

Introduction by Giorgio Verzotti to the catalogue “Fragile”, published in 2006.

“Tell Monet that trees are not purple”, thundered one contemporary journalist at an art salon, embroiling the Impressionists in yet another scandal. Monet, however, could have replied that, contrary to popular belief, trees do at times appear purple as their colour is influenced by a range of factors including light, time of day, weather and so on. For the sake of realism, he painted trees the colours they appeared to the eye, regardless of whether they appeared unnatural or shocking.

Today, nobody would bat an eyelid, but someone might ask Francesco Pignatelli where on earth you would see trees with *white* branches. In response to such an observation, he would reply that his work, too, is based on a need for realism. He is simply showing the branches as the mechanical eye of his camera sees them. There is a clear paradox to this and we find ourselves in a world where the finished piece, the work of art, is the culmination of a refined, conceptual process.

It is, indeed, a paradox to print the negative of a colour photograph rather than the positive, thus reversing all the colours. However, from a certain point of view, the creative process Pignatelli’s images undergo is actually a simplification that traces the image back to its origins. He captures what the eye (of the camera) sees before the image has been processed (by the photographer) and any notion has been apperceived (by the observer). By developing the negative print, Pignatelli lays bare the subject of the photograph itself, a concept in which metalanguage is combined with the intention to create something pleasing to the eye. The images remain colour, though ghosts of the originals, and give the impression that the object is real, yet has been exposed to some kind of genetic mutation.

Pignatelli has always used photography to probe psychological dimensions, right from his very first black and white portraits, which were inspired by those he considered his mentors, and by Duane Michals, the great photographic illusionist, in particular.

The black and white photographs to which Pignatelli devoted himself many years ago were designed to evoke the cinema as they were set out in a narrative sequence. They were not conceived as single pieces, but as shots governed by a consequential linearity.

At the beginning of his career, Pignatelli was not overly interested in colour photography because he deemed it too documentary, too realistic. He was seeking to distance himself from reality in order to suspend photography in the mind, within the world of psychological alienation where all his portraits hung. His initial refusal then acceptance of colour was motivated by two factors: his work and his personal needs. The former, his inner reason and logic, called on him to capture recognisable images that yet were alien, belonging to a parallel universe, familiar yet completely mutated. The latter because Pignatelli had grown up among artists and had shown a natural flair for painting. He wanted to test his skills within a field that was a world apart in terms of technique, yet so near in terms of image production.

At the heart of the artist’s work lies a need “to gather elements that are part of the common visual experience and transform them into states of mind”. This is a half-reference to Boccioni and to his painting, which used modern icons and natural phenomena to encapsulate the vital energy of the universe.

In his mind, photography does not represent reality, but transfigures it; imbuing its icons with emotion, it senses the repercussions and the emotional currents at the heart of the image. He believes that light, its raw material, will not reveal the truth, but only draw the shroud of pretence tighter still.

Pignatelli uses photography to find the most direct path to these results and seeks to unveil the meanings within images hidden at their very core.

The first scenes captured with this technique were cityscapes where reversing the colours prevented the observer recognising the time of day the photograph was taken - unlike in Monet's work - but not the location it portrayed. The motorway junction signs, the shop fronts, the building facades, the objects and clothes of the few people walking along these otherwise deserted streets provide the clues in this reversed world. There is also a simple colour-coded grammar needed to understand it: greens become all manner of reddish hues, blues become yellows and naturally whites become blacks and vice versa.

However, when the photographer reverses the colours in masterpieces of Italian Renaissance painting, then recognising them becomes even easier and the results are all the more surprising. Unlike the previous cycle, here the artist intervenes manually by processing the picture digitally rather than with traditional printing techniques.

As the artist puts it, we have a sort of "visionary reportage" in the cityscapes and a sort of psychedelic delirium in the works of art. Both operations vaunt strong aesthetics, which do not, however, overwhelm the meaning of the photographs. The undeniable and surprising beauty of these photographs leaves a mixed aftertaste, however, as their ghostly aura repulses as much as the new-found freedom of the colours, the exciting chromatic incongruities, attracts. His most recent works on natural landscapes confirm this.

If the purpose of photography is to capture moments of reality in an image and also in our memory, which sparks to life each time the image is seen, and the camera serves to conjure up the image and to conserve it, Pignatelli's photographs are motivated by a much different intention. Nobody sees reality in these colours, and the images are removed from the reality they describe as they abandon all notion of conservation in favour of creating something new.

His new photographs demonstrate this process most clearly: the closer the artist gets, the further he delves physically into the natural scene under investigation - the wooded area, the details of tree trunks, bushes, (white!) branches or (blue!) leaves - the further he wanders from the reality that surrounds him. This reversal of colours is also a process of abandonment as the photographer distances himself from all recognisable forms.

In this latest volume, Pignatelli has divided his works into themes which detail a whole host of ways to build a landscape in what is a startlingly take on reality.

The physicality of the trunks, branches and boughs are plain to see and the foliage of the woods and the clearings are recognisable. The dominant whites of these images conjure up scenes of snowy, winter landscapes. Immediately after, the patches of brown colouring the sky between the leaves and the pine needles, the pinky, fuchsia or blue hues adorning the undergrowth, and the odd bluey-greys of the leaves remind us that the rhetoric of the "reversed" is at work. The psychological effect, however, is still alienating and the observer feels as though he has stumbled upon a genetically-mutated version of nature, a landscape that is degenerating from within, leaving the framework intact while eating away at the surface.

Once again the observer is both attracted and repelled. There are beautiful images of trees with bright blue or pink leaves, steep black landscapes and slender white tree trunks, but it is a sick beauty that has the same intriguing and repugnant effect as reptiles; the bluish branches ensnare us in their tangled knots, like a deadly trap.

In a certain sense, too, the artist's aesthetic tastes are reversed and consequently they have the opposite effect; his impeccable photographs do not please, but alarm to the extent that they drive us to the brink of refusal.

Yet the very strength of these photographs lies in their being immaculate formally and unacceptable conceptually, just like the reality that the artist places before our eyes.

Pignatelli's landscapes, however, are not the deformed landscapes that make up the tradition of the horrid. They are symbolic scenes, *memento mori*, addressed to the landscape and to its inhabitants, who take their world for granted; they are epiphanies of a nature that is still rich yet contaminated, lush yet poisoned. To reinforce the image's drama the artist attempts to overcome the two-dimensionality of the photographic paper and with a simple gesture he crumples the photograph and presents it as an ephemeral bas-relief that more than ever retains its power to shock. Such physical presence seems to compensate for the fact that the objects are fading away. When the mechanical eye focuses on a natural detail and captures the tangled branches, almost becoming tangled in them itself, it seems the artist wants to underline this idea. The tangles are shown as if they were the nerves of an organic tissue seen under a microscope, or a surface on which everything runs in different directions. The photograph becomes a dimensionless scene, one that no longer has (or creates) space around itself, as if it were surrendering to indiscriminate and to chaos.

The artist does indeed portray an extreme vision. We have reached the point of no return: will we tip into catastrophe or be guided towards salvation? Everything ends in chaos, but everything also has a beginning. Breton said that beauty would be "convulsive" or not at all. As an artist, Pignatelli shows us beautiful, enigmatic images which are all the more so because they are the work of a machine serving its natural purpose. Although mechanical, this beauty still has the strength and power to redeem the whole world, and us with it.