

Article published on the magazine "Giudizio Universale" n° 3, pag. 70.

Date: June 2005

Botticelli ? Negative

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In 1986, Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* was reproduced as a screenprint and repainted by Andy Warhol, who already two years previously had discoloured, coloured again and painted the face of Botticelli's *Venus*. Thus, distracted or excessively impulsive detractors might not recognize any originality in Francesco Pignatelli's work *Reversed Renaissance*, a series of twenty-two photographs of masterpieces of Renaissance painting manipulated in the darkroom with digital techniques and painted interventions, and printed in negative.

While Warhol's reproduction was purely a provocation aimed at the semantic emptying of the institutional representations, Pignatelli's copies have a much greater value: they give rise to real photographic art that, at the same time, becomes innovation and mimesis. Just as the Renaissance artists had made the imitation of nature and ancient art their precept and goal, the young Pignatelli draws on the masterpieces of the period and transforms them through the mechanical medium of photography.

In his previous work, *Reversed Cities*, the photographer had immortalized views of large cities (urban areas paradoxically devoid of the human presence) and printed them in negative, obtaining anguished X-rays of space.

The same astonishing effect has been obtained with the reworking the paintings *The Ideal City* and *St Mark Preaching in Alexandria*, which, following alienating inversions and modifications of the colours, show an X-ray of the architectural structures depicted in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with diligent observance of Brunelleschi's and Alberti's rules of perspective.

Symmetry and classical stability are less important in Pignatelli's reinterpretations of Piero della Francesca's *Adoration of the Wood of the True Cross* and the *Meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, while the landscape in his version of Masolino da Panicale's *Herod's Banquet* appears to be ethereal and dreamlike: the colours, acid and fluorescent, but darkened by the prevalence of black, transform the works into fantastic holograms that

oblige the spectator to make a demanding but unavoidable effort to recognize the images.

These are hallucinations that one wants to continue gazing at.

In this mesmerized state one notes how secondary details in the originals emerge unexpectedly in these negatives and how the principal subjects yield their centrality to others: the spectators spontaneously indulge in exegeses that Pignatelli, perhaps, never expected. The clear sky – a sign of hope and resurrection in the background of Leonardo's *Last Supper* – appears leaden and oppressive in the negative, thick with clouds like those lowering over Christ after he was crucified. Practically all that remains of Botticelli's *Primavera* are the human figures, which seem to be blocks of black marble as graceful as if they had been sculpted by Canova. The protagonist of Filippino Lippi's *Vashti Leaving Susa* is reduced to a greenish spectre gliding through a silent night.

Wisely placed by Pignatelli at the end of his catalogue, is the most fascinating work of all, his reproduction of *Madonna del parto*, a fresco that Piero della Francesca painted around five centuries ago. What was, in the original, a snow-white rent in the Madonna's dress caused by her swollen belly, has been transformed by Pignatelli into a dark, painful chasm contrasting sharply with her expressionless composure. Also rigid in their harmonious symmetry, the two angels are ready to let go of the damask curtains of a pavilion that are about to close on this magnificent reversed Renaissance.