

Interview conducted by Francesca De Meis, published in *Fotonote*, 8 April 2009, on the occasion of the exhibition 'Translations' at Fotografia Italiana arte contemporanea, Milan.

Born in Milan, where he lives and works, Francesco Pignatelli is a photographer who has chosen to take an experimental approach to his practice. He makes use of photography in order to construct works of contemporary art that offer a fascinating interpretation of reality. In his most recent project, entitled *Translations*, Pignatelli goes beyond the image, transforming light into alphanumeric codes with truly amazing results.

How did you start doing abstract photography?

It is only apparently abstract. As a matter of fact, it's a form of writing that conceals a figurative image, which is decoded through the contemporary language of photography. By the way, this is the only work of mine that starts and finishes in digital form. Generally I use film cameras so as to have a negative I can work on. However, what interests me most about digital photograph is its language. At the moment when the shutter is released, the light doesn't leave its traces on the film, but becomes a code. I was surprised to discover that today, in the twenty-first century, we are going in the opposite direction to the Egyptians five thousand years ago. At that time they devised a method of decoding images (drawings, that is) to create a form of writing. Today we have decoded a form of writing (binary or hexadecimal) in order to represent reality and thus create images. This is what interested me, to the extent that I decided to create *Translations*, a work in which I dealt with universal themes in order to demonstrate how, over the centuries, languages may change, but not the dilemmas that have always inspired human thought: for instance with regard to birth, death, freedom, justice and so on.

How do you create your images?

I used a series of photographs taken from the Internet and then I used a program that allowed me to convert them into the equivalent alphanumeric code called hexadecimal. After this, I started to work on these bands of numbers and letters in an attempt to represent, in the best possible way, each individual theme composing *Translations*.

What do you want to recount through your works? Your images seem to be very distant from reality, but perhaps they are only a synthesis of this....

I would like to underline that the original pictures aren't mine, but are by various photographers specialized in portraiture. This is what the incomprehensible images in *Translations* show. All these strange writings are nothing but faces – that is, close-ups of people who, in a way, represent, in our times, the theme that each of the eighteen images in *Translations* depicts.

What future developments do you see in your work?

In this period I am working on a form of sculptural photography in which the photographic paper becomes a material that is better able to represent the image it shows. It's a development of a previous work of mine, *Fragile*, which I began in 2006.

I would tend to describe your way of photographing and interpreting images – in which photography is transformed into a process of removal – as being almost philosophical. What are the elements of reality that most stimulate your creativity?

There aren't any in particular; I would say it depends on the moment. If I look at my previous works, I realize that the stimuli have always been different: in *Pause* I preferred the human figure and its psychological dimension; in *Reversed City*, the most banal elements and the visual obsessions that the great metropolises have in common, transforming them into one huge global city; in *Reversed Renaissances*, the great masterpieces of Italian Renaissance painting; in *Fragile*, woods interpreted both as threatened nature and themselves threatening; in *Handle with Care* and *Metamorphosis*, the image becomes plastic material; and in *Translations*, the artistic language is effectively a summary of the image. The common denominator of all these works is certainly the will to go beyond objective representation of reality in an attempt to offer an alternative vision of the world. The process of removal is an essential part of my way of looking at things.

Today we live in a world overrun by information of all kinds: we are all accustomed to travelling far and wide and our visual experience is now so vast that, in my opinion, it no longer makes sense to take a photo of, say, a view of city just as I see it. An artist is someone who filters reality through his own experience, transforming what we see into what we would have never thought we would see. It is this that interests me most in an artist: his or her capacity to make the invisible visible, changing a real thing into an unknown one.

Are there any particular photographers or artists that have influenced you in your creative career?

All the artists that have had the strength to subordinate tradition to their own instincts, breaking fresh ground in the visual language. If I were to mention those who have worked with photography, a name that immediately comes to mind is that of Alfred Stieglitz, who was never afraid of contradicting himself, going from straight photography to the *Equivalents*, or Man Ray, who used photography in order to investigate the image, then Alexander Rodchenko, who redefined the way shots were framed, inventing new viewpoints, and again Harry Callahan's abstractions, Aaron Siskind's walls, Mario Giacomelli's landscapes, Duane Michals's imagination and many others besides. As far as painters are concerned, I would tend to think of Chaïm Soutine's visionary power, Georges Rouault's use of paint, Monet's rapid brushstroke, Picasso's freedom, Rothko's light, the incredible solitude of Bacon's figures and the essence of the figures in Giacometti's sculptures. With reference to more recent artists, I especially like the work of William Kentridge, Richard Long and Bill Viola.