

Introduction by Gianni Canova to the catalogue “Reversed Cities M6J 1H9”.

Published on the occasion of the same title exhibition at Spin Gallery, Toronto.

Date of publication: June 2005.

The soul, the words and the flesh

Whilst your eyes embrace the urban images of Francesco Pignatelli, you slowly realise that there is something you expected to find, but that it is missing and, on the contrary, there is something present which you would never have expected to see. The eye registers both an unforeseen absence and an unexpected presence.

The absence relates to the human image, the presence is that of words.

There are no humans, in the *reversed cities* of Pignatelli. Apart from the hurrying passer-by who brushes past a wall in an image of London, the two or three persons standing next to a taxi, viewed from above in a road in Caracas, and a couple of silhouettes which can be glimpsed under the Eiffel Tower in a Paris scene, Pignatelli's cities are places which look deserted. Unpopulated. Post-anthropic. Or de-anthropomorphised.

As in a film with a catastrophic saga, or in the pages of Guido Morselli's novel *Dissipatio H.G.*, the cities of Pignatelli are not cities in the full sense of the meaning: they are rather ghost towns, spectral and eerie agglomerates which not only do no longer look functional for living purposes, but they even seem to have lost the way, the tracks, the memory of their inhabitants. They are like fossils, archaeological findings or mineralised forms of those living organisms which were at one time the cities.

The only trace of life which remains – the only human sign, maybe even *too* human – are words. Pignatelli's gaze is attracted by words in a nearly obsessive manner. To the extent where, on some occasions he makes the words the central axis of the image, his vanishing point or his central and gravitational pivot. Whether it is a

signpost or a road sign, metropolitan graffiti or a logo of a commercial product, words are the true protagonists (the only inhabitants?) of the reversed cities of Pignatelli: as if the chaos and noise, so typical of contemporary urban experiences, had been absorbed by the mute alphabets which silently live on the walls. City-words, city-speech, city-language: “upturning” the soul of the city and transferring it to the dimension of anthropology and writing, Pignatelli performs an operation which is not solely aesthetical, but also – in its own way – conceptual and political (that is related to the same polis idea): he suggests that the language is now the only true genius loco and reminds us that there is no place without a name. For example: the *flesh* (of the city) has become *words*. And the words ring out from the walls, generate visions and identities as once upon a time – apparently – the inhabitants did. But only apparently. Actually those words talk with the off-screen space, with us as we look at them, with the eye of the photographer who chose – it doesn’t matter how conscious he was – to place them at the centre of the images. As if the human being – removed from visibility and the shot – has been transferred off-scene, to the place where we define ourselves and our identity through what remains of our capability of producing and deciphering – as always – signs and languages.

Maybe it is for this reason (*also* for this reason) that the cities of Pignatelli are “reversed”: because they are nothing less than the reflection of something which is always somewhere else compared to the image in which we see it.