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Giorgio Andreotta Calò

MAXXI, ROME, ITALY

In his recent documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), Werner Herzog unveils a cycle of powerful paintings in the Chauvet Cave, in Ardèche, which date from 32,000 years ago. Shot in 3D, the film cleverly links the prehistory of art with the history of the moving image, by showing how the play of light and shade upon the rocks naturally animates vision. The stampede of extinct bears, mammoths, rhinos, horses, bison and lions, sometimes painted with six legs to convey dynamism, seems to roar and run again. Interviewed by Herzog, an anthropologist suggests that instead of marking the rise of Homo Sapiens – a definition by far too optimistic, he says, given our scarce capacity to understand much of the world – the birth of art should be associated with that of Homo Spiritualis, a human species capable of perceiving the magic of the sublime. Since the cave is very close to Pont d'Arc, one of the largest natural arches in Europe, the birth of the picturesque could be assumed to be from the same time.

Talking about *Prima che sia notte* (Before Night Falls, 2012), the installation that won him the 2012 edition of MAXXI's Premio Italia Arte Contemporanea (the other finalists were Patrizio Di Massimo, Adrian Paci and Luca Trevisani), Giorgio Andreotta Calò referred to prehistoric paintings, declaring that these early images could be seen as reflections of the external world, as if caves were gigantic camera obscura. Andreotta Calò's work is based on a similar optical device: a stenoepic hole, which brings into the museum the image of the urban area which surrounds it – a definitely un-picturesque scenery of tenement flats, trams and cars, all of which are part of the vast expanse of peripheries so common in contemporary *bella Italia*.

From the outside, *Prima che sia notte* looked like a bulky construction that obstructed much of a large window at the top of Gallery 5; it recalled a big TV screen attached to the architectural body. It was to this luminous 'loggia' visitors were drawn to, as if expecting spectacular urban views outside, only to find that there was nothing very scenic to look at, besides the window itself. By turning this banal panorama into the protagonist, Andreotta Calò thus reversed the hierarchy between the starchitect's creation (MAXXI was designed by Zaha Hadid) and its anonymous neighbours, the stunning and the unnoticeable. Furthermore, in a museum with few partitions, which forces the viewers to move around while being constantly exposed to the gaze of others, Andreotta Calò provided a hiding place where you could rest with just one image at a time. Once inside, eyes adapted to darkness and the city's skyline slowly appeared, both reversed and reflected in the pool of water at the bottom of the installation. Watching the moving images of the trams running by, the wind rustling the leaves of trees and of people walking by recalled the kind of theatre that evokes the wondrous 'oh, look!' of childhood. Andreotta Calò was born in Venice; Canaletto's pin-hole views come to mind, as well as the daily occurrence of reflected images in a city built on canals. The artist has also employed reflections in water also in previous works including *Voluer* (2008) at Galleria Zero, in Milan and *Untitled* (2010) at Rijksakademie Open Studio.

Prima che sia notte could only be seen in daylight, and as

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Andreotta Calò insisted it was not documented, you had to see it *in situ*. I was lucky enough to see it at dusk, literally 'before night falls', so that the programmed epiphany vanished before my eyes, losing its contours, fading to black. Its afterimage danced on my retina for a while, allowing memory to record a lasting impression. Due to the economic crisis, *Prima che sia notte* has now gained an extra metaphorical layer: with the MAXXI currently under spending review and the looming perspective of severe budget cuts, it's unclear whether this big museum (Italy's first national contemporary art museum, opened only two years ago), will survive or vanish from our radar.

Barbara Casavecchia

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