Published in *Elisa Sighicelli,* Laure Genillard Gallery and Ffotogallery, London e Cardiff 1999.

From house to house, from light to light....

Francesca Pasini

The anomalous portraits of Elisa Sighicelli show houses, rooms, windows and not people, yet they evoke eyes, hands, profiles... in other words the features that normally define the portrait. This materiality made me feel a complex emotion: the pleasure of memory that often houses and places give back, and the disorientation of solitude. A solitude that however is not a synonym of abandonment, but more like a subtle euphoria, which I believe that everyone feels when the lack of relationships is compensated by curiosity and imagination.

This feeling of not belonging, while making us feel free, brings with it an anxiety. In fact the dimension of probability in our choices, not being misled by the already seen, becomes explicit. And this is troubling. Because it introduces a variable which lies between what we know and what we should hypothesise realised independently of our decisions. Perhaps it is banal, but daily references to the memory of emotions, tied to household objects, offer an idea of continuity that isn't included in the probabilistic comparison in the events that we live.

Even in private life, the past isn't made from what ifs. And when we realise that we have not known how to coordinate the assumed desires that distract from our interpretation, we ascribe to them an objective improbability, or an unrealistic vision, seen as how things have gone. Even in hindsight there is a resistance to keep in mind possibilities that seem unrealisable, only because they haven't been fulfilled.

In the light boxes of Elisa Sighicelli the absence of a human presence is linked with the idea of a shared passage on earth, but also to the event of probability, in the sense that this absence makes visible both who has lived in these rooms and who could live there now. An intuition made real by the use of fluorescent tubes which back lights the photographs: natural light, taken from the moment of the shot, and therefore, already past, and the current electric light are united. It is a simple, yet very fine invention, primarily because there is nothing to add and also because it is potentially available to everyone.

The images that she has gathered are there in front of the eyes, they have imprinted the film, they are real, they recall her subjective choice yet they stand aside from the poetry of the elected spaces because they allow a glimpse of a daily process, which, however invisible, other subjects have created.

The neon light is not only a symbolic intermediary that links the past and the present, but also a discovery that discloses an inventive source that we can derive from the vision. Anna Achmatova, the renown Russian poet, said " when something new appears, you know what sensation its contemporaries should feel? That it is only pure chance that is wasn't them to write it, that they themselves were about to write it and the others snatched it from their hands..." But the material of invention isn't in heaven but in the daily reality that Achmatova describes in her long discussion with the literary critic Lidija Cukovskaja: "the poet works with the same words that people use to ask each other to tea..."

And so, how do the household objects of Sighicelli participate today in intimate and emotional memory, both present and past? Rhythms always more accelerated press to quickly change reference points, and the memory, thus hastened, can no longer coagulate around a space, a specific place, but around a *fore-sight* of what might modify that space and that site.
It is a turning, that for some corresponds to globalisation, for others to the virtual consciousness in which no longer seem necessary the pauses, the emptiness, the wasting of time, to create a vision of things, of feelings, of thoughts.

But Elisa Sighicelli doesn't seem to resign herself to this hypothesis.

She, on the other hand works on the liquid ridge where existence fluctuates between sediment of the past and recent footprints. Her photographs, gathering the passage of a living that *is no longer tangible, or isn't yet*, act like screens onto which the shadows and reflections of an intimacy to come are projected. The illusive appearance doesn't refer only to what wasn't seen before in that fragment, and that now appears from a photographic still, but to what might occur in this very image. There is a swing between how much one recognises within his own visual accumulation and how much one imagines.
The convergence of physical and mental activity that, as Heidegger would say, defines the sequence "build - inhabit - think", on one hand is evidenced by the absence of the subjects who live in these rooms and cities; on the other tends to prepare itself according to a probabilistic canon. The quantum of probability is not resolved, as would normally happen, only in the meeting with the spatial coordinates in which the work of

art is exhibited, but in an autonomous pre-view of the subjectivities which build, inhabit, think. It is not dependent on the simple memory of experiences lived, but on the effort that everyone must complete to define the narrative structure to project on these image-screens.

We are in front of a concept of intimacy which does not lean on an internal transfiguration, but rather on a daily lived reality, before it becomes a lived experience and it bonds with feelings and memory. It is an intimacy connected to "a transcendence which", says Sighicelli, "expresses itself in the reality of everyday" and not in a stratified symbolic value.
This is her way of disorienting the linearity of the virtual influence, which today seems to be the obligatory door for perceiving the present and the future.

Yet in the photographs of Sighicelli the concept of probability, with which she describes her own story, doesn't neglect the larger theme of direct participation of the subjects who live, act, create. And today with the lack of idealism and utopias, it is more than ever necessary to hold onto the probability that we have in front of us to make a choice.
These light boxes, entering in contact with anonymous lives, with no predefined explicitly rational and emotional convictions, interrupt the dream to reproduce our surroundings, which has been the main attraction that photography has offered since its birth.

The "characters" to which Elisa gives life have a certain assonance with literary visuality, and, I would say, specifically with the diarist form. It would seem a contradiction in terms, seeing that there isn't a trace of a human presence in her photographs, yet the fore shortenings, the rarefaction of the air, the reflections of light, the objects evoke the note transcribed day by day and the story of a change which make not only the mind but also the space sensitive.

Hotel rooms and temporary residences take the place of single family homes, of the apartment where one was born; the house in "To the Lighthouse" of Virginia Woolf is substituted by organised trips. The search for work makes us nomads; the "need to know" make us visit museums, galleries, shows, far from our private study. And so the objects and places of dwelling of men and women are progressively abandoning the hearth of an era. But millenniums of the habit of centrality of the native home, from which it was only consented for the men to leave, have prevented the elaboration of a "building, living, thinking" in which men weren't opposed to women. This is why today

the transitory environments, in which everybody finds himself living temporarily, can only represent empty shells, even if they are dense.

Perhaps only through the void we may realise the inherent contradiction in the androcentric myth of the journey to consciousness. In the moment in which there is maximum freedom in the exchange between men and women-not even he who works the soil (the subject taken from Heidegger to analyse the synthesised root in the triad "build, inhabit, think") remains stably anchored to the place of birth-the emotional pulsing, born from a cultural and ontological nomadism are welcomed by anonymous skeletons where that which visibly results is the absence of the very persons that make them necessary. This also is an image that emerges from the photographs of Elisa Sighicelli.

Sighicelli herself has abandoned her home in Turin; she went first to Florence and then to London. She has lived rooms decorated by others, in hotel rooms, in domestic simulacra like residences, motels. All of her work seems to me to be a troubling diary of a strange day which crosses time and countries, where the void becomes the material to build a life and a home in harmony with the probability of physical and mental displacement.

When Elisa talks about her work, she tells of the desire to unite the past -present- future in a single image. It is her witchcraft. And so with precision and patience she arranges a fluorescent light where she wants light, on the backside of the photograph she paints black where she wants shadow, tangible, thick, three dimensional. The flame of the candle scorches (*Near to Nothing*, 1998). The sun is reflected on the ground and warms the room (*Levanto: Bedroom*, 1997), then filters beneath a curtain and encroaches on a table top (*Monterey: Armchairs*, 1999) finally creates a halo in counter light (*Las Vegas: Curtain*, 1997) and I understand that it is now high on the horizon.

A reflection illuminates a floor that coming out from a corner of a bed and turning, finishes underneath an armchair (*Budapest: Armchair*, 1999) next to a round table. Two fluerescent lights, one on the edge of a table and one on the backrest of an armchair create that particular dazzling that appears in half closed rooms. Only squinting my eyes am I able to make out the furniture: the darkness behind the shoulders makes one foretell that someone can come from there. Slowly I get used to the counter light and I recognise a hotel; one smells the dusty and aseptic odour of the room before it is camouflaged by that of who enters.

The day presses on: the opalescent ray, that comes in from an open window, perks up an orderly kitchen. The air is fresh, everything is resting: the night is passing and a dream or insomnia has urged someone to make coffee at the first light of dawn (*Senza mondo I-IV: Kitchen*, 1998).

In this nomadism I realise that the bathroom door is open: the partly closed blind and the wide open window say that it is summertime, that it's hot, that a current of air is necessary (*Bathroom, Door*, 1998).

This light box is special, because it has been inserted in the wall and all of the gallery is pulled into a domestic intimacy. The illusion of the trompe-l'oeil is very strong, we seem to have entered in someone's home.

However, we are in an exhibition space, and that which acquires an art-like quality is the vision of a private space, without a romantic aura, generally not associated with the act of creating. This also is a novelty that works with the need to reinvent home-like places and objects in a way in which the division between the private and politics (in the sense of the Greek polis) is put again into discussion. We can not forget that the birth of western democracy comes from the polis and that, for however important this event, it declared the exclusion of women from politics and from art in a wider sense. How would have the social and cultural model been able to evolve if women also had participated in an active way? This is not a rhetorical question, but a probability that the patriarchal system should look at the balance sheet, to which many women are already responding with their works of art.

Other visions, other thoughts. Here we are in the street. It is dark, someone is still not asleep; a window is open, a reddish light indicates a bedroom (*Senza mondo VI: Wall*, 1998). What novels, what stories the lit windows of the city at night make us invent! This strange day isn't finished: a hotel, maybe a motel room. In the entrance there is a red armchair and an open door from which one intuits a bedroom: the blind has a pattern of light and shade and is like an abstract painting (*L.A.: Blinds I-III*, 1999).

From house to house, from light to light, the diary of Elisa continues.

English Translation by Jeanette L. Hall