

Ozmo è figlio del postmodernismo italiano, un controverso autunno della storia male accordato con la cronologia occidentale e solo nel recentissimo passato riconsiderato dalla generazione che, negli anni Novanta, viveva il pieno della giovinezza. Per questo, forse, è così bravo a combinare con serena audacia alto e basso, sacro e profano, vessilli capitalistici ed empatia totale per i vinti, gli oppressi, i perdenti di Genova, della crisi mondiale, delle missioni di pace. L'artista toscano sa bene cosa sta facendo e riesce a infondere un innegabile impegno nel gioco combinatorio che informa le sue soluzioni visuali. In questo senso è un ospite anche dei tempi, un denunciatore senza megafono, un rivoluzionario che invece di dar fuoco all'arredamento di questa età postrema lo riarrangia quel tanto che basta per rivelarne le storture. Certo, contemplando i faccioni atri dei celeberrimi bronzi calabresi rifatti in acrilico viene subito in mente Sanguineti, che ne intuì e mise alla berlina con sobrio divertimento – «Sono un bronzo di Riace (uno dei due, quello che più ti piace)» – la mercificazione dopo il famoso restauro anni Ottanta; e similmente il San Francesco che riceve le stigmate nella colante realizzazione in bianco e nero del 2015 invita a pensare al recentissimo Francesco di Aldo Nove e alla sua relativamente involontaria interazione col pontificato di Bergoglio e con la sua controversa ricezione mediatica. Ozmo però è alfiere di un nuovo modo di fare avanguardia, meno egemone e ideologicamente ferreo di quello avviato negli anni Sessanta e al contempo più *engagé* e responsabile di quello fiorito nei dintorni del Gruppo93. Disincanto e fantasmagoria, attualità ed eternità dell'immagine, iperrealismo e artificio esplicito (si pensi alle gocce di vernice che scivolano sul supporto plastico o alla rinuncia ai colori e ai contorni nei piccoli formati) sono i suoi strumenti, che lo connettono al contempo al Pop europeo – non penso solo a Piazza del Popolo, ma anche alla Parigi del *décollage* – e ai paradossali usi non industriali del design, al più euforico postmodernismo e all'enigmatico magistero di un genio cool come Piero

Manzoni. Pur pessimista della ragione, come si capisce benissimo dalle deformazioni delle sue *Miss Universo* o magari dalla leggerezza con cui rimescola gli ingredienti del *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* con dita leonardesche e braccia in più, Ozmo è un ottimista della volontà. Non si spiegherebbe altrimenti, nella desolante piramide sociale di *You are worth more than many sparrows*, il sovvertimento del motto americano che campeggia su miliardi di banconote verdi. Crediamo nell'Arte, perché malgrado tutto può ancora essere una proprietà non-privata e uno strumento politico senza perdere l'incanto delle immagini pure, che non imitano nessuna realtà, e la meraviglia giocosa della libertà compositiva.

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#### POPMODERN. HOSPITALITY AND MEMORY, ENGAGEMENT AND PLAY IN THE WORK OF OZMO

The most evident quality in Ozmo's works is their determined and generous intention to constantly negotiate, from a voluntarily subordinate position, their role and their right to exist in the context they appear in, from a perspective that is more cultural than just aesthetic or socio-politically self-absolving. In this sense, it remains clear that, even in experiments on atypical media and indoor environments which are more or less official (which I will touch on later), we are dealing with works rooted in the most authentic and fundamental ethics of street art. Not writing on walls' then, but giving them voice; not occupying a space, but freeing its potential, considering the community that shares it and the history that has opened it, more or less willingly, to the artist's intervention. Ozmo's mark can become refined in manner, grow thin in the last imitation of the etching line, or thicken in black and white brush strokes that allude as much to the

analyticity of Picasso's monochromes as to the popular patheticism of European post-Romantic oils. In any case, it decides – as the polar opposite of graffiti and anything generally defined as 'vandalism' – to inhabit the surface as a guest, to truly and deeply integrate with the visual grammar and historical-artistic events of the place it proposes to enrich. In this way, it is obviously difficult for the observer to fully understand similar objects if they are not part of the material or spiritual context they dialogue with. Most of all, it is difficult to see them in photographs, since they function like a town square, a monument, a park: the images they are made up of are an integral part of the human and material landscape they reflect, and if one does not personally cross that landscape (that street, in most cases) at least mentally, part of their value remains inaccessible.

One very clear example is *Probably, the biggest St. Rosalia in the world*, a wallpainting that is 15 metres tall, created in 2008 in the province of Palermo. A passer-by from Milan or Rome, who might have the *Street Art Sweet Art* catalogue in their living room, or who has visited *Scala Mercalli*, could easily recognise a variation of Ozmo's emblem, a skull with clenched teeth pronouncing the tag in a balloon, and remember that part of the artist's production reinvents and juxtaposes religious icons and even the image of Christ. (For example, the crowded wall of *About JC project* is both *unheimlich* and reassuring, halfway between the visual obsessiveness of Italian Catholicism and the sweet child's habit of collecting figurines of the busts of young sports heroes). The viewer could mentally transfer the benedictory saint in Rome's Ostiense neighbourhood, near the iron bridge, where Ozmo instead created a face of Gramsci that seems like the enlargement of an impossible xylograph from the 1500s, and thus appreciate overall the recognisability of subjects and techniques, the specificity of a style that jumps out at those who recognise him today, in many cities in Italy and throughout the world. Well, this way, that continental passer-by will miss noticing what anyone from Palermo would instantly realise: Rosalia lives right in those streets. Local grandmothers and girls have taken her name for centuries; she is the saint celebrated during the

summer with parades and fireworks, the most familiar of the celestial faces watching over western Sicily from Paradise. The skull on the book has always been the most characteristic element of her iconography: the artist did nothing more than minimise the logical steps of representation, depicting himself as covert in a purely devotional conceptualism. At the same time, he visually translated the Medieval virgin in the most typical painting style provided by a long, up-close experience with overpoweringly sized surfaces, making it his own without appropriating it, and signing it in the visible speech of a comic. It is precisely this complex and simple solution that allowed him, in the lunar context of Campofelice di Roccella (which is not particularly open, understandably, to experimenting with street art on its almost pre-urban wrinkled skin), to obtain an enormous blind wall, more visible than ever, as a surface: a wall that the average Sicilian would tend to prefer mute than infested with unrecognisable signs or aesthetic works unjustifiably attempting to appear youthful. All without shock or visual invasions, without minimally clashing in anyone's eyes, not even in those of the most devout, God-fearing old lady of the historical centre, who will actually hobble more cheerfully to church beneath the gaze of the benevolent eyes of her patron. This is what ethics can mean in street art.

This is not to say that similar careful operations of semiotic grafting can always peacefully acclimate in their difficult habitats. The very recent case of *Lady Liberty and David sharing the same pedestal* is emblematic, and reveals the unexpected difficulties that Ozmo's work can encounter. The pedestal that makes the colossal feet of Michelangelo's marble meet with the robes of the Statue of Liberty is the protagonist of a wall that is ambitious in scale and pictorial technique, created with dozens of different colours in Miami's Wynwood Art District. As opposed to the gigantic Rosalia, this composition might seem too easily positioned: requested by Italian-Americans, created with minimum investment but impressive visual effects, elegantly placed in an area full of artistic projects that hosts pavilions packed with contemporary works, Ozmo's painting does nothing more than

revamp the very clear input of the most ideal scenario imaginable. Still, this representation, which seems to wink at 1960s Roman Pop (I'm thinking of a unique mash-up between Schifano's American imagery and the unscrupulous recycling Festa subjected Michelangelo to), lives on in absurd destiny of impermanence, since it had to surrender space to a commercial building and disappear from the view of the patrons it was conceived for. Ridiculously, you can only see it in photographs, as if its creation was a happening instead of the impression of a strong and elementary message – can we think of a clearer synthesis for the meeting between the two shores of the Atlantic? – on a surface so used to conveying similar visual proposals. Just as interesting is the *affaire* that exploded around the *Holy mother with child with upside down heads*, a wall in Ancona where Ozmo collaborated with MCity and Run in 2008. Now, who could really believe that an artist willing to explore the city's picture gallery, fall in love with Lorenzo Lotto, then recreate the altarpiece of the Alabarda, increasing its dimensions tenfold, have offensive or even blasphemous intentions? Nevertheless, that Virgin Mary in blue and pink, with her feet resting on the pattern of an urban reality so distant from the Marche region – with her feet resting on the entire world we may say dominating, severe and protective – and crowned with the author's signature, was threatened by the most boorish politics and even by the press, and attempts were made to strip it from the city. Of course, if it had been painted on a canvas or printed on some other mobile surface, it may have been legitimate to read irreverence and even blasphemy in the strong gesture of turning the heads of the Virgin and Child upward. But in Ancona – and the wall, for its very nature, cannot move from Ancona, nor escape from the history and shape of this city – those two figures (in that specific form, following the precise lines from the 1500s) are at home: it is impossible to exchange them for generic religious images that may eventually be ridiculed. Other, much more simple interpretations are in order: maybe the heads are upside down because finally, out in the open after centuries of rooms and museum halls, the two bodies can gaze at the sky they are eternally destined

for; maybe instead they prefer to leave the parking lot that extends at their feet to building speculation and civil indifference, to invite passers-by to transcendence and contemplation of the heavens; or maybe it is the artist himself to ask the people of Ancona to rediscover those faces that have been memorised and lost in habit through the estrangement imposed by a simple rotation. In any case, as opposed to the Rosalia or the elegant *Portrait of PI* that looms on the façade of San Michele degli Scalzi in Pisa (Renaissance scenes and jet fighters, tourists taking selfies with the tower and medals of illustrious citizens), the work in Ancona had to fight in order to not be hidden or eliminated, enduring the inevitable disturbances that public and outdoor art must be defended from.

Similar interactions with the most stringent reality require Ozmo to work with memories that are not his, just as a respectful guest or a foreigner who does not settle for tourism must do. Without dragging in Derrida, we can say that the walls gathered in this book are examples of how one can deeply intervene in a host place without evading the subordinate position of the guest: Ozmo, in wallpainting, never becomes the owner of the surface, but instead applies the incessant and absolutely non-violent strength of mimesis, of camouflage, of surrendering to pre-existing meanings and memories, ready to be displayed. He works like an anthropologist or a dialectologist, careful not to misrepresent the results of his experiments by aggressively contaminating the community he explores: it is the city that speaks in his paintings, filtered and thickened by an ocular intelligence that suggests the simple and potent ideas we have seen up to now. However, in this procedure, Ozmo does not lose his identity, which is made even more clear and recognisable by the procedure itself: a sort of conceptual signature or, if you wish, hiding in full view. To highlight the relative novelty of this ethical position, I would like to move on to some indoor works that present creative events and intentions which are very different from what we have seen up to now.

In the combinatorial euphoria that characterises most of Ozmo's work, especially indoor, I

feel I recognise a sort of childish victory over the empire of commercial images, joyfully married to art history masterpieces and religious icons, without any trite anti-consumerist moralism. The Nike swoosh, the faces of Mickey Mouse and Disney's Pinocchio, the icon warning against inflammable industrial products, the Smile, the Puma, the MTV logo: in Ozmo's compositions, all these highly recognisable pieces of marketing and the post-industrial panorama meet Paolo Uccello's Saint George, Brueghel's engravings, Michelangelo's nudes, Leonardo's enigmatic angels, the disturbing Renaissance elaborations of classical mythology – from Leda embracing the swan to Olympia crying on the beach. To these we may add, in an intermediate position, images that seem cut out from a primary school textbook or a well-made Italian children's encyclopaedia: the Chimera of Arezzo, the funeral Mask of Agamemnon, a design citrus juicer, an old Fiat 500 car. Naturally, we don't lose the mechanisms of estrangement and the elementary but disruptive visual tricks used on walls. In *Backflip*, the figures from the original painting are found on the wall that hosts the canvas, where a deserted landscape now remains, reminding us that not even the museum is a neutral container; we must listen even to the whitest of walls. Meanwhile, the diptych *Apocalypse* openly denounces its own nature as a material object, leaving halfway visible the vertical groove separating the two panels, which are only partly marked, as if they had been barely hit by a greater explosion that was not completely registered by the whiteness of the pvc. Nevertheless, we may thus more clearly see another element of Ozmo's sublime and elated poetics.

Ozmo is a child of Italy's belated postmodernism, a controversial autumn of history out of tune with western chronology, which only in its very recent past has been reconsidered by the generation that, in the 1990s, was in the prime of its youth. Perhaps this is why he is so good at using such serene audacity to combine high and low, sacred and profane, capitalistic banners and complete empathy for the defeated, the oppressed, the losers of Genoa, of the economic crisis, of peace missions. This Tuscan artist knows what he is doing, and

manages – this is the innovation I announced at the beginning – to instill undeniable dedication to the combinatorial game that informs his visual solutions. In this sense, he is also a guest of time, a denouncer without a megaphone, a revolutionary who, instead of setting fire to the last furniture of this age, rearranges it just enough to reveal its crookedness. Of course, contemplating the large heads of the celebrated bronzes from Calabria redone in acrylic brings Sanguineti straight to mind, when he grasped their commercialisation and soberly ridiculed it – «I'm a Riace bronze (one of the two, whichever you prefer)» – after their famous restoration in the 1980s. Likewise, the Saint Francis receiving the stigma in the seeping black and white creation from 2015 invites us to think about the very recent Francis by Aldo Nove, his relatively involuntary interaction with Pope Bergoglio's papacy and its controversial media reception. However, Ozmo is a forerunner of a new way of making avant-garde, less hegemonic and ideologically strict than that of the 1960s, and at the same time more *engagé* and responsible than that which developed around Gruppo93. Disenchantment and phantasmagoria, modernity and eternity of the image, hyperrealism and explicit artifice (consider the drops of paint that slide onto the plastic surface or the renouncement of colours and contours in small formats) are his tools, that connect him to European Pop – I'm not only thinking of Piazza del Popolo, but also of Paris's *décollage* – and to the paradoxical, non-industrial uses of design, to the most euphoric postmodernism, and to the enigmatic mastery of a cool genius like Piero Manzoni. Though he is a pessimist of reason, as you can easily understand from the deformations of his Miss Universe or the casualness with which he mixes the ingredients of *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* with Leonardo extra fingers and arms, Ozmo is an optimist of will. There is no other way to explain, in the desolate social pyramid of *You are worth more than many sparrows*, the upheaval of the American motto that dominates billions of green banknotes. We believe in Art, because despite everything, it can still be a non-private property and a political tool without losing the fascination of pure images that do not imitate any reality, and the playful magnificence of compositional freedom.

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## OZMO, UN MODERNO CRIPTO-CLASSICO

Se si valuta il talento di un artista dalla sua capacità di rinnovare, evolvere ed espandere lo spettro della sua produzione, allora Ozmo è un genio. Difficilmente inquadrabile, polimorfico, eclettico, è un artista che mette in produzione lavori che variano sia dal punto di vista iconografico, che stilistico, che tecnico. Percorre infatti un vasto repertorio iconografico che va dagli antichi capolavori, attraversando i percorsi dei grandi maestri classici, fino ad arrivare all'immaginario pop passando dalla fotografia in bianco e nero e dai tarocchi. Ogni tipologia di immagine è facilmente riprodotta utilizzando formalismi sempre diversi. Stencil, sticker, poster, pittura a spray, pittura dal vero, tutto tende a mostrare la fame insaziabile dell'artista, sempre avido di innovazione. Tuttavia niente è gratuito nella sua proposta, «lo lavoro con la forza delle immagini».

Formatosi all'Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze, Gionata Gesi – a.k.a. Ozmo – ha una cultura classica e un background accademico che gli permette di affrontare qualsiasi sfida stilistica. Nel suo lavoro sono innumerevoli i riferimenti alla storia dell'arte tanto che Laocoonte, Mantegna o Caravaggio si trovano a disputarsela con Manet o Picasso. L'artista usa l'arma della citazione per invitare a una sorta di deviazione, perché non è tanto questione di invocare un'eredità tirandola fuori dai musei, quanto di esaminarla attraverso il prisma della modernità per interpretarne il messaggio rinnovato poiché stilisticamente pulito. Senza dubbio Ozmo non vuole insegnare la storia dell'arte, ma piuttosto immagini ben note al grande pubblico vengono associate e ricomposte con uno stile omogeneo e senza alcuna gerarchia. Non solo. Ozmo,

come accade nella sua serie sull'Apocalisse, fa arrivare sullo stesso piano i simboli iconici di produzioni artistiche, stili e correnti, immaginari e poetiche che hanno attraversato i secoli, per mescolare arbitrariamente ciò che è popolare e ciò che è accademico, il sacro e il profano. La curiosità viscerale, e un atteggiamento di perpetua ricerca, danno prova di una creatività esplosiva, l'uso di Internet per soddisfare questa perpetua ricerca fa di lui un figlio dei suoi tempi. Personaggi dei cartoni animati della Disney, eroi dei manga, emojis o personaggi dei tarocchi prendono vita dal suo pennello o dalla sua bomboletta. Da questo universo, eterogeneo nella genesi, ma coerente nella forma, Ozmo racconta storie di un nuovo genere. Come Jérôme Bosch, i suoi lavori ci offrono una lettura a più livelli. Non è difficile, al primo sguardo, intravedere in questi caleidoscopi il senso di un *exquisite corpse* assurdo e delirante. Ma nulla è lasciato al caso. Ed è qui che si sviluppa il paradosso della sua originale arte urbana. Sebbene il creare in strada presupponga la proposta di un messaggio immediato e richieda una composizione semplice e leggibile, Ozmo accetta la sfida di invitare a un'interpretazione più complessa, a rischio di scoraggiare lo spettatore affrettato, ma anche di catturarne talmente tanto l'attenzione da farlo fermare nel tentativo di leggere e decrittare l'opera.

È esattamente qui che il contesto urbano delle sue opere diventa fondamentale perché, pescando dalla cultura iconografica popolare e locale, Ozmo dialoga con gli autoctoni; attraverso un'iconografia di tipo più trasversale e alta si rivolge a chi voglia effettivamente decrittare il messaggio tra le righe della composizione. Ozmo riesce a mescolare l'intimo con l'universale. Così a Palermo, la sua Santa Rosalia, venerata in Sicilia, prende surrettiziamente le sembianze della proprietaria del muro, di nome appunto Rosalia. A Bari, il suo *Tre San Nicola* è una denuncia della perdita di memoria che caratterizza il nostro tempo. La sua rappresentazione dello stesso personaggio agiografico, dipinto secondo gli stili di tre diverse culture –