

Ernesto Morales, painting impermanence

Interview by Nicola Davide Angerame - June, 2019

How did you come to discover clouds?

I was about 17 years old and was finishing art school and preparing to start the academy in Buenos Aires; at that time, I was interested in the method and materials with which the artist Antoni Tàpies composed the image of his works. I remember that the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires held three of his great works of the 1960s and I periodically observed them almost as if it were a necessary rite to understand in those years what interested me in art. Tàpies was also an influential essayist of the informal Catalan avant-garde, he wrote a lot, his philosophical knowledge belonged to that existentialist tradition linked to Martin Heidegger and then he opened himself up to the Zen philosophy when the teacher Suzuki arrived in Europe in the 40s and introduced several classic texts of this Eastern philosophical thought. Thus, Tàpies began to study the relationship between painting and Zen, and the relationship between empty and full, the poetics of the only possible gesture. And due to that, I also started to study these philosophies of the Far East in that moment, their concepts resounded inside me, I felt as if they belonged to me.

Tàpies told of how a Zen monk had once told him: "You have replaced the time of concentration with space, enlarging the object so that the viewer can enter the new reality without having to concentrate for hours. Because he understood that Western viewers are inattentive and look around with their ever-insignificant eyes". So, he introduced you to Zen philosophy?

What he said about painting reflected the feeling of an era and not only in Europe, for example in the United States there were artists like Mark Tobey or Franz Kline who were close to these researches; there were also the texts of Alan Watts, of Herrigel, of Krishnamurti that were studied a lot, especially in those environments where doing art joined an existential type of research. What I was doing and studying on my own, that is, the way of understanding pictorial space and treating the monochrome colour just as the material with which I painted, found a significant reflection for me in the thought of Tàpies, even if he introduced more materials typical of informal painting, like sand or pieces of wood, while I was interested in transforming natural elements into pigments for the realization of colors with which to paint. I still prepare my colours today with the intention of introducing nature into the painting, so that the work can be one with the environment and with the process of interdependence between the elements that compose it. When I was at the Academy of Fine Arts, trying to put into practice some philosophical concepts I was studying, I started attending a Zen monastery located in the mountains of Cordoba, towards the north of Argentina. One day, the abbot of this monastery, while observing some paintings that I was doing and that represented the movement of the mountains that were around, told me: "*Ernesto, look around and look up, you will see that reality is as changeable as the clouds*" quoting the master Dogen, founder of Zen in 1280 in Kyoto. That concept struck me so much that I began to study the landscape, interior and exterior, to seek a dialogue with that mutable character that all things have and to be able to build an image that goes towards their essence. I began to take an interest in the representation of light and what is ethereal. Over the years it would become a key concept of all my work: light that is that unknown that is everything.

And what did you discover working on these concepts?

I found an analogy between the constantly changing landscape and the movement of our thought. At that time my first reflections on clouds began, which years later became paintings. Clouds are elusive, they have no consistency, you can't catch hold of them; moreover, their strength lies there, they are a great metaphor of our thought that changes and transforms itself. We are not our thought, but it is a part of us, so we can break away from it and observe it, see how it flows. If you let it flow, you can see how it is mutable and changes constantly. Being able to observe that thought that flows, without identifying with it, and being able to represent it in a fixed image like a painting, allows us to fix what is always changing and allows what is ethereal to become body. I tried to understand all of this through painting.

When do your first paintings of clouds date back to?

Around 2012; I had moved to Italy in 2006 and I already had a studio for a year in Turin. At that time the clouds I painted were more vaporous, deriving from the cosmic nebulas I had been working on for a few years. I was interested in some topics related to astrophysics and some reflections on the meaning of the interconnection between all things, of the organic world and the inorganic one.

What interests you about clouds?

When we talk about it, the implicit referent is the water cycle and how everything is connected and transformed. The cloud becomes a river, a sea, an ocean and maybe returns to be a cloud on the other side of the world. I am interested in that cloud that is always different but is always the same, going through time. The cloud becomes a symbol of all that is regenerated, transformed, the cloud shows us that everything is interconnected.

Why do you leave the dripping of the brushstrokes visible?

Because the painting itself can show that transformation, because painting is not only a representation of something, but it is also a representation of painting itself. I am interested in pointing out that even painting is changeable and transforms, putting a fiction in the foreground, a mental projection of our fluid thought. Generally, we try to fossilize things, to keep them rigid, but art can show us a different way to approach the big questions that cover our existence.

But you first started from photographs.

From 2001, I started to take hundreds of photographs of clouds with the intention of creating an *Atlas of Clouds* as a metaphor of the world, that is also constantly changing. I took photos of clouds wherever I was and then took note of the date and the place of the shot; today I reconsider them and choose them as models. I am interested in the idea that, despite the enormous change of everything, a photograph taken ten years ago can still tell me that on that precise date and in that precise place there was a specific cloud, where every cloud in this way also represents the historical cultural context of a specific place.

You draw them too.

Time stands still in a photographic shot and with a drawing I make a further transformation, using its freshness and its link with a fast time, which painting in the way I treat it, does not possess. I began to draw by following another idea, that of developing an *Encyclopaedia of clouds*, and this is linked to the fascination that acts on me the eighteenth century idea of the Encyclopaedia intended as a twist of reality and imagination, as well as an attempt to build a symbolic order capable of telling how the world is composed.

What process do you use to do your paintings and why do you make the colours yourself?

Before beginning the pictorial process of a new project, I go through a study and research phase with the aim of understanding the topic and deepening it in every aspect. Then, when I start painting, I live completely inside the painting, I follow its codes and its rhythms. My mind is connected to that manual dimension and search for colour and the right shape. I make the colours that I use because in this way nature itself enters the work and is ennobled. For me it is almost like an alchemical process, in which rough stone is transformed into the search for the philosopher's stone, becoming an analogy, a metaphor, of a profound transformation that can also take place within each of us.

Your clouds appear as mental visions, which emerge from a monochrome background that makes them the background and leap from the canvas through a construction of volumes.

In fact, all my research focused on the landscape has the general title of *Mindscaapes*, landscapes of the mind, in which the work on the monochrome is central and serves to construct a compositional discourse through full and empty spaces I want to extract from the pictorial space only what I think may be essential for the painting and this can only happen if every aspect, shape, colour and brushstroke maintain an authentic relationship with the space and become one with it. It is a way of overcoming the compositional dualism that is often found in the image.

How do you choose the clouds to be photographed, how do you decide which one is the right one?

I proceed by sensations, I often observe for a long time before taking pictures, I don't like clouds that transform quickly, I prefer those that try to accompany a slow rhythm of time, I am interested that they have definite shapes and contours, I perceive the cloud also as a volume, a body, a character.

It is as if you were looking, in its concrete expressions, for the ideal cloud; it is as if you represented ideas of a platonic type, whose rational images are clear to us so that they can be shared, but they become problematic when we try to translate them into concrete reality.

I believe so, but it is an ideal that runs through all my pictorial research. At the moment, it focuses on the shape of the cloud, but it is an ideal that transcends everything. In fact, the references I feed off – besides those of the Eastern philosophies we spoke about earlier – are often classical literature and Greek Roman mythology, Neoplatonism and the hermetic philosophies that influenced it, but also scientific studies in the field of astrophysics, Jungian psychoanalysis and neuroaesthetics.

How much of the Argentine landscape and the Pampas is there in your paintings?

That is my landscape, I grew up in it, it is a landscape defined by a flat horizon, a simple horizontal line; the further inwards you go and the further this line moves away, you want to reach something that is unattainable. You feel you are always on the road but feel you will never reach your destination. I am not interested in representing that landscape directly, but it certainly lives inside me, perhaps evoked – perhaps unconsciously – with a horizontal line at the bottom that I use in my paintings to make the space of the canvas boundless. If you wish, it's a way to get closer to the idea of infinity.

You work with ancient techniques.

I think art should speak about its time and in a context of hyper-technology I accepted the challenge of returning to the origin of things, to a manual skill that lies at the origin of art and that is based on awareness with respect to the materials used. To speed I put forward a contemplative dimension of

suspended time; to the mechanization of products and objects I put forward a sort of "manual skill". I am interested in thinking of an alternative in the ways of living, doing and thinking in these times. I believe that contemporary art is partly returning to this vision. Technology offers us the possibility of living better under certain points of view, but we must put it in dialogue with a conscious use of its tools, so that we can dominate them, and not be dominated by them.

Charles Baudelaire maintained that reality is a *forest of symbols* that refers to a higher reality, which from the psychological point of view betrays a sort of dissatisfaction with physical things and the concrete world. I think you feel it too.

For me it is a dissatisfaction with the visible, I try to go beyond the visible starting from the visible itself. The aim is to find out what the conformation of reality is, what it wants to tell us, what its structure is.

But you, as a painter, do it through a visual language that puts you in a condition of greater difficulty.

Painting is not just representing but it is above all an experience. When I spend three or four months painting a picture, what happens on the canvas also happens inside me, it is a symbiosis. I am not speaking of a mediumistic experience, but of a concrete experience from which one can find a dissatisfaction and an uneasiness towards everyday life: it is necessary to see how much you manipulate that daily to transform it into an access route to a higher degree of reading. Often you can't do it and the sense of disquiet comes from there. I instead think that it can be done with art.

I think that your painting can be defined as a gesture of *secular mysticism*, since through painting you touch the true nature of the thing, its symbol being, but without referring to a revealed religion. How do you think someone who is not a painter, can connect with this truth of the picture, of which you experience by painting?

I believe that an artist should not try to direct the thoughts of others but can offer them stimuli to open the mind. Everyone connects with their own tools, which derive from a particular sensitivity and an openness to certain codes that we all have deep down. It is a level of communication and reception that is empathic and works by following codes that deal with archetypes. I believe that there is a non-verbal communication that passes through the vision of the work. After all, the work speaks the language of symbols, and of a material that has existed, like the mineral which has become dust and pigment and which, through its composition with oil, becomes present in the picture as a whole of cellular units that transmit a memory.

So, you think that by looking at the painting, all of this is unconsciously perceived?

If the mind is predisposed, yes, of course. However, a contemplative gaze is required, and I believe that slowing down the gesture of painting, working in the way I have given myself, can help to access this gaze. It is a gaze that I also see in other fields of knowledge and that today returns to be a reason for reflection: a more conscious way of relating to the planet, with the environment, of understanding ecology as a dimension that involves all living beings and all our senses, to experiment the gestures that seemed of the past and that come back because man, who has moved away from his nature, is trying to get closer in a more emphatic and respectful way. I believe that art does not elude this way of feeling. For my part I try to create a painting that can be reunited with an idea of origin. Because the originality of things means exactly their being related with the beginning