

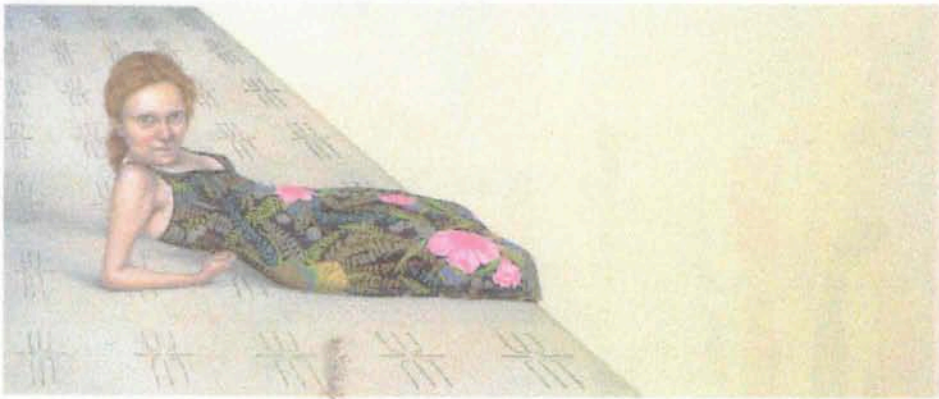
EXAMINING PICTURES

CATALOGO
DELLA MOSTRA
"EXAMINING
PICTURES"

WHITECHAPEL, LONDRA
N.C.A., CHICAGO
1999

TESTI DI
FRANCESCO BONATI
JUDITH RESBITT

Painting creates the clearest equivalent to the process of seeing, by placing the viewer in the privileged position of the artist, with nothing but the canvas before them. In this process of identification with the role of the artist, the viewer reoccupies the centre of the scene. The gaze that organises the painting and the gaze for which it is displayed meet in that present moment. Is this ability to see and be seen, to be both painter and viewer, a contemporary sensibility? Velázquez commanding gaze from his two-way reflective picture suggests not.



Manzelli's seductress dangles her legs over the edge between the realm of representation and the blank surface of the canvas. With her 'come hither' look (a determined attempt to make a relationship with the viewer), tight-lipped and with clenched fist, it would be a high risk strategy to tangle with her. In this picture, Manzelli stages a balancing act: like a pimp positioning one of his girls to pull a customer, so she sets up the relationship, in a blatant attempt to implicate the viewer in the spatial transaction of the picture.

Margherita Manzelli
Stilnox
1998

They're as confessional and confusing as someone showing you their bones. Hinting at strange and necessary secrets the postures of the women who dwell in Margherita Manzelli's pictures are inert and peculiar, punctuated by stilled introspective gestures. Frozen within the confines of the paintings and works on paper, something appears to be beyond their comprehension - as if some deep-seated, unspoken obsession is leaking out of the thin paint and hard lines that delineate their existence.

Perhaps these women are just exhausted - some of the titles of Manzelli's most recent paintings are named after sleeping aids: *Neobros*, *Sitrox* and *Dienzephale* (all works 1998). The tired skin of their faces seems riddled with insomnia, caught in the hallucinogenic glare of late night supermarkets. The only sign of movement is in their eyes or their fingers: the flickering, ready indicators of something, someone or somewhere else.

Colour is peeled away like a layer of clothing, until only the solid threads of canvas or paper remain: the lines that distinguish the body from air. Dangling limbs, manipulated by subtle distortions in scale, often fade away.

tucked beneath a resting body or curved across the division of a real space and a void. The act of painting itself - a way of passing through, and registering experience - has somehow claimed something from the anxiety that prompted the creation of these women. The drawing is exquisite. Fluctuating between an intense scrutiny of detail and a disparaging disdain of surface, it lends these excursions into nocturnal dissolution an appropriately dream-like combination of oppression and equivocation.

For all their disjunction, Manzelli's women inhabit spaces that are as consistently symmetrical as they are filled with an oddly benevolent anxiety. Her subjects may seem slightly unhooked, but her handling of them insists that their lack of equilibrium is infused with a certain logic - like a child finding the perfectly balanced centre of a see-saw. Large areas of nothingness zoom into the centre of the picture plane, only to collide with bodies which throb with concentrated detail: twisted fingers pluck at an ingrown hair or hover uncertainly above a thigh, bewildered faces split open with large eyes and otherworldly smiles, framed with bony shoulders and tapering, frighteningly flexible wrists. But for all their self-absorption, they never stop watching you looking at them. These are pictures complicated by the things that usually complicate apparently straightforward situations - a glance, a gesture, the ambiguous meanings that reside in and confuse the bluntest of intentions.

A woman sits demurely on an office chair, her stockings around her ankles. Her hands curled together in her lap (*Neobros*).

Another, in heavy walking boots, emerges from a psyche-

delic, cell-like gloom, her hands held out beside her naked body, her head protected by a colourful beanie (*Dienzephale*). The crudest way of exposing yourself may be to remove a piece of clothing, but sometimes it's also the most effective - nudity as an indicator of emotional openness. For Manzelli, however, naked skin functions like a confused and emotional border guard, not sure of who or what should be allowed in. In this sense, her women fluctuate between reticence and an almost overwhelming visibility.

None of the women are the same, but they echo each other like room-mates in the same psychic space. Their narrow limbs and oversized heads may be childlike, but their expressions are old and weary, as if memories of their former, more innocent selves had run amok and collapsed exhausted into the comfort of their own arms or the weight of their own spine. At times, their yearning is intensely sexual, but any development of their sexuality is permanently frustrated by the paint that imprisons them. Of indeterminate age, they could wait forever in the space they occupy to be filled with something more concrete than atmosphere or gloomy patterns. To escape they'd have to leap into the void - but most of them don't even have the necessary limbs to propel themselves. It's as if their bodies have become the walls of an eternal transit lounge in a nondescript airport.

The problem of being someone else's creation means that you can never change the way you look. Manzelli has painted a group of women who demand a certain intimacy from their audience but who have no control over how they might appear. As a result, there's an expectancy about their lack of realisation, as if they're waiting for someone to complete the unfinished sentence that has become their existence. But although they may appear to be worried or simply preoccupied, their self-absorption isn't crude or easily explained. They lean into the atmosphere like they're looking for some kind of abstract support, pushing against themselves, or into someone they're thinking about who won't ever arrive.

Ultimately though, you can never know what they're thinking - they're pictures; it's in their nature to keep you guessing. They stare out at you with the implacable disingenuity of exhausted spies.

Stillex, 1998 (detail)
Di on Calvin, 1991 (detail)

WOMEN ON THE VERGE

Jennifer Higgin on Margherita Manzelli

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SEPTEMBER 17 EYLÜL - OCTOBER 30 EKİM 1999



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Jennifer Higgle

Frieze, (March-April 1999).



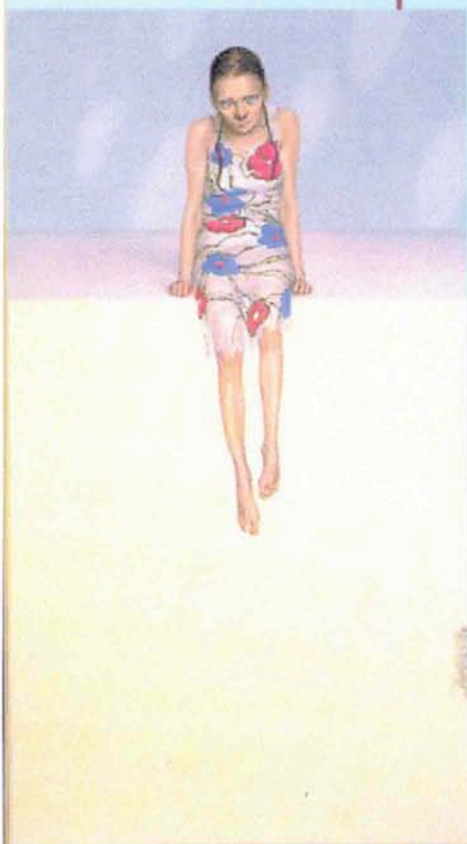
BORN IN RAVENNA, ITALY 1968. LIVES IN MILAN. MARGHERITA MANZELLI - 123

Margherita Manzelli

Studio Guenzani, **Milano**

Volti invecchiati, a volte malati; occhi troppo grandi, sgranati, fissi sullo spettatore; labbra chiuse come per trattenere qualcosa; corpi di bambina, spesso nudi. Le donne immaginate e dipinte da Margherita Manzelli popolano un mondo ossessivo, indagato con attenzione maniacale, in cui i personaggi inscenano un dialogo con l'intimità profonda e torbida dell'uomo contemporaneo. Allo stesso tempo, le figure di Manzelli stabiliscono un legame oscuro e impegnativo con lo spettatore, poiché l'atto dell'essere guardate esige e richiede la presenza di chi guarda: la nudità dei corpi femminili li protegge da qualsiasi altra richiesta e consente loro di fissare l'interlocutore con un atteggiamento provocatorio. Come in un gioco ozioso di rimandi visivi lo spettatore si trova nella posizione inconsapevole e involontaria di *voyeur*, smascherato, continuamente osservato e costretto a non potere nascondere le proprie manie e le proprie malattie. La pittura di Manzelli si definisce attraverso il rapporto tra le figure di donna in primo piano e i campi lunghi degli sfondi, spesso di carattere decorativo. Nei quadri realizzati in passato, le donne vivevano all'interno di ambienti borghesi, stanze confortevoli con arredi minimi, in un'atmosfera esistenziale che rivelava la stessa malattia sottile e dolorosa che colpisce la carne dei corpi nudi. Nella serie dei nuovi lavori presentati a Milano, le tonalità di colore degli sfondi sono diventate più acide, più luminose, quasi pop. Gli atteggiamenti, le mosse e le posizioni dei corpi appaiono adesso sospesi nello spazio infinito aperto ai loro piedi o alle loro spalle e l'espressione del male o del bene è trasposta dunque in una dimensione metafisica. In *Nottem*, per esempio, le gambe penzolano nel vuoto — la posizione dei piedi, tipica delle crocifissioni, ricorda El Greco — perdute in un giallo tenue che contrasta la violenza della posa. In un altro lavoro le vene, meticolosamente tracciate lungo tutto il corpo, creano un gioco visivo con la decorazione di una stoffa multicolore. Durante l'inaugurazione, Manzelli ha dato vita, come sua consuetudine, a una performance: l'artista dialogava con chiunque le si avvicinasse, mentre una stenografa registrava ogni parola della conversazione. Se le donne delle sue tele si offrono al nostro sguardo, nella performance l'artista ruba e conserva per sé le parole, le finzioni, i pensieri, le confidenze dello spettatore.

Salvatore Lacagnina



Margherita Manzelli,
Nottem, 2000, olio su lino,
250 x 200 cm.

MILANO

RECENZIONI

MARGHERITA MANZELLI

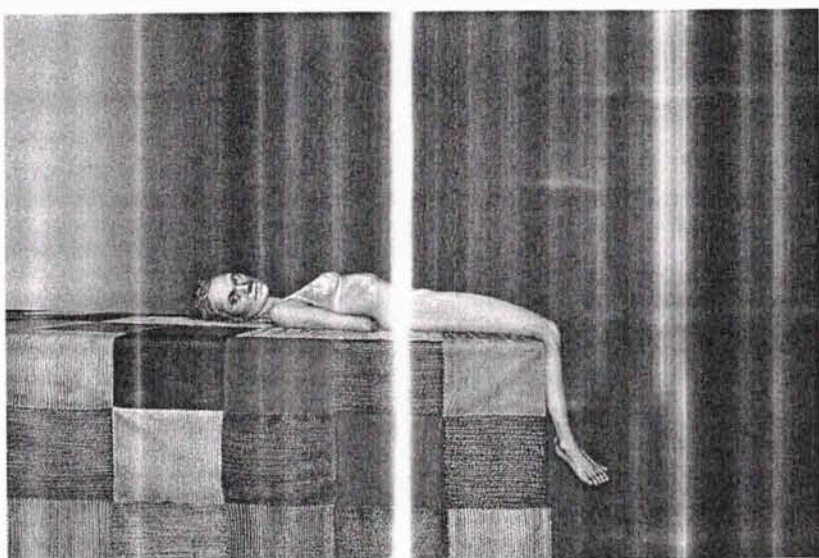
STUDIO GUENZANI

Grazie a un'intensa ricerca di nuove soluzioni pittoriche e a un'indubbia capacità di gestione, Margherita Manzelli rappresenta oggi l'unica credibile alternativa rispetto ad altre più conclamate espressioni per un'arte italiana che riscuota successo oltre confine. Tutto ciò mescolando al coraggioso, e inattuale, recupero della tradizione figurativa novecentesca (con climi e suggestioni che vanno da Casorati al "Ritorno all'ordine", dalla metafisica al realismo magico) la tematica del femminile, che nel suo caso pone senza timori il proprio se stesso al centro dell'opera, con una sincera carica di investimento esistenziale, tutta privata e senza alcuna implicazione sociale o politica (condizione che regge invece l'opera di molte artiste, da Marlene Dumas alla maggior parte delle giovani americane).

In questa sua nuova mostra da Guenzani, Manzelli presenta come al solito pochi lavori — tre grandi quadri più uno introduttivo — molto belli e particolarmente riusciti: Protagonista è sempre l'alter ego dell'artista, invecchiata e spettrale, con la pelle trasparente, le vene in evidenza, ma con le espressioni del viso che la rendono immediatamente riconoscibile e familiare.

Il soggetto abita — è proprio il caso di dire — ogni tela come fosse l'episodio singolo di un'unica lunga storia. Particolarmente belli sono *S*, dove questa enigmatica presenza è sdraiata su un grande cuscino a quadri colorati (forse un omaggio o una citazione di una scultura dell'artista californiano Jim Isermann), e *Binaural* in cui spicca l'innovazione formale del fondo, che di fatto costituisce il centro dell'opera, non più piatto e uniforme ma ondoso e spiraliforme a suggerire una lettura appunto nervosa e psichedelica, come di energia magnetica fuoriscita dalla testa del suo personaggio. Nella vacuità della scena, in cui la narrazione non prende mai il sopravvento, spiccano poi alcuni particolari descrittivi — come nelle stoffe degli abiti — in cui eccelle tutto il suo preziosismo pittorico.

Luca Beatrice



MARGHERITA MANZELLI, *S*, 2000. Olio su lino, 150 x 220 cm.

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