

DARK THEATRE

Emmanuel Bornstein belongs to a new generation of artists, a generation fortunate in being freed from the critical relationship with painting – often conflicted, sometimes anachronistic, rarely meaningful – that characterised the history of art during the second half of the last century. His work has nothing to do with purely formal investigations of aesthetic status, materials or the picture space. And even less to do with the purportedly philological approach of one recent backward-looking avant-garde, adroitly marketed under the label Transavantgarde. It is never about painting itself. On the contrary, it is the direct and quasi spontaneous (though certainly not naive) medium of a narrative imagination, rather than the dead end of a sterile, self-referential speculation. His paintings are, at most, enriched by the lessons and icons of the great masters, yet he never falls into modest/pompous paraphrase and never resorts to pedantic commentary or superfluous quotation: these lessons and icons are always integrated as the figures, masks or characters of a vast theatre that is just as much psychological as it is pictorial.

The fact is that Emmanuel Bornstein has a story to tell. A tale that's "full of sound and fury," told by "a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more." This tale owes a great deal to memory, to stories of memories, to the caprices and nightmares of memory and their representation. His painting has a very clearly dramatic quality – the decors, lights and costumes serve to show something that could not be revealed without the filter of a theatrical presentation. And so against backdrops as black as the wings of a theatre, as dark as Goya's *Caprichos* or the smoke rising from the chimneys of Auschwitz, he accumulates, cleverly composed, a breathless and teeming crowd of victims and executioners, monsters, asses, rulers, wolves, clowns and falling bodies, overcome by the force of history's gravity, drawn towards the abyss. Disasters of war, tragic and grotesque. The truth of suffering, and a human masquerade. Choreography of terror, and dance of death.

The narrative character of these works is expressed in a pictorial alphabet essentially comprising four colours: black, white, grey and yellow. A chromatic scale of memory, dominated by darkness, and shot through with a few rays of yellowish light, as livid as the sunlight of the camps, picking out the grey of the guards' uniforms, which merges with the grey of donkey skin, engulfing the skin tones, now ghostly white, of the deportees. And the drawing serves to heighten the dramatic tension, creating within the composition a conflict between the figures that are represented realistically and those that are barely sketched in with a few brushmarks, as if a struggle were ongoing within the painting itself between remembering and forgetting, between the attempt to retain all these images and the need to be rid of them, the poignant desire to put a name to every face and the inevitable disappearance of their identity. The result is painting that is authentically inhabited by theatre, not only in its images but also in its conception and its method – and all infused with a pathos at once intense and profound.

While looking at Emmanuel Bornstein's paintings I could almost hear the harrowing, captivating waltz that accompanies the main scene of Tadeusz Kantor's *Dead Class*, in which an elderly supervisor passes among the students, cutting them down to the rhythm of the dance. I don't think that this was a coincidence: the two worlds share many close affinities. Yet this reference to a great master of the stage should not be read as an attempt to magnify the work of a young artist, much less to enclose it within a fixed interpretive framework. It merely serves to highlight an atmosphere I loved so much, a fragrance rising to the surface of the mind through memory's sweet torment. Theatre of memory, dark paintings. Paintings of memory, dark theatre.

Didi Bozzini, November 2011