

Excerpt from*:

“Solar” paintings from Hopper to the new generations.

By Nicola Vitae

Published 2016 by Milan-Udine in the series: Discours - Figure directed by Elio Franzini, Professor of Aesthetics at Università degli Studi di Milano.

*Translated from Italian

8) Andrea Joyce Heimer – *Even Though Mrs. Miller Thought She Was Allergic To Her Environment She Still Put On Perfume Every Day And Sometimes Lipstick Too*, 2009



Andrea Joyce Heimer was born in Montana. She is a painter with an innate sense of colour and compositional technique which is combined with a singular decorative and symbolic obsession. Her moderately sized paintings open onto domestic scenes with acutely disturbing features. A seemingly infantile expressive manner is combined with descriptions that take on a weirdly brutal and perverse nature. The artist represents the interiors of middle class homes or views of the exteriors of ordinary detached houses with gardens, typical of the outskirts of most American towns. But what occurs, what seems described as the most normal everyday life, has in fact more of a dream-like character, a nightmare in which the familiar presences of the world we are accustomed to assume a hostile and menacing aspect.

Men and women, often dressed in body stockings and balaclavas, are intent on gardening, bike-riding, having a barbecue in the garden and other ordinary occupations, but which look as if they will inevitably degenerate (fig. 62). Quarrels become real battles that leave bleeding wounded on the field. But events proceed in a vortex of uneasiness right up to a hallucination of thunder clouds that build up even inside the houses; ferocious animals appear, rabid dogs,

cheetahs and hyenas that disturb the peace with their threatening presence; until finally, from the darkest dream, monsters and devils appear that hover above sowing anxiety and terror, or the frightening dream, turning back into ordinariness, reveals the unimportant presence of flying saucers.

Childhood or adolescence experienced in a small town has left a mark that appears to have surfaced in her paintings like a kind of obsession. With her individual form of symbolism, Andrea Heimer makes a show of the “human comedy” of contemporary life, without hiding its disquieting side where a sort of lucid collective madness lurks. Her recurring theme of “suburbia” suggests that the outskirts are not only a scene of social exclusion but that the root “sub” seems to indicate a steep decline, a decayed civilisation, man who has become subhuman.

The innocent games of youth take on disturbing forms: the pyjama party, the pillow fight or the games of a bored society like strip poker, are all moments that disclose an undertone of perversion and violence.

The theme of disguise, like all Andrea Heimer’s figuration, has a strongly symbolic nature. It seems to allude to a masked humanity that does not show its true face, which hides sometimes behind the anonymity of the unspoken or sometimes, when the balaclavas become coloured, behind the false dignity of disguises and frivolous appearance.

If the artist’s pictures stopped with this content, then they would be no more than a sort of social protest, like many other images starting from Otto Dix’s satirically-based scenes that exposed the sick soul of bourgeois decadence and the horrors of war. But Andrea Heimer paints this sick world in pastel colours of extraordinary softness, her compositions always look for the balance of harmony, her formal invention always has exquisite and interesting solutions; the decorative aspect has an important role, covering walls, carpets and curtain material with captivating patterns. She repeats small figurative modules with obsessive care, filling whole areas of the painting with a striking effect of vibration and suggesting children’s illustrations.

In fact the naivety of the figures and the manner with which objects are simplified in her pictures call to mind the stroke used in children’s drawings. An easy interpretation could be that she shows us the expression of an innocent spirit, like that of a child who observes the world that he does not understand but that disturbs him. But this seems short-sighted in that Andrea Heimer’s works cannot be considered naïf. From a formal point of view her paintings are always formally resolved, despite the limited and intentionally defective use of representational means – typical of naturalism – like perspective and the theory of shadows. Nor is the content naïve: it discloses a symbolic character with intellectual implications that have nothing to do with childishness.

How is it therefore possible to reconcile the harmonious beauty of her paintings with the ferocity of the content? It is in this peculiar combination that the concept of *solare* lies, which Andrea Heimer’s work approaches. As we have stressed repeatedly, this is not a predetermined ideological choice but a profound expressive instinct of our times which changes aesthetic principles completely. In particular, we find in her works some correspondence with the work of Luigi Ontoni or in some way with that of Angermann, in which the disenchanting view on decadent contemporary life paradoxically urges a rediscovery of a kind of re-enchantment. But to go back to the origin of this concept of ours, we can find similarity in the painting of Edward Hopper, who – even though with very different formal means – paints solitude, not as a criticism of society but as something to accept and welcome as a hardship that modern society tends to hide and remove; it is like a sort of new awareness in which embarrassing and painful reality must be accepted and not denied, reintegrated into full consciousness, with a vitalising, and in the end also joyful

affirmation. Andrea Heimer's poetics seems to belong to this completely new change in perception, but which is based on ancient premises that perhaps go back to the beginning of time. Here in fact beautiful medieval paintings come to mind in which in the midst of the splendour of colour and an aura of transparency and serenity, the cruellest crimes are depicted, such as decapitations, martyrs at the stake and the slaughter of the innocents. However, whereas in the Middle Ages it was faith that accepted such acts as the workings of Divine Providence, a similar splendour in the pictures of the American artist appears to want to temper external violence with inner peace, accept it knowingly and refashion it, gaining the strength to overcome it as oriental wisdom has taught for millennia.

The long titles of Heimer's paintings – the complete opposite of the lapidary "without title" that the inexpressible nature of the picture would require – are parodies of the incidental prolixity of words, useless chatter, descriptions of situations simultaneously of puerile logic and meaningless. One of her most exquisite pictures of recent years is a small square painting of little more than 10" x 10", acrylic and pencil on wood, dated 2009: *Even Though Mrs. Miller Thought She Was Allergic To Her Environment She Still Put On Perfume Every Day And Sometimes Lipstick Too*. It is possibly one of the artist's least colourful works, of neutral composition, where whites and blacks are predominant; but it is extremely thorough and organic, and we can see the finesse of the chromatic and compositional solutions.

The lady in the picture is in fact disguised, wearing a balaclava and a tight-fitting check body stocking. She is looking at herself in the large bathroom mirror, so the figure seems duplicated in the reflection. It is this reflection that enriches the picture's variety, in which, as in all the artist's paintings, perspective and the volumes of objects are rendered on a single plane, with simplified connotations that remind one, as said, of children's drawings; a combination of reflection and deviated perspectives that here creates the effect of an hallucination.

However from a formal point of view, one is immediately struck by the skilfully organised structure of the composition in which different parts are harmonised, like for example the black and white chequered floor. Or vice versa, where there is symmetry of similar elements (with a risk of monotony), we see effective variations, like for example the floral pattern of the grey-green wallpaper on the left which on the right is broken to make way for the light colour of the shower curtain.

In the centre of the picture, well contained by the lateral elements that form a coloured and decorated frame, is the white panel that simulates the tiled part of the bathroom, with the washbasins and mirror. This central part of the painting, unlike the sides that frame it, is mostly treated graphically, with thin lines drawn on the white background, where the two washbasins also appear as simple outlines in contrast with the lined surface below. The white of this central part is echoed on the sides by the white flowers of the wallpaper and by the curtains on the right, and below by the white tiles which alternate with black ones, which in turn are in harmony with some small black areas inside the central white surface.

Now let us see how these clear-cut differences in the surfaces described above, while coordinated chromatically, still need minimal variations and further formal relationships in order to be integrated organically. In fact it can be seen how in the central white part, although mostly only drawn, there are some full shapes, completely painted, which interrupt its monotony: for instance the pictures on the back wall seen reflected in the mirror, or the half-open cupboard on the right where a grey surface and a pile of coloured towels can be glimpsed, or again on the left where the light brown wall with the diamond pattern and part of the pink bathtub are reflected. The female figure's reflection shows her opposite while she appears to put the balaclava straight, a good metaphor to show (as previously introduced) the care of a false – masking – outside appearance.

It is important to see how in this detail of the picture (the reflection of Mrs Miller) four levels with different connotations are superimposed, making it one of the richest parts of the painting. Here first of all we find the compact decoration of the figure's body stocking, where a quadrangular pattern of countless colours is perfectly integrated, implying (as in all Heimer's painted fabrics) a flat surface intended to represent a volume, with a unique effect of expressive synthesis. But only the upper part of the figure is reflected and so only a limited part of the decoration, on which the leaves of the plant on the shelf are superimposed. In this way both a warm-cold contrast is created between the green of the plant and the largely red of the body stocking, and also an effective variation that prevents monotony in the relationship between the figure and its reflection. But as said, the figure's reflection is also superimposed on the background planes between the reflections of the yellow curtain and part of the pink bathtub, with the appropriate part of the pale brown wall above it. In all this we have a virtuoso of formal and chromatic solutions of great merit, inasmuch as the highly complex coordination of the planes in this detail are perfectly integrated in the whole painting. At this point it is worthwhile taking another look at the relationship between the figure and its reflection. We can see the function of the mass of grey-blue of the lavatory next to the figure, which with its uniform and cooling colour creates a perfect contrast harmonising the patterned and multi-coloured body stocking. But as the reflection is of smaller proportions compared to the figure, the grey-blue mass, in order to achieve an appropriate cooling effect, must also be reduced, as can indeed be seen with the vase on the shelf which serves the same formal function as the lavatory. This grey-blue finds balancing echoes throughout the painting: in the mountains in the picture hanging on the reflected wall, in other little objects on the shelf, among the towels in the cupboard, but above all in the carpet. Along with the pink carpet it creates an important variation to the monotony of the chequered floor, enlivening the whole painting. In its turn, the pink is echoed in the towel hanging on the left of the mirror and in a paler variation (which softens the relation) in the bathtub and its reflection.

In the little objects lying on the floor, echoes of all the colours of the painting are found, harmonising them with the chequered surface. There are socks, glasses, combs, another balaclava, gloves and so on. As can often be seen in Andrea Heimer's paintings, personal objects are spread on floors or the pavement, abandoned, lost and forgotten. They are tiny objects, out of proportion, as if they were the organic remains of an excessively equipped wealthy humanity, remains that are disseminated, by now dead and useless like the squandered words of long titles.