

VITTORIA CHIERICI

### SAILING AWAY TO PAINT THE SEA

Vittoria Chierici was not suddenly stricken with a passion for the sea, already in 2006 she had boarded a merchant marine ship in New Jersey to make the documentary "Wave Containers" focusing on sailors and their lives aboard ships. In the summer of 2012 she decided to venture in the open sea, following the "Great Circle Route", the shortest line between Europe and the Americas, running along the 50<sup>th</sup> parallel in the North starting from Amsterdam's industrial harbor and ending in Cleveland crossing the North Sea, the English Channel, the Saint Lawrence River and Seaway and the Great Ontario and Erie Lakes which are connected by the seven locks of the Welland Canal.

In Euclidean space every circle is exactly a "great circle" of a sphere; in geography comparing Earth to a sphere all meridians and the Equator are maximum circles, while in navigation the term "maximum circle" denotes the shortest distance between two points on the Earth's surface. In the heavenly sphere the astronomic horizon is a great circle too.

Vittoria's journey was a total immersion in a mathematical and mythological space becoming an incommensurable reality, without borders, searching for another space on earth following an ancient route towards a New World which was already ancient. It was a journey on the Ocean that had been sailed upon by the Spanish caravels of the European colonizers, by immigrants with the American Dream in their suitcases, the great sea into which artist Bas Jan disappeared in the 70s "in search of the miraculous".

Vittoria Chierici's journey was a pioneer's effort which was accurately planned on land. The artist, who is a stranger to commercial agreements with galleries and a staunch defender of her autonomy of operation, personally contacted a group of friends and collectors willing to finance the project in advance by buying a share corresponding to a painting yet to be painted. She boarded a safe mercantile ship, equipped with state of the art technology, long and narrow so that it could sail inland in rivers, yet strong and made of steel so as not to succumb to the challenges of the open sea. Fifteen days of navigation during which she worked without pause and with every means available in her "work-station" consisting of small wooden table situated in the stern, on the B bridge, from which she photographed, filmed, painted, urged on by the need to paint "live", not to leave anything out while providing very accurate, realistic and emotional documentation, like an entomologist in the nuances. In her blog, she told about the sense of freedom she felt in front of a perfectly curved horizon which was always visible, the safety of feeling small in the immensity of the sea, and what it meant to lose consciousness of arrival and destination. Her return to reality was marked by the metallic clicking of the great locks once fluvial navigation started with its mechanical and artificial intermittences. "Sailing away to paint the sea" became a project that was expressed as well as accomplished; the artist directly confronted her own craft, implementing the whole array of artistic "languages" at her disposal so that she could transport us on a boat in the middle of the Ocean as well.

First of all the process of *plein air* painting. Vittoria painted a sequence of small format canvasses (25 X 30 cm) placing in the center of each of them a print of a photograph showing a frame of water, each one

differing in brightness, color, wave pattern, specific quality (ocean water, river water, lake water), smell, depth, transparency or sometimes its relation to the sky above. A potentially infinite series, which appears to be devoid of critical judgment and yet seems to generate itself according to a medieval principle of knowledge as a process of addition besides the contemporary trend of the exponential multiplication of images unleashed by the popularization of digital photography. Judgment is in fact suspended, or rather, expressed by manifesting the natural impossibility to assign an aesthetic or emotional value that is objective or superficial vis-à-vis the primordial element from which life began.

Her analysis is instead constant and lucid, is not scared off by the immensity of space and the titanic nature of her endeavor. Each of these photographic images is framed by a large border taken up by Chierici's brush strokes which, while suggesting an instinctual intervention, convey the exact impression of what you see in the photograph. It is then a type of expression that uses a different style of realism, with an augmented impact yet a naked one, after the disappearance of the accidents of physicality of vision, which is instead the basis for photo-reporting. An abstraction which decodes essence, a catalog of abstractions that bravely confront their direct referent and betray the artist's subjective perception without losing their peculiar scientific nature.

A sort of water dowsing game is involved in the process she uses to develop her paintings. First Vittoria prints the photograph on the canvass, then she masks it so that she can freely paint the hidden subject, which is destined to reveal itself again only when the operation is completed. It is an ironic kind of game as the painter chooses as her field of action the space that is traditionally reserved to the frame, thus negating any type of classification, while having fun emphasizing a cocky negation of landscape painting (a nineteenth century favorite). Her first painting in the series winks at Courbet's "Le bord de mer a Palavas" surrounded by Vittoria's painting. At last returning home: Vittoria Chierici who has been living in New York for years (after rising to fame in the 90s, mentioned among those innovators whose reference point was Corrado Levi) presented her work first in the Frigoriferi Milanesi gallery, then in Bologna, her native city with two shows that lasted a very brief time before the paintings were delivered to the patrons who had funded the project. They were finally reunited in a sort of "blind date".

This is an atypical *vernissage* – the only chances to see the whole series which from its inception was destined to be broken up. In its complete form, the series is able to convey the Ocean in its entirety, and the intention to codify and abstract the incommensurable in a sequence of space-temporal-water units, with the painter acting as a participant-seismologist. The minimal set-up, the simple juxtaposition inside a room, turns these small canvasses into fragments of narrative art with an implied story for which no words are needed. It is also a work in progress: the footage of moving waterscapes filmed on the ship, the work of the artist and her interactions with the crew was professionally edited to reconstruct a captain's vlog. A brief pre-view of the video was screened at the presentation in Bologna thereby transforming the exhibit in a performance event as well, with the participation of Marco Dalpane, a pianist and composer who performs live music for silent movies. His piano music interpreted the voice of the waves in an original composition following the suggestions of the visual work of Vittoria Chierici, paving the way for a synthesis of artistic languages which by itself was able to complete transfigure the plain environment hosting the exhibit, with no need for anything else.