

## INSIDE OUT

At the time of writing, the mass media are busy covering the Israeli air raids on Gaza. A few days ago I came across one of the many dramatic images of this, in a newspaper.

Three fathers, followed by a crowd in procession, were holding in their arms babies who had been killed by the bombardments. Each victim was wrapped in a white sheet, the colour encapsulating their total innocence in a ghastly way. The photographer's expert eye had captured the scene head-on. There was a precise symmetry between each element: the distance between the three oncoming men, the three white sheets covering the children's bodies, each perfectly uniform, and the faces of the fathers, now dulled in almost suffocated pain. That cold frontal view, that studied symmetry, hit us with full dramatic impact. In just one frame, what the photographer's eye sees manages to say much more than words: it denounces a crime; it shakes us to the core. The next day, equally dramatic images must have superseded this particular shot. Photographs of political events and all kinds of news must have come after it. Each news story lives and burns bright for a day, to be frozen in oblivion the day after.

I do not mention this very powerful image by accident, for it had affected me profoundly. Moreover, I believe that, quite unexpectedly, I have started to look more carefully at the pictures published in the press since I began to find out about the artistic research of Christina Maria Pfeifer. Somehow the image captured in Gaza, apart from its dramatic content, links in with my reflections since I started working on the exhibition *Frozen Hotspots*.

Pfeifer likes to define one facet of herself as 'news junkie'. An avid newspaper reader, the artist has built up a personal archive of pictures over the years. Collected thus in a scrapbook, and clipped out of their newsprint context, they now seem in search of a life of their own, of a separate identity.

The latter is a dynamic within the life and destiny of newspaper images and their manipulation by the expert eyes of photographers, spin doctors and political advisers, which has prompted part of Pfeifer's artistic research and continues to motivate it.

She graduated in economics and embarked on an academic career. She then left it to work as a strategy adviser in a small think tank which specialized in the production of a type of software which enabled the artist to analyse and map out the reasoning processes followed by political and industrial decision-makers.

She not only has an in-depth knowledge of this field and what influences it. She combines it with a love of all kinds of artistic practice, which she has cultivated since childhood: writing, music and the visual arts. All this has led her to create the series now exhibited, using her own, uniquely personal, language and writing.

Creating these works is a slow process at the start. The artist takes a long look at the image, now detached from the news it once illustrated. Gradually imagination takes hold. Coupled with careful analysis and research, this provides the intangible stimulus by which the picture is conceived. The pace is slow, for this first stage is one of concentration. As a result, step by step, the artist starts to see the image already transformed. With the picture clear in her mind, she can start work on depicting it. She sticks the image carefully on to card. Then her hand starts moving quickly across it. With total freedom and detachment, Pfeifer starts to trace thin lines of ink on the photograph. Her preliminary analysis gives way to frenzied activity. She is impatient to tease a new image out of the photograph. Her special kind of 'writing'

consists of many lines which seem to appear and disappear in constant interplay between inside and outside. With the passage of time, her first childhood drawings have matured into an artist's stylistic cipher. Now it is this which reaches the point of destroying the image and creating, instead, a new perspective. It is a sort of 'fourth dimension' which does more than reveal how the scene in the photograph has been manipulated. Specifically, it unveils a new meaning of the image. The content is gradually internalized by the technique. She adds several oil pastel layers to those thin inked lines. Her choice of twelve intense colours seem to assume a near-symbolic value. They come to represent the intensity of Pfeifer's sense of each picture and her approach to it. But the sometimes dominant bright red also comes to symbolise a role of absolute power and a trial of strength, as with the closed fist of President Bush in *The President and the Saints*. At other times it gives a hieratic impression, as in her portrayal of the Russian icon in *Russian Body of State*. The artist achieves these tones of varying brightness by superimposing layers of colour on the image. In some cases it even becomes almost unrecognizable, as in the series *Power Breast*. Here, the six works of small dimensions seem to change into painting so that the original glued image is no longer easily discerned. Each stage of the creative process tends to contrast with this original image and seems to enjoy the widest freedom to erode it in different ways, by superimposing different layers, like photographs touched up by computer. It is a sensual game of change of the material which finally leads towards a new dimension of the image, though its origin never wholly disappears. This gives rise to the term 'oil pastel montage,' coined by the artist for her works in the exhibition. She thinks of a title for the picture as part of the creative process itself. The artist writes it at the bottom of the picture, so that it becomes part of it. The title is essential, not only to proceed with the creation of each work, but also because of its close link to the picture.

The installation entitled *Paradise Vest, Life Vest, Security Vest* allows the viewer to see, in three-dimensional space, the same process as she applies to oil pastel montages. The work consists of three showcases from which three different vests arise, almost like sculptures, braced by iron ribs inside. They form part of a work which has been in progress for some time: the artist is working on ten vests.

Pfeifer has modified each of the vests she displays at the exhibition by using colour and sewing large numbers of gold buttons in different positions on each garment. Like the images of her previous oil pastel montages, they are eroded by her use of ink and oil pastels. Thus each part of the installation impinges on the vests to contrast with our accustomed image of them, to explore new avenues of meaning.

Seen from afar, the jackets attract our attention, like high fashion displayed in brightly lit shop windows. Bit by bit, as we approach, we begin to notice the details, to read the titles written on the plinths supporting the windows. Then we encounter the first state of dislocation. We immediately recognise the outlines of a jacket used by suicide bombers, of a lifejacket issued to passengers of ships, and of a bullet-proof vest.

That initial breaking of step gives way to a careful analysis of the details. The front of *Paradise Vest* is covered with 700 glistening gold buttons like a cluster of little mirrors. In reality, if we look closer, the uncovered pockets reveal the presence of explosives. The *Security Vest*, used by the police, security guards and troops, features gold buttons sewn only to the shoulders, like in military uniform though, ironically, the artist distances herself from this by sewing too many on.

A collage painting accompanies each showcase. With the three titles, this completes the significance of each vest and invites us in deeper to understand its meaning. The main motif of *Paradise Vest* and *Security Vest* is a plan of the walls of the Old

City of Jerusalem, considered the ideal of the city and a symbol of security and peace. Such is the dream of humanity and the origin of the three greatest monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In the first work, featuring the *Paradise Vest*, the walls surround a garden representing the promised paradise, as portrayed in the Muslim tradition. The Islamic paradise Pfeifer depicts is full of flowers reminiscent of the gold buttons she has sewn to the vests. She plants them at different levels, just as paradise has different levels in Islam. These become points linking a grid through which we can discern the places held holy by all three religions. But, as soon as we notice the black beneath the golden tint, it belies the gleam of the gold. Two black vortexes next to the image of the Dome of the Rock have the same effect: this is where the holy places of Christianity and Judaism ought to appear. The image of paradise enclosed within the walls of Jerusalem seems to implode frighteningly upon itself. The Earth, in the background with its seven continents, in turn encloses part of the city plan, pulling it in. The encircling movement all around it is not easy on the eye. Instead it lends the image a veiled sense of worry. Paradise becomes a restrictive place with no way out, where the artist imagines the Christian and Jewish religions as black holes, with no point of contact with Islam.

The second work, featuring the *Security Vest*, repeats the previous vision of Jerusalem as the ideal city, where the material and spiritual worlds join. In this case the city walls open out to the image of Earth seen from the universe. All around it are images of famous skyscrapers and the four points of the compass. They seem almost to grow from the foundations of the garden of palm trees around the walls. In dark green, the trees take the forms almost of a hidden paradise. These same buildings of an ideal city, symbol of harmony and peace, paradoxically point threateningly towards the Earth at the centre. They make their presence felt at a distance, like missiles keeping it under constant attack. Suddenly each image seems to start to vibrate in a dangerously hanging atmosphere, in the movement of the palm trees, in the murky chiaroscuro where green and black alternate. This makes the whole work subtly equivocal. Can the utopia of the ideal city coexist peacefully with life on Earth, or will it finally attack it?

In both works, the images seem viewed from outside, from the universe, in an imaginary union of heaven and earth. But, at the same time, they also offer us an inside view, both of the promised Islamic paradise and of a utopian ideal city. The installation's centrepiece is the *Life Vest*, weakly closed by a single thread wound twice around it. The ends of the thread cross over in front and are held by two gold buttons. Tied like this, the lifejacket commonly used to stay afloat, and therefore save the wearer's life, seems to represent the vulnerability of our lives. For the work associated with this last vest, Pfeifer has used images taken from ultrasound scans of her own body, and we can guess which parts are which. The human body, depicted in a foetal position, is seen in a new way, through an interplay of inside and out. It becomes the metaphor for the lifejacket worn on ships, aboard which our balance tends to wobble, just as when we emerge into the light and start to live. At the same time that body seems suspended in the protective amniotic fluid of the maternal womb. Its state is one of profound peace, an unconscious part of us from our first life experiences.

Whenever we look at the works of Christina Maria Pfeifer we almost have the impression of looking out of a window open on to the world, which we can observe from a special coign of vantage. It is as if that window becomes a passage - our passage - by which we enter a 'fourth dimension'. The initial dislocation which affects us as we behold a reality in which we recognise images and signs

unexpectedly yields to the language used by the artist. Then, in an instant, we discover a new knowledge of each thing as we seek possible new worlds.

Eleonora Di Erasmo, Curator; February 2009

*Translated from the Italian by Hugh J. Morgan.*

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