Masked, unmasked

It's been almost 15 years since Donald held his exhibition at H'art. I remember it took place during summer and, obviously, we were young. The exhibition had a bizarre title, chosen specially by the artist: “The portrait of D.Juns”. I remember that, in a hurry, I first read it as “The portrait of Dr. Jung”, a mistake commonly seen in others too. I didn't bother too much with the title, at that time, for me it seemed like a legitimate self-fiction technique that any artist is entitled to use. There were about 7-8 canvases with The Couple as the main subject. The theme was the distance inside a couple, the strangeness of such an encounter, and its origin. Or so I thought.

The painting had an hieratic air, people were exposed in frozen positions, they were posing like they would in an epoque photo, either sitting on a sofa or standing with an attitude as if staged by a photographer from the Neckermann magazine. The backgrounds were a kind of an inflorated, lively wallpapers that contrasted with the oppressive atmosphere produced by the expressionless pairs, all frozen in one grave, slightly frowning gaze. The eyes of the characters are constantly fixed, lost in melancholy, and without a clear focus, lost somewhere behind the viewer. You might as well say it’s the gaze of a “mindless chicken looking into the woods”. It is, in fact, the very same gaze that turns to itself and cancels the exterior with its eyes wide open. You’re looking into the abyss, and that abyss is an inner one, the source-place of all our desires. This is how Donald starts to stage so, so many situations of inadequacy.The portraits, as I was telling you, suggest something on the edge of the monstrous, an anomaly that suddenly makes you abandon the idea that they are the portraits of *someone*, from the very beginning. They are generic, and all have common features, whether they represent men or women. Nobody smiles, except for Marilyn Monroe, whose canvas seems like a collage-portrait, her head seems to be added like a mask. Most of the women from the couples reveal their sex in a surprising gesture, contrasting with the couple's artificial, sober and melancholical posture.

Back then, during that summer 15 years ago, I did not trouble myself too much, the enigma seemed well-built, its decryption could wait, the art could continue, his works had many details like the above inserted in such a way as to produce a state of paradoxical anxiety, summerly painted on floral backgrounds. Donald continued to paint using these parameters and, I can only now, that the works are put together and somewhat chronologically ordered, start to see that some subtle changes are taking place along the way. Firstly, the following year (2007) reveals a series of paintings in which the background becomes more watermarked and less pop, it's not about couples anymore, but about a mini-series of women's portraits, a little warmer, almost alive. The technique is becoming more confident, the chromatic agreements are becoming more refined. There is a portrait in his profile (page 24) slightly off-centered and dubbed “I am the background” which, through employing methods to divert your attention from the woman’s profile, only makes it much more evident.

It's a Piero della Francesca play which takes up modern compositional freedoms. Out of the parameters of the first exhibition in H’art, some still exist: the hieratic air of faces and that frown which is, from time to time, subdued by a female smile (pages 22 and 25). The year 2007 also brings an extraordinary series of paintings that revisit the original subject and the associated theme.

Here, D.S.'s technique reaches its peak. Love date scenes that don't seem to deal nor with love, nor with sex, kind of like snapshots in a transit brothel for the traveling salesmen. As a painting, the achievement is complete, there are some chromatic plane agreements in the works Between, 2007 - p. 28, Before, 2008 – p. 29 or After - 2008, p. -30, which charm and yet again create a dissonance between the subject – the inadequacy in meeting with the opposite sex, and the warm, maternal background. The year 2008, the most prolific year, produces indoor scenes where the characters sit, the couples sit on bourgeois sofas, the alienation is implicit and it slowly becomes a character itself, first as a snail phoetus on a girl's bed. Then, Gregor Samsa turns into the Lacoste crocodile that will suffer a series of martyrdoms. He's hanged, gutted and dangling in hooks. Hanged, drawn and quartered, as would the English say, the punishment for high treason. When cut into pieces (page 46 - Perfectible slicing), the crocodile has its interior coloured in primary colors.

Newer works opt for a more realistic style in which people appear with their hands in their pockets, a symbol of indifference, resignation and relaxation. There are also small scenes of successful dates, those happy moments in Que Pasa in which the feeling of being foreign melted and paradise was simply there, on Praporgescu street. The catalogue ends with two key works. First of all, the portrait of a woman who draws a thorn from her heel (a clear reference to the “Spinario” statue), and an even clearer memento mori, and the work entitled “Baker”, the one that closes the story. Who's the baker?

Looking at the above, I have tried to understand the stake at least now, 15 years after the first exhibition. Here's my reading: A first key would be that, in every character, human or non-human, Donald paints himself. Look at the artist's photo at the end of the catalogue, you will see that frown on the face of all the portraits in his works. He is both Lenin and Elvis and Che Guevara, the snail, the crocodile and all the women who uncover themselves in all possible ways. He is the woman with the thorn in her heel, and he is also the baker who unrolled, wrapped and baked everything and everyone. These works are the Portraits of D. Gray or the Portraits of the Artist as a Young Man (D.Juns), self-portraits through which the artist tries to find equilibrium, to assume his innate anima, to solve the big theme that goes through all D.S’s works - *"What am I doing here and why does life seem like a grotesque accident?"* All of Donald's works are like masks, they are artistic duplications that invoke the *self* lost somewhere, here in the world. This is what the mask does, it's a tool to create sacred moments, and Donald uses it brilliantly.

Before ‘89, there was a TV show titled “Masked, Unmasked”. The pattern of the show consisted of a masked personality being invited to interpret something (a vignette, or a song, etc.). The audience in the room were betting on who could it be. I was young and I remember it was my favorite show. I also remember that every time the masks were taken off, I had a feeling of disappointment, even when I could already guess who was the person behind the masked character. It was the unshakeable feeling that once the masquerade ends, when the masks were taken off, there was little time left before the host entered and announced the end of the show.