

OSART GALLERY

The Panza enigma and the Modiano key

by Nicola Ricciardi

A skilled collector does not just choose their artworks with personal taste or passion, but rather reflects on how to relate and match them with context, history, and culture. And given that such artworks will necessarily change over time, even the most well-established collections often appear unpredictable and volatile: throughout the years, their paths split, their layerings overlap, and their weave is sometimes so complex that it's hard to grasp the interwoven threads just by looking at the final fabric. The richness and splendor in the Panza Collection warp is no exception, counting over 2,500 artworks acquired in more than 50 years of research. Although Giuseppe Panza stands out for having collected a large number of artworks from a quite limited list of artists, his explorations and discoveries are not delimited nor linear, but rather follow vast and sometimes unpredictable routes. Starting from the 50's, Panza has set out to discover the European Art informel as well as the American Pop Art, later to cross the roads of Minimal and Conceptual Art, and finally arrive to – always ahead of time - Organic and Land Art, already in the second half of the 80's. Trying to read, to interpret, and to narrate his marvelous circumnavigation today require a deductive effort and a taste for investigation: we find ourselves on the quest of clues and hidden meanings, putting together a strong yet sometimes invisible idea. The present exhibition is conceived as an attempt to give a form to such investigation, focusing on one of the most evocative cores of the Panza Collection, namely Conceptual Art, and on the work of eight selected artists – Robert Barry, Max Cole, Stephen Dean, Allan Graham, Ron Griffiin, Douglas Huebler, Jonathan Seliger, and Ian Wilson – united by a particular attention to words, both as a mean of communication and as an object of investigation. Like many conceptual artists, the eight characters of this story face language not as a conventional and random code, but rather as a complex and ambiguous system that can lead to multiple interpretations, word games, and paradoxes. Unfolding on the walls of Osart Gallery is a story filled with encrypted messages: blank pages and dark boards, alternative alphabets and secrets reduced to ashes, references to Rosecrucian and traces of conversations of which we know nothing except for the location they took place in. And again, newsprint excerpts, bank checks, crosswords filled with color stains instead of words... Like in a detective story, we must follow the shadow of a memory, a subtle detail, a puzzle piece to fit in the right place. And, like in every successful mystery, the hypothetical solution can only come from a key: a word, a group of letters, or a name, allowing the passage from one sense to another.

Encouraged to decrypt this body of works from the Panza Collection, and aided by a passion for detective stories and puzzles, I tried first-hand to insert a keyword to solve the charade, drawing from a parallel universe – the investigative literature. And here's when Patrick Modiano enters the scene, writer and Nobel laureate, serial list compiler and, in turn, collector of small details. Modiano's stories are about deconstruction and recomposition, and like those of Giuseppe Panza, they are wanderings where one must mend the

memory in order to find the right way. In one of Stendhal most fortunate novel's epigraph, there is a quote reading "I cannot give the reality of facts, I can only present their shadow", and such quote is worth the entire production of the writer. The seeming ease and the minimalist style, characterized by an essential and precise writing, actually hide a love for references, the unsaid, the ambiguity, the empty, quiet, and mysterious spaces. His pages are filled with street names, city squares, hotels, cafés, but the meticulousness with which the details are aligned carries a hallucinatory trait: as soon as we got an itinerary, an address, or a statement, it's easy to realize that we are facing a diversion, the most refined form that a detective story can take. Indeed, these stylistic inclinations bring the work of the French writer closer to the research of the eight artists on display. But the deepest link is probably the ability to exploit language as a tool to recreate and question the reality, emphasizing the process over the product, the experience over the object, the context over the content. In this perspective, comparing literary works to works of art can generate delightful meaningful combinations. Decrypting, for example, Ian Wilson's *Discussion: October 30th, 1974* using the Modiano key, it allows us to dwell on how they both treat the form of dialogue as a testing and provocative ground between artist and public, art and reality, sign and meaning. They both recall that the work is, above all, a form of complicity - on par with puzzles – capable of stimulating curiosity, creativity, involvement. Similarly, if we put Robert Barry's research on the immaterial next to the one of the French writer, we can read in backlight a common desire to continuously challenge the process of transmission and reception of information. Alternatively, we can confront the use that Modiano and Jonathan Seliger make of common objects as narrative elements – tickets, keys, documents – in which a shared yet unexpected and alienating irony emerges. Like for puzzles, this is also a form of speculation and entertainment, and each comparison is to be taken less seriously. Yet, once the key is inserted in the combination, it's hard not to see and align the contact points: Max Cole's canvases seem to match Modiano's stories in the common use of repetition and variation to explore memory and reach a transcendent dimension; the gaze of Stephen Dean, like his compatriot, falls on the details, the gestures, the symbols, the customs, using color as an evocative and symbolic element; the form of the journal and of the testimony, so as the attention to a punctual and precise spacetime dimension, bring Modiano closer to Douglas Huebler, as well as playing with words and creating ambiguous meaning and sound effects bring him closer to Allan Graham. And lastly, Thoreau's quote chosen by Ron Griffin as his manifesto ("A true account of the actual is the rarest poetry") couldn't be an ideal epigraph for any of the Nobel Prize winner novels? As stated, it's only a game. But as Modiano has taught us, puzzles not only can be an effective narrative technique, but also a fundamental exercise for the muscles of memory. As the French writer wrote: "Today, I get the sense that memory is much less sure of itself, engaged as it is in a constant struggle against amnesia and oblivion". Giuseppe Panza, who has turned the duty of memory into a mission, anticipated all of this: he chose not to show us the way so that we would make the effort to find it. He collected and scattered clues, leaving us the traces of a plan whose complexity we can only guess at. It's up to us to connect the dots, as we did as kids with our grandparents' *La Settimana Enigmistica**.

* *La Settimana Enigmistica* is a popular Italian weekly issue of puzzles and crosswords