

A Visit to Luca Pancrazzi's Exhibition *Occidente Esotico*

In his introduction to the exhibition *Occidente Esotico*, Luca Pancrazzi explains why he chose this title. While a century ago there were still “blank spots” in cartography—unknown, unexplored, mysterious areas—today every corner of our planet has been explored and described thanks to Earth-observing satellites. According to Pancrazzi, there are “no more hidden places and no longer any secrets . . . for anyone who has a computer or a desire to travel.” This progress has been accompanied by a loss of the exotic as a realm of the imagination, as a warming feeling and a creative longing. Thus, with his paintings of the Upper Engadine, the artist aims to create a new undiscovered country, a *miraggio esotico*, an exotic mirage out of the famous high valley, which has been described, painted, and photographed countless times before. In compensation for the disappearance of the blank spots on the maps, he gives us his white visions on a pigeon-gray ground.

The painting *Fuori Registro (Volare I)* in the foyer of Galerie Caratsch seems to invite the visitor on a reconnaissance flight over this “exotic Western land.” If we get into the glider and ride the winds, then soon a dreamlike realm of lights will present itself. The two large-scale works *Fuori Registro (Cinque Laghi)* and *Fuori Registro (Cinque Laghi II)* immediately attract the viewer's attention. The familiar landscape of the Upper Engadine lakes is immediately recognizable in all its details: the rhythmic sequence of bodies of water, the mountain ranges that flank them, the villages. Even the construction cranes in St. Moritz can be seen. . . . And yet, something doesn't seem right. A kind of veil separates the viewer from the observed landscape. We know that when we look at a backlit landscape, it sometimes appears as if it were shrouded in a light fog. But in this case it is different: here this all too uniform veil is not an aspect of the subject, not part of the landscape; rather, its origin lies in painting itself, emerges from the picture, and yet simultaneously appears to cover the entire picture. This makes the landscape appear far away and unreal, even though it has been depicted with great attention to detail. It resists me and my need to fully comprehend what I see, just as I can access any image from Google Maps on a computer. I automatically approach the painting *Fuori Registro (Cinque Laghi II)*, though my confusion only increases. After all, seen up close, the elements of the landscape dissolve—the forest, for example—and the figurative scene becomes an abstract picture, a seemingly arbitrary mixture of pointillist dabs of paint in various sizes and densities, in stripes and broad expanses of paint, from half-transparent to opaque, in which individual brushstrokes can no longer be discerned.

This up-close view at least corrects some original misinterpretations. For instance, at first glance I thought that the Italian artist used a color palette reduced to white and gray tones. Now I realize with amazement that the only color applied to the canvas is white, the “non-color” that contains all the colors of the spectrum. But just as important as the painted color for all the works exhibited here is the natural color of the ungrounded canvas. Depending on how lightly or thickly Pancrazzi's paintbrush applied the white dabs, strokes, or expanses of paint, the warm pigeon gray of the cotton shines through the paint and asserts itself in the painting with varying intensities as a more or less light gray. The resulting richness of intermediate tones is astonishing. In addition to the aforementioned colors, another hidden

color plays a certain role: the black layer beneath the canvas. In those places where the fabric is less dense, this black sometimes appears in tiny dots or subtly influences the color effects of the paintings as a dark shadow. This effect is anything but constant; rather, it strongly depends on the viewer's position and the varying incidence of light. White in particular picks up and reflects the tones and intensities of the light in the room and reflects it much more strongly than any other color. Thus, from a certain distance, it seems as if the canvas were thickly coated with paint. Upon approaching it, one realizes how thinly the white has been applied and the economy of means with which the painter achieves his effects. This is evident, for example, in the barely visible and extremely thinned dabs of white that he uses to evoke the Staz Forest backlit by the sun.

Similar motifs to *Fuori Registro (Cinque Laghi)* and *Fuori Registro (Cinque Laghi II)* can be found in the painting *Fuori Registro (St. Moritz Notturmo)*, which, despite its realistic detail, exudes an even stronger fairy-tale-like atmosphere than the other two works. The Upper Engadine lake landscape with St. Moritz in the foreground is captured in the atmospheric hour of twilight, in which two realities of light coexist, so to speak. The wide Engadine sky is still bright, still filled with the light of the sun after it has set. The shapes of the mountains, the forested slopes, and a light veil of mist depicted with great refinement are still clearly recognizable. Below, in the bottom of the valley, night has already fallen, and St. Moritz is now filled with a very different artificial light that is partially reflected on the lake. Is anyone there still looking up at this bright evening sky of white and broad dabs of paint that become increasingly dense from top to bottom? It is reminiscent, despite the extreme reduction of the color palette, of Giovanni Segantini's expansive sky "woven" out of myriads of thin brushstrokes in his painting *Sein (La natura)*, the middle part of the triptych *Werden – Sein – Vergehen*. Here, too, as in Pancrazzi's painting, the time between sunset and darkness is captured—a subject that Segantini depicted particularly often. Thus, the comparison between the two painters is, despite some major differences, not entirely wrong, since both consider the exploration of light to be among the main objectives of their work as artists.

In Pancrazzi's work this objective becomes "clear as day" when one beholds *Fuori Registro (Maloja)*, a true festival of lights. What was visible in the background of the aforementioned landscapes—Lake Sils at the end of the valley—seems to be "zoomed in" here and becomes the principal subject of the painting. The light is omnipresent, even though its source cannot be precisely discerned. Not only does the surface of Lake Sils sparkle in the light, and not only do the slate shingles on the roofs of the houses of Sils and Maloja glitter, but the air itself seems to be suffused with light, as if physical particles of light were swirling in the atmosphere, blown by the wind like drops of a fine spray of light. The freshness and the lively, vibrating dynamic that the painting radiates have an infectious appeal, while at the same time it seems as if one needs to protect oneself from the aggressive force of this flickering, blinding light that appears to outshine all the colors of nature. A similarly mixed feeling of fascination and menace struck me on viewing another work that attests to Pancrazzi's involvement with the topic of light at this year's St. Moritz Art Masters: *Maseratirundum*, a real Maserati completely covered in 800 kilograms of broken glass, a hybrid of a beautiful, sparkling light sculpture and an aggressive, sharp-edged and thorny monster.

The mountain slopes in the lower part of the painting *Fuori Registro (Muragl)* also seem to be strewn with countless shards of glass. The blazing summer light causes the scree to glitter, which Pancrazzi depicts with dabs of paint in varying thicknesses applied next to or over one another. As with Segantini, the painting process is very time-consuming and has a meditative quality. The painting takes shape slowly, in several sittings. Layer upon layer is added, interrupted by intervals in which the artist continually compares the painting with photographic templates and his constantly changing mental image. The insight that there can be no definitive, ultimate depiction of the object is another important topic in Pancrazzi's work. The artist offers the following explanation for why all the Upper Engadine landscapes—and not only these—bear the common title *Fuori Registro*:

“Here the register *outside the register* [beyond the perceptible] is time. My painting consists of layers The medium between the layers is passing time that causes the painted picture to only imprecisely—*outside the register*—agree with what is remembered.”

Pancrazzi's “mountain portraits”—which, seen from afar, one could assume to be enlarged reproductions of old black-and-white photos, like those taken by the alpinist and photographer Elisabeth Main in the 1880s—are impressive results of this futile striving for an agreement between the artwork and an inner reality. However, when one approaches a painting such as *Fuori Registro (Margna)* or *Fuori Registro (Cra'st'Agüzza)*, the mountain landscape loses the hieratic, iconic quality of the old, usually razor-sharp photos and begins to vibrate. The shapes of the mountains are blurred, as if the massifs had begun to oscillate. Again and again—unsuccessfully—one automatically attempts to bring them into focus. This exhibition offers a striking demonstration of the fact that what is supposedly immovable, the mountain, resists the attempt to—at least visually—capture or “register” it, and it escapes into a flickering mirage. The work *Fuori Registro (Muragl II)* has a particularly fascinating effect on me due to the contrast between the blurriness in the depiction of the rock formations on the one hand and the sharp contours of the mountain silhouette against the sky painted in a dense white on the other. It is as if the painter had cut out his vibrating mountain scene from its background, “outside the register,” and pasted it onto a foreign, white background. What is more “real”: the fixed lines or the moving shapes?

Viewing this work reminds me of a fragment from Friedrich Nietzsche's posthumously published works in which the philosopher questions the belief in permanence while viewing a mountain landscape:

Here the mountains show their three bumps: with a sharper pair of binoculars I see a crowd of new bumps, the outline becoming ever clearer with each stronger pair of binoculars, and the old one becoming an arbitrary phantasm. At last I arrive at the point where the outline is no longer observable because the *movement of weathering* escapes our eyes. The movement *dissolves the line*.¹

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, K.G.W. V(2), 11 (227). Translation in: Mark Edmund Bolland, *Nietzsche and mountains*, thesis, Durham University, p. 100. URL: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1579/>

The first painting in a small series attests to the similarity in nature between the supposedly constant and the fleeting which, along with the common title *Fuori Registro*, also bears the additional title *Nuvolare*, a pleasing coinage by the artist that combines the noun *nuvola* (cloud) with the verb *volare* (to fly). Viewing *Fuori Registro (Nuvolare I)*, I indeed imagine myself in flight amid the clouds. Enchanted, the viewer's gaze follows the play of the light with the constantly shifting cloud formations. And suddenly the clouds lift, like a fringed theater curtain, and offer a view of another, apparently no less ephemeral dimension, a mountain slope at the time of the melting of the snow. The bands of snow contrast with the gray background like artful arabesques and ornaments of an oriental carpet.

At the end of his introduction, the artist writes:

Painting the Engadine mountains allows the exotic mirage to come back into contact with the soul.

This is what Luca Pancrazzi's works are capable of.