

## Beyond the Shore

Looking up we are often amazed by what Plato called 'friezes in the sky', but we may not be aware that he considered those figures the "most beautiful and precise" in the visible realm. They are images that we do not recognise immediately because they emerge in secret, but that precisely because of this sort of almost magical quality allow us to turn 'a living gaze' on things.

A living gaze that, almost a century ago, the Russian scientist and intellectual Pavel Florensky, philosopher of the symbol, discontinuity and rhythm, explained in his essay *Iconostasis*. Often compared to Leonardo da Vinci, Florensky declared that the painting of icons was equivalent to the 'fixing of heavenly images, to their gelling on the panel of life'. The icon, therefore, is not just 'a painting', but an image in which the world of the visible and the invisible come into contact. It is a manifestation of the living representation, in which a continual flowing, streaming, changing takes place; it shimmers, sparkles and pulsates and the gaze never lingers on the inward contemplation of a single thing. It does not refer to a meaning beyond, there is nothing to interpret and there is no trace of linear perspective, foreshortening, chiaroscuro or shadows. The gaze is merely called on to linger on it, not to look away from the picture, because that picture is an apparition in itself. To put it simply, Heaven in person.

In an age ruled by digital technology, rapidity of reproduction and 'I-tech' languages, speaking of icons, myths, folk traditions, heavenly fables, the working of wood and the ancient tradition of egg tempera painting might seem strange. But what seems strange often turns out to be something original. Veronica Smirnoff is probably one of the few artists of our time who in her works reflects on and studies the profound implications and the significance of the icon in the present. Observing and following the rules, the method and the techniques that over the centuries have represented the expression of a popular Russian religiosity and spirituality, the artist ventures further – as is suggested by the title of the work *Beyond the Shore* – to draw on Greek and Roman myths, the traits of Japanese and Chinese decorations, the imagination of the Oriental miniaturists and the codices of mediaeval cartographers.

Out of this have come *Mappe mundis* and *Evening Annals*, where figures and objects that are not immediately recognisable emerge from the soft and sinuous brushstrokes, from meticulously laid on coats of paint, showing us a majestic and marvellous 'fluid nature', where everything merges, but nothing is accidental. The paintings are shaped almost by *osmosis* and slowly reveal landscapes inhabited by timeless subjects, each with its own sound and colour: ghosts, knights, maidens, beggars, or horses, trees, flowers...

The longer you look at Smirnoff's pictures the more you get the impression that that they have the power to awaken – like those 'friezes in the sky' – a kind of knowledge that lurks exclusively in the twists and turns of the human imagination. And it is the artist herself who suggests to us that it consists of possible 'cognitive maps', where myths, different periods in history, memory and imagination meet one another

and live on the same surface, at the same time.

Undoubtedly, in order to grasp any kind of contemporaneousness in things, it is necessary to leave the gaze the freedom to grow keen and the mind the possibility to roam on its own, so that we can still be amazed by the privileged relationship that we have with the visible world. A world that perhaps does not belong to us, but that we continue with so much hostility to try to control and shape, even at the cost of losing touch with the most beautiful and exact images, with what we were and what we have always dreamed of becoming.

Mara Ambrožič