

LIRISMO INDIFESO

unarmed lyricism

THE ART OF FRANCO ONALI

by jacopo bucciantini

At first glance, Franco Onali's oeuvre may appear highly heterogeneous, even erratic. Typically, a painter's style remains relatively consistent over time: while techniques are refined and themes or subjects may evolve, it is rare for an artist to radically overturn their methods and visions or to repeatedly start anew. Perhaps such behavior can be observed among the mannerists; yet, in Onali's case, one is compelled to ask: in the manner of whom?

To grasp the logic behind Onali's artistic volatility — and, consequently, the meaning of his works — it is necessary to reconsider the very concept of the painting. His works do not communicate directly, they do not narrate stories on their own. Rather, they subtly reflect the inner moods of their creator, an instinctive, unfiltered and pure man, much like a mirror reveals only what stands before it. It is no coincidence that Onali's production alternates between intensely prolific periods and intervals of complete inactivity. For several years, he did not pick up a single brush.

Reconstructing Onali's life is far from straightforward: he never sought to cultivate a public image or to promote himself. In practice, he sold — often reluctantly — his works to friends and acquaintances only and he consistently avoided exhibitions and gallery displays. Consequently, the literature available for a thorough analysis of his artistic trajectory is limited. While these writings have allowed the creation of a brief — and invaluable — biography, they have not made it possible to delineate his emotional phases. Moreover, Onali's memory has long been compromised by illness, thus any understanding of these phases must rely on oral testimonies from those who knew him intimately.

Broadly speaking, Onali's production can be divided into two essential cycles: a youthful cycle (from the 1940s to the 1970s), beginning in childhood and concluding with his separation from his first wife; and a later cycle (from the 1990s to the present), initiated after he overcame the profound depression caused by his divorce, following his meeting with Anna Maria Roncoroni, who would soon become his wife.

The first cycle is characterized by works that are primarily post-Cubist, with figurative elements. In his early years, Onali produced figurative paintings with traces of Surrealism or Symbolism, gradually developing a preference for a Cubist-influenced aesthetic, though grounded in entirely original principles. While Cubism traditionally seeks to depict a subject from multiple viewpoints, thereby challenging conventional perspective, Onali employed this principle to convey his own inner tensions and restlessness. In other words, the simultaneous presence of multiple perspectives acquires a novel significance in his work: it reflects the pervasive uncertainty that marked much of his life. In this sense, his work can be described as post-Cubist: Cubism — already a historical language by this period — serves merely as a means for something else. Through painting, Onali sought to mitigate his inner turmoil, and for a time, he succeeded — until it ultimately prevailed, leading him to lose faith in art and halt his work for several years, thus concluding his first productive phase.

The second cycle represents a profound departure from the first. Although he continued to produce post-Cubist works during this period, Onali increasingly devoted himself to Abstract art, exploring it in multiple forms. It is as if painting had become a ritual for him, rather than a means of regaining confidence in art. His abstraction does not communicate anything directly; rather, it manifests a radical

disinterest in objects and subjects. Onali conveys emptiness, nothingness, through a sophisticated and deliberate use of color. In effect, he expresses non-expression itself, achieving this through a refined aesthetic sensibility. Many works from this period feature “subjects” as unpainted areas of the canvas, surrounded by vibrant colors: a reflection of an artist who embraces non-expression, and thereby absolute authenticity. These white or non-figures mirror the artist himself: a man uninterested in entities in the broadest sense, perpetually seeking something he never fully articulated in words, yet approached through his art.