

Clément Mitéran, or of the meaning of portraiture between photography and mosaic

by Daniele Torcellini

The German philosopher Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay dedicated to the relationship between art and technique, writes that the reception of art occurs according to different modalities, of which two of these, opposed to each other, are of particular importance: «with one, the accent is on the cult value; with the other, on the exhibition value of the work¹». The art was born to answer the ritual requirements, magic, spiritual and cultural, emancipating itself gradually from the rite to be always more exposed. The mosaic, during its emblematic development in the early Christian era and the Byzantine era is by excellence the technique by which the Christian aesthetic is incarnated. Its cultural value is firmly anchored, it is functional for liturgical celebrations. The materials that constitute it, tesserae covered with gold leaf, glass paste and marble, guarantee maximum efficiency to make the Christian icons shine with light and color, giving presence to God, Christ, the Virgin, the saints and the angels in the sacred space of the basilica. Following Benjamin in his reasoning, in opposition to the mosaic is the photography. Technique with delicate materiality which, applied to the reproduction of the art by the multiplication of the copies that allows the negative-positive process, deprives of aura what is reproduced. For Benjamin the aura is that intense experience that can only be derived from the direct confrontation with the object and its materiality, in a real space. The aura is the unique appearance of a distance, the inapproachable character of the cultural image.

The technical reproducibility of the art is destined to accentuate the value of exhibition to the detriment of the cultural value, with consequences that Benjamin perceives as being of political order. A long reflection opens then, of which the German philosopher draws as much the negative implications as the innovative aspects, followed by an important outcome: if with the photography the value of exhibition begins to substitute itself from all points of view to the cultural value, writes Benjamin, «But cult value does not give way without resistance. It retires into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face¹ ».

Mosaic, photography and human faces are central to Clément Mitéran's artistic practice. The parisian artist, in three intense series of works produced over the course of more than a decade, explores themes related to representation through portraiture, gradually shifting his interest to an analysis of the meaning and implications of representing through portraiture, referring to themes of recognition, as well as both loss and memory of identity.

At the beginning of his career, Mitéran confronts the practice of the portrait in mosaic, from photographic images of important and internationally recognized personalities in the literary and philosophical field. Field of expression already used by artists who use the mosaic as a means of expression for the amplification of meaning it produces, as is the case of Leonardo Pivi with his series of covers of popular magazines, fashion, music, politics, art, redefined through interventions in micro-mosaic - Mitéran's mosaic portraits present a modern and contemporary mythology that is as much the shared expression of our Western culture as the mirror of interests and personal inclinations. Mitéran consecrates our myths and his myths through mosaic,

rematerializing in the form of unique works destined to last in time the digital multiplicity of photographic images, mostly from the internet. The photograph extends in space. The mosaic extends in time. The portraits of Charles Baudelaire, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Houellebecq constitute however for Mitéran a first approach to a reflection on the nature of the artistic language and the employed techniques, as proves the emphasis with which the material of the mosaic is exploited, with an obvious and sought discontinuity of textures, sizes and arrangement of the materials of the mosaic, stony or vitreous, so as to draw our attention not only towards what (or who) is represented, but also on how, what is represented, is incarnated in the material. But it is not only the mosaic that is the object of Mitéran's analysis. The themes that revolve around the portrait are exploited by also exploring the language of photography, declined in a wide spectrum of possibilities. The first cycle of works ends with a portrait of Michel Houellebecq - melancholic expression and cigarette in hand - made from a photograph taken by Mitéran himself.

In the second series of artworks, from an approach with a post-photographic flavor of collecting images on the web, Mitéran makes follow to the techniques and processes of analog and digital photography, an approach of retro-experimental type. In the manner of the early 18th century pioneers who grappled with the chemical and physical properties of silver halide for processes to be calibrated and results often disappointing - but emblematic if not explicitly researched - Mitéran extends the photosensitive emulsion onto complex and diverse mosaic surfaces to print portraits of artists around him. In the series *Figures of the modern and contemporary mythology*, photographs and mosaics find a conciliation in the continuation of action which places the mosaic like conclusion of a work of reinterpretation of a photographic image; in this second series, the artist underlines on the contrary the contrast generated by two

media through opposite couples: image/support; subject/background; light-darkness of the faces/monochromy of the texture; continuity/discontinuity; dematerialized nature of the photographic image/strong evidence of the mosaic materials; ephemeral/durable; rapid chemical reaction/long-term manual work. The results are evanescent images of frontal pose, minimalist expressions and deliberately on the borders of ID photography, reminiscent of the *Portraits*, *Blue Eyes* and *Other Portraits* series of an author particularly attentive to research on photographic language such as Thomas Ruff, all the more so with the use of faded funeral black and white and for the practice of photographic montage to which Mitéran sometimes resorts, to create hybrids in which two faces are as one. The identities of the protagonists of the *Anonymous figurations* series become blurred, lose their ability to be recognized, or are recognizable only with difficulty and by a small group of people who belong to what could be described as a micro-community, a niche that shares common interests and whose relational and social dynamics that Mitéran explores. Each initial photographic negative is destined to be incarnated in a single copy on the surface of a mosaic that seems reticent to accommodate the chiaroscuro nuances of the photograph. On the other hand, the photographic images are beautifully mismatched to the textural variations of the underlying mosaics, except that they are made by recomposing the style of the artists whose portraits Mitéran makes, opening up a potential risk of loss of identity that concerns the portraitist, Mitéran himself, rather than the one who is the object of the portrait.

In the first series, the subjects and modalities of representation are central to the work, in the second the motive of the choice of subjects is important, but these do not emerge explicitly. Without any spirit of self-commiseration - on the contrary, it is rather a sophisticated irony - the series is born with the objective of showing and at the same time hiding the face of the artists who work with the medium of mosaic, a technique and language with a glorious past, whose presence in contemporary art practices is discontinuous, not fully recognized and often undervalued.

The third series of works, *Consecratio/Abolitio nominis*, insofar as it shares the underlying intentions of

Anonymous figurations, opens up to other implications of a more general nature. In the Roman law of the republican and then imperial period, the *abolitio nominis* is a legal sanction that deprives the condemned of the possibility of transmitting his *praenomen* to his heirs and foresees the erasure of his name in all the public space, leading also to the destruction of the effigies of the condemned. The emperors recognized for their value are consecrated by the institution of the *apotheosis*. From Roman law to the present day, many practices of erasure of names and images have succeeded one another, in opposition to the forms of exaltation of the personality, from the iconoclasm of the Byzantine period and the use of the parietal mosaic as one of the most imposing forms of celebration of the imperial power, until the present binomial opposing the actions of the so-called *cancel culture* and of the influencers conquering a hyper-visibility with clicks. We live in a technologically advanced society that has quite sophisticated instruments for the diffusion of images; in recent years many of us have obstinately seen our own faces and those of others in digital frames during the video calls or videoconferences that punctuated the working days during the pandemic; the success of social networks like Instagram and Tik Tok is largely founded on the presence of faces and bodies on permanent display; against the backdrop of articulated and complex dynamics that have to do with the ways in which, through the images that represent us, we relate to ourselves and to the others, transporting the past into the future, Mitéran digitally and physically assaults the photographic portraits of the Anonymous Figurations series. The artist creates works that further accelerate the ambiguity of identity, between impossible recognition due to digital and physical interventions and attempts of restoration. From the digital point of view, Mitéran acts in the perimeter of actions of photographic post-production that are, after all, also of pre-production, if we consider the successive prints of the obtained images. These elaborations are obtained by superimposing, mixing and alternating the photographs of departure and the photographs of the finished works of the previous series, in a process of auto-appropriation, which is also a process of autophagy, and which leads to paradoxical results of photographs of mosaics and faces printed on polished mosaics, or on marble plates, in a way that one doesn't know anymore which is what. From the material point of view, Mitéran, after the printing of the portraits, intervenes with destructive intentions that recall some of the results of Arnulf Rainer's work.

In our case, however, it is not a question of graphic or pictorial signs but of hammer blows, drilling, abrasion, corrosive acids used to erase the faces, but also, in the opposite direction, of filling in the gaps and renovations that recall the practices of restoration and conservation through the history of works damaged by iconoclastic actions³. In the series *Consecratio/Abolitio nominis* form and content thus collapse into a formless agglomerate⁴ that reaches its peak with *Ricoperto*, in which of the mosaic and the face, but also of what is materially realized and what is photographically printed, only indistinguishable shreds remain. Mitéran's work is an incessant and obsessive process in which attempts at recomposition and decomposition are intertwined, leading to the collapse of identity and memory, as much of the techniques employed as of the subjects portrayed, in search, one might think, of a possibility of redefining the aura of the representation of the human face embodied in matter, even when the face is erased, and even more so when it is erased.