

Marco Costantini

Jean Crotti – Getting lost in his eyes, 2010

“It is indeed there, the expression he tried to convey when he painted the eyes and the lips... That mouth, those lips shaped for the subtlest acts of voluptuousness...”¹

Drawing intentionally

Jean Crotti has been active since the 1980s, and in his work as a painter and graphic artist he has concentrated on depicting other people, ones he has loved or lost. After studying for a year at the Arts Faculty of the University of Lausanne, in 1977 he enrolled at the Ecole supérieure d'art visuel of Geneva, which he left in 1979, from then on devoting himself entirely to painting. With his friends Alain Huck, Robert Ireland, Jean-Luc Manz, Christian Messerli and Catherine Monney, he founded the group M/2 in 1987 at Vevey; up to the time of its dissolution in 1991 it organized some 40 exhibitions. But it was his discovery of Egypt in 1992 that was to have a profound impact on his work. For ten years he would divide his life and work between Lausanne and Cairo. That experience would mark his work for ever and lead him to declare in the course of an interview: “It’s something that lives in you; anyone who’s tasted the waters of the Nile...”²

His return from Egypt was hard and can be compared to a lovers’ rift. The works that followed are marked by it, now tackling the themes of absence, separation and distance. Through them, Egypt and his work become confused, coalescing into a love song similar to those interpreted by Oum Kalsoum, or the poetry of someone like Constantine Cavafy telling the story of clandestine male love affairs.

Concentrating primarily on the human figure, Crotti’s work consists mainly of drawings. Made with coloured pencils, embroidered threads and by pyrography, they all result from a need for simplicity and effectiveness which, in conjunction with the aesthetic naivety often mentioned in connection with his work, make it possible to conceive of the practice of drawing as a memorial ritual, or an appeal towards the faces depicted, these vanished men, these anonymous people. Thus drawing is the perfect technique for capturing these faces in phases of visual oscillation: rapid and direct.

¹ Constantine Cavafy, “Portrait of a young man aged twenty-three, painted by a friend of his own age, an amateur artist”, in *Présentation critique de Constantin Cavafy*, French translation by Marguerite Yourcenar, Paris, Gallimard, 1958, p. 229.

² http://www.artfiction.ch/document3_entretien.html

Once again Crotti has used scrap material as the support for the drawings presented in the exhibition. It endows the drawings with an extra sense of fragility. The pieces of card damaged and stigmatised by their previous use only serve to augment the vulnerability of the boys portrayed. And the fact that the pieces of card are often quite large only makes the models appear more fragile, the size merely highlighting their ethereal presence all the more.

Disappearance – appearance

Crotti's works are a wonderful replay of the ever so traditional act, so important in the history of art and literature: the painter and his model. Even if we only get to look at the model, it really is a meeting that these works imply. If posing sessions in the studio are hardly current practice any more, with the complicated relationships they can give rise to – scenes brilliantly described by Honoré de Balzac, Théophile Gautier, Alfred de Musset or Emile Zola – the fact remains that new arrangements have come into being. Thus "the pose" with Crotti takes place via a screen, the screen of his computer which has been transformed through the Internet into a huge directory of potential models. If the association between painter and model still takes place, as it does despite a non-existent reciprocal presence, it is because Crotti circles round his models, getting to know them before he draws them. In this way he forms as strong a bond of affection with them as the one between Claude and Christine Emile Zola describes in *L'Œuvre*.

Chat rooms, a real new contemporary means of communication, make it possible to enter into written dialogue with people who are a long way off. In conjunction with a webcam, an electronic relationship can be established visually too, with each party able to see the person he is talking to. Using these new tools Crotti carries out a sort of casting session during which the models, all coming from the Balkans, converse and introduce themselves, one by one attesting to the modest conditions they are living in over there, and the dream of a new Eldorado that Western Europe represents for them. For although it is now part of the European Union, Romania for example has a high level of unemployment among young people, approaching 20% at the end of 2006. This partly explains the infatuation evinced by the young Romanians and inhabitants of the Balkans in general for meetings on the net, exchanges that might extricate them from their difficult situation. The type of relational discourse brought in through the system of computer-based dialogue, but also the typology of the images that are exchanged or given via it, inevitably lead to a latent eroticization of the relationship, a game being established that is based on seduction.

Crotti's drawings offer a gallery of portraits that Pasolini would not have spurned. Already in his novel *Ragazzi di vita* (1955), Pasolini describes male prostitution in the slums of Rome, and he could have discerned similarities in the choice of these young men subsisting as best they can in a country recently opened up to capitalism. The anonymity of Crotti's models echoes the nicknames Pasolini's characters are known by – Il Riccetto (Curly), Il Lenzetta (Smartass), Borgo Antico (Old Town), Il Begalone (Butterfingers), Il Caciotta (Cheese), etc. – as well as the exclusively male world he moves in. Aside from that, the marginality and

virility of both Crotti's and Pasolini's characters are emphasized only in order better to conceal the large portion of underlying emotion that is present in all of them.

Rightly, Crotti's portraits illustrate the way of talking used on the net. These meetings are therefore inexorably placed under the sign of appearance and disappearance. Each of the parties is free at any moment to leave the discussion space, leading to a state of frustration or, on the contrary, arousal through desire for his reappearance. The very look of Crotti's drawings, even unfinished ones, implies the idea that these young men are in a state of just appearing, or are already about to leave. So these drawings are like in-between moments. The diaphanous look of the portraits in itself justifies that interpretation. Thus when Aristotle states in his treatise *On the Soul*, "By diaphanous I mean what is visible without being absolutely visible in itself, but by virtue of an extraneous colour", he is invoking a transitory figure that has to lead to appearance, has to make visible what had previously been concealed from view.³ Along the same lines, Freud, in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), describes the game with a bobbin enjoyed by his grandson Ernst:

"The child had a wooden bobbin with a piece of string round it. [...] he very skilfully threw the bobbin over the edge of his bed which was surrounded by a curtain, where it disappeared. He then uttered his invariable o-o-o-o [meaning, in the opinion of both his mother and Freud, "gone", in German "fort"], and pulled in the bobbin, this time greeting it with a joyful "Da" ("there"). That was the whole game, involving a *disappearance* and a *reappearance*, but generally we saw only the first action, which was repeated untiringly, although it was obvious that it was the second action that gave the child the greatest pleasure."⁴

The bobbin then takes on the value of a symbol of loss, as the child indulges in this game at the very time his mother disappears from his field of vision. Freud's analysis demonstrates that a gesture, or an image, expresses this movement of loss and recovery. The two phonemes used by the child are also remarkable in that the first, "fort", indicates presence in absence, and "da" absence in presence. Pierre Fédida adds à propos of this: "Playing always involves recreating disappearance, making what is hidden appear by making it disappear."⁵ The game with the bobbin is an interlude in time between two states. While in little Ernst's game the string materialises the interval of time that elapses between the bobbin's disappearance and its return, in Crotti it is the unfinished, ethereal look of the drawings in pastel colours that celebrates it. Crotti's characters seem to be prisoners of an alternating movement, now fixed in deadly inertia, now moved by creative energy. The drawing in

³ Aristotle, *De l'âme* [On the Soul], text established by A. Jannone, transl. into French by E. Barbotin, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1966, p. 48.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Au-delà du principe de plaisir" [Beyond the Pleasure Principle], in *Essais de psychanalyse*, transl. into French by S. Jankélévitch, Paris, Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 1975, p. 16-17.

⁵ Pierre Fédida, *L'Absence*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978, p. 121.

Crotti's work then seems to serve as a transitional object, a rampart against fear of a final, irreversible loss.

The concept of sublimation also applies as a resource for fighting against absence and missing someone or something. Taking *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* published by Freud in 1905 as a basis, we can say that sublimation describes "a type of human activity (literary, artistic and intellectual creation) with no apparent connection with sexuality, but deriving its strength from the sexual drive in as far as it is transferred on to a non-sexual goal by investing socially valued objects"⁶. Crotti's serial work, a tireless act of repetition, also conveys the beginnings of sublimation in which "desire is exhausted, but also takes birth"⁷. The interest of repetition lies in the paradoxical fact that it is not entirely that. Repetition always sets up the failure of the attempt to reproduce the "same" initial thing. It makes it possible to impose order, to set limits, to give meaning. But the mode of repetition chosen by Crotti functions more as an object of diffraction, a means of tirelessly giving an opportunity to see the object of desire again in its multiple faces. Therefore it is more universal love that is evoked by these drawings than love of a particular person. The models chosen on the Internet then function – at least in this artistic work – only as incarnations of amorous desire. The very gesture of Crotti, who each time causes a new face to appear on these scrap, damaged pieces of card, attests to an emotion and an urgent need to conjure up the beloved, even if in a kind of way the fact of starting on a new drawing symbolises the destruction of the previous one, as having suddenly become unsuited to revealing the face of the beloved. And if all these portraits indicate a failure in the depiction of that beloved, they nonetheless perform a dynamic and cathartic job in revealing the aura of the missing person. The less we see him, the more we look for him, the more his aura becomes perceptible.

Fantastical dreaming

Crotti's work has to do with the depiction of desire. At times, the solar, enigmatic faces of his models do not fail to evoke Gustav von Aschenbach's fascination with the youthful Tadzio in Thomas Mann's novella, *Death in Venice*. Like the character of the writer in the story, Crotti is in pursuit of "his" Tadzio, while at the same time avoiding him. This dynamics of avoidance, through the multiplication of the faces and the rejection of a single choice, and in the anonymity the artist preserves for his models, is just as important as the previously described dynamics of failure, for it prompts an inverted attempt at reconciliation by virtue of which a face can be conjured up again. Just as in the concept of appearance and disappearance, in Crotti's work there is an oscillation between two forces in the notion of desire: first that of *seeing*, then that of *not seeing*. Paradoxically, in the optical exercise we are engaged in as viewers, *seeing* would be equivalent to *no longer seeing anything*, for if we look at the series of portraits presented to us we are attesting to the fact that we cannot

⁶ Elisabeth Roudinesco and Michel Plon, *Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Fayard, 2006, p. 1038.

⁷ Baldine Saint Girons, "Répétition", in *Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Encyclopédie Universalis/Albin Michel, 1997, p. 738-739.

perceive the person who should be there in their place, and who is so sought after by the artist, "THE" model. This impossibility of seeing as an unconscious wish not to see recurs in the figure of the phantasm.

It can be stated without too much difficulty that the phantasm is at the root of all creative activity and defines both its arrangement and its structure. Thus Crotti's drawings are the material existence of silhouettes, shadows, phantoms. They serve as hallucinatory fulfilments of desire, as symbolic substitutes for the phantasm. It is true that the painting or the drawing operates as the supreme transcendence of the sign, by means of direct action on the phantasm. The portraits then become intermediary images for a fixation that is signficatory to the viewer and the artist alike. These comments can be complemented by what Claude Wiart rightly says: "The phantasm is not realisation of the desire, because it is not material, but it is realised desire, in as far as it exists as a mental reality. [...] For the painting is directly linked to the vision, the phantom; it is an equivalence, a symbolic substitute for the phantasm, a fantastical temporary structuring by the creator."⁸ Therefore the phantasm is at the centre of the representational activity as a staging or shaping of desire, and mainly of instinctual arousal. Emerging from the preconscious, the phantasm differs from the dream in its enduring and persistent nature, even if it can develop and be transformed. Thus in Crotti's work, from his portraits of the "Egyptian period" frequently done as line drawings or drawn on wooden boards – a reference to what are known as the Fayoum mummy portraits, the nearness of whose function in both commemorating and conjuring up the absent person is not unconnected with his own – to those done today with his Balkan models, we can observe a formal and thematic persistence, despite the various techniques used. The supports chosen – found wooden boards or discarded pieces of card – also demonstrate persistence. Indeed Egyptians and Romanians thus find themselves linked by this symbolic shared use of degraded, precarious, fragile supports, in the image of these special amorous relationships.

Crotti's fantastical drawings suddenly appear in the light of an illustration of the realisation whereby reality locates the emptiness of representation. They also illustrate Lacan's remarks according to which the phantasm constitutes a screen for desire and the screen of desire, and therefore operates both as an obstructor of reality and an opening on to reality.⁹ In their ambiguous presence Crotti's men seem frozen in an in-between moment, and almost independent of the support. While at their iconographic origin these men appeared on the computer screen as if they had come from the other side, from within, through Crotti's intervention they have crossed that screen to find themselves back in front of it, now made of card. Crotti's phantasms have operated as "ferry-men", bringing right up close to him these men who when it comes down to it are still absent in reality. Support or ground, monitor or cardboard, the in-between space of the level of representation is the meeting point of inside and outside, and so becomes the place of presence.

⁸ Claude Wiart, "Des fantasmes et des 'ismes' en peinture", in *Art et fantasme*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 1984, p. 39.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire*, Book XI, *Les Quatre Concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (1964), Paris, Seuil, 1973, p. 99.

Reality and unreality fight one another in Crotti, like Genet's figures in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (1944) or *Un chant d'amour* (1950). Phantasms and phantoms dwell in both artists, who through their dreams imagine their visual or literary stories from the starting point of a truthful story. The experienced portion and the fantasized portion then give form to a new poetics of desire.