

## **Marco Bongiorno**

text by Mike Watson

The 21st Century is known as the epoch of the image: From printed media to street advertising to memes and social media interfaces we have learned to live with—and be consumed by—the visual realm. We exist within a vast ecology of images linked to a data economy that feeds on our image and text communications. Elections and referendums are being swung by the ease of image manipulation and dissemination, with often unexpected results.

In a sense we are held under siege by the image, though we must be careful to note that this is not in itself a new phenomenon. Our historical relationship with the visual has changed in form though arguably not in intensity. Art, philosophy and literature throughout the ages speak consistently of a conflictual relationship between the individual human who both sees an ‘other’ and is itself seen by that ‘other’. This subject-object relationship is one that defines our understanding of reality.

In the exhibition *Kangal*, the artist Marco Bongiorno interrogates the act of seeing using one of the oldest forms of pictorial representation—painting. Working wearing a series of crude handmade visual filters (which are themselves on display), utilising magnifying glasses, optical insulators, mirrors, underwater masks, glasses and VR goggles, Bongiorno not only constrains but conditions the act of viewing, thereby accentuating the strengths and weaknesses of human perception. Consequently, these works reflect not only on how we perceive the world, but how we exist within it and how we negotiate our relationship with the natural forces which both shape and threaten us. As, in the 21st Century, we seem both close to overcoming nature and to being destroyed by it painting would appear an appropriate medium to consider our times, not least as it is among the most visceral and hands on modes of pictorial representation, demanding that our hands, our bodies enter into the fray and partake in the discourse between the human subject and its natural environment.

Our modernist forebears have recounted assiduously the tendency for the industrial image to control us and to objectify us. Somehow, it seems that the more images we see the more we end up being subjected to someone else’s gaze. Adorno, Benjamin, Berger, Mulvey and Sontag are just a few of the 20th century theorists who have recounted this phenomenon. To read them it would appear that we had in the ‘70s, ‘60s, or as far back even as the ‘30s reached some kind of limit point regarding image saturation. As Sontag argued in 1977, ‘To collect photographs is to collect the world,’ thereby warning that just as everything was being photographed, reproduced and catalogued, everything was being collected, reduced, objectified.

And yet, here we are, 40 years after Sontag published ‘On Photography’ and living with tens of thousands times more images than Sontag had to endure... and we still ask ‘how is it possible to assert our subjectivity when we are bombarded daily with so many pictures?’. What is most crucial in this question—which has been repeated over generations—is the very real belief that our subjectivity remains to be rescued. Subjectivity is something that we still believe can be saved, even in the face of the many images that reduce our own image to one object among countless others.

Given this persistence of the battle between subjectivity and objectivity throughout history, what is it that seems unique about 20th Century image culture? Why do we feel as if we are engaged in a very specific and new battle with the image? And what do we do about it?

As stated before, our sense of objectification by a ‘seeing’ nature (refracted via an industrial production of images that lead us to feel further scrutinised) is no novelty. We have always felt fully beholden by the gaze of the ‘other’, a fact that motivates Sartre’s famed proclamation ‘hell is other people’. Whilst this is nothing new, our perception of time and space has become so distorted since the wide use of

internet and mobile communications that we today have trouble locating ourselves in the gaze of the other: We know we are being looked at but we don't know where or when we're being looked at. Or rather, we can feel ourselves being looked at but we cannot locate ourselves within that gaze. It is as if we are being looked at through a distorted lens. Somewhere in recent history the gaze of the other broke, and with it our own gaze.

It is this contemporary sense of a partial blindness, both of our own gaze and of the gaze of the 'other', that Marco Bongiorni investigates with his handmade visual filters, using them to distort his own vision as images are fixed within one lens so as to force a recreation of the violence of our visual culture. In his series of depicted dogs—painted from small low resolution photographic reproductions of dogs—we see the results as a kind of enforced visual impairment which is not the overfamiliar fragmentation or pastiche of postmodern culture. For example in *Cani da pastore* (120 x 80cm, 2017), we do not see a dog being fragmented in space and time, but a dog being nowhere in space and time. The formal properties, such as crude geometric lines and the clash of orange and blue serve to disembody rather than dismember.

Similarly in *Pastore dell'asia centrale* (28 x 28cm 2017) a disembodied canine points to familiar existence of the dog figure (man's best friend), yet in a way that is eerily removed from us. Ultimately such works use the motif of the dog to describe the primordial attachment with and relation to nature which can still be seen in the relationship between sheepdog, shepherd and herd, but which is lost to most individuals in the 21st century developed world. Indeed the exhibition's name, *Kangal*, comes from the popular name for a variety of mastif used in animal herding, a reference that Bongiorni has chosen in order to point to our lost ability to orientate ourselves within nature.

In these works, the relationship to photography is counter-intuitive. We find ourselves far from Susan Sontag's postmodern warnings about an excess of image culture. Sontag, like Adorno and so many others modernist theorists warned us that modernism risked been broken by the industrially reproduced image as reproductions of reproductions fragmented our notion of a linear time and a mythic image—or idea—that could lead us to a better world. Bongiorni, rather, points to something more ethereal than a broken temporal whole. What his optical devices do is distort the sensory apparatus so as to make evident the ghost like nature of 21st Century experience. The absurdity of contemporary image culture, with its injunction to always look at something—meme, advertising image, celebrity selfie, politician's portrait, etc—leaves us nothing solid to grab hold of. Just as with the ubiquitous image of the dictator in every town square within a totalitarian society, the omnipresence of the image points to an emptiness behind the facade, and within ourselves. In this age of mass surveillance and of the selfie there is nothing to look at, precisely because there is a sensory overload.

In his series *SLPFL* (*Still Life. President for Life*, 2017) Bongiorni confronts the political implications of this overload by painting nine still lifes—each measuring 20x20cm—wearing his roughly produced visual mechanisms. The use of these optical devices to restrict the vision from one eye to the image of a dictator (such as Mugabe, Putin, Assad, and Kim Jong-un) aims to overcome the tyranny of the image that has robbed humanity of its physical coordinates. For example, *rags and lemons + Mugabe*—which, like all of the works in the series features a small glass framed photo of the president above the painted image—creates a short circuit as the relationship between the depicted president and the real lemons painted by the artist reinstate the possibility of concrete time and space. If there are lemons, there might be other real things and, as such, a whole world to be configured by human subjects. Similarly in *rags + Assad*, the depicted scrunched up red and blue rags—that somehow conjure the real political battles of left and right that took place in the 18th to 20th centuries—seemingly objectify Assad through their proximity to him, reinstating a material reality in which we humans are also objects: ones that can again fight for our subjectivity. Here again, the physical act of painting using an 'augmented' vision points, in its clumsiness, to the rift between the human subject and nature in its particular 21st Century manifestation. It is testament to the tireless research of the artist presented in the exhibition *Kangal* that so many questions are raised in the process.

