

Michael Broughton

Achieving blindness

Michael Broughton's studio is found in Hackney Wick, a neighbourhood in East London where artists can still gain access to unused industrial buildings. The aroma rising from two cups of piping hot coffee intertwines with that of the oil and turps which have impregnated the well-worn floorboards. A large weary flower, leaning on its own hunched stem; a vanitas caving in upon itself between four walls: this is how Michael Broughton's studio appears to me, awash as it is with leftover materials. The artist – who says of himself: “I have destroyed a number of studios” – mixes lumps of paint straight onto the wood of the table and wipes his brush on the wall; the passing of time, of months of rent, marks out the slow expansion of the indecipherable brownish matter spreading across the brickwork and window panes. I walk over layers of dry paint and sit down on an oil-splattered stool. I glance at a little bunch of wilted roses in a glass vase and a few pieces of paper tanned by the side-on sunlight. Everything in Broughton's studio seems to come from a little world devoted to painting, in which life is already still and a face is already a portrait.

Neither figuration nor abstraction: Michael Broughton investigates the realm of perception. He paints the relationship between the onlooker and the looked upon, in research that nevertheless remains constantly intimate, empathic, ‘un-optical’, without ever conceptualising viewing mechanisms. In order to render a subject with suitable *sprezzatura*, the artist examines it through numerous preparatory studies on paper using a charcoal crayon. I ask him when he senses the period of study of a subject is complete; he replies: “When I go blind in front of what I'm going to paint.” The artist sees the concept of blindness as akin to that of knowledge: the gaze is an instrument that passes through the eyes to the hands; only when seeing is no longer indispensable and perception has been acquired on a bodily level is the canvas ready to be addressed. According to Broughton, each choreography of the gaze corresponds to a mirroring choreography of gesture; thus we might say that his painting process is made up of two stages: learning the tangible characteristics of the subject through perception, and then translating that perception into the specific bodily practice of painting.

Perception pertains to the individual, by virtue of our own physical and psychological characteristics, each one of us perceives differently from everyone else, not to mention differently from ourselves, from day to day, hour to hour.

Perception is a phenomenon is a constant state of change, and for this reason Michael Broughton's painting is closely bound up in time. After the preparatory study phase, the artist produces paintings dense with matter in sessions that last only a few hours. Invoking a constant movement in which he picks up paint from the table and transfers it to the canvas, Broughton traces and shapes everything he has absorbed over the course of his days of drawing. Broughton sees the object as its manifestation, i.e. a phenomenon, and as such requires intense work on the surface in order to be grasped by both the substantial and ephemeral elements of its body.

The light, the dust in the air, the position of the artist in the space, the distortions of perspective, the weight of the atmosphere and that of the horizon, the inclination of the hand: the *Mentmore* work cycle, dedicated to an urban view, is conditioned by these elements. "It is a slow uncovering-discovering in the true sense;" according to Broughton, the essence of the relationship between the painter and the subject lives in its unveiling. And although this idea immediately brings to mind a number of the founding theories of German idealism, for Broughton, 'uncovering' has more to do with the *via di porre* and most of all with the *via di levare* of the sculptural process. The painter 'uncovers' the subject in the moment he addresses its form and matter.

In *Mentmore*, the houses bend, or sometimes crumple, like clay cups modelled by a child; the curve of the road is malleable, soft, asphalted by a quick stroke that finds its shape by following empirical paths. There is no rigidity in Michael Broughton; his faith in the matter ensures that a few hours' painting smell of the centuries that have crossed that road, punctuated by the English artist's elegant black drops. Broughton's gaze reminds us that only the instant, the transient, that which is endowed with temporality may be immortalised. Each view offers a testimony of the single day in which the artist contemplated it.

In his interior paintings, *Home Interior* and *Studio Interior*, the perspective of the gaze remains the same as that of his views: the scene is portrayed from top to bottom and often diagonally. Broughton, not only the artist but also the guardian of the point of view from which the interior is observed, takes up a markedly pronounced position: he who, while descending the stairs, engages a limited side-on view of the furniture seen against the light. This is not down to any voyeuristic intent: framing the subject through the outlines of its darkened furnishings entails the scene portrayed not being a 'still interior' but an interior

explicitly lived in by a person who is there, who is entering and whose gaze is off-centre, non-orthogonal compared to the objects. Once again, Broughton paints the temporary view of the individual. Broughton's choices of perspective originate in a peculiar moment in the history of English art, as the artist himself declares: "My roots are absolutely in the Bombergian tradition which as I have understood means that the body holds the space of the mind both externally and internally."

Broughton's work focuses on the manifestation of the real, almost slipping away from the artist's authoriality. The artist is there because he looks, acts and perceives, and not because he paints a world of his own psychic invention or intimate interpretation. Displaying Michael Broughton's painting in Italy is also an invitation to rethink the gaze in phenomenological terms, and to examine the eyes of the mind, the eyes of history and above all, the eyes of the body.

Sofia Silva