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Terrestre

Francesco Simeti

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The series of paper collages entitled *Terrestre* was assembled by Francesco Simeti by bringing together photo reproductions of the sky taken from articles in the *New York Times*. By making use of clippings from the pages of the newspaper collected and saved over a period of years in his own archives, in these works the artist reverses the method used for his previous wallpapers, where he removed the background from the silhouettes of photographic subjects and thus always excluded the sky as an irrelevant and marginal offscreen element. Instead, an inversion of language prevails in *Terrestre*, in which the collages reject an immediate narrative readability in order to privilege the space of the sky and the little parts of urban elements that emerge, such as the tops of skyscrapers, pylons, architectural fragments, and street lights. The eleven collages on display, each organized vertically and thus forever sacrificing the artist's original clippings, are arranged according to a chromatic classification, like variable color fields, from light blue to violet, from navy to crimson. The portions of skies, undated, come from a wide variety of *New York Times* sections, such as "International News", in which the images are part of a political connotation, "Travel and Leisure", where more light-hearted and social scenes predominate, or "Real Estate", with articles and advertising about luxury homes accompanied by clear and radiant skies. Simeti's visual syntax keeps the grid layout of a newspaper but removes any contextual anchor, thus entrusting the viewer alone with the possibility of questioning the photos to understand a possible revelation.

Likewise, *Corpi* is a double projection of eighty slides, all photographic variations on the theme of water, in a variety of tones and textures, also generated from details of photo clippings from the *New York Times*. Again as with the skies of *Terrestre*, they are taken from very different scenes – from the atmosphere of never-ending vacation of the Caribbean Sea, to the drama of migrant ships in the Mediterranean, or the devastations of North American flooding – nevertheless the slides do not betray any hint of history or geography, casting in an abstract and dematerialized form such a key element in the life cycle as water.

Terrestre is a minimal expository elegy for air and water, fundamental elements for the generation of life and the organic survival of the planet – and discussed as such since the presocratic philosophical tradition – but which have become increasingly reduced in quantity and quality. While for the classical economists of the 18th century such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, the forbears of the contemporary liberalism, water and air could not be assigned a monetary value because they were thought to be of *unlimited quantity*, Simeti has staged a troubling reflection on the precariousness of the two elements. A sense of *spleen* comes through in his collages, generated by an observation of sky and water that is only indirect, mediated as it is by fragile photo clippings from newspapers, images perhaps of a collective gaze that has become too myopic to see the clear need to stop the loss and impoverishment of life.

Over the course of his experiences with nonviolent protest in Sicily in the 1950s, Danilo Dolci wrote that the access to primary goods such as water must exclude any form of dominion, and favor instead a creative adaptation between the need to maintain the goods themselves and the human power for action. The dichotomy noted by Dolci between *power* as a democratic experience of *acting together* and *dominion* as an *abuse* which gives to some the possibility it denies to others, is a theme which seems to offer a possible interpretation of the works displayed in Simeti's exhibition. A sculptural group entitled *Muro* hinders access to one part of the gallery, made up of elements in turquoise glass paste, artifacts produced by the artist inspired by the material compositions of finds of ancient civilizations. From a form that is near to classical architectural elements, or hard biological aggregates, such as shells, in their shape, lines and color, these elements resemble the shields and body armor of modern police forces. They evoke in Simeti the apprehension, personally experienced by the artist, caused by the appearance in the streets of US cities of the "Blue Lives Matter" movement, which by parading the color of the police forces laid claim to a political dominion of a white, violent and militaristic nature. It is an insinuation that comes increasingly closer to an undefined yet alarming image, almost a Kafkaian *odradek*, the final gloss on a process in which the artist appeals to the viewers with the silent strength of materials that are entirely *terrestrial*, analogue and friable, paper, terracottas and newspaper clippings.

Luigi Fassi

