

Images in the theater of the mind

I cannot understand why we never thanked Vienna.

I suspect that the backdrop is by now a centuries-old imprint, cultivated in generations of schoolchildren's minds, forcefully planted there by textbooks and patriotic anecdotes, of the loathing of *the murmur of the Piave river* against the Austrian invader.

In fact, the foreigner is not welcome within our borders in our culture of images, not *that* foreigner, the next-door neighbor of the Eastern Alps. All others are: our photographic know-how, for example, has staunch Anglo-Saxon roots with a robust minor French vein.

Thus I find it fitting as well as beautiful, and more so even than the work being so well-crafted, that the photographer has chosen to thank Vienna, the Vienna that I will tell about.

I speak of Orit Drori, born in Israel, residing in Thailand, having studied photography in Rome, who for eight years now travels back and forth to the Austrian capital in search of the spirit of a European culture interrupted and fractured repeatedly by its continental conflicts.

In her exhibit *Shadows, Roses, Shadows* there is the Vienna of Sigmund Freud, of Karl Kraus, of Stefan Zweig, of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, of Arthur Schnitzler, of Franz Werfel.

Photographing this spirit today is a challenge that Drori has taken up with the weapon of evocative metaphor. A chronicle of allusions, one could say.

For what then, particularly if we love visual culture, should we thank Vienna?

For having led us, I believe, to some sound questioning of what we see and of the way we see it.

These are the thoughts of Eric R. Kandel, a neuroscientist, Nobel Prize laureate in Medicine, with a consummate sensitivity for art and the curiosity to cross-reference all these topics.

One of his most startling and original books is *The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present*. Browsing through its pages at random is enough to create the suspicion that within it something unusual is underway: brain maps juxtaposed to painting reproductions.

Therein lies a historical and critical introduction to the cultural hybrid, in my view extremely fertile, known by the name of neuro-aesthetics.

For Kandel it is precisely in the Great Vienna of the early twentieth century that the initial fissures appear in the rigid partition between the two cultures, scientific and humanistic, both interested in what happens within our minds but unable to exchange suggestions or clues.

At the coffee tables of the Café Central where doctors and psychological explorers met together with painters and writers, an intuition dawned on

Kandel: one day we would witness the discovery of the mechanisms of the biological substratum that determines psychic functions such as those regulating our aesthetic judgments and artistic emotions.

It was actually more the artists watching, fascinated, the work of the explorers of the mind. Gustav Klimt admired Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud. For Oskar Kokoschka expressionism was a rival of psychoanalysis.

In Kandel's view, it was the painters who bridged the rift, creating paintings as intuitive experiments of the functioning of biological and neural mechanisms.

If Freud seemed more interested in psychoanalyzing painters' biographies than their works, Alois Riegl recognized precisely by studying paintings, how important the "part of the observer" is, the far from passive role played by the beholder through his or her mental elaboration on the artwork beheld.

Vienna was where the first insight was born that art, the product of a mind, is truly achieved only in the brain of those who embrace and recast it, reworking it in the great theater of their interiority, memories, and experience.

Vienna was where the first suspicion about the innocence of the eye and the denial of its virginity saw the light.

Vienna was where the conviction gradually arose that the myth of direct access to reality through the perceptions of our senses, including sight, the queen of our culture, is only the most ingenious of the mental constructions of our evolutionary apparatus.

Vienna was where we ventured into what would become the neurological theory of emotions, interpreted as *propensities to act* in response to external stimuli re-elaborated within the mind. Thus the unknown land of a cognitive psychology of art came to be explored.

I believe that Orit Drori had the right intuition, choosing for her images shades full of shadows breached by the afterglow of sparse details, bodies, limbs, stones, architecture.

Darkness pervades the theater at the beginning of the performance. What we call images - paintings, photographs - and believe to be endowed with objective stability in the real world are nothing more than changing perceptions in the private theater of the mind.

All this may seem dramatically esoteric and a bit disturbing. Who is the director in that theater?

We are! None other than us! But it is indeed, *us*, a plural. The lesson of Vienna, after all, is that art is not essential for survival but it is necessary for cohabitation, that which renders survival pleasant.

I cite Kandel: "The first thing that is revealed to us by art is that we want to share each others' mental processes," that we possess "an unconscious, hardwired tendency to keep our cognitive state up to date with that of others."

Furthermore: "Art is an attempt, in itself pleasing and instructive, of the artist and of the viewer to communicate and share with each other the creative process that characterizes every human brain."

Art is the sign of the fundamental need, inscribed in our human specificity, to share one's thoughts through images.

Photography has made that possibility universal. Thank you Vienna. Thank you Orit.