

ATP DIARY

Interview with Fabio Cherstich - "Patrick Angus" at the Bortolami Gallery in New York

Angus's works tell through the colors and the marks of the pencil, stories of people, places and atmospheres that no longer exist. An intimate diary, narration and testimony of the public and private life of the period, before the AIDS catastrophe took away most of the subjects portrayed in his works.

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Patrick Angus (1953 - 1992), Installation view, Bortolami Gallery, New York. Photo Kristian Laudrup.

Text and interview by **Davide Pirovano** -

Fabio Cherstich, director of prose and opera, is also the leading European collector and researcher of the artist **Patrick Angus**. Having died prematurely due to AIDS, Angus through his works witnessed America in the late 70s and early 80s, under the inspiration of great masters, such as David Hockney and a great passion for Pablo Picasso. The latter is also demonstrated by the painting entitled "Self-portrait as Picasso" (1980). Angus's works tell through the colors and the marks of the pencil, stories of people, places and atmospheres that no longer exist. An intimate diary, narration and testimony of the public and private life of the period, before the AIDS catastrophe took away most of the subjects portrayed in his works. What remains to us thanks to the realism of Angus are pieces of a significant historical period, which marked a generation. They are complete testimony and vibration of an era. In the visual apparatus, but also in the titles, which on some occasions mention the songs that defined the collective moments of the society of the period, as happens with "I Get Weak" (1991) and "Hanky Panky" (1990). Everything brings to mind the nostalgia of an entire historical moment.

The interview with Cherstich is on the occasion of Angus's solo show at the Bortolami Gallery in New York, from January 15 to February 27, 2021, the artist's first solo show in the big city, after the last one in 2004 at the Leslie - Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art.

Davide Pirovano: What triggered this great interest in Angus?

Fabio Cherstich: The interest in Angus did not start suddenly even if surely the current exhibition at Bortolami is the most important for prestige and visibility and is becoming a case not only in NYC. In the last two years, two retrospectives have seen him as a protagonist at the Kunstmuseum in Stuttgart in 2017 and at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 2019. An important anthological catalog published by Hatje Cantz and other important publications in international magazines and trade journals have pulled from oblivion not only his extraordinary talent and his very personal vision of the world, but, above all, a precious testimony of the great season of American realism, a fascinating and complex story of art and life. Certainly unique.

DP: What potential did you see in your works?

FC: Since in 2012 in Paris the Italian artist and my dear friend Tomaso De Luca talked to me about Angus' work showing me a painting that I still consider one of my favorites today (*Hanky Panky* from 1990) - I have never stopped being passionate more and more not only to his work - which I find special - but to his biography by coming into contact with family, friends and life partners: The few survivors of AIDS that has decimated a generation of artists.

DP: Where and how does Angus' career start?

FC: Angus has been drawing non-stop since he was thirteen and has been living in North Hollywood, mainly portraits and still lifes. A high school teacher notices her talent and advises her mother to call a private painting and drawing teacher twice a week to help develop the talent she sensed in the boy. Very shy and introverted in life but very determined in the ambition to become an artist.

DP: How is your research evolving?

FC: Already in the very first period of production - late 60s - the obsession with portraiture recurs in Angus' work: himself and his enigmatic *boys*, initially friends or schoolmates, then the life models of Santa Barbara Institute of Art. These are his muses, adolescents and provincials, *dandies* improvisers, workers, sportsmen, bored and almost lost boys, half-naked portraits on a bed or lying on the sofa, the air often elusive, perhaps bored, beautiful and elusive in their jeans and tight T-shirts. The sexual theme becomes more explicit and insistent starting in the late '70s, when Angus lands in the boundless and frightening Los Angeles in search of a more engaging and free life and eager to make himself known as an artist. When he arrives in Los Angeles in the mid-70s and eager to feel part of a world, the artistic and libertine one, where he can finally express his homosexuality, but always remaining on the sidelines. A self-condemnation to loneliness, perhaps, but certainly the only possible position to truly witness something.

DP: Who were your main teachers?

FC: Hockney and all the Bay Area artists when he is in Los Angeles, then Picasso, loved and studied since high school. His painting can be said to be a mix of these influences, in absolute antithesis with the informal vocation of the art market of those years.

DP: What has it brought that is new compared to who inspired it?

FC: As Emanuele Mocarrelli wrote in the precious text that accompanied the artist's first Italian exhibition at the LOOM Gallery in Milan in 2015 "... the paintings (by Patrick Angus) today appear to be pioneering and founding evidence of an early reflection on *queer spaces*, which Angus probed

with a sharp and amused eye; thus *removing*, thanks to a masterly mastery of the pictorial medium, the underworld of the New York *drague* from the stigma of squalor and social condemnation, to make it a metaphor for universal conditions. Angus is a great *American realist*, and his optical device always firmly embraces the figures in context and space, the heat of the body in the relentless indifference of the *non-human world*. There are preparatory studies in which he calculates, like the Severini of *effort modern*, the proportional tabature of the paintings, in the golden section. And although the sensitive ductus of his painting trembles when he caresses the beloved bodies of boys, Angus is never an expressionist painter: on the contrary, his latest works, studded with programmatic references to Hopper, attest to an extreme formal decantation, of which unfortunately we will never know the possible outcomes."

DP: Your works have a value above all of testimony of what the 70s and 80s were in America. Today, in addition to this important testimonial value, what do your works tell us?

FC: Places and people that no longer exist fixed forever by Angus on canvas and paper. The visual diary not only of Angus but of an era.

DP: The narrativity of your images speaks to us of many episodes: both private and collective. Could we conceive his work as a single story through images?

FC: Absolutely yes. Observing his works, you leaf through the pages of a personal, intimate visual diary, in which the American province of his childhood is summarized in canvases and works on paper that portray domestic environments or open and desolate spaces, abandoned gas stations and villas immortalized with an eye photographic. Los Angeles and its characters, palm trees, the places of outdoor cruising that he too frequented. And then the gay clubs and saunas of New York or the apartments of friends and lovers. A diary for images in fact.

DP: Is this solo show at the Bortolami Gallery in New York the first since the 2004 one at the Leslie - Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art?

FC: The Premiere in NYC yes.

DP: Where did the idea for this exhibition come from and what do you explore new in Angus' production corpus?

FC: I was in NYC a year ago to present Angus' work to the curator of the Whitney Museum permanent collection. After that meeting I went on the advice of Paola Clerico to Stefania Bortolami to talk about an artist that she represents and I love very much, Barbara Kasten.

I had brought my book "a visual diary" with me to introduce her to the work. Lightning strike. He flipped through it quickly and said "great, let's do a show". And so it was. The choice made was to focus on works on paper, but also presenting 3 important canvases from the New York period... let's hope only the beginning of the long-awaited return to NYC finally as a protagonist.

The great success that Angus would have deserved as an artist only touched him at the end of his life, in a great personal exhibition organized by the University of Santa Barbara in February 1992; it is on this occasion that David Hockney (yes, he himself, one of his absolute models) bought six of his works and shot a short video of the evening. There remains a photo of two men laughing: one is Hockney - tall, burly, already landed in the hyperuranium of the masters of the twentieth century - and the other is Angus - minute and already visibly worn out by AIDS which will kill him only three months later, yet smiling, perhaps for the first time aware of his extraordinary talent.

Today we can finally say that the star of Angus has returned to shine also in New York, the city he loved most and that finally after too many years of indifference thanks to the Bortolami exhibition celebrates the talent of a great artist that I now consider as a friend from the past: Patrick Angus.