

Maps

Roaming the world. A journey through time and space, history and geography, images and borders.

Rita Selvaggio

...I like maps, because they lie.
Because they give no access to the vicious truth.
Because great-heartedly, good-naturedly
they spread before me a world
not of this world.

Wisława Szymborska, "Map"¹

Giulia Piscitelli's practice is one that has maintained from the outset a relationship with reality and with the haemorrhage of the passing days. It faces up to what exists, offering it a background of meaning. Her work has always concentrated on a scattered and confused humanity that, with its obsessions and its fragmented routine of existence, embodies the common condition of the present day.

An attentive and sharp gaze, an otherness understood as creative condition and existential autonomy, analyses ideologies and truths hidden by faiths and cults, by habits and clichés. With controlled lyricism, Piscitelli focuses her attention on the habitual and the customary, on the uneasy and at times so illogical sphere of the everyday. Presupposing an involvement in the things of daily life, with a measure of self-mocking detachment and attention to the world of the very small, the artist sets

1 "Map" is the last poem written by Wisława Szymborska, published posthumously in English in *Map: Collected and Last Poems*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.

out with rigour and profundity to underline the uniqueness of everything in existence, of everything that cannot be made to fit into a collective classification. She adjusts the viewpoint and inverts the perspective, placing at the centre of her inquiry not so much the observing subject as the things that are observed and the way they are constructed to form the world.

Things are organized in an “obscure thread” until a human gaze intervenes to illuminate them. At the limits of unobtrusiveness and introversion, where time stumbles and falls, perhaps overwhelmed by the surfeit of the world, the series of her *Maps* extracts the geographic terms from eternity and takes the viewer on a journey in space and time. The maps reduce the vast distances between here and elsewhere and, re-creating huge expanses in the palm of a hand, make us see the world as if we were looking at another world.

For centuries maps of the world have tried to picture in an imaginative way what the unknowable world might look like. Cartographers in fact did not limit themselves to reproducing the world but set out to construct it, and the origins of map-making lie above all in the need to comprise the dimensions of space and time in a single image. The map is not the territory and, in a relationship similar to the one that connects language with the objects it designates, can never coincide with the territory it proposes to represent.

As with the figure of speech called the metaphor, it entails the transfer of something from one place to another.

Giulia Piscitelli's research along these lines is founded on a system of proportions between the different scales of some maps, which permit identification of the modifications made by human beings to territorial borders over the course of history, for reasons of political conflict or geological contingency, and the iconographic symbol most historically representative of the divine, namely the halo. The first group of these works was shown in the solo exhibition *Live the Dream* she held in Naples in 2016, which presented a cornucopia of images bewildering in

— la circonferenza del bacino (larghezza massima conoscenza della propria taglia è importante non del b
miner
— la
rata,
punto
— la
sul fi
— la
piega
bracc
— L
conve
torace
Perciò
cm 8
40; u
e cos

their variety, a world of maps. Onto maps dating from other times that, in many cases, no longer correspond to reality and using the traditional technique for the application of gold leaf, the artist transfers, in proportion, the haloes found in some masterpieces of the history of art. Paintings, illuminations, frescoes and temperas on wood dating from between the 11th and the 15th century offer the inexhaustible possibility of creating an infinite universe of relations and frameworks of interpretation. And so on a map of Greece in 1941 we find the *Portrait of Saint Matthew the Evangelist* from an illumination of the Gospel of Kharberd (1025) in the Matenadaran Library; or Cimabue's *Maestà* (c. 1280) in the Louvre is traced on a map of France from the 1930s.

In practice Piscitelli takes away from the subjects of these pictures their figurability, the thing that bestows on dreams, signs and visions their paradoxical visual quality and their dissimilar resemblances. Resemblances that are always metaphorical, inextricably bound together, constantly tending to place themselves outside themselves. The place and its background, like the body, that area of darkness filled with organs, are made abstract by virtue of the multiplication of temporalities at work in them: past or historical, present or tropological, future or analogical. The ways that this metamorphosis can occur are as intricate as a spider web.

In these works space is not a Cartesian grid of relations between places but should be read on the basis of the swarm of haloes that fill it, of the subject that is incorporated in it and that brings it to life by internal animation or by the "radiating of the visible", as Merleau-Ponty would probably have put it.

In his essay *Il viandante nella mappa*, Italo Calvino noted that the map is drawn in view of a journey. It is the reminder of a series of stages, of a plotted course, and so finds its coherent form in the line rather than in the area. In the time of ancient Rome, in fact, *Itineraria picta* were used by the army to travel along safe roads. It suffices to think of the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, a mediaeval copy of an ancient Roman map on a parch-

ment scroll divided into eleven sections. Originally perhaps seven metres long and just thirty-four centimetres high, it shows the whole road system of the Empire, from the west of Morocco to present-day Turkey, and the world then known to the Romans, from the Pillars of Hercules to the Far East.

For *Secret of the Landscape*², a group exhibition held in London, Piscitelli selected a series of British maps dating from between 1930 and 1957 and paid particular attention to the works of art in the collection of the National Gallery. "A stroll in time and space" is how the artist described her contribution. "The first need to fix the location of places on the map is linked to the journey"³, wrote Calvino. And even if the map is static, it presupposes an idea of narration, it is conceived in relation to a route, it is an Odyssey.

In Giulia Piscitelli the idea of the map stems on the contrary from the physical impossibility of travel, from a forced period of sedentariness that has turned instead into a silently inner journey, into that stationary journey typical of true nomads. Her maps are situated on the borderline between two geographies, that of the part and that of the whole, that of the earth and that of the sky. They follow the subjective impetus of an operation, like mapmaking, that would appear instead to be based on the most neutral objectivity.

As the anthropologist Gregory Bateson argued, "what is on the paper map is a representation of what was in the retinal representation of the man who made the map"⁴. And the result is an infinite regression, an endless series of maps, an extraordinary act of symbiotic alchemy and, above all, an ingenious illusion.

2 *Secret of the Landscape*, group exhibition curated by Rita Selvaggio (Isabelle Cornaro, Giulia Piscitelli, Jessica Warboys), Frith Street Gallery, London, 23 February-6 April 2018.

3 Italo Calvino, *Il viandante nella mappa*, in *Collezione di sabbia*. Milan: Mondadori, 1994.

4 Gregory Bateson, *Form, Substance and Difference*, in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Northvale, NJ-London: Jason Aronson, 1987, 461.

Una s
cattol
regalo

— I n
per es
dato);
ferro
marro
due p

— L'
disegr
tenagl

— La
dello
fornit
cessiv
piato,
prima

— L'e
raddo
il tagli
marro
fatte
la par
verde
intero
mezzo
a pur
delle
parti)
zampe
filo d
sopra
la cor
inferic

In her extensive retrospective at the Kunstmuseum Luzern, Piscitelli placed at the beginning of the exhibition three military maps of Swiss territory dated 1884, 1900 and 1905 that attest to the role of the cartographic discourse not just as a form of knowledge but also as a form of power. In fact some of the practical implications of maps fall to a considerable extent within the category of what Foucault defined as “acts of surveillance” related to wars, to political propaganda, to the drawing of boundaries or to the preservation of public order.

In the solo exhibition *Anime*, held at Casa Masaccio/Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea, in 2019, Piscitelli followed the examples of the rooms devoted to geography in some major museums⁵, but gave them a domestic air by presenting the visitor in the long and narrow entrance hall with a series of maps of ten regions of Italy. Intended as ecological fields of the soul, they drew the gaze with symbolic rituality and a mythological sense of poetry, marking a boundary between the end of the eternity that preceded them and promised immortality. They concealed the representation in the weave of their fabric, holding back what has been yielded at every step, emotions included. They were Souls of Virgins and Mothers, of divine motherhood. A “garden inclosed” was defined as the Mother of God in the Song of Songs, a world of purity, a hortus conclusus inseminated by “mystic breath” that is befittingly walled, just as Mary was closed to the outer senses, as we read in the writings of Albertus Magnus. Giotto's *Ognissanti Maestà* (c. 1310), Gentile

5 In particular the Gallery of Maps in the Vatican Museums which, created between 1581 and 1583, is an exceptional cartographic representation of the regions of Italy and constitutes a precious testimony to the geographical knowledge and the state of the places at that time. In the Uffizi too, there is a room next to the ones in which Botticelli's *Primavera* and *Venus* are displayed that remained closed for many years. It is Room XVI, which used to be known as the Terrazza delle Carte Geografiche or the “Terrace of Maps”, and was designed by Stefano Bonsignori, geographer to Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici. The maps based on his drawings were painted in oil with illuminations in gold by Ludovico Buti. Sublime visions that illustrated the “old Florentine domain”, the island of Elba and the state of Siena. There was also a loggia that overlooked the wonders of Florence, thereby uniting art, geography and town planning.

da Fabriano's *Madonna of Humility* (c. 1420-23) or Sano di Pietro's *Madonna and Child* known as the *Madonna del Pilastro* (1444), Masaccio's *Maestà* (1426) and Pinturicchio's *Madonna with Blessing Child* (c. 1480) shake up the invisible in the manner of a wind of mystery. And again, the haloes of the *Black Madonna* of Montevergine (13th/14th cent.) hold sway on a map of the Gulf of Naples published by the Touring Club Italiano in 1929.

Also known as the *Mamma Schiavona*⁶, owing to the colour of her skin, her sanctuary on the Partenio massif was built on top of the ruins of a pagan temple dedicated to the goddess Cybele where, at the spring equinox, Corybantes used to play drums and sing in orgiastic ecstasy. Above the effigy of "She who gives everything and forgives everything" are set the words "*Nigra et formosa es, amica mea*", a paraphrase of the famous line "I am black, but comely" in the Song of Songs. In the space of Casa Masaccio, the maps were arranged progressively from Southern Italy to the Alps and traversed the peninsula by conceptual nodes, representing their subjects in a golden state here too. Golden as light and as light not just the prime, corporeal form of all things but also an element that as it spreads through the three dimensions generates space. Beginning of forms and essential form of every natural body⁷.

"Soul plying the South Seas", wrote the artist in one of the first lines of the introduction to the exhibition. In a kind of impossible reciprocity between the haloes of the picture and the place that housed them, the souls arrived driven by the warm and humid winds of the South, crossing the seas on the routes followed by the boats of migrants. "Nomads have no history, they only have

6 It should be pointed out that in the Neapolitan dialect the term *schiaivo* meant "dark-skinned" and from this we can deduce the importance that the faithful give to the colour of the Virgin Mary's face. The cult of "Black Virgins", of mediaeval origin, turned around a concrete image of the universal feminine principle. Inasmuch as a black substance represents the principle of *materia prima*, which is found in the bowels of the earth.

7 Cf. in this sense the reflections of Robert Grosseteste in *De luce seu de inchoatione formarum*.

geography" declares a well-known aphorism of Gilles Deleuze⁸. A 1929 map of Palermo is dominated by the two haloes of the Pelagonitissa Mother of God, a variant of the Eleousa, the "Virgin of Tenderness", an iconography that reflects the characteristics of an affectionate and emotional spirituality. Here the Child does not sit regally in the arms of his Mother, but turns towards her and touches her cheek. The etymology of the word *emotion* speaks clearly of a physical motive force: it derives from the French word *émouvoir*, based in turn on the late Latin *emovere*, "to move out". The meaning of *emotion* is therefore associated with the idea of movement, and has a very strong geographical as well as spatial connotation. Archaic cultures considered space to be the principal modality of being in the world. They believed that the exercise of thought was not independent of the place where one lived. Mapping, as an ancient art of memory, also involved the geography of the heart and the space where the movement of emotion took place, a cartographic model that linked the inner to the outer. In this connection it suffices to think that in 1654, in an attempt to picture an inner country, following the movement of the emotions through moors, rivers, lakes, seas, island and mountains, Mademoiselle de Scudéry drew the *Carte du pays de tendre*, a map of the country of love, to illustrate her novel *Clélie*. It was the embodiment of a narrative journey that visualized in the form of a landscape a mobile anatomy of spaces of experience, the relations of distance and perspective between the projected passions. In practice, the emotional journey of which the novel speaks.

The mind is much broader than the sky and Wislawa Szymborska closes *Map*, her last poem, with a sense of vacuity, of the unfinished. A world without barriers and without borders exists, but only on maps, where you cannot get lost and where everything is close to everything else. "I like maps, because they lie." And that's enough.

8 Gilles Deleuze, in Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, 31.