

Green White Red
A Flavour of Italy from the Collection of the Frac Aquitaine

Claire Jacquet

Text for the catalogue (excerpt)

Rarely have two countries shared so many historical, political and cultural ties as France and Italy, these Latin cousins facing each other across the Alps. Both heirs to a civilisation derived from antiquity, they have for centuries engaged in exchanges according to the vicissitudes of their destiny, whether joint or separate. If it is common knowledge that Gaul was conquered by the Romans, it is often forgotten that Gaulish tribes invaded the Peninsula, going as far as to seize Rome in 390BC. According to Hervé Rayner, 'In the sixteenth century, the marriage of Henri II, son of François I, to Catherine de' Medici, brought about an *italianisation* in the manners of the French court.' [...]

If Petrarch and Boccaccio maintained close links with France, Ronsard, Du Bellay and Rabelais spent time in Italy. Leonardo da Vinci's sojourn at Fontainebleau symbolises the influence of the Renaissance on the kingdom of France, a trend that culminated in the creation of the famous *Prix de Rome* by Louis XIV, who honoured Bernini by commissioning from him an equestrian statue of himself, which can today be seen at the Louvre.

Recent history proves how strong these trans-Alpine links are: if Napoleon created the French Academy in Rome, making the Eternal City the highpoint of any artistic itinerary, he also presided over the short-lived Italian Republic, before proclaiming himself King of Italy in 1805 [...]

To celebrate the 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy and in the context of the cultural cooperation between Aquitaine and Emilia-Romagna, the Collezione Maramotti has invited the Frac Aquitaine to present a panorama of its collection of contemporary photographic works. Under the heading 'Green White Red', the works in the exhibition have been selected by a curator to tell a very particular story. Inspired by the colours of the Italian flag, the exhibition is divided into three chapters, conjuring up respectively: nature and the order of the landscape; the age of innocence or silence; passion and conflicts. Beyond these three chromatic fields, an allusive portrait of the Peninsula will be presented that will touch more broadly on a history universally shared by all, at the intersection of contemplation, action and emotion.

Green

The colour green instinctively evokes nature. Was it not for this very reason that Piet Mondrian banished it from the range of primary colours that he used in his grids? The works grouped in this first chapter all share a common link with nature in the broad sense (forests, mountains, plains...). They belong to a repertoire of images that were constructed as a 'genre' in the seventeenth century, that of landscape or still life, taking Giorgione's *Tempesta* of a century earlier as a precursor. The depiction of landscape as a separate subject is to be seen as a relatively recent innovation, both in literature and in art, its rise culminating in the triumph of Romanticism, which elevated the travel account to the status of a literary genre [...]

The period of the Enlightenment witnessed the growing popularity of the *Grand Tour*, a year-long journey taking in the most iconic ancient sites that provided well-to-do young men with an opportunity to complete their education. The advent of this worldly and cultivated form of tourism led to the invention of a new kind of pictorial representation, originating in Italy and called *vedute*. These were no longer paintings inspired by mythological, biblical or historical stories, but canvases of smaller dimensions (so as to be portable), faithfully reproducing views that these young men had discovered and admired in the course of their travels (the Colosseum

in Rome or the Grand Canal in Venice). The *vedute* of Canaletto and Guardi contributed to the popularisation of the genre – the ancestor of the postcard – which were sought after by collectors for their sense of precision. In this respect the success of the *veduta* (which went on to decorate the interiors of the European middle classes) was part of an emerging democratisation of culture, seeming to prefigure the attraction for photography that would put a brutal stop to this infatuation in the nineteenth century. If the introduction to this exhibition of photographs has taken the form of a rather lengthy digression, it is by way of reminding readers that the distant roots of this medium are to be found in the ambit of painting and the decisive chapter of its evolution that unfolded in Italy.

Josef Sudek, born in Bohemia at the end of the nineteenth century, is indeed indebted to the pictorial tradition, using the camera to produce romantic, misty landscapes. The rise of Nazism and the Second World War caused him to withdraw into his studio, through the window of which he observed the world and its transformations. The image entitled *The window of my atelier* is a perfect example of his work. When we look at it we are reminded that, since the Renaissance, the representation of nature has obeyed certain rules of composition laid down by Leon Battista Alberti. It is to Alberti that we owe the invention of perspective according to a mathematical logic that allows our vision to open up in such a way that it might be projected through the frame of a 'window on the world.' It is the creation of depth of field that allows lines to converge towards a vanishing point while at the same time arranging the different elements in the painting in respect of their proportions. The 'Albertian' window rests on a principle of observation that Sudek takes literally. His photograph reveals the pane of a window, with its effects of transparency and opacity, combining the mists of the garden with the condensation of the studio. Curiously, it evokes Nicéphore Niépce's photograph of 1826–27, referred to by its creator as a 'heliograph' and taken from the (open) window of his property at Saint-Loup de Varennes: a negative image with very strong contrasts, the earliest known permanent image and a key foundation stone in the history of photography.

If observing from one's window is a first step, travelling through the countryside is a second. Following in the wake of the British Romantic painters, Hamish Fulton and Richard Long are not content to contemplate vast expanses: they range across them physically, each in his own way, the former distinguishing himself from the latter in that he does not make interventions in the landscape. From these walks, Fulton brings back images that are ambivalent, like nature itself: disturbing and calm, majestic and of the utmost simplicity. The horizon line of *Buzzing Fly* reaches the dimension of a panorama, separating two worlds (the earth and the sky) and embodying the idea of moving through space without there being any clue to suggest such a reading. Richard Long, on the other hand, intervenes directly, as evidenced by *Avon Gorge Water Drawing Bristol 1983*, which shows the 'drawing' of water that the artist had intentionally projected onto the rock face; a line as vertical and uneven as Fulton's horizon line is flat and natural.

This practice of intervening in the landscape seems to be a common trend among contemporary artists, John Pfahl for example stretching a red cord between two coconut palms in order to mark the level of the sea. It is the modern equivalent of the *capriccio*, the invention of painters who composed their landscapes by taking liberties, not hesitating to 'combine' real and fantastical elements [...]

From the macroscopic view of a world that 'is vacillating' (to cite Webb), Dove Allouche offers a microscopic view of a world that 'is sinking:' during the summer of 2003, in the south of Portugal, the artist took several photographs of a completely charred eucalyptus forest in the aftermath of a fire. His series *Mélanophila II* is the faithful reconstruction of these views in the form of graphite drawings. Through this process of transfer, Allouche seeks as much to restore the real as to distance himself from it. These images refer to a forest that had disappeared, to feelings of loss and of grief [...]

Pauline Bastard's *Beautiful Landscapes* achieve a sort of landscape synthesis by superimposing different strata of images derived from different sources. By manipulating images from old history and geography textbooks, she reveals a play of sedimentations demonstrating that the landscape is as much a cultural construction as it is a geological one [...]

The landscape is an invention on the part of those who explore it; in 1336, having left Bologna around ten years earlier to follow the popes to Avignon, Petrarch threw himself into the ascent of Mont Ventoux, demonstrating in the process a thoroughly modern sensibility. In his account of the climb, the experience is seen as an opportunity to examine his own states of mind as he achieves beatitude through contact with the coarseness of reality, confessing at the same time his nostalgia for the skies of Italy. In 1951 Marguerite Yourcenar published her recreation of the life of the Emperor Hadrian, written in the first person and based on a minute observation of the archaeological remains of Hadrian's Villa and an immersion in classical culture. A landscape that bears the imprint of man. So far, so near...

White

White is the colour of silence that precedes or follows chaos. The still lifes of Jan Groover seem to teeter on the edge, like a world given over to a state of disturbing strangeness. His images capture collections of objects in spaces devoid of any human presence, reminiscent of the sensuality of photographs by Edward Weston (peppers) or the atemporal paintings of Giorgio Morandi (flasks and carafes). The way his images are printed – using the platinum process – produces a very silvery, almost unreal luminosity, blurring the contrasts while at the same time preserving the smallest of details [...]

The façades photographed by Thomas Ruff in 1988, and by Walker Evans in 1936, exhibit an implacable neutrality, eschewing any psychological interpretation. The German photographer is known to be heavily reliant on the work of the American, whose documentary precision has something of the non-emphatic style of a Gustave Flaubert. On the other hand, the series *Gentlemen* by Karen Knorr immerses the viewer in the gentlemen's clubs of London and brings to the surface the patriarchal aspect of their representatives, drawing our attention to snatches of conversation with parodic accents [...]

There is a group of photographs that seems to plot the subjective cartography of all these more or less white states associated with childhood. In a work by Cartier-Bresson, whiteness is embodied in the dress worn by a little African-American girl in New Orleans in 1947. Not far from this are two other photographs: one by Diane Arbus showing a group of children wearing masks in an attempt to keep their identity a secret; the other by August Sander depicting two blind children deep in conversation.

The softness of a world linked to the feminine imbues several portraits: that by Harry Callahan, those by Ralph Gibson in which light illuminates only one half of the face and a breast modestly veiled in white, or indeed David Seidner's in which the identities of a Cindy Sherman and her 'double' overlap, revealed in broad daylight. While Duane Michals's Kim Novak, a star without glitz and unsettling by nature, throws us a look of infinite tenderness, Mattia Bonetti's angel already turns his back on us. We seem to have completely given up on the idea of returning to an Arcadia [...]

The portrait by Clegg & Gutmann is a return to the past, an invitation to enter into a private interior where a young couple in a beautifully studied pose are to be found in a refined setting. At their side is a bust of Marie-Antoinette, the effigy of an ancient aristocracy that ruled over the world of business as well as that of the arts. Such a photograph brings to mind those portraits of rich Italian families whose rivalries once contributed to aggrandising their cities (the Visconti

in Milan, the Medici in Florence, the Este in Ferrara) and who helped artists and corporations by granting countless commissions. The municipal authorities conducted a policy of monumental munificence in the public realm, adorning squares with fountains and statues. In Bologna, the Asinelli family erected a tower a few hundred metres high based on a clever architectonic calculation that finds an echo in the balancing act of Fischli & Weiss [...]

In France, the final hours of the *Ancien Régime* are conjured up by Deborah Turbeville through furnishings covered with white dust sheets in Madame Du Barry's bedroom at Versailles, the period seemingly frozen for ever in a second eternity.

Red

Red is the colour of exacerbated sentiments, from passion to violence. It is also the colour of danger and toxicity, as evoked by the opening works of Gilbert & George and Valérie Jouve on the subject of noxious inhalations. The checkerboard of *Burning Souls* plays on the opposition of black and red. Did Stendhal not use these very colours to represent the two possible careers open to his hero, Julien Sorel, in his bid to conquer the world: the Army (red uniform) or the Church (black cassock)? At the risk of making this choice even more restrictive: passion or death? [...]

Red is a colour endowed with a strong power of attraction, which women put to good use in their games of seduction. The Cindy Sherman image is the quintessence of this: the artist snaps herself in a falsely cheery pose, mimicking that of glamour models or film studio girls, ready of any adventure. David Seidner's photograph is all too aware of the effect of vertigo induced by the sight of a woman magnificently dressed in an Yves Saint Laurent gown [...]

Conflicts are bloody, as the colour red so dramatically shows. The twentieth century was marked by the Jewish genocide that obsessed Christian Boltanski in his quest for memory, that of the living and the dead. The series *Les Enfants de Berlin* is animated by a strange violence which the artist manages in the end to control and channel: of Jewish origin, Boltanski found himself in 1975 photographing young children in Germany and admits having made up his mind to carry out this photographic session like a series of point-blank shots fired at these innocent faces.

The true faces of war are impossible to avoid: the young soldier photographed by August Sander in the Westerwald in 1945 or Manuel Álvarez Bravo's poignant photograph of a workman assassinated in Mexico City in 1934. On the ground, a puddle of blood... that seems to spread out inexorably towards *Milk Cross* by Andres Serrano, which the artist created by plunging a cross-shaped receptacle containing milk into a larger vat containing blood. This chromatic duality is an inversion of the more usual 'red cross' (on a white background). It takes its place in a social and medical context marked by the AIDS virus at the end of the 1980s... [...]

The work by Geneviève Cadieux entitled *Amour aveugle* (Blind Love) is made up of two huge photographs, one showing eyes and the other a mouth. They are like the two expressive poles of the face: two extremes, the *loci* of sometimes disjointed emotions (the seat of reason on the one hand, that of passion on the other: the head versus the heart). The piece is like the coming together of two antagonisms, like the North and South of a same territory... [...]

'There are two sorts of Italians,' affirmed the humorist Pierre Desproges, 'the Italians of the North who live in the North and the Italians of the South who die in the South.' It is difficult to gloss over the gaps in mentality between the two extremities of the Peninsula, or indeed the socio-economic contrasts that still distinguish Piedmont from Puglia [...]

In the final section of the exhibition, however, an equation comes into play. The + sign acts as a hyphen between the two parts of the work of Geneviève Cadieux as if a sum of the two elements were possible. In the same way, the face of a woman can be read in relation to a frieze painted by children: the image of the protective and coercive 'mamma' that reigns over the family in Italy and that, alongside the Church, is considered the nation's most 'sacred' institution,

like a distant echo of Piero della Francesca's *Madonna della Misericordia*. A country nourished by local particularities and profound antagonisms, Italy is reunited around a great common denominator, as the historian Catherine Brice reminds us: 'Christianity spread out across the whole world from its epicentre in Rome, the residence of its spiritual and temporal head.'³ That symbol of the Christian religion which can also be read at the heart of *Milk Cross*.

By taking certain works in the collection of the Frac Aquitaine as our starting point and allowing ourselves to be inspired by the colours of Italy, we have been able to draw out some of the big questions common to all nations (the exploration of natural spaces, the upheaval of change, the torments of life and death). Artists have always been inspired by these themes, which is the reason why their works remain so alive through the ages. Deep down, it is the heart of the mystery of creation that the opening photograph by Josef Sudek embodies: the artist's personal feelings are translated for others and expressed in a universal form, beyond temporal and linguistic barriers. The visitor can insert himself into this history, written a day at a time, by looking at his reflection in the work by Heimo Zobernig, which consists of a broken mirror: a sort of immediate and furtive 'photograph' by way of a reminder that history is far from being a perfect chronological line and that it has to be composed from its own traces, one might even say its 'accidents.' And if an itinerary around this exhibition begins and ends with Luigi Ghirri, it only serves to remind us – in an echo of the banner in the final cantica of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Paradise – that the motifs of travel in Italy are numerous. As much across the land as over the four seas that surround it.