

Claudio Del Sole: 'Un'antenna sensibile'

Christopher Adams

It is a prevalent misconception that art and science occupy two antithetical spheres of activity, possessing irreconcilable traits, purposes and methodologies. If the former tends to be associated in the popular mind with instinct, emotion and the irrational, and to be perceived as a nobly 'disinterested' pursuit, the latter is typically characterized in terms of methodical research, intellectual discipline and logical reasoning, and as being directed toward specific, eminently practical, ends and applications. Yet even the most cursory glance at the history of art reveals the fallacy of such clichés and stereotypes, for scientific advances have informed and expanded the technical means, expressive range, formal character and iconographical content of painting down the ages. Leon Battista Alberti's treatise *De Pictura* (1435) is emblematic of this symbiotic relationship, with its mathematically rigorous exposition of linear perspective, while Leonardo's anatomical drawings, and visionary designs for bridges, vehicles and other mechanical contrivances, significantly blurred the boundaries between the two disciplines. Investigations into optical phenomena, and the properties of light and colour, constituted the foundations of Neo-Impressionism, while the hard-edged vocabulary popularized by Art Deco during the 1920s and 1930s was directly influenced by the 'geometric and mechanical splendour'¹ of modern engineering. Such examples are illustrative of the ways in which art has consistently 'humanized' science, constituting an important conduit through which its ideas have percolated into the wider social consciousness.

The work of Claudio Del Sole is very much in this tradition. An astronomer as well as a painter,² he recognized no rigid distinctions or mutual exclusivity between the two disciplines, asserting that "the study of light, colour, form [...] [and] space is something that unites painting and astronomy". Indeed, he stressed the interdependence of art and science more generally, maintaining that any relevant artist "is not enclosed in a restricted and exclusive world of his own. He is like an antenna, sensitive to everything that happens around him. Accordingly, he is attentive [...] to the progress of science – that is, to the unfolding story of mankind".³ His work covered a range of media, encompassing painting, printmaking, sculpture and kinetic art, and ran the gamut of post-war Italian avant-garde aesthetics. It received favourable notices during his lifetime, and he was a prolific exhibitor – a list in the artist's archive detailing his participation in 36 shows between the years 1951 and 1964 alone. The majority of these took place in Italy, but his work was also included in a survey of Italian printmaking at Mexico's National Museum of Modern Art in 1962, and he was subsequently awarded two solo shows at New York's Shuster Gallery in 1967 and 1968.⁴ Yet he remained somewhat on the periphery of the contemporary art scene (perhaps partly as a consequence of his reserved nature)⁵ and his work has fallen into relative obscurity since the late 1970s.⁶

Born in Rome in 1926, Del Sole began his artistic training in 1944 as a pupil of the painter and sculptor Vincenzo Luigi Jerace (1862-1947). In 1948 he met Sante Monachesi, an artist who had been associated with the iconoclastic Futurist movement during the 1930s and early 1940s. A versatile, adventurous figure, who explored a vast range of different formal vocabularies throughout his career, Monachesi would exert an important influence on the younger painter – with whom he shared a studio for several years – encouraging him to abandon his academic studies. In 1950, Del Sole's discovery of Klee and Kandinsky proved revelatory, although it does not immediately appear to have stimulated any experimentation with abstraction, and the robust 'neo-Fauve' style employed by Monachesi at this time would remain a key reference point over the following five years. However, during the second half of the 1950s his technique became increasingly attuned to the prevailing *Astratto-Concreto* aesthetic – a tendency that has been described as "the central

stylistic current of the decade"⁷ – which combined abstraction with forms evoking objective reality. Contemporary press reviews reveal that Del Sole was considered to be a particularly successful exponent of this vocabulary, his imagery being praised for maintaining an unusually harmonious balance between its opposing elements.⁸

Toward the end of the decade, the Space Race intensified his existing interest in astronomy, and he glimpsed the possibility of a more vital art, capable of bearing witness to this significant moment in human history. On 14 September 1959 – the day after the Soviet Union's *Luna 2* spacecraft became the first such object to land on the surface of the moon – he was one of five artists to sign a manifesto of 'Astralism' (along with Monachesi, Alessandro Trotti, Saverio Ungheri and Grazioso David) with the aim of initiating "a new art, conscious of the cosmic dimension opening up before humanity".⁹ The Astralists were by no means alone in their fascination with such matters. That same year, Giulio Turcato also began to produce works that "allude[d] to the depth and light of the cosmos",¹⁰ and Lucio Fontana created the first of his slashed canvases, through which one seems to glimpse the infinity of space. The Nuclear artists, led by Enrico Baj, also published a manifesto of 'Interplanetary Art', in which they vowed

to free ourselves from our tyrant earth by transcending the conventional and already abandoned law of gravity; at the risk that our brushes and colours slide out of human control and that our words and typographical characters float in mid-air, in revolt against canvas and paper, like sodium vapour and crystal lithium in suspension in the dense atmosphere of Mars, in the rosy oceans of Venus, in the black depths of Neptune, in the rainbow rings of Saturn.¹¹

Astralism's agenda also echoed the resolutely modern thrust of Futurism, the influence of which continued to reverberate throughout the post-war period. Declaring that "there can be no modern painting without the starting point of an absolutely modern sensation",¹² its artists and poets had looked to "the triumphant progress of science"¹³ for inspiration, rather than traditional subjects such as the still life or the nude. Giacomo Balla's *Mercury Passing in Front of the Sun* (1914), Gerardo Dottori's *Astral Rhythms* (1916) and Enrico Prampolini's celestial 'aeropaintings' of the 1930s and 1940s were emblematic of this change in focus, and constituted a 'cosmic' heritage of which Del Sole would have been particularly aware through his friendship with Monachesi.

Like Futurism's own initial proclamations, the manifesto of Astralism was more a bold statement of intent to engage with contemporary subject matter than a document setting out the formal and technical characteristics of this new art form – and still less one that described an existing body of work created in accordance with its principles. A period of adjustment was evidently required following the manifesto's publication, for six months later a solo exhibition of Del Sole's work gave no indication of his new interests, still comprising semi-abstract landscapes and dynamic images of dancers.¹⁴ Subsequently, he appears to have identified an initial way forward in the aesthetics of *Art Informel*, which became widespread in Italy after 1957. As its name suggests, this tendency eschewed preconceived aesthetic systems or painterly styles, emphasizing instead a personal, instinctive and gestural approach that made it perfectly suited to evoking the amorphous, diffuse forms of nebulae, or galaxies scattered throughout the infinity of the cosmos.

By contrast, the late 1960s saw Del Sole begin to investigate the varied evolution of Spatialist aesthetics, creating works that incorporated three-dimensional 'tracery' or else pierced, layered surfaces, reminiscent of the contemporary work of figures such as Paolo Scheggi. Simultaneously, his vocabulary became more geometric in nature, employing spirals, ellipses, helixes and other forms redolent of galactic structures, light waves, sidereal trajectories or the orbits of satellites. Works of this kind were displayed in a group show held at Rome's La Balduina gallery in 1969 to mark both

Astralism's tenth anniversary and the momentous Apollo 11 mission, which coincided neatly with the exhibition.¹⁵ It would be the artist's final major stylistic shift, and subsequent exhibitions during the 1970s saw him refine and develop his new artistic language.

When he died in 2005, Del Sole left behind a remarkable body of work that has been unfairly passed over by 'official' art-historical narratives. With the ongoing revival of interest in post-war Italian art, this exhibition is a timely celebration of a figure whose work constituted a sophisticated, accomplished and highly distinctive response to some of the most significant artistic and scientific developments of his day.

Notes

¹ A reference to F. T. Marinetti's 1914 essay 'Geometric and Mechanical Splendor and the Numerical Sensibility', in F. T. Marinetti, *Let's Murder the Moonshine: Selected Writings*, ed. by R. W. Flint (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1991), pp. 105-11.

² Del Sole began to construct his own telescopes during the 1950s, and in 2007 many of his astronomical photographs were included in an 'atlas' of galaxies published by the journal *Astronomia* [<https://www.astrisroma.org/documentazione/atlantegrafico.pdf>]. The following year, an observatory was dedicated to his memory at the border between the regions of Lazio and Abruzzo in central Italy [<https://www.astrisroma.org/osservatorio/>].

³ See Roberto Bizzotto's interview with the artist, 'Claudio Del Sole. Un artista e l'astronomia', *Il Cielo*, August 1998, pp. 54-57 (p. 54).

⁴ *Claudio Del Sole*, 5-22 April 1967; *Claudio Del Sole: Paintings*, 18 September - 12 October 1968.

⁵ In the catalogue of Del Sole's 1973 exhibition at Avezzano's Centro Iniziative Culturali, Giacomo Cives described him as "shy and rather solitary, tending to devote all his energy to the [...] constant development of his research rather than to frequenting the circles of gallerists and critics", with the result that his work "has perhaps not received the recognition it deserves" ('Claudio Del Sole. Pittore astrale', n. p.).

⁶ Mariano Apa's useful volume *Catacombe. Spazi di arte nascosta a Roma, dal '59 al '90* (Urbino: QuattroVenti, 1992) represents one of the few attempts to characterize the artistic milieu with which Del Sole was associated between the 1950s and 1970s.

⁷ Maurizio Calvesi, 'Informel and Abstraction in Italian Art of the Fifties', in Emily Braun (ed.), *Italian Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture 1900-1988*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, 1989), pp. 289-94 (p. 289).

⁸ See, for example, the unsigned article 'Mostra personale del pittore Claudio Del Sole', *La Vedetta d'Italia*, 16 April 1960.

⁹ Bizzotto, 'Claudio Del Sole. Un artista e l'astronomia', p. 55.

¹⁰ Calvesi, 'Informel and Abstraction in Italian Art of the Fifties', p. 293.

¹¹ See Tristan Sauvage, *Nuclear Art* (Stockholm: Eric Diefenbronner, 1962), pp. 211-13 (pp. 212-13).

¹² Umberto Boccioni, and others, 'The Exhibitors to the Public' (1912), in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos* (Boston: MFA, 2001), pp. 45-50 (p. 46).

¹³ Umberto Boccioni, and others, 'Manifesto of the Futurist Painters' (1910), in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, pp. 24-27 (p. 24).

¹⁴ *Claudio Del Sole*, Passeggiata di Ripetta Galleria, 26 March - 8 April 1960.

¹⁵ The show ran from 20 June to 26 July 1969; the Apollo 11 mission lasted from 16-24 July.