

## DE CHIRICO AND NATURE. OR EXISTENCE? THE EXHIBITION AT PALAZZO DELLE ESPOSIZIONI, ROME, 2010\*

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The title of the exhibition held at Rome's Palazzo delle Esposizioni (9 April - 11 July 2010) is intriguing: *Nature According to de Chirico*. It brings to mind Raffaella Cordisco's article *De Chirico, la fiera dei sogni, o delle polemiche?* (A fair of dreams or of polemic?) on the Parisian show *De Chirico – La Fabrique des rêves*. One could start debating on the concept of "Nature", rarely used in reference to the artist. The opposite is true for the Impressionists, who were celebrated in the exhibition *Da Corot a Monet, la sinfonia della Natura (From Corot to Monet: a Symphony of Nature)* at the nearby Vittoriano venue. And yet, this exhibition's title is clear, *Nature According to de Chirico*, given by the prestigious curator Achille Bonito Oliva, who intentionally uses cultural provocation as a powerful intellectual stimulus.

### **Historical and Artistic Value in an Innovative Exhibition**

This may even be an intentional provocation, but as de Chirico's work covers such a vast range of time, style, content and inspirational motives, it allows for an ample range of selections. In 2009, two monographic exhibitions were held in Rome: *De Chirico and the Museum* (on copies and *d'après*) and *De Chirico, the Magic of Line* (of drawings), whilst in Teramo the exhibition *Between Figure and Sign (from de Chirico to Fontana)* celebrated captivating themes of the greatest artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Nature According to de Chirico* coincides with the centennial of the artist's metaphysical explosion, which also explains the occurrence of other exhibitions and initiatives. Moreover, the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Unification of Italy is indeed a favourable coincidence, as we find many of our country's fundamental values in the art of de Chirico (who was born in Greece to Italian parents), from urban squares to antiquities, from Classical to Baroque traditions. Considering the two in parallel seems courageous as well as necessary.

De Chirico was an artist-symbol who left a deep mark on Italian art and beyond. Like Garibaldi, the "Hero of two Worlds", we feel that he is ideally and completely our own. De Chirico's life in Piazza di Spagna with his daily visits to nearby Caffè Greco, is well known, as is his polemic with

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the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna (where he saw works on show that he felt did not deserve such honour), and which he even called “the museum of horrors”, out of an intense love-hate relationship. Even though de Chirico should not be confined to a specific country – as his territory encompasses the limitless world of Art –, the more that world is explored, the more one realises that the artist's ideal landing place is indeed Italy. After Athens, Munich and Paris, his return to Rome feels just. It is also pleasing to note that one of the first and most famous metaphysical paintings – *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* — was inspired in Florence's Piazza Santa Croce, whilst the young artist contemplated light reflecting on the statue of Dante. The same is true of the artist's urban compositions based on Turin's porticoes and piazzas, as well as statues and equestrian monuments in the shadow of the Mole Antonelliana. Florence, Turin and Rome: three capital cities of a unified Italy, with Athens – the cradle of our civilization – in the background, the vision is complete.

Considerations such as these suffice to give the exhibition at Palazzo delle Esposizioni historical value in addition to its artistic value. However, even if one remains focused on the latter, the painter's versatility lends itself to multiple monographic readings. Some have been mentioned, but there are indeed many others, as expert Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco once said, “de Chirico is (at least) 12 painters”, a fact that is extraordinary considering how stylistically static 20<sup>th</sup> century painters were, even those who had long artistic careers. Take, for example, the famous American painter Edward Hopper whose exhibition at Fondazione Roma emphasised constancy and coherence of style and content in his work. After his youthful “dark side”, he was intrigued by light on his way to Paris and would later remain anchored to the placid, relaxed scenes of middle-class life in provincial America. Instead, the “(at least) 12 painters” that are in de Chirico give him polyhedral value, and even if preference can be given to one period or another of his multifarious artistic life, it is necessary to go into depth in order to analyse, understand and respect the form and content that he gives body to. But this must be done without falling in love with a certain style excluding others, almost as if they were not executed by same artist, or were not the result of his research and maturation, which in de Chirico is also nourished by philosophical thought as well as an exceptional technical ability.

### **The Key to a “Horizontal” Exhibition**

This is precisely where the key to Bonito Oliva's innovative exhibition lies. He did not divide de Chirico's works according to the styles of Fagiolo dell'Arco's “12 painters”, which are listed thusly: the early metaphysical painting of 1910-15 in Florence and Paris; the Ferrarese Interiors of 1915-18; the classical, “Valori Plastici” period of 1918-22; the romantic period of 1923-24; the crisis in the surrealist period of 1925; the Parisian period with the new mythologies of 1926-30; the classical monumental period of 1930-35; the dream-like visions of the Mysterious Baths of 1934-35; the American period of 1936-37; romantic baroque period of 1937-48 and the metaphysical period of 1948-78 when the artist took up the Mysterious Baths theme again.

Instead of a vertical division of this kind, Bonito Oliva engaged himself instead in an almost impossible mission: an unified take on the different periods and painting styles hinging on what lies behind

form and colour – in short, behind painting. There are motives – often unconscious – that are perceivable beyond the most conspicuous expression and the most immediate manifestation that can be found in the subject represented and in the style adopted. In order to do this, it is necessary to delve into de Chirico's special vision, which is strongly linked to philosophy. De Chirico had long cultivated the innovative philosophical theories of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. The artist's *Memoirs* and remarkable contributions to the journal "Valori Plastici" are extremely useful for an in-depth study of his work.

De Chirico is an open book, but we know that the Sibylline oracles were also susceptible to contradictory interpretations, and certainly this ambivalence was something he could not escape: born in Volos at the foot of Mount Pelion where the Centaurs lived and Peleus' son Achilles was educated by the wise Chiron in the land from which the Argonauts set off towards Colchis to search for the Golden Fleece. One could dig even further into the artist's Italian descent, as well as the profession of his father, a railway engineer who was no stranger to puffing locomotives. In fact, the origins and visitations of antiquity are familiar fare in his continuous classical reminiscences. How to break free from the definition of "12 painters" without separating them in a vertical order, surely easier and more accessible, but less innovative and illuminating?

Bonito Oliva has done this by dividing the exhibition into seven sections that do not correspond to seven of the twelve painters identified in de Chirico, but rather, to seven motives behind his art and the convergence of different styles developed over time. In this, the artist's true nature comes to light. Indeed, as he always stated, it is not chronology or style that mattered, but rather, something completely different: content. The curator did not stop here, as the installation does not follow the traditional format seen in previous shows at this venue. The characteristic of Palazzo delle Esposizioni is its versatility, the fact that the space can be modified and shaped through the installation of new structures, giving it a desired physiognomy. In this case, one has the impression of finding oneself inside a temple, in which a sacred representation is being held.

The heart of the temple is the great central rotunda with its sixteen imposing fluted columns of the same colour as the brown marble corner pilasters. Two gigantic photos make de Chirico's presence tangible. The black and white images lend it an element of antiquity and memory: in one, the artist is seated in front of an ancient bust, palette in hand; the other is a full-figure photo of the artist standing on his balcony, his hand shielding his eyes as he gazes off into the distance. One can only guess if the object of his scrutiny is the beautiful panorama of Piazza di Spagna where he lived, or an undefined horizon. De Chirico's presence is not only evoked by these images, one can also hear his voice from above, discretely accompanying the visitors as they pause as if de Chirico's soul were stirring in this "temple". Surrounding the rotunda are seven chapels (like in a church), one for each of the seven sections of a sacred representation dedicated to Nature as the title *Nature According to de Chirico* declares. The title may seem limiting, unless Nature is considered in the vaster sense, that of existence. The mystery and enigma that make the artist's work unique and unmistakable, intense and intriguing, is directly woven into *being*. Such a condition cannot be understood in a frame limited to Nature. Mystery and enigma are within us because they concern our existence, which is expressed through archetypes in which symbols, concepts and a philosophical bearing can be made visible.

At this point, Bonito Oliva's work seems to have gone far beyond the curating of an art exhibition, even a difficult and prestigious one like this, with its 140 works from important public and private collections, as well as from Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico (who had lent almost the totality of works in other shows). The exhibition surpasses the research-based exhibition recently seen at the Vittoriano, *A Symphony of Nature*, which attempted an "ecological" interpretation of Impressionism. The focus of the de Chirico show does not concern naturalistic philosophical themes alone and this is precisely why the reference to existence seems more suitable, since it encompasses a comprehensive view of Nature, beyond the accepted notion limited to appearance rather than to being.

The question here regards the Nature of Myth and of Shadow, Interior Nature and Anti-Nature, the Nature of Things and Open Nature, as well as Living Nature. If we consider Nature here as existence, and not merely the frame reality offers to human living while remaining extraneous, it also expresses the most profound mystery that Bonito Oliva meritoriously delved into in the philosophical folds of de Chirico's work by going far beyond his different styles, mixed, as they were, in each section. It is not form that counts, nor is it appearance: it is the soul that gives life to matter. There is also a soul in things that makes a mark on their being, just as it makes a mark on the human being. We call it nature, of course, but it ends up as existence, made of spirit as well as matter.

As Laura Cherubini most relevantly recalls, "the analysis that Martin Heidegger makes of the term *physis* is very interesting, the term that in the Greek language refers to Nature: 'The *physis* is the same being thanks to which the being becomes observable and stays observable... *Physis* originally referred to the sky as much as to the earth, the stone as much as to the plant, the animal as much as to Man and refers to the history of the human race as the work of Man and the gods, and finally most importantly the gods themselves in pro-destiny". To which she adds: "Perhaps de Chirico would have agreed". For what it is worth, we undoubtedly do. These words contain the link connecting nature to existence. We have searched for it, only to find it in Heidegger's philosophical thought, specifically in his "Introduction to Metaphysics". In the end, it is the same "Pandean" concept that we perceive in Bonito Oliva's interpretation, and it is not far from Virgil's "*sunt lacrimae rerum*": the tears of nature touch the minds of men.

### **The Nature of Myth: from Diana to Ariadne**

In the first section on *The Nature of Myth* the remixing of styles and chronology is immediately confirmed. We find four metaphysical paintings, three horses, a few mythological paintings and a few figures. But what is myth for de Chirico? He speaks of "the cool, faraway breath of mythology", and suddenly, behold his philosophical thought: divinities "that look without seeing"; theirs is "the gaze of one who knows that there is nothing to know". Bonito Oliva sees in nature a transfiguration in a mythical key of a "scenario of universal archetypes". And it is up to culture to present itself as "the victorious civilizing force in the apparent disorder of nature". But we do not see them as opposites; they have mystery in common. The enigma to decode is in nature, and culture can help us solve it.

Starting with the oldest work, *Battle of the Centaurs*, 1909, painted after the artist's encounter with Böcklin's *Battle of the Centaurs* and Klinger's engravings on the same subject. De Chirico was fascinated by the mythological origins of these figures from his native land. The work, an elaborate composition in which the impetus of conflict is fully rendered, differs from the simple essentiality of another work from the artist's Böcklinesque period, the *Dying Centaur*, in which the figure, lying on its back, blends with the rocks and ground. The painting (which is not on show) is a "Pandean" assimilation that Bonito Oliva would have probably liked to include in the exhibition. Here, we find centaurs and divinities like *Diana Asleep in the Woods* and mythological characters like *Orestes and Electra* and *Ulysses and Lucretia*, or those in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, down to the double images of *Two Mythological Figures* and *Two Nudes* (fig. 1), all from the 1920s or shortly after. De Chirico's work in this section differs from more his more famous work.



fig. 1 G. de Chirico, *Two Nudes*, 1926, Museo d'Arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto

The rounded figures of the *Horses on the Seashore* with Dioscuri and Argonauts, lend a classical statuesque tone, among omnipresent ruins of broken columns and temples in the distance (including the Parthenon), in four paintings dating from 1926 to 1932. The theme of horses was dear to the artist, and Thessaly, the land of his origins, was famous for horse breeding. Broken columns also appear in the later *The Daughters of Minos*, but it is the three "Graces" in softly reclined positions on the rocks at the seaside with a temple in the background, in a magical pinkish atmosphere on a turquoise surface, who dominate. Ten years later, we have *Composition with the Head of Jupiter*, composed on a background suggesting a metaphysical piazza. Instead of ruins of columns, a sculpted head and a foot with a sandal dominate the scene. Under the signature one reads 1942, "datable c. 1968": here – and we will see many other examples – is the a-temporal de Chirico who drove critics crazy.

The foreshortened view is an inviting overture. Myth lets us descend into the magical metaphysical atmosphere of three famous "piazzas" that cover a very broad period: from *Souvenir of Italy*, 1912, (also entitled *Melancholy*) to *Melancholy of Ariadne* of the Neometaphysical period of 1968-71, passing through *Italian Piazza with Ariadne*, from the second half of the 1930s. But the piazza is not the protagonist of this section. The myth of Ariadne is. Abandoned by the ungrateful Theseus while she lay sleeping on the island of Naxos, here she is represented in a reclining position on the central monument, constituting thus a symbol of melancholy.

*The Philosopher and the Poet*, a famous pencil drawing also deals with Myth: mannequins with egg-shaped heads are portrayed amid rulers and geometric lines. *The Philosopher*, 1924, which

despite being positioned in the shadow of a reddish curtain with towers in the background, also deals with mythology due to its element of classical statuary. From here we leap to the most metaphysical painting, *The Disquieting Muses*, which one might say sums up many motifs. The one exhibited here, of various existing versions, is signed 1925 (datable to 1946). We find a column and a peplos, egg-shaped heads, a seated limbless figure like a mutilated statue, the piazza, a building, a monument, objects, and a truncated tower and smokestacks instead of a puffing locomotive.

One is tempted to leave the realm of Myth and project oneself into de Chirico's metaphysics without a mediation of content or the interference of other styles. Bonito Oliva immediately satisfies our desire, as the following section presents purely metaphysical paintings. This is not, however, a change of plan on the proposed horizontal subject-based layout in contrast to the usual vertical one according to style. Here, subject is developed through content, which is expressed in different forms, and not only in the well-known Piazza, as the title of this section shows: *The Nature of Shadow*.

### **The Nature of Shadow: the Enigma of the Italian Piazza**

In the previous section, the Italian Piazza theme was introduced with *The Disquieting Muses*. Here, in *The Morning of the Muses*, 1972, it is portrayed with greater realism and stronger shadows. The theme is also seen in *The Seer*, 1914-15, with egg-headed mannequin and a shadow projected from outside the painting. Whilst in the Metaphysical Interiors *The Poet's House* (a drawing of 1918) and *The Mysterious Calculator* (a watercolour of 1975), one can perceive faint shadows within the room, strong shadows can be seen in a typical monumental outdoor scene framed by a window.

External scenes dominate in this section, where the famous metaphysical piazzas seen in the Myth of Ariadne offer pure enjoyment for the spirit and eye. Prominent, well-defined deep shadows are found in all of these works, along with arcades, monuments, truncated towers and puffing locomotives in the background. Shadows such as these have undergone much scrutiny. In the beautiful exhibition catalogue curated by Bonito Oliva, Vincenzo Trione strings together an endless chain of definitions, the fruit of cultural research, which, starting with Poe and Maupassant, Dostoevsky and Andersen, he then arrives at the "poetics of the double" of Schlemil, Zarathustra, Pinocchio: "What do these books have in common? Nothing. Perhaps only an interpreter, Giorgio de Chirico". Trione comments on the magical, enigmatic atmospheric effect the shadow has on the entire composition, where they conceal, or reveal, many meanings in the piazzas on show. "De Chirico's shadow" – writes Trione – "is a riot of ambiguity. Solitary, it alludes without referring to anything else. A place of intense and exhausting transits, it whittles down, slims down, consumes bodies, making them similar to blades hidden in suspended landscapes. Taciturn but not devastated, it is forced to flee in continuation: it loses everything, giving us back – regal and patient – its gifts. It appears and disappears from sight. Ephemeral, it is exposed to the oscillations of time." In an earlier painting, *The Anguishing Morning*, 1912, a wide black band invades the piazza diagonally from the dark arch on the right to the series of dark arcades of the white building on the left. "In itself, it gathers intimate traces, dreams, reverberations of situations or events: mirages and visions, fears and desires. It does not represent

anything with exactness, but is surrounded by multiple, and at times, different meanings. It is here, in front of us, and it is beyond, in the no-where". Two miniscule human figures and their shadows are lost in four different piazzas dominated by monuments and buildings: from *Italian Piazza (Souvenir d'Italie)*, 1924-25 to *Italian Piazza with Politician*, from the second half of the 1930s, from *Present and Past*, 1936, to *Italian Piazza with Statue of Cavour*, 1974.

"An appearance that is impossible to caress, it is light that intuits darkness. And it is darkness that is dispersed, to embrace images, to cover them up again, until it dissolves, between vibrations and resonances. A relic that belongs to a real environment and that, at the same time, disappears from view. A reflection of a given universe, it also holds onto autonomy of its own. Changeable, it is not part of things. Yet, it certifies the substance of an object, since what it projects is always true."

The use of shadows is true and real, even when they are set in a hodgepodge of symbolic objects like the T-squares and spirals in a complex composition like *Italian Piazza (The Big Game)*, 1968, or projected by two people in the centre of the piazza, or even, as occurs in *The Delights of the Poet*, of the early 1950s, drawn in representation of a building on the right outside the painting which "closes" the piazza. "Like a spell, it constitutes the secret side of men. A riddle that is impossible to solve, it indicates the internal structure of phenomena. Metaphor of the non-finite, it hides the soul of forms. It is not part of anything real, because it is elusive. Nevertheless, it has semantic conspicuousness, which can only be explained by the laws of optics. It is waiting for us: it wants to tell its story, to describe and interpret itself."

This is what we feel in front of the "great void" of *Italian Piazza*, 1938, a painting in which there are no people and the monument has been replaced by a fountain. The shadow of the building on the right is even more present and real than the building itself, as is also true for the shadow of the smokestack. The same can be felt in the "great fullness" of *Arrival of the Movers*, signed 1951 (datable to c. 1965), where, in addition to the arcades we find two people in the centre, smokestacks and, above all, the moving van with its mysteries and questions. "Similar in colour, it does not have a 'permanent, specific molecular environment'. It irradiates from the density of the world, 'like light irradiates from a luminous source'. It is not mere accompaniment, but a concrete event. It is located between light sources and opaque solids, in some cases even managing to encourage specific kinds of knowledge. Shadows are vague: they arrive slowly, without doing any harm. They creep into our daily lives."

The everyday quality of *Italian Piazza with Pink Tower*, 1934, and of *Italian Piazza with Fountain*, signed 1954 (datable c. 1968), lies in the two little figures that project a slender shadow from outside the picture in the first, and in the second, from the left side behind the arcade. But there is more: in both works, there is a different presence that had already appeared less evidently in *Italian Piazza with Politician* and *Present and Past*: a great tower in the background of the painting. It casts no shadow; we are in the kingdom of light. And high towers in the three paintings *The Tower (The Big Tower)*, 1915, *The Tower and the Train*, 1934, and *The Tower of Silence*, 1937 do not project shadows. In common, they have the dark background of a sky like a lid over a luminous base: in the co-presence of light and darkness without shadows.

There is no time to dwell on these details: the difference between marked shadows and diffused darkness, between the piazzas and the towers. There are five more sections, with the same number

of pilgrimage chapels. The next section is entitled Interior Nature: after the enigma of the Italian Piazza, we encounter the mystery of allusive and equally enigmatic interiors.

### Interior Nature: “Second Nature”

That which Luca Barbero calls “second nature”, whilst looking upon these interiors from a metaphysical perspective, is in fact, “the nature of Man”, thus a return to life. “Giorgio de Chirico was not satisfied with one way of seeing, so it is not just one *perspective* and mystery that he offers us in his paintings”. Unlike other great artists, de Chirico’s research is unceasing and is nourished by a disquietude caused by philosophical culture, from the pages of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Weininger. This occurs during the “incubational phase of metaphysical painting”, where there are piazzas with their enigmas, and the interiors, which although more difficult to decipher, are no less intriguing.

The enclosed space of an atelier, like that of a bedroom or another kind of room, becomes the landing place of a journey through disquietude. When the problems of the psyche arise, images are overlapped and juxtaposed; there is no rigorous, spectral order as occurs in the piazza, but rather, a symmetrical repercussion. After such external disquietude, we find ourselves with an even greater sense of anguish and unrest as new inner phantoms join the outer ones: “In the first metaphysical moment the metaphysical/vaticinator traveller returns to incredibly claustrophobic rooms to leave his new obsessions and divine toys in the form of a boldly made trophy”, says Barbero, and cites Schmied – the great scholar of de Chirico’s metaphysical art seen in light of philosophers’ thought – with regard to the “second nature” expressed in the metaphysical interiors. There, “the history of the human race, human action, that, unknown and inexplicable, welcomes us *into* things”. Because “de Chirico’s world is a human world and exclusively human” when nature, we must add, is interpreted as existence.

In closing the visit to first two sections, we have shown trees materializing inside a room in *My Room in the Midi*, 1927-28 (fig. 2). It is not just a figurative and symbolic transposition, a profound



fig. 2 G. de Chirico, *My Room in the Midi*, 1927-1928, private collection

intellectual formulation is taking place here. In these years de Chirico wrote the novel *Hebdomeros* in which characters from his paintings emerge. *Hebdomeros* does not appear in this painting, but the sea-carpet does in the sepulchral closing of the room in which one senses the “new obsessions”.

In *Ulysses’ Return*, 1968, the sea, not the sky, is the protagonist. A figure, which may indeed be the young *Hebdomeros* –, rows on waves in a room with an armchair, a painting, a wardrobe and an open door, whilst a metaphysical painting, “The Pink Tower”, hangs on the wall. *The House with Green Shutters*,



1924 portrays two houses enclosed in connecting rooms, with rocks and vegetation. In *The Temple in the Room*, 1927, we find rocks and ruins with broken columns; the same temple appears in *Thèbes*, 1928, where the invasion is complete with an imposing rock wall and water pouring in. There are two little shrines but only one rock in *Furniture and Rocks in a Room*, 1923, whilst a statue of an athlete dominates the foreground, above which an opening shows a patch of blue sky. A similar sky can be found in *Metaphysical triangle with Glove*, 1958, beyond the checkerboard with glove, up above the chimneys. The inner-outer transpositions are reversible. There is a series of paintings in which it is the interiors that “exit” into the open air. It is not difficult to give Freudian interpretations to the two-way street of Metaphysical Art. Armchairs and



fig. 3 G. de Chirico, *Landscape Painter*, 1930s, private collection

the wardrobes are taken from indoors and placed outdoors. This is also the case in *Furniture on the Seashore* and in the three *Furniture in the Valley* paintings, all from 1927. In one of them, there is also a bed; in all of them, the sky unfolds above. In the fourth painting on this theme, from 1966, Barbero describes “Renoir-like” the sky of an outdoor scene with a faraway temple and a plaster cast, ruins and a little horse near an armchair and wardrobe. One does not have an impression of anything extraordinary or transitory; the intimacy of the domestic environment is simply outside. No claustrophobic nightmares lurk here, unlike in *The Sadness of Spring*, 1970, where two egg-headed mannequins expressing innate humanity are confined in an oppressive interior, whilst outside the window, the call of nature bursts forth in the form of two luxuriant trees. A pause on a lighter note comes with the elegant, subtle depiction of *Venetian Decorators*, 1973, and *Mystery of a Hotel Room in Venice*, 1974, together with the triumph of the theme of the “painting within a painting” in *Landscape Painter*, of the 1930s (fig. 3), where a mannequin with T-squares sits in front of a real painting of trees, and *Metaphysical Interior with Romantic Landscape*, 1968, in which the figurative style of the imaginary painting inside the real painting stands out amid metaphysical T-squares and buildings peeping in through the window.

In *Mystery of Manhattan*, 1973, the skyscrapers of New York have a much stronger presence, as they seem to enter the room from a big vertical window. There is a painting in which a portrait of Mercury is set adjacent to skyscrapers, with red curtains tied back revealing an impractical armchair. It is a bare, unwelcoming room with an intriguing outdoor scene trying to substitute the one inside – an event that perhaps only Mercury the messenger can help avoid.

### Anti-Nature: from Statues and Shadows to Mannequins

There is no human presence in the interiors that we have seen, even if evidence of such is seen in the armchairs and wardrobes, just as there was none in the piazzas, except for the tiny conversing figures, whose projected shadows are more important than they themselves are. Indeed, this is a painting of absences that succeeds in conveying a sense of apprehension that something is about to happen. Perhaps in the famous “Ideal City” of Urbino, by Laurana or Piero della Francesca, one gets this sensation, through doors that are ajar and fountains without water, which await someone to bring life to an immobile, almost timeless atmosphere.

In the piazzas and indoor-outdoor scenes by de Chirico that we have seen, the normal dimension of space and time is lost, as would happen if one were to travel at the speed of light, according to Einstein’s theory of relativity. Here the same result is obtained without movement, through the absence of individual and collective action. The scene is the piazza or room in which trees, rocks, houses and temples enter, or the valley or beach where armchairs and armoires appear. But de Chirico does not do away with the human presence, he transfigures it.

And behold the mannequin, the leading figure of the metaphysics of man. He is the prime performer in the pictorial tale of the fourth section dedicated to “Anti-Nature”. The ambivalence between natural and artificial seen in the piazzas and the interiors is shifted to the human figure transformed into an automaton, a sort of technological mannequin in which the artist incorporates the findings of our civilization, in virtual cybernetics fed by ruins and temples of the past as well as by modern, everyday objects. The bodies thus transformed become masters of the scene, but their identity is problematic.

Intermediate, almost mutant figures, they represent the concept of “anti-nature”, or what Nietzsche meant when he said: “Here nature has to be contradicted!” De Chirico is imperative: “To completely suppress the idea of mankind as a guide or means for expressing symbols, sensations and thoughts. To free painting once and for all from the anthropomorphism that suffocates sculpture. To see every thing, even mankind, for its essential quality as a thing.” This became de Chirico’s method for treating the human aspect.

The idea of Man is purposefully suppressed through this divergence from, and contradiction of, Nature. In the case of the philosopher, the passage from man to mannequin comes about with the intermediate phase of the statue, which basically can be considered as an anti-natural presence in the piazza. With regard to the mannequin, an evolution takes place in which its components are assembled in more elaborate ways, comprised of an infinite number of miniature combinations, from temples to armchairs, from T-squares to ruins, almost as if de-humanization and anti-nature are tempered by including these vital elements once again.

The section presents a rich array of mannequins: from the elementary ones in *The Duo*, 1914-15, to a more elaborated version in *The Condottiere*, 1925, and *The Troubadour*, 1952, with its drawing instruments, as well as *Masks*, 1968, with the two framed heads, and the precise *The Contemplator*, 1976. Somewhere between these two extremes the *Archaeologists* break in – after the artist met Raissa, a Russian ballerina and archaeology student –, despite the disapproval of the Breton surrealists, whom de Chirico was initially affiliated with.

Two paintings are exemplary in this sense. In *The Solitary Archaeologist*, 1937, the mannequin's body is made up of a temple shrine and a piece of a column, and in *Archaeologists*, 1968, the elements in the bodies of the two mannequins are multiplied: temples, towers, columns, busts, rocks, and more. *Head of Mysterious Animal*, 1975, is totally composed of artefacts, ruins and ancient temples, as an intent witness to a grand historical past.

In two paintings of the same title, *The Nobles and the Bourgeois*, both of 1933, the mannequins in the composition incorporate in their bodies, not ruins and temples, but instead, armchairs and armoires of varying degrees of elegance, according to their social rank. In *The Muses on Holiday*, 1927, the elements incorporated in the bodies are well suited: pleasant cottages with yards, porches, windows and balconies. *The Painter's Family*, 1926, almost a metaphysical "holy family" with elements that are more geometrical than evocative, is also in character.

The section closes with *The Meditator* and *The Bride's Secret*, both from 1971, although very different and extraneous to the compositional theme of the Archaeologists. Nothing is incorporated into the two figures; the first, with its engulfed form, is not even a mannequin. Following these, we find *The Prodigal Son*, 1973, in which temples appear again, but even this is not a true mannequin. At its side is a Hebdomeros-like figure, similar to the young man that we saw rowing in a room in *Ulysses' Return*.

In *Metaphysical Interior with Anatomical Nude*, of 1968 (back-dated to 20 years earlier), we see the return of the articulate composition, with a "painting within a painting" and the window open on a distant scene. This introduces us to the next section dedicated to the "Nature of Things": heterogeneous things, all of which are part of existence.

### **The Nature of Things: the Metaphysical Interiors**

In the fifth section we pass from the "human machine" of the Mannequin, in which the being is transfigured through the incorporation of elements pertaining to history and ancient art, to the "metaphysical machine", assembled in heterogeneous compositions that put together and take apart the most disparate elements. Why is it called "The Nature of Things"? We have here intermediate structures between the natural and the artificial that bear witness to a continuous evolution, in which contemporary objects are added to those of antiquity, in an articulated, vital *unicum*.

The city of Ferrara, where de Chirico and his brother Andrea (aka Alberto Savinio), arrived at the beginning of the summer of 1915 to carry out their military service during the First World War, played an important role. Certain elements of the city made an impression on de Chirico, which he used in his paintings: not only in their monumental backgrounds, but also in minor motifs, in particular, the Ferrarese biscuits and bread evoking contemporaneity, together with countless other motifs. No bounds or limits check these unrelated objects: the omnipresent T-squares, for example, are beyond any form of logic or interconnection. The irrationality and instability of life also forcefully emerge from these works. This is the unchangeable nature of things. There are numerous "paintings within a painting", a way of incorporating external elements and past events, creating encrypted references that remain to be discovered.

The “Ferrarese biscuits” are central protagonists in a number of the paintings on show, such as two Ferrara period works of 1916: *Metaphysical Composition with Biscuits and Insignia*, where the biscuits themselves seem to be honorary awards, and *Greetings from a Distant Friend*, with characteristic Ferrarese bread in the foreground. These biscuits also appear in the drawing *Metaphysical Composition*, 1918, and in *Metaphysical Interior with Ball and Biscuits* and *Metaphysical Interior with Black Oval*, both datable to 1968, even though the signature dates them back to 1950 and 1958.

Decoding their meaning has engaged critics, including Fagiolo dell’Arco, who said that “the biscuits are assembled in geometric, recurring orders that inevitably make us think of a spiritual iconography”. He also mentioned the triangle, which for de Chirico “has served from antiquity, as indeed it still does today in the theosophist doctrine, as a mystical and magical symbol, and it certainly often awakes a sense of uneasiness and even of fear”.

De Chirico’s brother linked them to ancient Ferrarese funerary rites: “They accompany the libations offered to local infernal gods, to facilitate entry into the realms of underworld. Those who bite into these fatal pastries taste eternity”. Sabina D’Angelosante underlines “the importance given to their arrangement; they are anonymous in a crowd like innocent toy soldiers, as if strategically aligned on a blue battlefield” because that is often the colour of the support to which they are “fixed”, which recalls a painting framed with an irregular geometrical shape.

This section is especially important. We are at the heart of de Chirico’s art. The mirror image of the metaphysical piazza stands before us. Art in the “nature of things”, which suggests another invention: the *Metaphysical Interior*, in which, once more, real paintings are often represented.

In *Metaphysical Interior with Landscape, Villa and Fountain*, 1955, two biscuits are framed on a sky-blue background panel above an enigmatic pale blue roundel that suggests the circular shape of the fountain of the painting in the painting: from potentiality to action? From a villa in a natural setting, we pass to factories with bellowing smokestacks in the two paintings *Metaphysical Interior with Factory*, 1958-59 and *Metaphysical Interior with Workshop*, datable to 1968 and signed 1948, compositions in which the painting is *magna pars*, in addition to the famous drawing instruments.

In *Evangelical Still Life* and *Melancholy of Departure*, of 1916, there are angled wooden sticks and costal maps of fjords instead of T-squares. In the first painting, the Ferrarese biscuits appear once again. D’Angelosante refers to internet with her comment: “Even if we were to ‘click’ on each element, *Melancholy of Departure* would not crack open like a solved rebus, simply because it is not a rebus. We struggle to the point of admitting that the ‘meaning’ of what de Chirico puts *in painting* escapes us.” And she adds: “But are the things around us *in reality* actually that much more understandable? Perhaps the ambiguous nature of de Chirico’s objects is meant to show us the elusive nature of *things in general*: ‘Nature loves to hide’, Heraclitus noted in Fragment 123. It is a matter of understanding *where and how* it hides. Yet, things seem *natural* to us.” This “unknowability” is something we find stimulating and fascinating, as seen in the passage from the domestic *Metaphysical Interior with Pears*, 1968, to the *Metaphysical Vision of New York*, 1975. The same T-squares and rulers are there, yet we pass from two big pears to skyscrapers on a blue sky seen through a window. In the *Harmony of Solitude*, 1976, once again, a portico is positioned behind an assemblage of rulers. A prevalent element in *The Sailors’ Barracks*, of 1914, the portico audaciously takes position in *Antique*

*Idyll*, 1972, (signed and backdated to 30 years earlier) and in *Turinese Mystery and Solitude*, 1966. The building is presented at an angle, like the prow of a ship, with the high, narrow arches seen in the metaphysical Italian piazza.

In these interior scenes, the artist eliminates human presence and even pieces of furniture, whilst including T-squares. However, the paintings *Trophy Makers* and *Trophy Builders*, of 1926-29, are an exception to this rule, as human figures with mannequin-like heads and well-modelled bodies with outstretched hands are present. Whilst in *The Big Mysterious Trophy*, 1973, we catch a glimpse of a statue between two windows looking out onto archaeological exteriors. This anthropomorphic element is seen again outside the window in *Metaphysical Interior with Statue Profile* (signed 1962, datable 1967) behind a heap of symbolic elements in the foreground, including two versions of the famous triangle. It is only a hint,

while the human head, thoughtful or bewildered – perhaps in warning – looms dominantly in *Hermetic Melancholy*, 1919 (fig. 4), reminding us that, in the end, man is always the measure of all things.

A philosophical mind like de Chirico's could not forget this, and Bonito Oliva did well to fix this idea firmly, presenting it in this section in a forceful evocative image that remains impressed upon our memory, in the simple form interlocking sticks and a display of biscuits.



fig. 4 G. de Chirico, *Hermetic Melancholy*, 1919, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris

### Open Nature: The Mysterious Baths and the Sun on the Easel

The curator's guidance does not stop here, as he leads us now into the sixth section "Open Nature", which although anchored to the primordial elements – earth, air, fire and water –, places the human figure at the centre, with the saga of the *Mysterious Baths*. Without the metaphysical transposition of the Mannequins or the classical and mythological transposition of the Archaeologists, Gladiators and Argonauts: the human being is depicted with rounded lines softly sculpting its anatomy, similar to the way in which mythological characters are portrayed, or, is shown dressed in the current fashion – jackets and trousers, briefcases and ties –, inhabitants of parallel realities, both of which are real and visible at the same time, but that can only meet in the magic of an almost surreal location. It is an unexpected return to the origins after exploring the most daring and extravagant transfigurations.

In the mid-1930s, and a sort of magic was born – hinging on an idea, or better, on a lightning bolt that struck the artist when he saw someone walking on a parquet floor that had been waxed

and polished to the point of making the person seem like he was sinking into water, hence the idea of “water-parquet” in which a new species of modern centaurs are immersed, figures engaging in dialogue with the contemporary world through men in elegant suits and ties in a seaside atmosphere amid beach cabins on pilings rising from the “water-parquet”. It is the atmosphere that strikes one the most, with its intense calm that may only be apparent, streaked, as it is, with disquietude. Everything is unusual, even in what seemingly appears as familiar. In these paintings, Man almost always commands a central and dominant position.

The theme originated with the artist’s illustration of Jean Cocteau’s *Mythologie*, of which a drawing and ten lithographs (1934) are on show. Their transposition in painting did not stop in the middle of the 1930s, since the works chosen for the section include *Mysterious Baths I and II*, *Cabins with Red Door* and the extreme synthesis of *Tub with Bather and Bourgeois*.

The theme was taken up again later on, beginning with *The Enigma of Skyscraper*, 1960, the most “heretical” with respect to the initial paintings on the theme with its petrified forest of illuminated sky-scrapers rising high above the parquet, the immersed naked figures and the imposing fully dressed figure beside them. Four remarkable variants of 1965-70 follow. In two of these, *Swimmer in a Mysterious Bath* and *Mysterious Baths with Duck*, of 1973-74, the focus is on the water-parquet with centrally positioned figures immersed under the cabins. Whilst in two very similar compositions of 1968-71, *Departure Towards the Sea* and *Arrival from the Walk*, Hebdomeros is seen in his boat under a temple in the form of a lyre.

Humanity re-surfaces with culminating force in *The Poetical Dreamer*, 1937. Here, after the statuary bust of *Hermetic Melancholy*, we have an authentic human head: a youth crowned with beach cabins, yet so dignified and proud as to command respect despite the fact that his headdress evokes a Pirandello-like “cap with bells”. *Vessels and Veils*, 1935, brings the Mysterious Baths’ meandering exploration into matter to a close: parquet and bathers have disappeared, but curtains and empty, allusive containers remain.

And the four primordial elements? Katherine Robinson sees them as summed up in one of the early paintings on show: *The Surprise*, 1914 (exhibited for the first time in Europe in 80 years), the “metaphysical magnitude” of which she associates with the colour field paintings of the American Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman. It is a very dark, symbolic composition in which a vertical opening of sky and an isolated smokestack evoke air and fire, whilst earth resides in the materiality of the stone arcades and water is found in a painting beneath, the x-ray of which shows the outline of fountain. “*The Surprise* constitutes an extraordinary fusion between representational painting and abstract painting in which line and colour are elements that speak for themselves”.

Air and fire make the sun that warms the earth and causes water to play its role in the life cycle of evaporation and rain. Perhaps this is why the section closes with the sun, and even the sky, in a room. The paintings exhibited number four, not the “Thousand Splendid Suns” in Hosseini’s novel, but four just as splendid suns shining in interiors, whose great windows are open on the world. Suns, with the moon, have their opposite, the extinguished sun: “The sun’s gone out and you are the one who has turned it off,” as an old song once went. Here one finds all of the universality and perennial nature of art, with the coquetry of a great artist summing up his favourite motifs: temples and

buildings, outdoors, T-squares and armchairs, indoors. We see it in *Sun on the Easel* and *Mysterious Show*, as well as in *Metaphysical Interior with the Sun Turned Off* and *Offering to the Sun* from the 1970s. This thematic return was also inspired by the illustration of a literary text (as occurred with the *Mysterious Baths*): Apollinaire's collection of poems, *Calligrammes*, 1930, for which the artist executed sixty-six lithographs, including some that are truly a hymn to the sun.

Giorgio de Chirico is indeed a grand artist, and this exhibition, which acts as a true reincarnation, is also grand.

### Living Nature: usually known as “Natura morta”

How to define the element of surprise one encounters in this seventh and last section? Is it a masterful touch on Bonito Oliva's behalf, or another of his cultural provocations? Both, we believe.

De Chirico's basic concept here regards nature as “silent Nature” (rather than “dead nature”, as in *natura morta*), and Art as a force capable of restoring life. Thus, life-giving Art as immortalizing poetry. Is creativity the primary characteristic of art or not? Well, as such it can re-awaken whatever is dormant in nature and restore its primeval vitality.

Such force can be seen in the paintings on show – almost an exhibition within the exhibition – as they reveal a side that has not yet emerged, at least to the extent that it does in this section. Included are the rural scenes of *The Departure of the Knight-Errant* and *The Departure of the Knight-Errant (Roman Landscape)*, both from 1923, *Metaphysical Memory of Orvieto's Rocky Hillside*, 1921, and *October Outing*, 1924, together with three paintings of nature from 1932-40, such as, *Florentine Landscape*, *Farmstead Landscape* and *Forest*. A Pandean sense pervades the paintings, and here, too, one feels the “symphony of nature” of the Impressionists, but with an indefinable sense of anxiety.

The still lifes become “living nature” in Bonito Oliva's exhibition due to their opulence and as they seem to pulse with vital lymph and energy, hence life. It suffices to look at them to feel the life coursing through these gifts of nature. From *Still life with Grapes and Pomegranate*, 1923, to *Pomegranates in a Landscape*, 1946: in the 23 years that separates them, the initial freshness has not been lost – quite the contrary. The same can be said of *Mandarins on a Branch (Oranges - Villa Romana)*, 1922 and *Fruit with Red Drape on the Left*, 1960, compositions set in an indistinct environment, painted at an interval of almost 40



fig. 5 G. de Chirico, *Ego quoque in Arcadia vixi*, 1923, private collection