

fare pace con la memoria

Make peace with your memory

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Interview with Louis Fratino

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We are on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, September 2016. A Maryland boy in his early twenties stands behind the Guggenheim's ticket office and welcomes tourists with a smile. "A boring job, I know, but I was surrounded by paintings. Besides," that boy says today, "there was a small room full of art catalogues. The breaks I spent there, leafing through them all." Eight years later, Louis Fratino, that is his name, became an artist full-time and his works, this year, are exhibited at the Venice Art Biennale. A sensational leap, one might say. Yet, this artistic metamorphosis seems animated by the same mystery that inhabits his canvases: "I am happy, of course. After being, however, terrified, overwhelmed and so on," he jokes from his studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where I'd met him. But to Venice and the metamorphosis, we'll get to that.

First of all, it must be said that his is a New York story in the truest sense of the word. In the metropolis, Fratino arrived there, in his words, at a fortunate period: "At that moment in history, eight years ago, there was a growing interest in painting. Curators used social media to discover emerging artists and so I got my first show in the Lower East Side." Coincidentally, he was exhibiting with an artist already on insiders' radars, and so when Roberta Smith, a *New York Times* critic, visited and saw Fratino's work, she in-

At 30, American Louis Fratino is the rising star of painting. A beautiful story of talent and redemption.

stantly fell in love with it. In her consecration article, she compared him to such sacred monsters as Schutz, Matisse, Freud, and Hockney. "Actually my main source of inspiration is memory, my subjects come from there," says the artist, running a hand through his hair and staring for a few moments at one of his paintings hanging on the wall. "Memory is a mixture of observation and imagination, but

there is always a part that escapes recollection. I'm interested in filling that void with imagination. When I paint myself or my partner, at a certain point," he continues, "associative thoughts intervene and, thus, art history is mixed with memory. In that moment I have to let go of the source material and let the questions posed by the painting guide its conclusion."

As is evident, memory, in Fratino's work, is a fundamental element. Raised in a family of five children in a rural area just under an hour away from Baltimore, from his childhood he remembers his grandmother, a ceramicist and teacher at Gallaudet, a university for deaf and hearing-impaired students. "Although I don't come

from an artistic background, many of my family led lives steeped in creativity." As a child, he was already drawing like a maniac: at school, the teachers did nothing but encouraging him, and at home, it had become normal to see him hunched over a piece of paper. The only request, for purely economic reasons, is to also use the back of

the sheets. Thinking about it today, he smiles: "Receiving compliments pushed me to always draw more. It was a way to distinguish myself from others." The fact that, at only 30 years old, that teenager who dreamed of illustrating children's books is considered the rising star of contemporary art, does not faze him all that much. He confesses, however, that he is intrigued by it: "I'm interested in the concept of 'American artist' and I wonder if my work, one day, will be contextualized that way. Being able to spend a lot of time abroad has given me a different point of view, another way of being."

In addition to spending a year in Berlin, Louis loves Italy. If asked what he likes about our country, he doesn't answer spaghetti or espresso, but Umberto Saba and the poems of Sandro Penna. He seems less convinced, however, when his subjects get compared to Pasolini's *Ragazzi di vita*, whom he considers too shady a poet. Returning to Venice, Fratino is present with ten works, five of which were specially created for the occasion. "At the start, I admit, I felt a lot of pressure. Knowing the cultural and political situation of queer people in Italy, I felt I had some sort of responsibility. Well, I wanted to deal with the idea of family and sex in a sensitive way," he explains. When he started working on the canvas, however, he decided to put aside all personal issues and, above all, he freed himself from the idea of having to force a message. Among the previously unexhibited works, one of Fratino's most successful experiments pops up, namely the close-up of a boy, *Alessandro*, whose gaze, at once familiar and foreign, seems to wander beyond the painting. This is a sense of bewilderment that returns often in his works, all of which are

characterized by a feeling that is actually common to poetry, namely the mystery between life and artistic matter. "Matisse comes to mind according to which painting, like love, it concerns the quality of projection. I feel I'm most comfortable when the work remains a bit mysterious, when I don't have too many answers as to why I created it."

And here we are, once again, with art understood as an enigma or, to trouble Diane Arbus, as a paradox: the more it says, the less we know. Yet, according to him, no one lives in a politically neutral space. "Artists can choose to ignore it, but everything has a political dimension. Drawing attention to a niche topic is political, especially in a noisy, fast-paced age," he declares. After Venice, Fratino will have his first exhibition in an institution, in September, and also in Italy at the Centro Pecci in Prato. "At the end of the day, I think my work reflects a sense of loneliness, of course, but not in a negative sense. There is a struggle, in painting, an attempt to capture and solidify moments of affection that we know are ephemeral." This solidification, in his works, seems to create a kind of melancholy effect: "Of course, but it is also a way," he concludes, "to make peace with the ephemerality of existence and to find beauty in memory, which, in my work, I repeat, is central. It can also be permeated by loneliness, memory. But it is precious and, from a certain point on, it is all we have left." ■

In the photos, artist Louis Fratino in his studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Some works in progress, sketches and preparatory drawings of paintings. In the opening, his work table.