

Eva Brioschi, My no man's land

Text written for the solo show *My no man's land* (2008, ArtAgents Gallery, Hamburg, Germany)

Recent facts reported by Italian press have drawn the media's attention to the tragic desperation of thousands of people, willing to leave their home lands in the south east of the world and head for Europe, in search of a new life of wealth and comfort; like life in the western world is seen via satellite on TV, in films and advertising.

These people leave the African coasts after long days of crossing desert land, they don't have documents or any guarantees, and the sea is their last obstacle to face before fulfilling their dreams. Having spent their life savings to pay the scruple less seamen, who hoard hundreds of people onto unequipped boats without sufficient food and water supplies, these refugees, these up-rooted individuals, these asylum seekers, sometimes succeed in touching ground; in reaching the coast of the Italian peninsula. But not always. Sometimes this journey is the last of their lifetimes, and the sea their undulating grave swallowing them up forever.

Marzia Migliora's project for her first solo exhibition ArtAgents arose in wake of an incident, relative to this social emergency, that happened last spring and made its way to the Italian newspaper columns.

A boat packed with immigrants was spotted at sea, – in non-territorial waters – off the Maltese coast and was left at the mercy of bad weather conditions, despite having been reported by the AFM (Armed Forces of Malta) patrolling the territorial water borders at the time.

Apparently someone raised their hand from the boat waving a red cloth, a T-shirt or a scarf; a red garment however. Someone on the boat was waving it in the wind calling for rescue. The Maltese government let the boat reach Italian territory by itself, in doing so they placed the responsibility of the refugee rescue and shelter on another government. Unfortunately it was already too late for rescue boats, the vessel – sarcastically described as “a ghost vessel” once engulfed by the waves – had already sunk.

The Maltese government ordered their patrol boats to “monitor and keep at a distance”, the equivalent of saying, watch inertly while dozens of people risk their lives.

It was this cold-hearted order, given by the authorities that prompted Marzia Migliora to start work on this project. A project in which she could give voice to the civilian anger and human sufferance that derive from living in a world where not all human lives have the same value or the same social relevance.

The offending phrase can therefore be seen as a paradigm of a part of the world's behaviour: content with the comforts of life while watching inertly from the window as hundreds and thousands of people lose their lives.

A red coloured neon light, *Monitor and Keep at a Distance*, flashes like a disturbing alarm, warning us of the danger of communal enurement to the wrongs of the so called third/fourth world.

The artist chooses, once again, in this project to identify herself in the stories she tells. She leans out of that window of offending indifference, without fake morals or presumption of innocence, in an attempt to understand the *others* from her perspective. She tries to imagine herself in that dark sea reaching out her hand in search of a sheet anchor, for salvation, something to grab on to. So, next to the neon phrase, there are three white lifebuoys made of soap (*Monitor and Keep at a Distance*).

The soap dissolves and is slippery; like certain rescue units that arrive too late, or not at all, and dissolving – so neutral, colourless and odourless – leaves no traces, no record of any passage.

The sea that swallows up hope and human stories, on the other hand, is depicted as a black and indistinct magma where thousands of bodies are compressed, one on top of the other; the drawings (*High Sea*) are created by the artist as an oneiric vision of an ideal no-man's-high sea that these invisible “ghosts” will never abandon.

The whole project seems to unfold on the border between the cold and clean whiteness of the objects, that build up hope and salvation, scattered around like parts of an incomplete but open tale for the spectator, and the sombre and desolated black, the vortex of water, nightfall and death that we never actually see, but that we perceive as a silent presence occupying the spaces and the pauses between one piece and another. There aren't any corpses or blood and there isn't any pathos.

Everything is expressed with respectful dignity; because it's important to be honest and admit how difficult, it actually is, to consciously identify with people whose fate is so different from ours.

The project is completed by a video entitled *Viddi La mia fortuna in alto mare* (I saw my fortune in the open sea): Two men pull a stick on which there is a small white boat (the ghost vessel) filled to the brim with little human figures, the models used in architectural modelling.

The stick, to the eyes of the onlooker, is the horizon; where the sky meets the sea, upon which, the people's fate is determined by the movement of the two protagonists (huge superpowers). Will they save them or drown them? Will it be a happy ending or a tragic epilogue?

Breaking the immaculate purity of the white "ghost" is a choral song (interpreted by Michela Lucenti and Balletto Civile), it is melancholic and painful; like a wound that slowly and incessantly oozes blood, like the small red dot that can be spotted from the boat; a far cry for help in silent waters, telling of a fortune pursued but lost at high sea. A folk song sung in southern dialect that introduces into the project the imaginary presence of faces, lined and parched by the sun and salt, of the fishermen from the south of Italy. Men, who make a living from the sea and have learnt to respect it, fear it and worship it; like a powerful and capricious god from which you can neither separate nor escape.

"How can one travel to that from which one cannot move away?" Beckett asked himself in one of his diaries.

How can a man, imprisoned in the no-man's-land of his own solitude, an alien to himself and to the world, abandon this suspended dimension represented by the very confines of one's own naked and isolated identity?

Beckett described his work as "my no man's land"; Marzia Migliora borrows this definition and interweaves a parallel with high sea; that portion of non-territorial waters where, in theory, all states have rights but, where often, civil and moral duties fail to be accomplished. The artist does this deliberately to share, humbly, *her* no-man's-land with others, endeavouring with her work to dig beneath the surface of things and to discover and intertwine personal experiences with the experiences of others, making a big tapestry on which the human saga unwinds with all its usual ingredients – love, power, desire, fear, hope ... mixed together differently every time.

My no man's land is a project that marks a journey from Samuel Beckett's desolate land, but Marzia Migliora doesn't sink in a cold, aesthetic and sterile account, she seems to reach a piece of land ideally populated by vigilant consciences, for which, the immortal verses of a great British poet, John Donne, provide a precept of laic faith worth remembering daily:

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a Clod be washed away by the Sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a Promontory were, as well as Manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee".