

frieze

By Nicola Ricciardi

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Alessandro Pessoli Zero..., Milan, Italy

Setting aside the ceramics and sculptural works that have dominated his more recent output, for his first solo show at Zero ..., entitled 'Il mio cuore sulla spiaggia' (My Heart on the Beach), Alessandro Pessoli returned to focus on canvas, using brushwork, screen printing and stencils. While there is no doubt about Pessoli's deep-rooted belief in the elastic possibilities of painting, here the choice of medium seemed a deliberate trip down memory lane, one possibly aimed at renegotiating the formal and theoretical framework of the artist's production to date (and, given that his oeuvre spans three decades, hopefully one made in anticipation of a much-deserved retrospective of his work).

In this new series of paintings, comprising 14 (mostly small) canvases, one recurring theme was still lifes of fish. At first sight, this subject matter may appear less psychologically and emotionally charged than others previously chosen by Pessoli – such as his visionary rendezvous with religious imagery, or his investigations of how personal histories are interwoven with the larger, national narrative. Nonetheless, of all the possible subjects for a classical still life composition, fish are perhaps the most puzzling (could it be because they evoke both religious and sexual references at the same time?) and possibly also the most melancholic (perhaps because of their eyes, always wide open and staring sadly at the onlooker). This sense of melancholia was reinforced by other motifs in the paintings on display – empty boats, tiny anchors, deserted seashores – and by the subtle resemblance to the kind of fine art reproductions one might find in a pizzeria by the sea: faded mechanical copies of Canaletto and the like. A rather comforting feeling of nostalgia was also suggested by the cartoonish approach with which the subjects are often treated, evoking Bruno Bozzetto's animated cartoon series from the 1970s, an iconography that Pessoli has frequently explored.

The artist's nimbleness of thought, enhanced by his colourful imagination, allows for such non-stop shifts between themes, motifs and genres. In fact, it has always been standard procedure for Pessoli to mix personal associations with references to popular culture and allusions to art history, from the Italian Renaissance to European pop – or, in this case, the long tradition of marine-themed still life in the work of 20th-century Italian painters such as Carlo Carrà, Filippo De Pisis and Scipione. Nonetheless, the almost complete absence of the human figure, which has been prominent throughout Pessoli's career up to this point, is certainly atypical. There are no bodies, only the occasional face – the artist's own – emerging from a pile of fish, hiding behind stylized sunglasses or peeping out of a sailing boat. Rather than being the subject of his paintings, though, Pessoli appears as a bystander, caught while yearningly observing the same scene that we are viewing, presumably of the waterfront of Cervia, the seaside resort on the Adriatic Riviera where the artist was born and brought up.

Expectations of a nostalgic, warm-hearted exhibition were encouraged by the subject of the paintings, the artist's return to canvas, the intimate scale of the paintings and even the show's title. Yet, these were somehow tempered by the work's pragmatic, slightly impersonal display. The overly neat hanging of the pieces and the polished look of the space kept the melancholic tropes of the single works from forming a cohesive whole. I was prompted to think of the opening line of a book by Gesualdo Bufalino, *Argo il cieco* (Blind Argus, 1984): 'I was young and happy one summer, in 1951. Neither before nor after; just that summer.' Here, enduring memories of happy days by the seaside are defined as a single space-time unit, a solitary postcard removed from a shelved shoebox. There seemed to be a similar logic at play in this show: the artist's heart and spirit – the playfulness, the spontaneity, the liveliness captured even within the still life images – only emerged when standing extremely close to the individual paintings; if one stepped back to observe the whole show from a distance, the same expressive exuberance seemed somehow confined – as if happiness were limited to just a single summer.