

Inno alla Gioia e il Prezzo della Libertà (Ode to Joy and the Price of Freedom)

Remijon Pronja

Critical text by Claudio Cravero

Remijon Pronja's artwork is a constant struggle for freedom.

To the artist, video, photography, drawing, and installation are but means to expand his questioning of human existence under political oppression and economic restraints.

Inno alla Gioia e il Prezzo della Libertà is the title of the exhibition at Opere Scelte Gallery, Turin. While 'Ode to Joy' recalls the Ninth Symphony composed by Beethoven in 1824, it has been borrowed in this framework to highlight the everlasting human hope towards the search for happiness. However, happiness is a state of mind, body, and heart, after all. Pure bliss is not the achievement of goals, but it relates to one's endless endurance to reach them. Pronja is very much aware of this subtle but essential difference. As an Albanian who strove to study abroad and make his living as an artist, he has now become a storyteller of small worlds of courage in the form of poetry. In fact, the stories he talks about are somehow in contradiction to loftier prose. He is mostly interested in small, intimate narratives that are interspersed throughout the history of his country, whose past regimental influences still impact people's sense of belonging today.

At the entrance of the gallery, it is displayed *Untitled in Allegro Moderato* (2015). It consists of a mid-sized light-box and a series of painted pieces of a music score. In the photo, which results from a still from his video, is a cello musician who turns his back to a non-existent audience. He attempts to play the 'Ode to Joy', which here refers to the version adopted by the European Union as the 'Anthem of Europe' in 1972. The musician is not able to play the symphony because Pronja painted on the scripts some maps outlining Europe. Wet and crumpled, the sheets of paper are no longer readable, and the symphony turns out to be a syncopated non-concert for nobody's Europe.

Although Europe seems to live more as an idea in people's minds rather than a unified continent, another work by Pronja explores 'Ode to Joy' and its inner meanings among the younger generations. It is *Nushid AlFarah* (2016), namely the Arabic translation of the same verses. Pronja's video is a 3-minute-long sequence-shot recorded in the Muslim female school of Tirana. A teen-class is attending a singing lesson exercising on the Arabic rhymes of 'Ode to Joy'. They seem careless about the music, its origins and what the hymn can represent outside the classroom. All that the students care about is singing. From an adult's perspective, the students' behavior is beyond any Albanian dreams of joining Europe. In *Nushid AlFarah*, what Pronja captures through an expressive but not overtly-poignant interpretation is the poetry of everyday life's stories. While Pronja chooses to 'whisper' about a classroom, his tiny piece of an Albanian world speaks out loud about an older and more universal story: the definition of identity. Against the

current Albanians' prospects to be part of the old continent, Pronja shows head-scarfed students, while others wear western clothes, and different languages and voices are there to be heard. In this contemporary melting-pot, cultures interplay in unpredictable ways, and identity as such is beyond any descriptions.

Another small story about Albania is to be told through Pronja's eyes and his artistic means. It is *Someone made a choice* (2017), an installation consisting of a sculpture-like sack along with a series of drawings. While the sack is a replica of a wax-covered plastic bag filled with self-survival belongings, which were used by migrants escaping Albania in the 1970s and 80s, the drawings represent another aspect of the coastline from which fugitives would run away. In fact, the beaches along the Adriatic Sea were both scenarios of people's getaways and their summer holidays. However, from either perspective, this long stretch of land used to represent a springboard to a better future over the horizon at the time of the communist dictatorship. Back then, many Albanians attempted to escape their country in secret, by swimming, being more likely to drown or even be caught by the government beforehand. Regardless of whether they were successful or not in their risky venture, anyone from their family or who was linked to the deserters would be punished harshly. The price of human freedom was high to the extent it would push lots of Albanians to set out on their long journeys. Alongside the sack, a series of six drawings complete the other side of the same coin. Inspired by old archival photos, the artist brings those settings alive using watercolor painting and ink-pen. They appear as suspended snapshots and postcards of that time. It seems that Pronja has removed the distressed patina characterizing that era and he now wants to leave behind this fragment of his country's history.

Inno alla Gioia e il Prezzo della Libertà is not reflective of a bright, happy-go-lucky approach that Pronja wants to take toward life. On the contrary, it is a tribute to everyday, parallel stories of individuals because they are richer, more humane, and much more joyful than official history.