



Margherita Manzelli

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(Translated from the Italian by Marguerite Shore.)

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In Margherita Manzelli's new, large-scale oil paintings, space becomes an abstract plane of monochrome color, kindled by acid yellow or deep green light. In the four works exhibited under the title "Un cielo senza fine" (An endless sky) float bent-over female bodies, wan figures almost suffocated by the pervasive and blinding light, which accentuates their hieratic isolation. Fragile figures emanate uneasiness and dissatisfaction; harsh glances fixedly engage the eye of the viewer. Livid and bleak environments marked by a nervous and difficult subjectivity, a tension contracted in the bodies and condensed in feverish, questioning eyes--these are the elements that Manzelli has always placed at the center of her work. Here, as in her earlier paintings, the eyes staring out at the viewer become the focal point of the composition, the place from which is projected an energy that counterpoints the overall impression of the subject's weakness.

From the first, Manzelli has used painting to express her own subjectivity, her own experience, and she has often presented pictorial activity as a test of physical endurance. In the performance *Il fondo del mare-vulcano* (The bottom of the volcano-sea), 1995, a work that lasted one day, she wrapped herself in a black garment with a train so long it covered the entire floor of a gallery. Seated on a chair hanging on the wall, she began to draw, ceaselessly, letting the sheets of paper fall on the cloak behind her, eventually covering it. In such situations the artist makes visible the process of the work's creation--the physical, mental, and psychological effort of the act of representation. But she also allows the viewer to perceive it as a projection of the body, as something closely connected to her own physical and psychological condition. Manzelli has emphasized this body/painting symbiosis in various ways. In one instance, during the opening of her solo exhibition "La terra fredda" (The cold earth), 1996, she anchored herself to a corner amid her own canvases, her shoes nailed to the floor, stressing the tenacious connection between the world of representation (the image) and the world of reality (what is experienced).

Even in the absence of such gestures, painting remains an emanation of the body. It is no accident that the subjects of Manzelli's canvases, including those in this show, have always been fragile and problematic women, apparently lost in potentially dangerous, though domestic, environments. They are almost always solitary figures who resemble each other, as if they were multiple images of a single persona. But while the paintings distantly resemble self-portraits, the artist has always insisted that she has no desire to portray herself. Compared to earlier works, the paintings in this show project a stronger sense of solitude, emphasized by the fact that the figures wander in a space stripped of any identifying elements. These are no longer descriptions of domestic interiors, which might presuppose the existence of unseen relationships, but a void without coordinates--something like the space of consciousness, perhaps. But the image has become cooler, in some way more distant, more summary, as Manzelli has progressively rarefied the narrative and descriptive elements; the impression given is one that is even less energetic and expressive than before. I find myself wondering whether the artist isn't distancing herself from an involvement with her painting that she's found too emotionally intense.