



Invisible Cities

THE GREAT DOG AND MARCO POLO: two alternating monologues on the Invisible Cities of Italo Calvino
Written by Basilio Luoni

THE GREAT DOG:

The Emperor, Lord of the Lords, who is called Cublay Dog is neither small nor large, but medium in stature. He is chubby and well cut with a white and vermillion face like a rose; his eyes are black and beautiful; his nose is well made, in harmony with the rest. He has four legitimate wives, called Empresses, and each one holds a court on her own, with three hundred damsels and valets and squires. The Great Dog has twenty two sons from these four wives and twenty five more from the concubines. Of the twenty-two rightful sons, seven are kings of great kingdoms, and look like their father in feat and wisdom; the others, including the twenty-five unlawful ones, are all great barons.

MARCO POLO:

The Great Dog lives in the city of Cambaluc three months a year; December, January and February. And here he has a huge palace, with a one mile per side square belt. At the four corners of the boundary wall there are four palaces, where are kept the tools of the Great Dog, arches, turcassi and saddles and brakes, ropes and tents: all the equipment for war. Inside the enclosure there are four more buildings, so in all they make eight, and another wall with around eight more houses, and in the middle there is the Grand Dog palace, high above the ground and with a very high roof. The walls of the rooms are covered with gold and silver. In the large hall six thousand people can eat and there are so many rooms that you can't believe. The outside of the roof is painted vermillion and blue, green and all colors and you can see it shining like crystal from afar. Between the walls and the buildings there are meadows and trees and many animals: white deer, roe deer and fallow deer, ermines and other fur beasts. There is also a lake with many fish families, and a river that flows in and out of it.

THE GREAT DOG:

Near the palace, at a distance of a crossbow throw, there is a handmade mountain, where the Great Dog plants all the trees that do not lose their leaves. When it learns of a beautiful plant, the Great Dog orders it to be bared, with all its roots and carried here with the elephants, and put back into the ground. The mountain is all covered with lapis lazuli dust, and so it is of a beautiful green china colour, and on the top there is a very big palace, which gives joy to look at it. From the palace the Great Dog can look at the other buildings within the walls, and at the musicians, servants, women, animals, trees that live in, and he can imagine what they are doing and also what they are saying.

He can count how many deer and roe deer he owns and how many peaches are ripening on the branches. He spends hours and hours sitting in the lookout; he begins to count and always ends up interrupting himself because the numbers get confused and he has to start again. Because of the irritation he closes his eyes and he gets sleepy. And then the Great Dog dreams of being a prisoner and also of being mortally tired, because he has no one to hold the paper parasol painted with peony branches.

MARCO POLO:

In this case, dream and reality are not so far away. The Great Dog is really a prisoner: of court, of ceremonial and also a bit of his laziness, which is understandable, due to his age. For this reason, when he cannot and does not want to move, he has become accustomed to sending ambassadors around the various lands of the empire nearby or far away. He expects everything to be reported to him about what is happening. But mostly on their return, these ambassadors are a source of disappointment for the Great Dog: they can only tell him figures: the number of soldiers, horses, archers, inhabitants, slaves, silkworm breeders; they only forward petitions and list natural and supernatural misfortunes. They cannot tell him what the inhabitants preferred to eat, and which clothes they wore, and the myths they handed down, the songs they loved to sing and the dances they enjoyed to dance... and the most recent gossip about the Grand Turkish favourites.

THE GREAT DOG:

Is it worth the expense to send blind and deaf people through the world? They look like those idiotic travelers who only recall the color of the hotel's sheets and are just delighted to have done the poop in a different toilet. After listening to them, the Great Dog used to make them beat and cripple, so that they could no longer go around to clog the streets of the world. Then one day the fate was merciful to him. He sent a young Venetian man to Cambaluc, together with his father and an uncle who were merchants. The young man's name is Marco, and his family name is Polo. He knows the Tatar costumes, the Frankish ones, those of Constantinople and those of Arabia, he speaks Turkish, Mongolian, Arabic and Chinese and it is pleasant to hear him "ciacolar" in Venetian with his relatives, with whom he always wants to have the last word. The Great Dog listens to him for hours, forgets to eat, forgets the dates with the ministers, and even the marital rounds with his wives and concubines.

MARCO POLO:

But yes. Marco Polo doesn't miss anything: not the color of a hibiscus flower he saw in Jerash, nor the embroidery of the petticoat of a woman from Samarcanda, veiled like a ghost, nor the scent of a ripe pomegranate in a garden of Isfahan, nor the sound of light rain on the water made by silkworms devouring the mulberry leaves under the Great Wall. Not to mention the gossip he picked up in a street or in an inn, where he immediately begins to play with the young grooms and with the waitresses and cooks. As he returns to tell them, they become as funny as novels.

THE GREAT DOG:

In short, in Marco's stories the world is back to its colours and sounds and noises and all its dimensions; therefore the Great Dog has decided to send him as ambassador around the provinces of the empire and in the neighbouring kingdoms, to the east, beyond the sea in Cipnugo and to the south in Siam, and in the islands, in Sumatra and in Srilanka. Ambassador with full powers. The Minister of the Interior tried to oppose, because actually Marco is a foreigner. But the Great Dog did not want to hear such reasons: the Minister is a troublemaker, basically dull-headed and clogged and the only problem he is interested in, with modest abilities, are the graveyards. He should be promoted Gravedigger.

MARCO POLO:

Marco likes to travel. If he could, he would like to be like Sherazade and learn about the thousand and thousand and thousand and one history of the world and the thousand and thousand and thousand and one city to return to tell them to the Gran Dog, who enjoys himself like an old man and like a child and has not yet decided on which way is the best. And Marco is not yet like Sherazade but he has so far obtained the same result: he has not yet had his head cut off.

THE GREAT DOG:

The Great Dog knows very well that the Venetian does not only tell the truth. If he were limited to that, he would be a very modest storyteller. Of course, he describes cities he has seen, such as Corinth, Monenvassia or Mistra' or Smyrna, but he also describes many that do not exist and that are not less beautiful than the real ones. The Great Dog recognizes them quickly, because they almost all have a woman's name. He also understands that it is a tribute to him, if any name corresponds to one of his concubines. It's nice that a beloved woman becomes a city.

MARCO POLO:

So, to define them better, and also to remember them better and to avoid confusion, Marco Polo has agreed with a good miniaturist who has put and is putting on paper the face of these cities. If you were curious to see them, you will find them on display right here.

Imagining with Italo Calvino



Mariella Bertolio



If you raise a wall, think of what you leave out.

In times when the human kingdom seems to me condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus to another space. I'm not talking about escaping into the dream or the irrational. I mean, I have to change my approach, I have to look at the world from another perspective, another logic, other methods of knowledge and evaluation.

The images of lightness that I seek should not be dissolved as dreams by the reality of the present and the future....

I. Calvino - "American Lessons: Six Proposals for the Next Millennium" - Oscar Moderni Ed. pg. 11-12

I don't really remember where I found this image, but it certainly worked for me as a kind of provocation.

I like the human quietness that looks beyond and so I imagine Calvino getting inspiration for his Invisible Cities. I think he's using his eyes to see (Kublai Kan's Palace and Atlas...?) and his ears to listen (the dialogues between Marco Polo and the Mongolian Emperor...?). The hands, afterwards, will have time and room to do their job.

I like the ladder and I consider it an excellent tool-metaphor for our lives. Let's use it if there are walls (...maybe avoiding building new foolish ones!), appreciating ladder's undeniable qualities: lightness, essentiality, availability.

I don't know if I was able to faithfully portray some of the cities described by Calvino. I can only say that I tried, using my own ladder and trying to place it as close as possible to his.

I – Cities and memory

In the life of the emperors there is a moment that follows the pride for the boundless width of the territories we have conquered, the melancholy and the relief of knowing that soon we will renounce to know and understand them; such a sense of emptiness that grabs us one evening ...

... It is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire that seemed to us the sum of all wonders is a debacle without end or form, that its corruption is too hard for our sceptre to heal it, that the triumph over the opposing sovereigns has made us heirs of their long-lasting ruin.

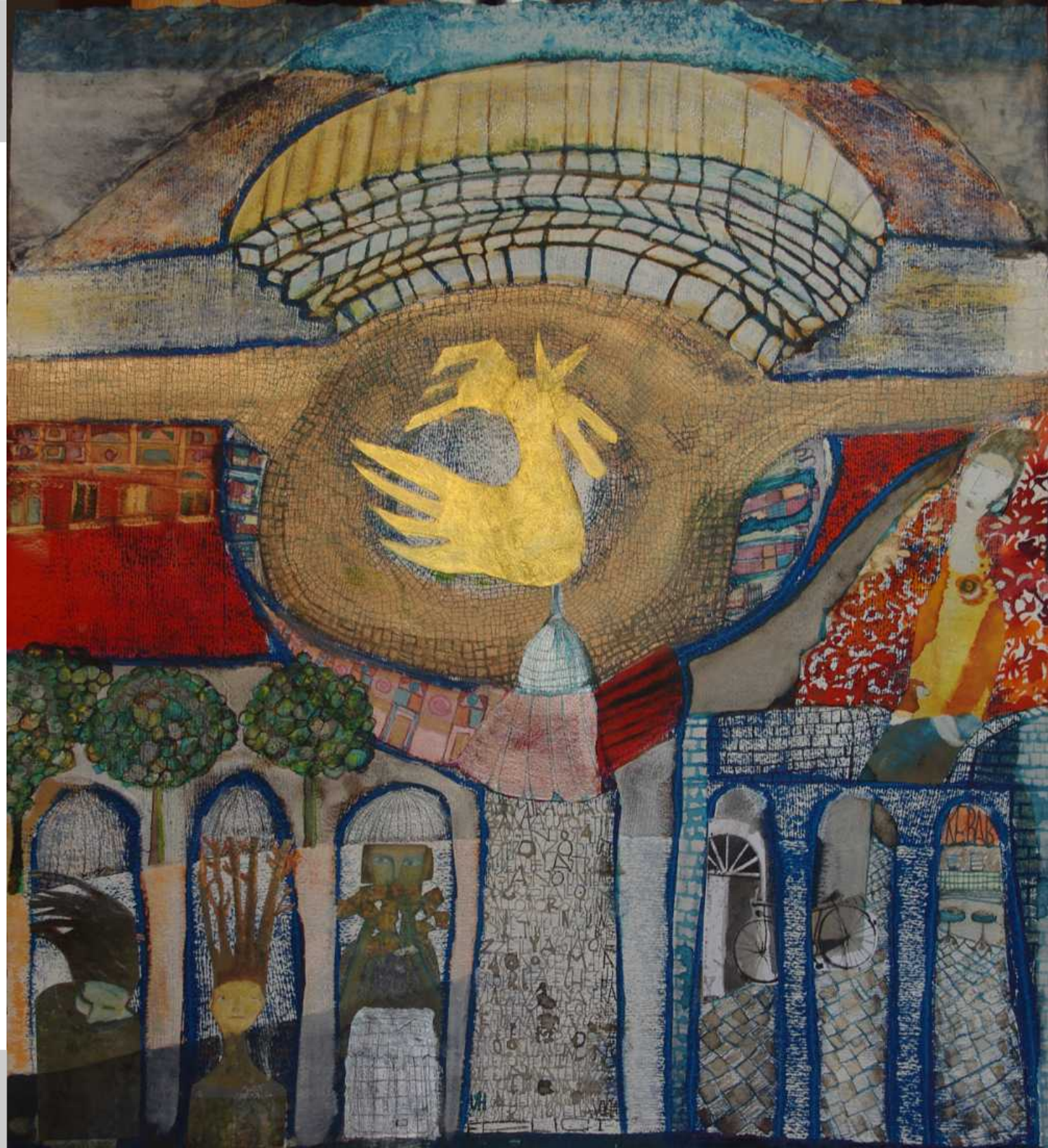
Only in Marco Polo's reports, Kublai Kan was able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to collapse, the filigree of a drawing so thin as to escape the bite of termites.

DIOMIRA

A city with sixty silver domes,
bronze statues of all gods,
paved streets in pond, a
crystal theater, a golden cock
that crows every morning.

If you arrive there one
evening in September, when
days get shorter, lamps light
up and a woman's voice from
a terrace shouts "UH!"...
Well, you'll envy the ones
who now believe they have
already lived an evening like
this and that they were
happy that time.

Mixed media on paper
51x57 cm.



ISIDORA

A city where buildings have spiral staircases encrusted with spiral seashells; where violins are hand-made; where when the foreigner is uncertain between two women, he'll definitely meet a third; where cockfights degenerate into bloody brawls among the bettors.

In the square you can see the wall bench where the old men sit watching the young go by; he's seated in a row with them. Desires are already memories.

Mixed media on paper
57 x 47 cm.



II - Cities and desire

*- The other ambassadors warn me of famine, of concussions, of conspiracies, or they tell me of mines of turquoise newly discovered, advantageous prices in the furs of marten, proposals of supplies of damask blades...
And you? - the Great Kan asked Polo. - - You come back from far away countries and all you can tell me are the thoughts of those who cool off in the evening sitting on the doorstep. So what's the point of travelling so much?*

All because Marco Polo could explain or imagine to explain or finally be able to explain to himself that what he was looking for was the past of the traveler who changes depending on the route taken. Arriving at each new city, the traveller finds what he no longer knew he had: the estrangement of what you are no longer or do not own any more awaits you when you enter the foreign and unowned places.

- Do you travel to relive your past? - was at this point the question of the Kan, which could also be formulated as follows: - Do you travel to find your future? And Marco's answer: - The elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveller realizes the little he has, discovering the much he has not had and will not have.

DESPINA

In due modi si raggiunge Despina:
per nave o per cammello.

Il cammelliere sa che è una città ma la
pensa come un bastimento che lo porti via
dal deserto...

Nella foschia della costa, il marinaio sa che
è una città ma la pensa come un
cammello....

Ogni città riceve la sua forma dal deserto a
cui si oppone: e così il cammelliere e il
marinaio vedono Despina, città di confine
tra due deserti.



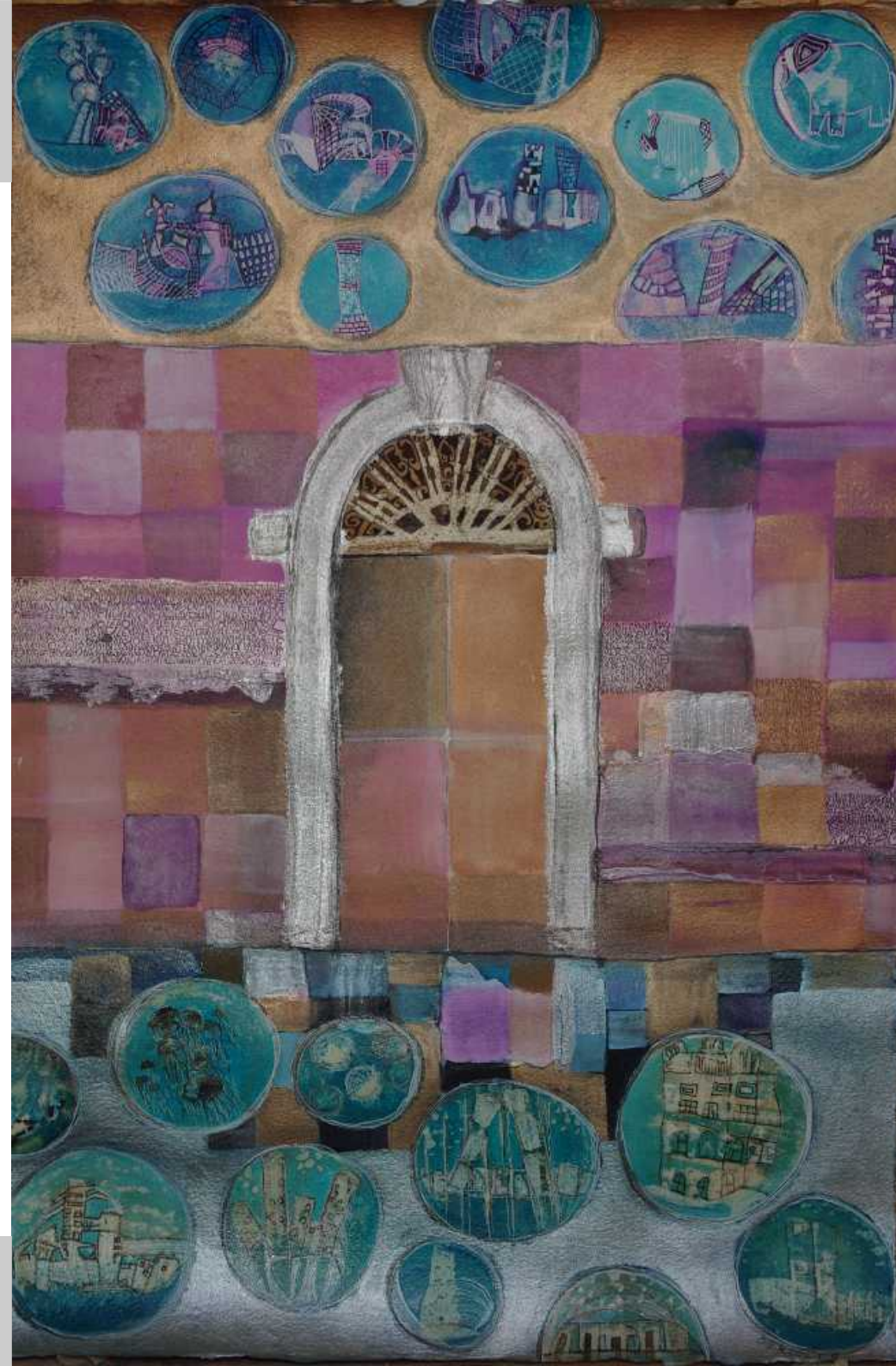
Tecnica mista su carta
46,5 x 57 cm

FEDORA

In the centre of Fedora stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room. Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of a different Fedora. These are forms the city could have taken if, for one reason or another, it had not become what we see today.

On the map of your empire, O Great Khan, there must be room both for the big Fedora and for the little ones in glass globes. Not because all real, but because just supposed.

The one contains what is accepted as necessary although it's not yet so; the others, what is imagined as possible and a moment later no longer.



Mixed media on paper
38 x 57 cm.

III - Cities and signs

Cities like dreams are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.

- I have no desires or fears - said the Kan - and my dreams are made up either by mind or by chance.

- Cities also believe they are a matter of mind or chance, but none of them is enough to keep their walls up. You don't enjoy the seven or seventy-seven wonders of a city, but the answer given to one of your questions.

- Or the question it asks you by forcing you to answer, like Thebes by the mouth of the Sphinx.



ZIRMA

Mixed media on paper
57 x 38 cm.

Travelers return from the city with distinct memories. I'm coming back from Zirma too: my memory includes airships flying in all directions at window level; streets full of shops where tattoos are drawn on sailor's skin; underground trains crammed with obese women.

Instead, my travel friends swear they saw only one airship, one tattoo artist and only one very fat woman fanning herself on a train's platform.

Memory is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city might start to be.



ZOE

Mixed media on paper
57 x 38 cm

Everywhere in this city you could sleep, make tools, cook, accumulate coins, undress, reign, sell... Any pyramid roof could cover the lazaret as well as the thermal baths of the odalisques. The traveller turns around and has only doubts. Everything mixes in his mind: Zoe appears as the place of inseparable existence. But why then the city? Which line divides the inside from the outside, the roar of the wheels from the howl of the wolves?

IV - Thin Cities

Your cities don't exist. Maybe they never existed. For sure they won't exist anymore. Why are you betraying yourself with soothing tales? I know that my empire is rotting... Why don't you tell me about this? Why do you lie to the Tartar emperor, foreigner?

Polo knew how to second the black mood of the sovereign. - Yes, the empire is sick and, what is worse, it tries to get used to its wounds. This is the aim of my explorations: by looking at the traces of happiness that can still be glimpsed, I measure their lack. If you want to know how much darkness there is around you, you have to sharpen your eyes on the faint distant lights.

Sometimes the Kan was instead visited by euphoric ups and downs. - Yet I know - he used to say - that my empire is made of the matter of crystals, and it aggregates its molecules according to a perfect design. In the boiling of the elements, a splendid and very hard diamond takes shape, an immense multifaceted and transparent mountain... Why do you hide the greatness of his destiny to the emperor?

And Marco: - While at your nod, Sire, the one and last city raises its unblemished walls, I collect the ashes of other possible cities that disappear to make room for it and can no longer be reconstructed or remembered.

Only if you know the unhappiness residue that no precious stone can compensate, you will be able to calculate the exact number of carats to which the final diamond must tend, and you won't break the calculations of your project from the beginning.



ISAURA (1)

Tecnica mista su compensato
70 x 50 cm.

ISAURA (2)

A city of a thousand wells, it is assumed to rise above a deep underground lake. Everywhere where the inhabitants, digging long vertical holes in the earth, have been able to pull up water, the city has spread to there and beyond: an invisible landscape conditions the visible one. Everything that moves in the sun is pushed by the wave beating closed under the limestone sky of the rock. Consequently religions of two species are given to Isaura. The gods of the city, according to some, live in the depths, in the black lake that feeds the underground veins. According to others, the gods live in buckets that go up hanging at the rope, in the pulleys that turn.

Mixed media on paper
38,5 x 57 cm



ZENOBIA

Although placed on dry ground it stands on high stilts and the houses are made of bamboo and zinc, with many platforms and balconies, connected by stairs and walkways, surmounted by viewpoints covered with cone roofs, barrels of water tanks and spinning windbreakers...

What need or command or desire led the founders of Zenobia to give this form to the city, we cannot remember. But certainly if we'll ask an inhabitant to describe how he would see a happy life, is always a city like Zenobia that he will imagine...

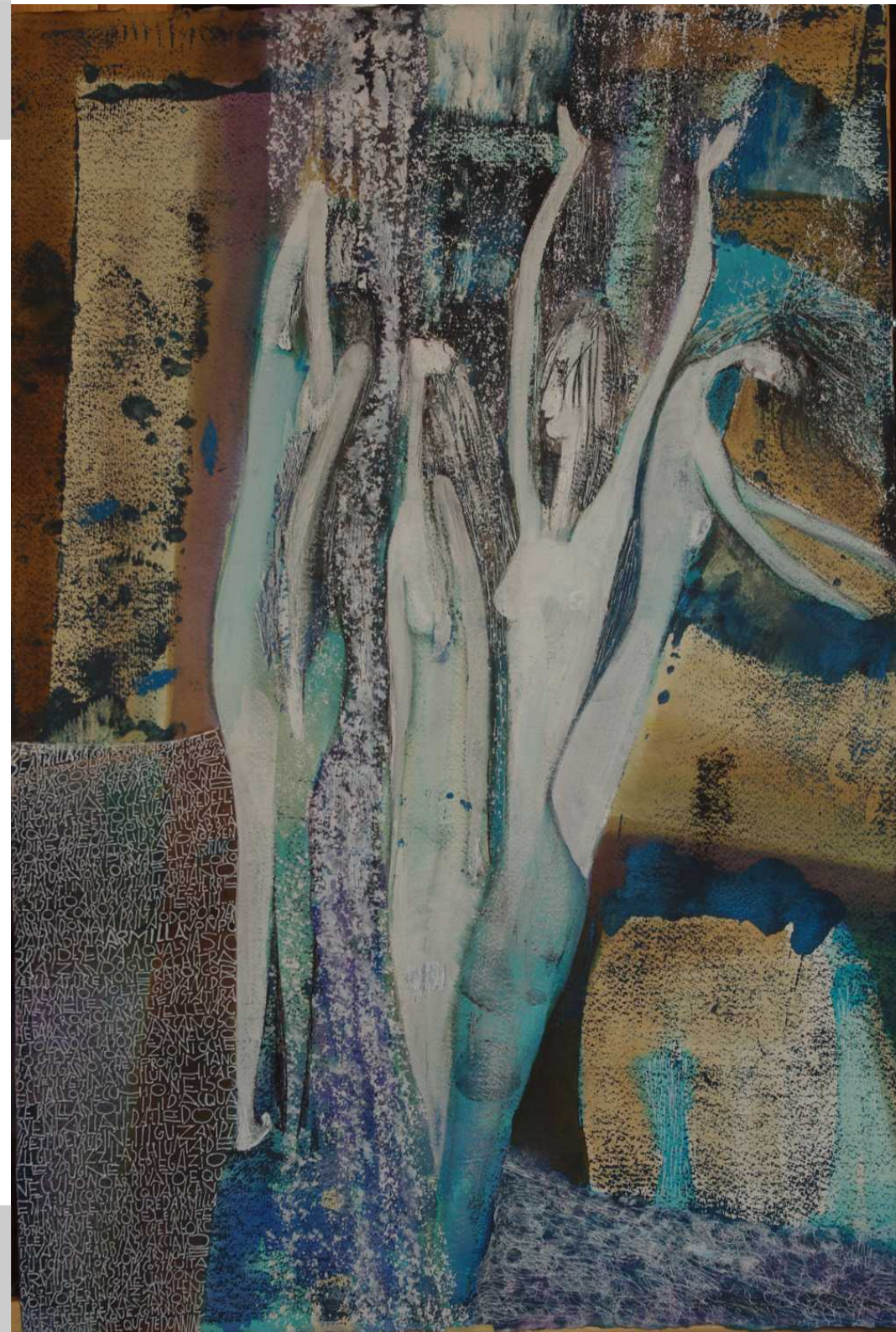
Mixed media on paper
38 x 57 cm.



ARMILLA

If the city is like that because it is unfinished or demolished, I do not know. Abandoned before or after being inhabited, Armilla cannot be said deserted. At any hour, raising the eyes among the pipes, it is not uncommon to see one or many young women, slender, not tall in stature, basking in the bathtubs, bowing under the showers suspended on the void, making ablutions or drying, or combing their long hair. I have come to the following explanation: the nymphs and naiads have remained masters of the watercourses channeled through Armilla's pipelines. It may be that their invasion has driven out men or it may be that Armilla was built as a votive offering to win the favor of the nymphs offended by the tampering with the waters. Anyway, now they seem to be happy, these maidens: in the morning you hear them singing.

Mixed media on paper
38 x 57 cm.





OTTAVIA

Acrylic on paper 57 x 29 cm

Now I will tell you how Octavia, the spider web-city, is made. There is a precipice between two steep mountains: the city is on the empty space, linked to the two ridges with ropes, chains and catwalks. Below there is nothing for hundreds and hundreds of meters.

This is the basis of the city: a network that serves as a passage and support.

Suspended over the abyss, the lives of the inhabitants of Octavia are less uncertain than in other cities.

They know that the network does not hold up all that much.

V - Cities and exchanges

- My empire has already grown too much outward, now it's time for it to start growing inward. - thought the Kan - Many seasons of abundance have filled the barns.

The Great Kan contemplates an empire covered with cities that weigh on the earth and on men, crammed with wealth and traffic jams, overloaded with ornaments and duties, complicated by mechanisms and hierarchies, swollen, tense, heavy.

- It's his own weight that is crushing the empire - Kublai thinks - and in his dreams now appear cities as light as kites, perforated as laces, transparent as mosquito nets, cities veined like leaves, cities lined like a hand's palm, filigreed - In the midst of a flat and yellow earth, sprinkled with meteorites and erratic boulders, I could see the spires of a city with thin pinnacles rising from afar, so that the Moon, on its journey, could rest on one or another, or swinging on the cables of the cranes. And Polo: - The city you dreamed of is Lalage. Its inhabitants arranged these invitations to rest in the night sky so that the Moon would grant everything in the city to grow and grow endlessly.

- There is something you do not know, - added the Kan. - Thankfully the Moon has given this city of Lalage a rarer privilege: to grow in lightness.

ERSILIA

To establish the relationships that support the life of the city, the inhabitants tend threads between the corners of the houses: white or black or grey or black and white depending on whether they mark kinship, partnership, leadership, representation. When wires are too many to pass through, the inhabitants leave and the houses are dismantled. Only the wires and the supports of the wires remain.

From the coast of a mountain, encamped with household goods, the refugees of Ersilia look at the tangle of threads in the plain: that's still their city, and they are nothing. Then, they rebuild Ersilia elsewhere.

So, while traveling in the territory of Ersilia, you'll come across the ruins of abandoned cities: no walls that do not last, no bones of the dead that wind makes roll around: just cobwebs of intricate relationships seeking for a shape.





Mixed media on paper
57 x 38 cm

EMERALDINE

An aquatic city, where a network of canals and a network of streets overlap and intersect. Thus the boredom to walk the same roads every day is spared to its inhabitants. The most habitual and quiet lives in Emeraldine pass without repeating themselves. A map of the city should include, marked in inks of different colors, all these solid and liquid traces, evident and hidden. It is more difficult to fix on the map the routes of the swallows.

VI - Cities and Eyes

The Great Kan used to end his evenings savouring Marco's stories with his eyes half-closed until his first yawn was a signal to the parade of pages to light the torches to lead the sovereign to the Pavilion of the Augustus Slumber. But this time he didn't seem willing to give in to tiredness and it was dawn when Marco, surrendering, said: - Sire, by now I have spoken to you about all the cities I know.

- There is still one you never talk about...

Marco Polo bowed his head.

- Venice, - said the Kan.

Marco smiled. - And what else did you think I was talking about?

The emperor did not blink. - Yet I never heard you mention his name.

And Polo: - Every time I describe a city I say something about Venice. To distinguish the qualities of the others, I must start from a first city that remains implicit. For me it's Venice.

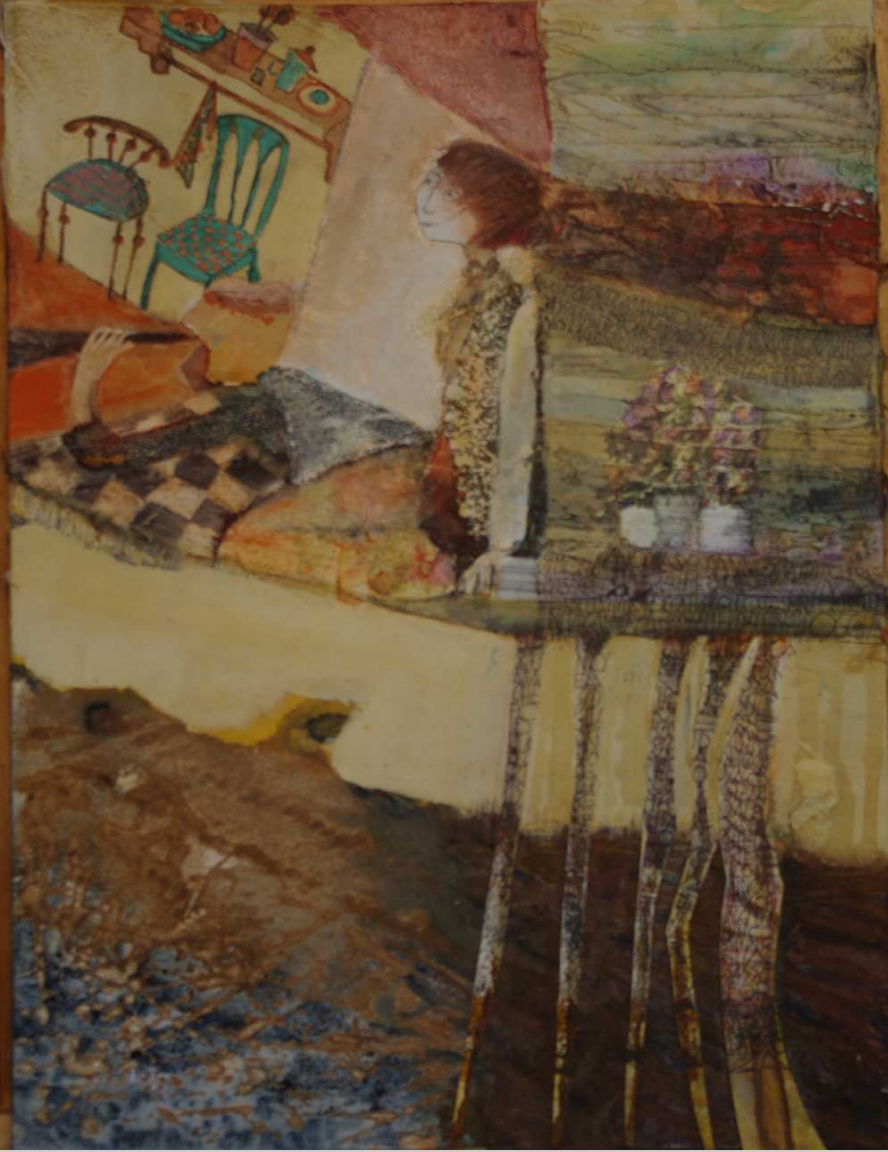
VALDRADA

Mixed media on paper
57 x 38 cm.

The ancients built it on the shores of a lake.

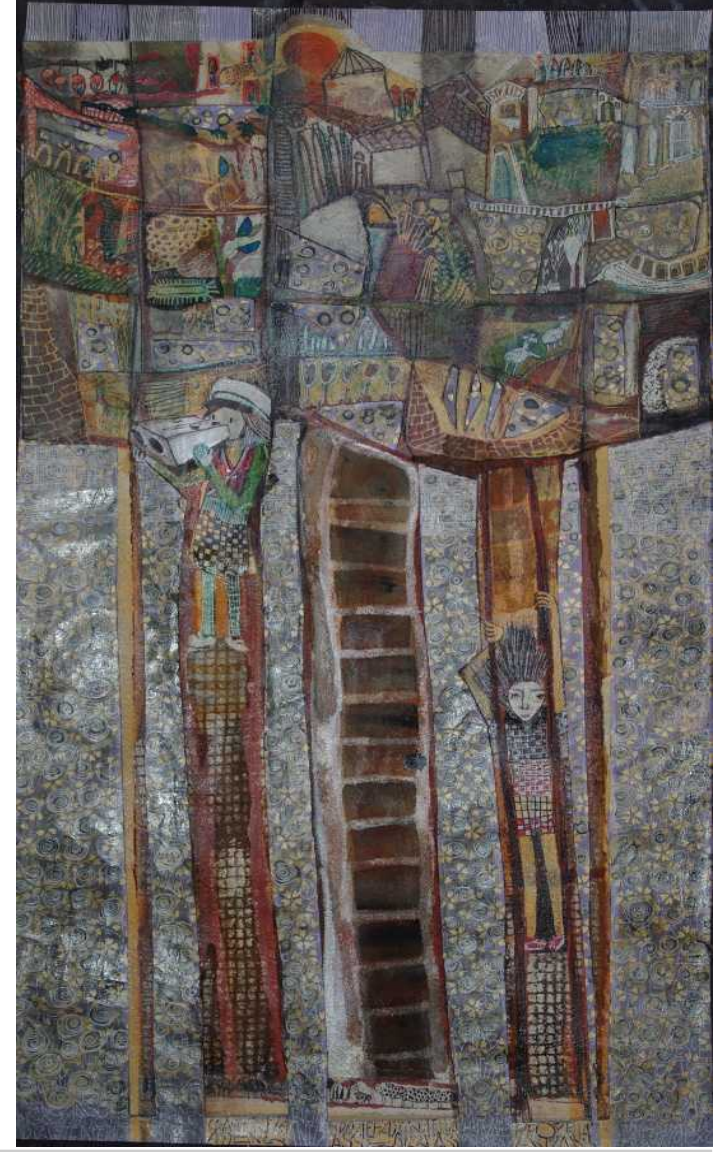
Thus the traveler sees two cities arriving: one straight above the lake and one reflected upside down. The inhabitants know that all their acts are at the same time that single act and its mirror image, to which the special dignity of the images belongs. This awareness forbids them from abandoning themselves, even for a moment, to chance and oblivion.





BAUCI (1)

Mixed media on cardboard
36 x 51,5 cm



BAUCI (2)

Mixed media on paper
40 x 70 cm.

Walking for seven days through woodlands, the traveler to Bauci still doesn't see it and yet he has arrived. The slender stilts that rise from the ground support the city. You go up with ladders. The inhabitants rarely show themselves on the ground: they have everything they need up there and prefer not to go down.

Three assumptions are given about the inhabitants of Bauci: they hate the earth; they respect it so much that every contact is avoided, they love it as it was before them and with spyglasses and telescopes pointing down they never give up in reviewing it: leaf by leaf, stone by stone, ant by ant, watching – enchanted - their absence.

VII - Cities and name

KUBLAI: - I don't know when you had time to visit all the countries you describe to me. It seems to me that you have never moved from this garden.

POLO: - Perhaps this garden exists only in the shadow of our lowered eyelids, and we have never stopped: you from raising dust on the battlefields, I from negotiating bags of pepper in distant markets...

KUBLAI: - Perhaps our dialogue is taking place between two beggars nicknamed Kublai Kan and Marco Polo, who are rummaging through a garbage dump, piling up rusty scrap, shreds of cloth, waste paper and, while drunk for few sips of bad wine, they see all the treasures of the East shining around them.

POLO: - Perhaps all that remains of the world is a wasteland covered with rubbish and the hanging garden of the palace of the Great Kan. It is our eyelids that separate them, but we do not know which is inside and which is outside.



AGLAURA

Mixed media on paper
57 x 38 cm.

If I were to describe the city to you by sticking to what I personally saw and experienced, I'd have to tell you that it's a faded city, with no character, put there as it comes. But it wouldn't be true either: at certain times, in some glimpses of the streets you can see the hint of something unmistakable, rare, perhaps magnificent opening up in front of you...

LEANDRA

Gods of two species protect the city. To distinguish them, we will call them Penates and Lari.

The Lari consider the Penates temporary, annoying, intrusive guests; the real Leandra is theirs. In common they have that on what happens in the family and in the city they always find to disagree, the Penates bringing into play the old, the great-grandparents, the great aunts, the family of yesteryear, the Lari the environment as it was before being spoiled.

But this doesn't mean that they only live on memories: they almanac projects about the career that children will have as adults (the Penates), about what that house or that area could become if it were in good hands (the Lari).

If you listen carefully, especially at night, to Leandra's houses, you will hear them talking thickly, murmuring steadily, shouting at each other and send back mock-ups, puffs and ironic laughter.

Mixed media on paper
38 x 57 cm.



VIII - Cities and the dead

By now Kublai Kan no longer needed to send Marco Polo on faraway missions: he kept him playing endless chess games.

The Great Kan tried to concentrate on the game: but it was now the game's reason that escaped him. Each game's goal is a win or a loss, but of what? What was the true stakes? At checkmate, beneath the king's foot knocked aside by the winner's hand, there remains a black and white square. By separating his conquests to reduce them to their essence, Kublai had reached the extreme operation: the definitive conquest, of which the empire's multiform treasures were only illusory wrappings. Everything was reduced to a piece of planed wood: the nothing....

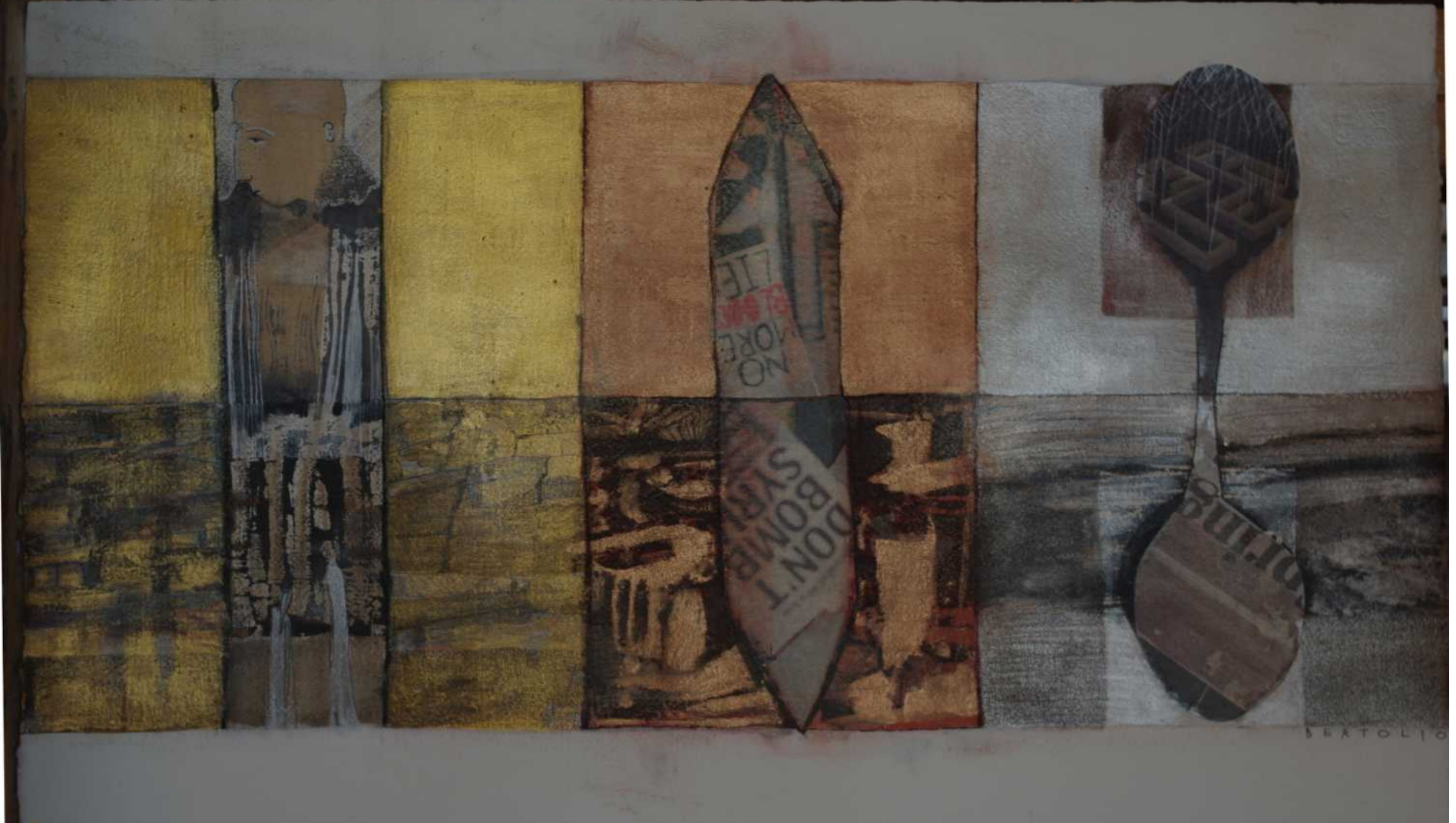


MELANCHOLY

Mixed media on paper
57 x 38 cm.

Every time you enter the square, you find yourself in the middle of a dialogue: the braggart soldier and the parasite meet with the young squanderer and the whore; or the miserly father gives his last recommendations to his loving daughter and is stopped by the silly servant who brings a note to the mizzen. We return to Melania after years and the same dialogue is found; in the meantime the parasite, the mizzen, the miserly father have died, but the braggart soldier, the loving daughter, the silly servant have taken their place. Even if the roles are no longer exactly the same, the action goes on and leads to some final meltdown, even when the hank seems to become more tangled.

From act to act the dialogue changes, but the lives of the inhabitants are too short to realize it.



EUSAPIA

Mixed media on paper
57 x 38 cm.

To make the leap from life to death less abrupt, the inhabitants of Eusapia have built an identical copy of their city underground. They say that every time the living go down they find innovations in the lower Eusapia; not many but the result of pondered reflection. And the living, in order not to be any less, want to do it too. So the Eusapia of the living began to copying its underground copy. They say that this has not just now begun to happen: actually, it would have been the dead who would have built the Eusapia above in the likeness of their city. They say that in the twin cities it is no longer possible to know who is alive and who is dead.

IX - Cities and the sky

Kublai asks Marco: - When you' ll return to the West, will you repeat the same stories to your people?

- I speak and I speak, - says Marco, - but the listener only keeps the words he is waiting for. It is not the voice that commands the story, it is the ear.

- Sometimes it seems to me that your voice comes from far away, while I am a prisoner of a showy and unlivable present, in which all forms of human society have reached an extreme of their cycle and you can not imagine which new forms will come. And I listen from your voice to the invisible reasons why cities lived, and why perhaps, after death, they will live again.

The Great Kan has an atlas that also depicts cities of which neither Mark nor the geographers know if they exist or where they are, but that couldn't be missing among the forms of possible cities.

-I think that you recognize cities better on the atlas than visiting them personally, - says the emperor to Marco while snap-closing the book.

And Polo: - Travelling you realize that differences are lost: every city is similar to all cities, places exchange form, order, distance, a shapeless dust invades the continents. Your atlas keeps all the differences intact: that range of qualities that are like letters in a name.

EUDOSSIA

She contains a carpet in which you can contemplate the true shape of the city. At first glance nothing seems less similar to Eudossia than the design of the carpet, ordered in symmetrical figures that repeat their motifs along straight and circular lines, woven by shiny colored yarns, which alternate wefts you can follow along the entire warp. Getting lost in Eudossia is easy, but when you concentrate on fixing the carpet you recognize the road you were looking for. Each inhabitant compares to the immobile order of the carpet his own image, his own anguish and everyone can find hidden among the arabesques an answer, the story of his life, the twists of fate.

Acrylic on paper
38 x 57 cm.

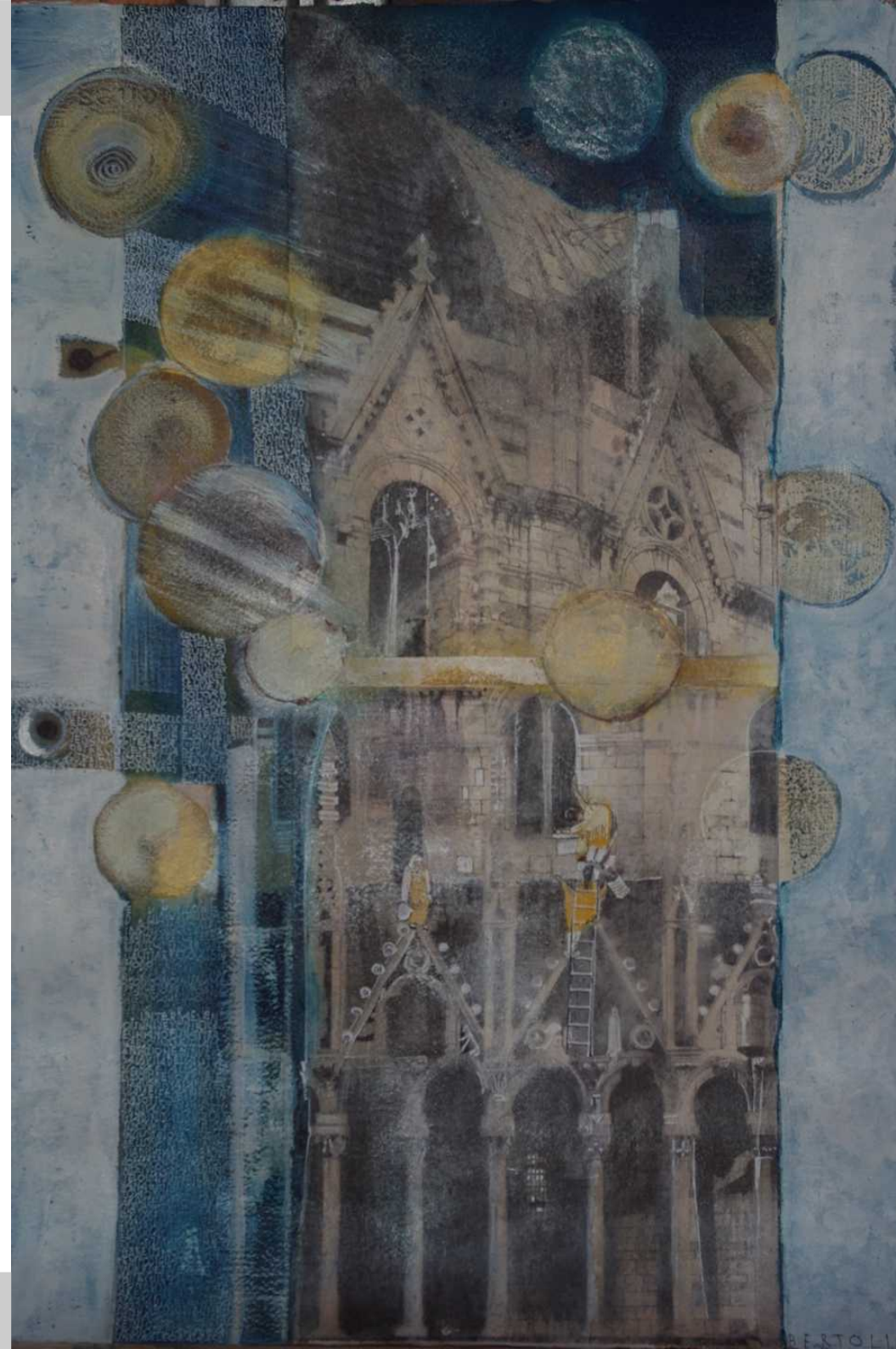


ANDRIA

With such art was built the city that each of its paths runs following the orbit of a planet and the buildings and places of common life repeat the order of the constellations and the position of the brightest stars.

- So perfect is the correspondence between our city and the sky - say the inhabitants - that every change in Andria involves some newness among the stars: the city and the sky never remain the same.

Two virtues of the inhabitants deserve to be remembered: self-confidence and prudence. Convinced that every innovation in the city influences the design of the sky, before every decision they calculate the risks and benefits for them, for the whole city and the worlds..



X - The continuous cities

The Great Kan has an atlas in which are gathered maps of all the cities: those which raise their walls on solid foundations, those which fell into ruin and were swallowed up by the sand, those which will exist one day and where now you can only find the dens of the hares.

Marco Polo flips the maps, recognizes Jericho, Ur, Carthage, points out the landings at the mouth of Scamander where the Achaean ships waited for ten years to reboard the besiegers, until the horse seized by Ulysses was drawn through the Sheer Doors. But speaking of Troy, he came to attribute to it the form of Constantinople and foresee the siege with which Mohammed would hold it for long months, until - as clever as Ulysses - he would have pulled the ships overnight up the streams from the Bosphorus to the Golden Horn, bypassing Pera and Galata.

And from the mixture of those two cities a third one emerged, which might be called San Francisco and extend very long and light bridges over the Golden Gate and the bay.

The atlas has this quality: it reveals the form of cities that do not yet have a shape or a name.

The catalogue of forms is endless: until each shape has found its own city, new cities will continue to be born. When forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of the city begins. On the last pages of the atlas one can see dilute networks without beginning or end, cities shaped like Los Angeles, shaped like Kyoto-Osaka, with no shape.



LEONIA

Mixed media on paper
57 x 38 cm.

The opulence of the city is measured by the things that are thrown away every day. One wonders if Leonia's true passion is really how they say to enjoying new and different things or rather not expelling discarding, cleansing itself from a recurring impurity. Surely garbage collectors are welcomed as angels, but the result is that the more the city expels, the more it accumulates.

PENTESYLEA

It spreads for miles in
a city soup diluted in
the plain.
Vague grounds, rusty
suburbs scattered like
a milky pigment.
If hidden in some sac
or wrinkle there is a
city the visitor can
recognize and
remember, or if
Pentesilea is only a
suburb of itself, you
have given up to
understand it.
But outside of
Pentesilea... is there
an outside?



Mixed media on paper
38 x 38 cm.

BERTOLIO

XI - Hidden Cities

The atlas of the Great Kan also contains the maps of the promised lands visited in thought but not yet discovered.

Kublai asked Marco: - You, who explore around and see the signs, can tell me towards which of these futures push us the favorable winds.

- For these harbours I would not know how to trace the course on paper or fix the date of landing. Sometimes I just need a glimpse that opens in the middle of an incongruous landscape, an outcrop of lights in the fog, the dialogue of two passers-by who meet in the crowds, to think that starting from there I will put together piece by piece the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of moments separated by intervals, of signals that one sends and does not know who picks them up. If I tell you that the city to which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now more rare, now denser, you must not believe that you can stop searching for it.

The Great Kan was just flipping through the maps of the cities that threaten in nightmares and curses: Enoch, Babylon, Yahoo, Butua, Brave New World. He says: - Everything is useless if the last landing place can only be the hellish city, and it is at the bottom there that, in an ever tighter spiral, the current sucks us in.

And Polo: - The hell of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the hell that we live every day, that we make up together. There are two ways to avoid suffering from it. The first is easy for many: to accept hell and become part of it to the point of no longer feeling it. The second is risky and requires continuous care and learning: to seek and be able to recognize who and what, in the midst of hell, is not hell, and make it last, and give it space.

OLINDA

Those who go there with a lens and look carefully can find somewhere a point no bigger than a pinhead. After a few years you will find it as big as an half lemon, then as a porcini mushroom, then as a soup plate.

Olinda is not the only city growing in concentric rings like tree trunks, which each year increase by one turn.

The old walls expand, taking with them the old quarters, keeping the proportions on a wider horizon.

An ever new Olinda that in her small size preserves the traits and the lymph flow of the first one and of all the Olinda growing later.



Acrylic on paper
38 x38 cm.



BERENICE

Mixed media on paper
57 x 38 cm.

Instead of telling you about Berenice, an unjust city, I should tell you about the hidden Berenice, the city of the just that in itself cultivates a malignant seed: the certainty and pride of being in the right ferment in bitterness, rivalry and repugnance, and the natural desire to retaliate against the unjust is tinged with the yearning to be in their place and do the same of them.

Perhaps you can then draw the conclusion that the real Berenice is a sequence in time of different cities, alternately fair and unfair and that all future Berenices are already present in this instant, wrapped inside each other, narrowed, pressed, inextricable.



The cities described by Calvino are 55.
For now I have managed - in about a year
- to "portray" 24 of them.
Isaura and Bauci asked for 2 different
versions. So, in total the paintings are 26.

I hope that the cotton paper used as a
support will forgive me: maybe "she" was
only expecting the brightness and the
glazing of the watercolor and instead I
always stressed her with monotype,
collage, acrylic, sanding, waxes and
transfer of images
I'm almost sure she appreciated (at least
as compensation...) Calvino's words
drawn on her surface.

Really a surprising exercise in "meditative
copying"!

It helped me to give depth, scale and link
to the images that gradually were
emerging. Above all, it made me guess
and feel by approximation what I would
call "the blessing of the amanuense".

Thank you Calvino!

Pisa, May 25th 2018