

A martian in milan

The capital of Lombardy inspired pages and pictures of enchanted and ironical metaphysical beauty in the twentieth century, from Savinio's *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città* to De Sica and Zavattini's *Miracolo a Milano*, in contrast to the cliché that sees it as a gray industrial city with little inclination for the enticements of poetic flânerie. The photographer and traveler Giuseppe Ripa, originally from Ragusa, Milanese by adoption, for his journey into the Fiera di Milano, a place powerfully symbolic of the city's life, he has chosen to adopt a way of seeing that takes the city's different souls into account, condensed into spaces and figures that bring to life a complex microcosm where reality and fantasy find an unexpected meeting point.

It is no coincidence, I think, that the picture sequence starts with a strange, indefinable object (a spaceship to replace the broomsticks flying over the Cathedral in De Sica's film?), and goes on to explore the paths marked out by furnishings, lighting, and setting up in an exhibition center that portrays the very moment when production and invention not only coexist, but draw essential nourishment from each other.

Looking at these pictures with their suggestions, it is easy to think back to Ugo Mulas's famous shots of great exhibitions in the sixties and seventies that emphasized the design and planning connected with the work of art and the importance of its setting, the fact that it originated from a reflection on space and its coexistence with it. Ghosts of Castellani's *Ambiente bianco*, or of the installations of those who made optical or kinetic art, or Aldo Ballo's photos of products of a legendary period of Italian design appear among Ripa's pictures like a kind of leitmotiv, holding together different moments and different discourses—of activity and of the act of taking photographs of it—that are a response to the same requirement to read space as a primary element in the relationship between the human being and the world, a measure of a relationship that is constantly evolving.

It is also from such reflections that the stylistic characteristics and temperature of these photos can be determined: one has only to see the backlit figures intent on seemingly meaningless, almost imitative movements, or the panels with legs sticking out below them, or the rear view of a figure gazing with enquiring attention into a kind of illuminated hut, or the curious encounter of a woman carrying a bundle of magazines or books, and another woman, half-hidden by a doorway in a tilted structure, to understand the photographer's intentions and the atmosphere that he wishes not so much to create as to reveal.

An atmosphere of suspended time, a place of almost surreal apparitions, as if Ripa were amusing himself by arresting the frenetic activity that is a natural attribute of such places, doing so innocently, with a lightness also present in the title of the series (a deliberate pun). That is not all, but basically the same things play a similar part, from the UFO at the beginning, mentioned above, to the tiny figures and even the cluster of chairs—which seem to pay joint homage to an image from a play by Ionesco well known to enthusiasts of photography and the theater—all enveloped in a silent, graceful but resolute reinvention of reality in the form of a mysterious apparition. And maybe the two figures embracing will make the spaceship that has landed in the middle of Milan take off again, perhaps passing through the enormous elliptical opening beneath which a lady is sitting, unaware, waiting for the next marvel.

Walter Guadagnini