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## Art from War

Vittoria Chierici interviewed by Italian feminist Anna Hilbe

**AH.** *Vittoria Chierici, you have been painting battles for a long time. From the 1992 Gulf War until your most recent work, Leonardo's The Battle of Anghiari. Why battles?*

**VC.** My generation often defended an idea of reality even when it conflicted with direct experience. I attended a school where Pop Art was considered the most influential trend in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a given, therefore, that the most important world events would provide the frame of reference for my ideas for many years. In this sense, the Gulf War was the input for "my" battles. It wasn't a matter of exposing the political issues or of emphasizing their journalistic, iconographic value. Rather, I was trying to provide many potential scenarios for abstract representation. As always happens in my more complete works, I would choose a topic that instinctually allowed interpretation on two levels --the present and the historical. The contingent event was in pictorial continuity with the great masters of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the minor painters in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The work was sparked off by a lucid idea and then shifted to an emblematic plane. I think that art is different from communication and information in that way. Over a ten years period, battles became the place where I engaged in a stylistic work-out. For example, in my painting I moved from a two-dimensional space to the space of a set, one that provided depth without naïvely exceeding its boundaries, i.e. without representing the scene in a gallery or in a museum, with objects or people. My use of perspective was not a reminiscence of the Renaissance, but a virtual space created by a computer. When recently I faced the task of reconstructing a hypothetical work by Leonardo, *The Battle of Anghiari* I understood that the computer could enable me to achieve a true redefinition of space and composition principles. At the same time I felt the need to accentuate brush strokes in order to give motion and life to the characters.

**AH.-** *Speaking as an artist, is the war that is going on today different from others?*

**VC.** War doesn't surprise me anymore. The conflict in Kosovo made war frighteningly familiar. I don't like to call it a peace mission. War cannot be used to hide feelings of guilt. The worse can happen when history exceeds the bounds of reason, when an historical era reaches a point of no return and the causes of a war go beyond the reach of political solutions. One should never get to that point of no return. The Gulf War was a prelude to decadence, an alarm bell that was not heeded by many people. Many experienced it as an exceptional media event, a spectacle, which in spite of the pain it caused should be viewed from an armchair. In those years the spreading of technological innovations caused a certain feeling of euphoria. I remember that progressive intellectuals at that time enthusiastically remarked the feeling of virtuality that the new war machines gave to the spectator when a target was simulated on their instruments, exactly like in videogames. In games war was becoming increasingly smarter, just in the same degree as intellectuals were losing their smarts. We should have emphasized more forcefully the difference in the reality of those who live in places where the bombs are dropping and those who witness war on a television screen. As an artist, I too feel uneasy about being a mere spectator of all these faraway wars which have left their dramatic mark even in the places I live in. What is the purpose of art in these very serious times? Perhaps that is why my battles are images as seen on a screen by someone who could comment on the war but did not have to take its risks. As a result, my soldiers do not denounce destruction, they merely display a feeling

of displacement . It is me who plays that role, I am in a world of make-believe, time after time, dressed in different uniforms just like children do.

**AH.** *Why do you paint war rather than something else?*

**VC.** Because for many years the very topic that shocked the respectable folks allowed me to express myself in a way that went beyond the merely therapeutic. Compared to the Gulf War and the war in Kosovo, now, [after 911], even spectators are struck by events in a way that is not merely virtual. The unpredictable logic of terrorism has laid siege to power at its highest level, hitting it in the eye. While military action was once again placed in the hands of specialists, the spectator has become very fearful and more emotionally involved. The spectator isn't just asked an opinion, he/she is asked to choose sides, to declare where s/he belongs. Thus, on one hand you have fear and on the other you are asked to choose in a situation where the facts are not at all clear. This makes critical and rational capacities ever more fragile giving rise to violent and ignorant behaviors doled out even in normal, everyday life. In such a context, the only thing an artist can do is capture sensations that are floating at the top of the collective spleen.

**AH.** *Other than the Renaissance knights of The Battle of Anghiari, your soldiers cannot be identified with a specific army: in your works there are American and Russian soldiers, cow-boys, horses, bayonettes, machine-guns. Who is at war against who? To me, today, it seems important to understand who is against who in this war. Are you interested in saying this with your paintings? My question also means: do you think that the latest events leave room for a new political role for the artist?*

**VC.** From the very beginning my soldiers were characters from an imaginary army, a chaotic one drawing from all historical epochs and all countries. In my paintings war is not between two opposing armies. Therefore it's not a real war and is erased by the simultaneous presence of contradictory historical information revealed by the different uniforms. It is an army without a destination, a little like an army breaking ranks when everything is over.

Today, as an artist, my choice would not be between two coalitions but between two limits -- freedom or convenience. A choice that is cultural before being political. It is the individual first of all, rather than the artist, who makes that political choice. The two things don't always converge when you plan to make an important work of art. The subjective experience, the human experience of war, does not have the same aesthetic value that it once had for the Futurists. Even the term avant-garde at that time reflected a concept that was specifically military. But now that even artistic culture has been largely subsumed by a sort of communication culture that has made everything uniform even to the point of manufacturing an "international style, you have to consider that, by definition, communication culture cannot be either heroic or poetic or revolutionary. The experience of a war reporter seems more honest to me. Artists are still too invested in their own personal success to come up with a new role for themselves. Presumably the economic situation will determine the changes, it can't be done by art because art has never been independent from those who commission it and the powers that be.

**AH.** *You studied and worked both here in Italy and in the US. How important are these two places for you?*

**VC.** I am always in transition between these places, because I have never put down roots. I would like to change place often, but I am not always able to. I feel in harmony with myself only if I am in a place I have an affinity for. I need to be able to smell its smells, as though it were a living organism. For me places are

not merely a landscape or architecture, they are the whole thing, including the people who live there and their activities.

I never thought of America as the ultimate place for art and worldly success. First I lived in Berkeley, in California, and I was interested in understanding the American lifestyle. It was the end of the 1970s and the myth of the American counterculture was still very much alive for us Europeans. Then my instincts urged me to move to New York. I didn't know anybody, but the city belonged to me as though I had lived there before. And in a certain sense it was true. Manhattan was the place to be for people who were not interested in raising a family. I felt at ease, a foreigner among other foreigners, and only that island gave me that sensation. Maybe it's not like that anymore. By now America too has an ancient history. The recent events will probably give Americans more national pride and cause more intolerance. I hope I am wrong. In the future Europe may offer great opportunities but Europeans are so damn slow and skeptical. And Italians are even more so. Sometimes I have a very strong desire to go back there, but at this moment I really wouldn't know where to go.

Vittoria Chierici was born in Bologna in 1955. She lives and works there as a visual artist. She earned her Master's from DAMS (the University of Bologna Department of Art, Music and Performing Arts) and later attended Columbia University and the School of Visual Arts in New York. Her first exhibitions in Bologna with a group of young artists called "Enfatisti", were curated by art critic Francesca Alinori. She then moved to Milan where she met other young artist and held collective shows with them in the 1980s. She later returned to New York and attended the New York Film Academy earning a degree in filmmaking. Her work has also been shown in London, Buenos Aires, Madrid and Tokyo.

Translation by Pina Piccolo