

The return of the giants

We stand on the shoulders of giant children and women, Nephilim who rebelled against the established order, hidden for millennia beneath Etna, responsible for countless natural disasters caused by their immense arrogance, and now returned to the light of day to show us the way to Ragnarök.

Those who created the islands and the mountains, who raised immense constructions and who openly defied the authority of God, are now among us.

STEFANIA BISON

From the ASHES of the PAST the RESOURCES of the FUTURE

Akira Zakamoto. The industrial complex of Porto Marghera. The setting chosen by the Turinese painter for the canvases made for this exhibition is emblematic. Not a casual choice — laden with deep meanings — and one that leaves little room for interpretative doubt. The birth and development of Porto Marghera date back to 1917, when the Venetian entrepreneur Volpi obtained from the ministry of public works the financial management of the project for building the industrial port. Within fifty years the industrial area tripled, and from a production centred on shipbuilding it became a driving force of the petrochemical sector. The economic boom increased production, and along with it multiplied the problems of atmospheric and lagoon-water pollution and the serious, documented consequences for workers' health. A theatre of great corporate mergers, union battles and protests, with the crisis of the petrochemical sector Marghera began once again to fold in on itself. Progressively the factories were abandoned, awaiting a project of redevelopment and reclamation for the area. And it is precisely at this moment that, under leaden skies saturated with pollution and behind menacing columns of smoke, Zakamoto's children arrive with great strides. Let us forget the blond cherubs of past iconography, because Akira's are no ordinary children. They are giants, and not only in stature, who with their gaze — now stern, now menacing — destroy chimneys and the skeletons of factories. And, looking us straight in the face, they accuse us. It is hard to turn away to avoid their eyes, because before them we are all responsible for the environmental and social devastation that over the course of a century we have managed to create. The iconographic choices the artist makes to tackle the theme of labour are as interesting as they are unprecedented. In these painted pages labour is evoked exclusively by the buildings that housed it over a century, just as the presence of the workers is implied but never made explicit. In this context too Zakamoto confirms himself as a realist painter who nonetheless deliberately does not respect the canons of that kind of painting. Akira does not openly shout his denunciation of contemporary society; he sublimates it and, in sublimating it, indirectly condemns it. These

are works of strong and immediate visual impact, in which the dark, rough tones play a happy chromatic counterpoint with the reds of the children's shirts, which significantly recall the metal sheeting of the factories. Looking at these canvases we realise that everything is exactly in the right place, that there is nothing superfluous or disturbing to the eye, no needless descriptivism meant only to wink at the observer and fill the space. As always the artist knows how to measure out absences and presences, loading them with meaning. But let us now try to change our point of view and look at these pictorial compositions from a different angle. We notice that in reality nothing is entirely concluded and that a chink of hope exists: the heavy, ashen skies leave room for scraps of blue that open the view onto a future that can and must be different. Had Zakamoto not wanted to grant himself, and us, a possibility of redemption, he would have let the profiles of the industrial buildings speak alone. But here the real protagonists are the children who, by assumption, are the promise and the hope of the future. It is they who, mercilessly destroying the past, offer us the chance to build the foundations of a different and better tomorrow. Porto Marghera, then, is nothing other than the emblem of a century that radically changed the economy and society, often trampling on human rights and individual lives. The child who looks at us with a mocking smile in the work *The end of labour* is in truth the starting point from which to begin again. Because every end always presupposes a new beginning.

STEFANIA BISON

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

The world seen by Akira Zakamoto. In artists alone, it is known, adult life is the natural continuation of childhood; this is why it is said that artists are great children. Alberto Savinio Of my first meeting with Akira Zakamoto I certainly remember my poorly concealed attempt to catch on his face some reminiscence of oriental features: nothing doing, Akira is not Japanese, nor does his family tree contain ancestors from the land of the rising sun. Then, reading his biography, which recounts him being abducted by extraterrestrials, I wondered with some curiosity what kind of painting he might make. It often happens to me, after meeting an artist, to try to intuit the kind of painting he does. Children, many of them, caught in their most natural expressions, but also and above all in their most incredible ones. No, I would not have expected Akira to paint — not only, but chiefly — children. Childhood lives inside and beside each one of us, even though it is the one dimension from which we are all, irremediably, excluded. It is a multiform universe, fascinating and at the same time unknown and mysterious. For centuries it has solicited the attention and the creativity of philosophers, poets, writers and artists; it is a journey à rebours that few have been able to resist, and that each of us, in different forms, has tried at least once in life to undertake. Perhaps because it represents, at once, our past and one of our possible futures. Fascinating, without doubt. Disquieting, without doubt. The truth is that childhood seen from afar is

always tinged with an intense melancholy, because it is the lost world, and it represents above all a way of feeling, seeing and touching that is unique and unrepeatable, of which adulthood has lost direct knowledge. In children we envy the wonder with which they look at things, with which they try to investigate the mystery of life. Naive? Not at all. And Zakamoto's canvases prove it. Let us forget the blond heads and the delicious forms of the cherubs. Akira's children are true giants — and not only in stature — keepers and bearers of an ancient wisdom that is at the same time still in the making. And so we adults are the dwarfs on the shoulders of these giant children, and climbing upon them we have the chance to look beyond. Beyond the visible, beyond the tangible. Beyond everything that binds us, and obliges us, to the present. Let us not, however, be deceived by Zakamoto's canvases. Because in spite of their constructive essentiality they carry messages that are not immediately or easily decoded. And by essentiality I mean the clean, linear balance that governs each of his painted pages. Observing one of his works we soon realise that everything is exactly in the right place, that there is nothing superfluous or disturbing to the eye, that there are no useless descriptivisms meant only to fill the space. Absences and presences are measured out wisely by the hand of an artist who, in my view, is not interested in pleasing at all costs. Akira has absorbed the art history of the twentieth century and at the same time seems to have wiped the slate clean of it. His works have no past — and so it is useless to look for quotations and connections with it — but they have a present that lives and cries out overbearingly in every single detail. Let us therefore consider Zakamoto a realist painter of our times, who does not shout his denunciation of contemporary society but sublimates it and, in sublimating it, indirectly condemns it. He subverts the world we know, changing the balance of power between things: he takes us by the hand into a Lilliputian world in which houses suddenly become small and children become giants who, not by chance, almost always turn their backs on us. He takes us to a beach where a group of mature women are towered over by the giant figure of a little girl dressed in the Chinese flag, emerging from the sea and running swiftly towards the shore: here is the sublimation of reality, which nonetheless takes on the contours of a warning about what the future may hold for us. But his is also the world in which Agnese magically loses herself among the clouds, in which Matteo — little boy and hero at once — is a Superman resting from the labour of carrying us on his shoulders. His is the world we can see through the gaze of the child who, hopeful and with his snack bag in hand, begins his first day in the future. And it is a world that, in spite of everything, fills us with hope and that we like.

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