

Oceanus/Tethys-Labyrinths-The Arrivals by Elisabetta Zoni

In contrast to American Pop Art, in the 50s and 60s English Pop developed a completely distinct and autonomous identity, characterized less by the use of "cool" visual and technical materials than by the tendency to "humanize" the stereotype of the Pop image, to turn it into something more vital and closer to experience. Within the English Pop Art movement, Joe Tilson (London, 1928) stands out as one of the strongest personalities.

Even during the 1960s, when he made reference to contemporary events and used modern technological processes such as vacuum-forming, photography and screen-printing to investigate contemporary culture, the mass culture from which Pop Art draws its materials and imagery, Tilson made associations and analogies between modern images and the forms of abstract art (grids, geometrical forms, symmetry) with primal, archaic themes. This led him to turn to the study of the myth.

Greek mythology is the subject of a series of works Tilson created in the 70s and early 80s, which include, among other works, the Labyrinth series, and the trilogy of the Arrivals (1982). From then on, Greek myths have been one of Tilson's favorite subjects.

In an interview with David Gansz conducted in 1981 (published in *Notus New Writing* Vol. 2 No. 1, 1987), Tilson mentions that a recent visit to Greece had inspired him and "reawakened my interest in the whole aspect of the mythology of the Earth -through Demeter and Persephone".

". hopefully also, as you would go on into it and pick up clues that are scattered in it like seeds, you would wonder what is the word Kore? What is the myth of Persephone in relation to Demeter? What does it mean? Why have the poets used it for century after century? Why is it central to D. H. Lawrence and Pound and Eliot? It is an ongoing process that forms part of European culture in general and has a resonance that works on many levels". (Joe Tilson quoted in M. Livingstone, in: Joe Tilson. *Alchimie dei simboli*. Milan, Skira, 2001, pp. 133-136)

Tilson sees art as "an instrument of transformation to put yourself in harmony with the world and with life". For him, "in the face of the chaos of nature, Man, everywhere in the world, relates to the sun, the moon [...]. There's north, south, east and west, the four directions. Why things grow, how they grow, how the seasons change. Night, day. The basic given data of experience and the physiological aspects of procreation and birth are totally unchanged". (Tilson, quoted in M. Livingstone, 2001).

This idea of art as a tool to harmonize with nature is reflected in the structural idea of art mirroring nature as an organic body. The cycles, the series, the variations on a theme, have always been a key feature of Joe Tilson's art - see the Labyrinths and the Arrivals below, or the earlier Proskynemi series (1978-1980) dedicated to the Greek oracles at Tyrins, Dodona, Delphi, and Olympia.

Ideally placing himself in the Jungian tradition, Tilson tries to emphasize the eternity of the archetypes that are embedded in the human psyche. His art, which makes constant reference to classic and pre-classic mythology, may therefore be described in terms of the psycho-mythological discourse of the Jungian psychologist James Hillman. According to Hillman, Greece continues to live in the contemporary individual as an inner landscape, "a metaphor of the realm of images, inhabited by archetypes in the shape of gods".

One of the main features of the works presented below is the combination of iconic and verbal signs. Tilson attempts to restore the unity between words and images, ultimately reaching a balance between the object, the image and the word, and rescuing the *graphein*, the expression Plato uses for both writing and drawing or painting. The mythical thought, then, clearly emerges as a 'thinking through images'.

What Tilson's art also shares with Greek myth, and with the literary tradition revolving around it, is the coexistence of opposite poles, such as the opposition between the female and male principles (see below *Oceanus/Tethys*, 1973).

But maybe the key feature in Tilson's works on mythology is their heavy texture as objects. Tilson tries to make us feel the 'human touch', the presence of the human gesture, of the handcrafted sign. For him, rejecting the human touch and replacing it through technology ultimately means de-humanizing the world, eliminating human beings altogether.