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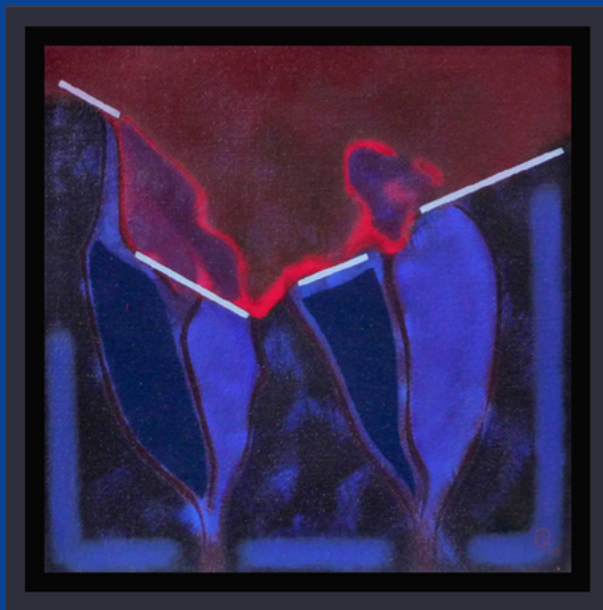
all·about·jazz

When art and jazz meet:
**GAETANO
FIORE**

by Libero Farnè

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Magma tra gli alberi - cm 40 x 40 - olio su tela

Often in the last fifty years when an expressive analogy between art and jazz has been sought, particularly when using art to illustrate jazz, an immediate relationship has been identified, almost of the same substance, between Afro-American improvisation and the various artistic experiences that from the 50s onwards have developed under the sign of gestures and the informal, from American Action Painting to the more material European trends.

An example might be the use of art, that with a capital A or the most attractive and unrealistic art that was made on LPs covers and then on CDs. After the reproduction of Jackson Pollock's "White Light" appeared on the cover of Ornette Coleman's Free Jazz in 1960, an event which constituted a sort of imprimatur, a legitimizing prototype, there was a real plunder of abstract informal images in bright colors, with rapid and uncontrolled gestures, in an attempt to indicate the vitality and dynamism of the music contained on the disk. The images are often repetitive and derivative, of little artistic value, deployed uncritically with a presumed descriptive intent.

To the contrary, the jazz musicians, who have also dedicated themselves continuously to art with commitment and a certain originality, have taken quite different roads. Daniel Humair's "graffiti Telephones" comes to mind, that then transformed themselves into almost monochromatic large canvases of which emerge essential and serial symbolic forms, or of Han Bennink's graphic irony and his "memory boxes", mixed media three-dimensional Dada inspired assemblages. Even Miles Davis in his most interesting work of the 1980s showed a powerful and up-to-date expressive vein, approaching the language of some graffiti artists or neo-expressionist black American contemporaries, primarily Jean-Michel Basquiat and James Brown.

Not to forget the most emblematic figure due to his professionalism and consistency: Bill Dixon, who as a youth trained in graphic art and produced, in the course of his life, a large number of paintings and graphics. He developed a personal style based on a balanced composition of a sample of recurring shapes and lines, a sort of "metamorphic abstraction", well studied in its structure and color sensitivity.

The work of Gaetano Fiore, artist and jazz fan born near Naples in 1960, has some aspects in common with Bill Dixon's art and music, to whom Fiore devoted a major exhibition shortly after Dixon's death. The pictorial language Fiore developed in the last twenty years (see a selection of his works in our gallery) is far from the

simple and uncritical gestures mentioned earlier, indeed it could be called a concentration of analytical deliberation.

Certainly one feels the influence of European and American masters of the past half century, like Magnelli, Rothko and others, in his works, but Fiore's insistent formal search ("a search until it makes your eyes burn" as Bill Dixon wrote me many years ago) produces a personal synthesis, able to decline an updated and vibrant vision, a targeted sample of ideas: always infallible chromatic relationships connect to balanced composition and to serial changes.

Within the extensive and significant collection of his works, it seems to me that the more elaborate horizontal canvases from 1998-2000 seem to stand out in particular, together with the recent series "Words of Judas – Judas' tree": small acrylic squares on Amalfi paper, which take on special nuances and timbres. In other works, however, the vertical wave shapes allude more clearly to nature as the source of inspiration (trees), even if stylized and symbolic.

In the following interview, Fiore's art and his personal life experiences give us the opportunity to address some of the fundamental questions which emerge any time one wants to speak knowledgeably about the relationship between art and jazz.

All About Jazz: Gaetano, you knew Bill Dixon. Can you tell us how and when you got to know his work and what memories or lessons the correspondence with him has left you?

Gaetano Fiore: My first encounter with Bill's musical world was back in the late 1980s when I started listening with great interest the records of Cecil Taylor. I was struck by Conquistador, I was impressed by Bill's short solos which still move me. Bill was not well known in Italy, but I remember that listening started my feverish odyssey to find his music. I bought all his records and I can say I know all his recordings, works one never tires of nor of wonders of discovering something new. Bill's music is an entire world!

In 2004 our intense correspondence began. In this regard, I hasten to add that I did not know Bill personally. On more than one occasion we should have met, but it was not to happen. The sharing of thoughts on his music and our painting meant that our knowledge grew ever stronger. He also wrote a review of my painting. Bill will continue to teach us so many things: every time when I stand

with my paints before a canvas, I remember a sentence he often repeated to me. “When you’re ready to do something beautiful, interesting, do it as if it were perhaps your last day on earth, and what you do will be recognized in the years to come.” That, for example, Bill taught me!

AAJ: I exchanged correspondence with him in the 80s and I met him a few times. Apart from his fame, his originality as a musician and an artist on the Afro-American landscape, I was particularly struck by his clear intellectual honesty which bordered on a polemic intransigence, his broad culture and also, compared to many of his American counterparts, by the richness and elegance of his English. Based on your experience, can you confirm my impressions?

G. F.: I fully agree with you. It’s true, Bill distinguished himself by his enlightenment and coherence. As a man of great culture, with rare strength and determination, he knew how to be independent of commercial pressures and has always expressed himself in complete freedom and frankness.

I also remember what he said regarding his relationship with art galleries, “I love painting, but I’ll have to impose hardship on myself. I will not present any work while black people are treated this way”. It was in the 60s.

I understand that he wrote and spoke a refined English; some of my friends who have helped me to translate many of his lyrics said as much. To my knowledge, Bill was also studying French and Italian.

AAJ: As in Dixon’s paintings the studied geometric and metamorphic shapes are almost always combined with quick gestural marks, is it possible to identify some similarities between his paintings and the balanced chromatic and compositional search in your works?

G. F.: My painting has always been broadly in harmony with his music, perhaps less so with his painting, apart from some of his works balanced in terms of composition and color such as “Rathe,” “Sfumato” and “The Idea of the Solo”, in which I believe we can find some similarities. I have some of his works that I find very interesting. His paintings can be compared in certain aspects with Robert Motherwell’s, a painter whom, I believe, Bill adored, along with Clifford Still. I like his rarefied use of color.

AAJ: In September 2010, shortly after his death, you dedicated an exhibition to Bill Dixon entitled “Listening painting, waiting for the color” and held in the Tower of San Vincenzo (Livorno, Tuscany). In addition, a number of your works have been inspired by the tracks on his album *Tapestries for Small Orchestra*. Can you clarify the genesis, the intent and the organization of this exhibit and of these works?

G. F.: When I found out about his death, I immediately understood that we had lost one of the greatest musicians of our time and I said to myself: his *Odyssey*, the extraordinary journey that he took us on with his music, has come to an end. “Bill is back home!” exclaimed Carlos Ward when he learned of Bill’s passing. All those who have had, more than I, the pleasure to meet him in person (artists such as Stephen Haynes and Andrew Raffo Dewar, with whom I immediately established a friendship, come to mind) know full well the value of the artistic inheritance Bill leaves us.

It was thus without hesitation that I decided to dedicate one of my solo shows to Bill, one in the Tower of San Vincenzo, an ideal place to blend the two aesthetic expressions, his music and my painting. Bill would have loved it: his music, carefully selected for the event, accompanied the many paintings inspired by his recent compositions. Works such as “Cinnamon”, “When Winter Comes (1976)” and others, such as “Tapestry No. 01” (Slivers), “Tapestry No. 02” (Allusions), “Tribute to Bill Dixon” ... Works in a way of painting, in search of painting. I immerse myself in Bill’s abstract sounds as if they were new chromatic systems. I listened many times to the luminous composition of the duet tracks with Tony Oxley and to those with others, well interwoven, a variety of styles such as those in *Tapestries for Small Orchestra*.

A painting with pure colors, not deafening, silent, looking for sound. In the works inspired by Bill, currently exhibited in Milan at Virgilio Patarini’s Galleria Zamenhof, I believe one can feel my inner spiritual need to explore color. A color, not at all material, that interacts with light, with space. To quote my friend Andrea Petrai: “listening painting and waiting for the color that reveal themselves only in the enchantment of the panic moment”. This is my pictorial journey! For now.

The most impressive hall in the tower, on the upper level, was set up to create this relationship between painting and music. The visitors could see, along with the inspired works, many photos (including one by Mark Mahaney which very nicely summarized the subtitle of the exhibition), documents, articles (including some of yours), large panels with notes I wrote about Bill, together with

some other material. Bill's wife Sharon Vogel (in the photo), whom I had the pleasure to meet in Verona shortly after the show, congratulated me for my tribute to Bill in Italy, a country he loved.

AAJ: You have however met other jazz musicians, in particular saxophonist Carlos Ward....

G. F.: Carlos is a good friend. I met him in 1998 during the concert at the Teatro Sociale di Soresina (Cremona). He performed with his group Radius. Interesting band, great concert! Carlos is an extraordinary musician, a tireless but under appreciated solo performer. I fell in love with his scratchy and bluesy sound the first time I saw him in Naples in 1981 at the Teatro Tenda along with the Dollar Brand. Carlos isn't a painter, but he certainly is very sensitive and attentive to the contemporary art world. We shared reflections on my painting - he has repeatedly told me that my paintings relate with jazz music in a more balanced and analytical form. One day maybe we'll manage to open one of my exhibitions with his sax.

AAJ: You've also had the chance to work with our pianist Roberto Magris. How, when and with what results has this collaboration taken place?

G. F.: Roberto is a great jazz pianist and a dear friend. We met many years ago in Trieste. He had already recorded a few LPs as part of a trio: Comunicazione sonora e Aria di città, records that had already demonstrated his talent. The truth be told, we've been planning a multimedia performance project combining painting and jazz piano for some time now. After several attempts, this project should open in 2013 during a personal exhibition curated by J. Lenssen at the Dom Museum in Würzburg Germany. Roberto is very impressed by my latest works, works which he finds particularly interesting due to their tonal variation, almost "improvisational", jazzistically speaking, since they start from a "theme" and develop "harmonically" in colors which he calls "bluesy".

AAJ: You are obviously passionate about jazz. Which periods or authors do you prefer?

G. F.: Jazz is the music I started listening to at the age of fifteen or sixteen. The first records which I wore out after hours of listening were those of Coleman Hawkins, e.g. "Picasso," a track of absolute modernity, and it was only 1948. To be truthful, the records were actually bought by my brother Lello; without him I probably never would have fallen in love with jazz. He listened to lots of

blues and I listened to a lot of jazz. The sounds of artists such as John Lee Hooker, J. B. Lenoir, Son House, just to mention a few, were interwoven in the air with the strong, contagious and difficult sounds of Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman and, above all, Cecil Taylor. I remember the day when the notes of the album *Interstellar Space* by John Coltrane made me rejoice for their outstanding formal coherence and overall rigour.

Free Jazz is the period to which I'm the closest. Even today, I listen with pleasure to those records. There are many musicians I love: Steve Lacy, Andrew Hill, Paul Bley, for example, and many others I listen to as well, such as William Parker, David S. Ware and Hamid Drake. I also listen to classical and contemporary music... Berg, Webern, Schönberg, Feldman and especially Messiaen.

AAJ: Do you usually listen to jazz when you're painting in your studio, as it seems Jackson Pollock did?

G. F.: Certainly! Lots of jazz and more, as I mentioned. The music that covers the walls of my studios here in Treviglio (Bergamo) and in Germany is that of Bill Dixon, Steve Lacy and Cecil Taylor. Currently I'm attentively listening to the CDs of some of the young musicians who played with Bill, for example, Stephen Haynes, Andrew Raffo Dewar, Taylor Ho Bynum, Rob Mazurek.

AAJ: More in general, do you think is it possible to identify operative analogies, be they of content or expression, between the processes of visual art and those of jazz composition / improvisation?

G. F.: Good question! I think so! Things aren't born in a vacuum, but everything comes from something, to paraphrase Bruno Munari. Rules and freedom. Obviously the art and jazz fields have different content, but I believe their operative processes essentially move in the same direction. For example, composition, as with improvisation, is crucial for the creation of abstract works as in my case and in some of the more recent tracks by Bill Dixon. The composition structure and planing are fundamental in both fields in order to bring out as much as possible of that which you have in you.

AAJ: Considering your paintings, how would you personally define your art? Do you believe there are content and communication differences between the large oil paintings and the small acrylics on Amalfi paper?

G. F.: My focus is on the arduous process of abstracting from

something so that something translates its true essence on the canvas! This applies to the production, definitely vaster, on large surfaces. As for my small acrylics on Amalfi paper, they're part of a series that began in 2008, after I read the theatre monologue "Words of Judas" written by my friend Paolo Puppa. Reading Words of Judas sparked my desire to do something again with theatre. The acrylics are visionary humoral landscapes that bring us back to the context and the character of Judas. Giovanni Bianchi underlines the link that was created between Judas' monologue-confession and my works, which he called essential, synthetic, absolutely not descriptive, poetic and inspired by those very words.

The contents are different, but the approach compared to the large surfaces is the same. Having also worked as a set designer, I know what it means to translate a sketch onto a huge surface. I'm not intimidated by making the switch from a small surface to a large one.

AAJ: In the 80s and 90s, in parallel to your activity as a painter, you also worked as a set designer, beginning in Naples with the Libera Scena Ensemble, directed by Gennaro Vitiello. Can you tell us about that Neapolitan cultural environment?

G. F.: Those were my formative years, artistically speaking. They were years of experimentation and ferment in a Naples which was contradictory and yet full of hope. I attended the Academy of Fine Arts in the set design section while working for the group Libera Scena Ensemble directed by Gennaro Vitiello. Gennaro was my great teacher, he invited me to his home, a workshop and a crossroads of actors, important painters, sculptors, musicians. I met his wife Uta Rieger and his daughters Cordelia and Elisabetta, both great supporters of their father's extraordinary work. In 1994 Elisabetta, a wonderful woman of great intelligence, became my inseparable companion.

The Libera Scena Ensemble has produced many plays since 1977, the year when the Teatro del Garage (Garage Theater) was founded in Torre del Greco. I had the privilege to work on many of them.

Few were able to experience Gennaro's wise touch in directing actors. He helped an actor to give birth to the character that was in him, taught an actor to find the strings of a truth that seemed unattainable. His teachings will continue to guide me securely in art and in life. I continued to work for the theatre with other companies and particularly with the director Pasquale De Cristofaro, until 1996. I created my last theatrical set in 1997 for Aeschylus'

Agamemnon; actor Renato De Carmine played the lead. My theatrical training, brief but intense, has, thanks to Gennaro Vitiello's influence, made a significant contribution to my painting, recognizable especially in the compositional rigour and in the strength which is almost architectural in nature.



Bill Dixon - *Inside Photos*, February 8, 2007

