

**TEXT FOR THE CATALOGUE OF CARLO BATTAGLIA'S "NEW YORK WATERCOLOURS" SHOW, Galleria 9 via della vetrina contemporanea, Rome, June 2002**

### **Maddalena, Manhattan: Islands**

On one end, the island of La Maddalena: an oasis of silence and solitude, the "maternal" island and habitual refuge where Carlo Battaglia usually lives and works since 1980. On the other end, New York: noisy and chaotic, the big city which he regularly visits to be with his wife Carla Panicali, who he joins in her business trips. In order to make his paintings, the artist needs to be in a state of complete isolation, he craves the ritual of gestures and thoughts in the atelier, the absolute focus, the continuous and customary aesthetic research. To make the watercolours, he uses an axis on an easel at the centre of a bright room, sheets of paper, brushes, and colours. In both cases, the effort, the constant work, is apparent. In La Maddalena, the daily discipline is regimented by a state of solitude. In New York, Carla goes out early in the morning and comes back to the house at 6pm to find Carlo still painting at his desk. For Carlo Battaglia, making watercolours represents a welcome break from his recurrent painting themes, it is something that helps re-generate the mind from the excessive concentration required by the creation of a painting. It is a therapeutic and playful way of training the eye to reproduce what it sees in the most direct manner. There is no aesthetic problem to solve, or that mental effort required to make a painting. It is a different, independent art form, not a preparatory study, whose subjects vary from landscapes to urban settings: simple "daily manual exercises", through which the artist faces new and different challenges in the creative process. The more recent New York landscapes (exhibited in the show for the first time, together with yet unreleased paintings made in past years) were realised in a very particular way: in an apartment where light and the sun fill every room. In Nini Mula's home – the place where Carlo and Carla have stayed in recently – the atmosphere is clean and rarefied, the colour white dominates, and the furniture is Italian without exceptions. There Carlo felt at home, and by just placing a simple small desk in the centre of the living room he was able to re-create an appropriate setting conducive to his work. Both in New York and in Maddalena Carlo Battaglia tackles painting in that same state of solitude, choosing in both cases the subjects of his paintings in his immediate surroundings. In the Maddalena island it is the sea – omnipresent vision which surrounds him all day – in New York it is represented by the skyscraper close to his apartment building, or a bird's eye view of the city, seen from the large windows of the apartment. The creation therefore happens in a closed space isolated from the exterior world where the image, held by visual memory, is first re-elaborated internally, then cleansed from elements which lead to imitation, and is finally fixed to the canvas. While Carla is out and about, surrounded by noise and chaos, Carlo dedicates himself to painting, retreating to his quiet internal silent space. In order to realise his American landscapes, Carlo Battaglia had to deal with far more complex problems than those related with the creation of flowers, so he decided to work on larger sheets of paper. The flowers take about two hours to paint, directly on paper, without a pencil. In this instance, the difficulty in the exercise lies in the fact that the eye and the hand work at different speeds, and the hand must be extremely careful and precise, in view of the fact that watercolour painting technique admits no mistakes. In front of the metropolitan landscape, things take shape in a different way: a light mark made by pencil shapes the structure of the entire composition, to establish the perspectival lines. However, it takes more time to finish the painting, at least a couple of days more. Looking at the American watercolours we can note an appreciation of the old masters: from Cézanne to Matisse, from Vermeer to Mondrian, the artist seems to pay tribute to

each one of them: to Cézanne with his passion for volumetric outlines; to Matisse, using the line as colour; to Vermeer, for the rarefied light of the urban landscapes; to Mondrian finally, for his interest in the structure of space. “Be it sea, waves, flower, city, the structure is the fascinated enigma to solve”, states Carlo Battaglia, but the real protagonist in his work is light. A light imbued in colours which transforms shapes, a light which is space itself. Observing the New York watercolours, at first glance it seems that they were made in different parts of town, but in reality the exact same settings recur, because once the artist chooses the angle for the painting, he then replicates the same images. What tricks us is the light – powerful and magical at the same time – which constantly changes and inevitably transforms the surroundings. Carlo Battaglia meticulously notes the exact spot where the painting was made, together with the place, date and time. Between 340 West and 57<sup>th</sup> Street for example, he has immortalised, at 8 h15 am, that block of skyscrapers we can glimpse from the street in several drawings. But if in each image of this series the buildings are the same, in every one the light catches the buildings in a different way, highlighting or minimising details, fooling us into believing they are different architectural structures. The New York watercolours are like pages from a private diary on which the artist records every day the different sensations felt by the eye; in other cases the creations happen from a distance, through a “re-meditation” of the chosen scene. During his enjoyable New York vacation, Carlo finds some similarities with his Maddalena island: the light which hits shapes, brightens colours, and envelops space. But also the wind breeze, coming from the West, caressing the park, the buildings, and the clouds in the sky. In New York, Carlo Battaglia finds the light, the wind, and the colours of his beloved island, and that is perhaps the reason why the composition of these watercolours remind closely that of the characteristic Maddalena paintings. In his American art pieces the artist – who definitely prefers portraying nature – apparently distances himself from his usual favourite themes in painting: the sea, the sky and the wind, which are always recurrent in his work. The beauty of the “urban jungle” fascinates the artist in a different way: it is born out and fed by the incessant chaos, so different from the poise of European cities, and even more from the extreme beauty of Renaissance Italian villages. However, the artificial landscape still has its origin in the natural landscape, and we can find similarities between the paintings of the Maddalena sea and the New York watercolours. The skyscrapers on the edge of Central Park stand out, mysterious, in the same way as the islands of the archipelago appear, suddenly, on the sea horizon. The sea is again present in the bird’s eye views of the city, blending in the geometrical silhouettes of modern buildings. But while the “Seas” of La Maddalena are emotional art pieces, born out of a constant, tense, aesthetic research, the watercolours transmit a sense of peaceful tranquillity. So sharp and still, the American landscapes seem almost unreal, the fruit of a dream-like dimension. The metropolis of Carlo Battaglia is very distant from chaos and noise. It is a silent and mysterious place which seems to have suddenly appeared from nowhere... And in that magical state of suspension, as if they had materialised out of the blue, the skyscrapers become idols, eternal symbols of modern beauty. Carlo and Carla repeat the same ritual both in New York and Maddalena: at the seaside, sitting on a bench in the garden, in the city, on a couch in the living room... In both places so distant the one from the other the sunset seems the same: the sun suddenly disappears in the horizon, engulfed by the vastness of the sea, captured by the city’s skyscrapers...