

I CHANGE BUT I CAN NOT DIE

Francesca Pasini, 2007

Critical essay of the solo show

I Change but I Can Not Die

curated by Francesca Pasini

Laura Bulian Gallery, Milan

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The title of this exhibition, *I change but I cannot die*, is taken from “The Cloud”, a poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley, and blends intuitively with the idea of art and this artist’s work in particular. The change occurring in her works is brought about by a twin-fold process, the materials used change their properties while the image changes according to light, place and orientation.

In Elisabetta Di Maggio’s artworks tissue paper unexpectedly becomes a fundamental strength, the strips adapt to being dried out without crumbling, soaps take on a similarity to wax used in casting, porcelain maintains the same texture as the tissue which vanishes when the kaolin is fired.

In this exhibition there are two great trajectories: on the one hand we have the transposition of the figure in the surgical composition of its sections; on the other the interpretation of figures drawn from the scientific study of the natural environment, such as the flight of butterflies.

In “*Wallpaper*, 2012”, metres and metres of cut paper tissue, following a pattern that recalls the embroidery and fluorescence of a wild garden, are completely wrapped around the pillar/wall that unites the first and second rooms of the gallery. They recall Shelly’s “woof”, the fragile texture of the clouds in the sky mentioned in the poem, but in Elisabetta Di Maggio’s hands they become a vortex that thickens within the walls of buildings, very often embodying both change and immutability. This sort of padding makes walls vanish and in their place layers upon layers of embroidery become a fantastic fundamental framework, holding back the texture (trellis) of the day-to-day magma, its repetitions and unforeseeable surprises.

The relationship between nature and internal fibre or network emerges in “*Victoria*, 2012”, three large waterlily leaves of the *Victoria Regia* variety. Using a scalpel Di Maggio intervenes amid their dorsal veins (their material is almost a vegetable form of flesh), creating slender yet decisive lacerations for air. It is a sort of alliance of mutual resistance, giving shape to fragility as a source of transformation rather than weakness. A trellis once again.

Recent research into butterfly flight has shed light on the unique movement of these pollinating insects. The apparently aimless motion attributed to them, and metaphorically to humans, described as a whimsical and undefinable path from one point to another, is actually determined by the structure of their wings which are spread through movements that are incompatible with a linear route between any two points. The symbology of uncertainty attributed to this multiform and multicoloured insect could indeed be redirected towards the processes of sentimental and intellectual experience, where changes of direction can rarely be underestimated.

In “*Butterfly flight trajectory #05*, 2012”, the artist translates this multidirectional flight into a sort of forest of pins protruding from a white, purely abstract panel. Pins and panels are the same instruments used by entomologists in their research. The sinuous flow reminds us of a wood while the sparkle of the pins highlights the golden sheen of their heads. It is something akin to a fairytale, yet it remains enigmatic. We are won over by the beauty of this itinerary.

Butterflies are a bridge between lives; through pollination they are instrumental in births. There is something very strong therefore in this affinity with humans, and yet they are insects, their bodies are different; nevertheless they have often been used as a synonym for the eternal feminine.

At this point the exhibition makes a diversion, the framework of reality shifts to another direction and another vision: one of the artist’s historical works, “*Rape*, 2001”, is exhibited in the basement. It is the interpretation of a drama that remains topical even today. The repetition of gestures, which make up the figures in each work by Elisabetta Di Maggio, make an alliance with a form of violence that shows no signs of tiring in its own repetition. Several dozen bars of laundry soap carrying the brand name *Sole* (Eng. Sun) are set side by side like a sort of puzzle. On some of these Di Maggio has carved out the names of liquids that are spilled during during an act of rape: *Saliva, Blood, Sweat, Sperm, Urine, Tears*. Each one alternates with a bar carrying the word *Sole*: the brand name.

What soap can wash away such an act? What removal would be possible? None. A material that can clean the soul while it cleans the skin does not exist. On the other hand, excision, by means of a scalpel, is almost didactic.

Di Maggio created this work in 2001, she exhibits it again today about two months after a case of rape fired public protests in India. But how many rapes go unreported? How many butterfly flights do women have to undertake until they can move freely without falling victim to the linearity of sexual violence? Di Maggio has inserted this message within the borrowed line *I change but I cannot die*. If, instead of applying this to a cloud, we apply it to the emotional, historical and cultural experience of humanity, we would need a scalpel to surgically remove the negative connotations from contrasts such as war/peace, love/violence, wealth/poverty. Like butterflies, we too move in a complex and contradictory manner. It is not possible therefore, to make clean, sweeping incisions. We need to dig deep inside, understand where and when to cut, how to make room for the air we need so as to breath in different way.

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