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**ZEITGEBER (DONATORE DI TEMPO)
COLTIVARE LA LUCE | SEMINARE LA CARTA**

Text by Michele Guido

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The sun is our clock by excellence: apart from helping regulate biological rhythms, it is only through the projection of its light, mainly due to its shadows, that we have been able to mechanically scan and organise our time. Tracing seasonal rhythms, marking the positions of our great star in relation to us. The same sun that before the Copernican revolution was a point that, like so many others, revolved around us, motionless like plants, sessile, at the centre of the universe, in our finite space. But in motion, in search of light, where food, energy, life, is nothing but a matter of light.

Ever since the centre of the solar system has been fixed elsewhere in respect to our planet, at a fixed point in cosmic space, in the sun, the whole universe started moving. Earth has moved, and at the same time humans, plants, human history and the history of nature have also moved. We began to discover other humans, other cultures, other plants, both in the West and in the East, also moving that other fixed point in history which was the Mediterranean. Because, to give you an example, what we call ‘Mediterranean flora’ is not all native flora. Quite the contrary: it is allochthonous plants, exported from all over the world and relocated in those temperate areas with Mediterranean climate, plants that have managed to become spontaneous much better than we have been able to do. In retrospect, the Mediterranean flora is as such. Like a planetarium, which collects, orders and positions stars and planets in an overall view, a galaxy or the infinite universe, these spaces are the result of the projections of hundreds of worlds in a single place.

Of course, a plant is more or less that same plant anywhere on the planet and in the universe. But what is important is that human cultures were created around plants. Knowing this, we can easily say that the history of nature and the history of man coincide, as well as that “The animal body is a part of the world, we are made of the world, we are made of stardust, we are made of the body of which all things in the world are made and we are the evolution of the very first cell to appear on the planet”¹.

“We are made of the world” and at the same time “we have the world” because we began to represent the world through the sign, and only thanks to this could we think as “the production of thought that is generated by the invention of a new form” placing it “at the origin of new work”². *In the beginning was the image*:³ from the Caves of Lascaux to Trajan’s Column, from the Sumerian tablets to the papyri, from the Divine Comedy to the audiobook. Thus a formal visual language and a verbal sound language were created.

It is in this sense that it can be said with Klee that “the artist is man, he himself is nature, a fragment of nature in the domain of nature”⁴.

And it is through this capacity for representation, the use of signs that is internal to nature itself, that language and image not only produce, but reproduce the world, producing history and memory, and therefore knowledge. But it is also true that there are different kinds of knowledge, not all of which relate to history as we understand it, and indeed relate to different times. For example, a ‘little knowledge is not to be compared to [a] great knowledge; neither short life to long life. How do you know that this is so? The mushroom that lives only one morning does not know the duration between morning and evening; the cicada that lives only one season does not know the succession of spring and autumn. These are examples of short lives. In the remotest antiquity there was a great cedar tree for which spring lasted eight thousand years and autumn eight thousand years. This is an



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example of a long life.”⁵

We can say that these cycles of time, though all different between them, are marked by light, the same light used today to measure planetary distances and explore infinite space-time. In the cosmos a perennial spectacle takes place, staging light, plants, breath, space, image, emptiness, word, silence. But it is light that moves the machine of the universe to trigger the process of cultivation, to sow the spaces, to sow the paper and to sow the memory, until evolution itself is set in motion.

Yes, because it is enough to think of that luminous process that, thanks to plants, creates in us that performance that is respiration and that binds us symbiotically to plants. The same biorhythm governed by day and night, by the sun that exposes and casts its shadow on Earth, activates both plants fed by the sun and diurnal animals, predators, and also plants able to live with scarce light sources and animals that prey at night. We feed on light, on the life-light of others, and follow the rhythm of time inscribed in light, the constraint between day and night.

It was only when homo sapiens realised that he could cultivate or breed that everything changed, making domestication one of the most important turning points in the history of mankind.⁶ With the cultivation of plants, architecture also became more stable and lasting, culminating in cities. There is a suggestion that relates precisely to the “ideal city” of the Renaissance, where the natural, wild space is completely replaced and humanised by an infinite stone pavement: this is the apex of the control of space, of the domestication of the other.

In any case, the relationship between man and nature remains the puzzle of all contemporary times, especially today, faced with a vertiginous population growth that is not homogeneous on the planet and global warming.

Agriculture creates a symbiosis between animal and plant species in a ‘natural habitat’ that has to be ‘controlled and supported by humans through cultivation’, making it difficult for many domesticated species to live independently, autonomously: it is a “link between us and the plant world [which] is testified to mythically by the endless metamorphoses of human beings into flowers or plants [...] or by the miraculous fertilisations of women or nymphs who swallow a seed or a fruit or a flower to obtain fertility, to generate another being, such as the myth of Attis whose mother was fertilised by a pomegranate”.⁷

Thus begins our journey through the “luminous rhythm” of the exhibition, with the nymph Marica, who seems to regenerate and multiply herself in order to flow over the bed of a river. We are in the Liri valley, known in the nineteenth century for its papermaking industries.⁸ As often was the case in the past, the town of Isola del Liri also developed along the course of the river from which it took its name, and at the top of the San Sebastiano hill a circular brick tower was built from the same earth as the place, dedicated to the nymph Marica, protector of fresh waters. The sculptures included in the exhibition are also made of earth and rest on images that tell the story of the nymph *Marica*. I am thinking of the sibyls of the *Chymica Vannus* (Amsterdam 1666) represented in the act of writing words in the ground; a significant image, which makes us reflect on that passage between the woman who fertilises the earth through the furrow of the word, and the word written on the “sheet that is the earth’s surface”, which consequentially becomes history. Culture can be sown in the furrow of the word; each seed is a vegetable organ that in the process of agricultural production is at two opposite ends, it is both the starting point as well as the end point.

And the nymphs made of earth that Giulia Mangoni proposes seem to be moulded by the waters from which they emerge, like a fertile procession. Like the sap that Apollo, through the touch of his hand, felt flowing under Daphne’s bark: “From fleeing running water, like molten lead, it becomes a plant, or rather air, since every tree with a vast foliage is a symbol of air”.⁹ The link between the nymphs and the vegetable kingdom is very strong: the incense plant in Greek mythology is said to have been born from a nymph, the lime tree is said to have been born from Filira’s metamorphosis, etc, etc.

Before entering Simon Nicasz-Dean’s “rows”, we find Giovanni Chiamenti’s *Nymphacea Cholorotica*, a work inspired by the water lily, which the Greeks also believed to be a nymph transformed into a plant. It is installed in the peripheral part of the gallery, in secrecy and



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shyness, as symbolised by its origin in the language of flowers. Here, too, we are moving around the Greek myth, but in this case the colour of the raku and its form lead us to discover other worlds that are less connected to light and precisely because of the chastity of its flower, but above all because of the relationship between form and content that is so dear to Giovanni.

In his last exhibitions, in fact, he had touched on concepts of sacredness and ritual, reflecting “on the loss of the sacred vision of nature”¹⁰ by creating “a series of clay models with clear references to sacred architecture”.¹¹ This time, Chiamenti does not offer us “a hymn to the sacredness of nature” - as he had also done in spazioSERRA with the “ceremony of the mysteries”, the octagonal-based environment that in Christian architecture symbolises the eighth day, that of eternity - rather a simple leaf tied to the Chlorotic water lily rather than a temple dedicated to it, a leaf that refers to the curious processes of *Elysia Chlorotica*: a water snail that not only has the shape of a leaf, but also feeds on light. An animal that, by feeding on chloroplasts, is also able to activate a process of photosynthesis, imitating that substantial characteristic that distinguishes the plant kingdom.

The forms of camouflaging in nature are diverse and very interesting, and although they are also shared by plants - such as that ivy that changes the shape of its leaves according to the tree it climbs - it is a process that is more common in the animal kingdom, where it is accentuated thanks to the relationship between prey and predator, a subject that we will also see develop in the course of the exhibition.

Giovanni’s installation occupies the external space of the gallery, transforming it into a sort of greenhouse/lemon house, where we find various ceramics with shapes originating from an imaginary world that starts with the pokemon Oddish and reaches as far as the Vegetable Lamb of Tartary. Sculptures that, having an empty interior, assume both the role of vectors for the liquid flows coming from the brass tubes and the role of containers. They look like large tubers from which, ideally, the earth around them has been removed to reveal forms of a strange organism halfway between the vegetable and animal kingdoms. It reminds me of Giuseppe Fiorelli, who poured plaster into the lava voids and brought to light the shapes and forms of bodies from 2000 years ago. So Giovanni, between fullness and emptiness, extirpates his sculptures from the earth.

As in *Chimera*, we often find synthetic materials in Giovanni Chiamenti’s work. At first we think we are looking at a technical sculpture, entirely shaped by numerically controlled machines. But if we look carefully at the two ‘roots’ that act as a support, we immediately realise that they are hand-crafted with the intention of imitating on the one hand that system of mechanical stratigraphy, and on the other the dendrochronology given by their circles. Similarly, even the plexiglass plate seems to reproduce a sort of scientific mapping, but it is instead an image of a pond taken in Salinas Grandes (Argentina) and processed by a program capable of transforming two-dimensional images into three-dimensional ones, without using real volumetry but chromatic intensity, so that the numerically controlled machine engaged in excavating the plate finds itself using data that do not correspond to the real mapping of the lake, playing with the assumptions of technical validity.

From Giulia Mangoni and Giovanni Chiamenti’s verticality we move on to the horizontal line of Simon Nicasz-Dean, who cultivates the paper as if it were a plain of earth. Clods of colour, images and memories of a space involving domestic interiors and apocalyptic exteriors emerge from the furrows traced on the paper. These parallel and regular grooves generate different worlds, like leaves that have the same internal structure and a varied external shape.

They are monotypes made from glass plates that in some cases are charged with intensity and in others the same matrix is used to ‘impress’ several sheets; by doing so, black yields to white, but the image takes on a dark vision and we should imagine it as coming from a negative film that has received little light. The action that generates the monotype, the adhesion of the sheet to the glass matrix, to make it capture the necessary ink, imprints on each page a ‘geological’ stratigraphy, involving both the personal history, familial, and that of the material. An idea that reflects “on the flow of waste and ruins that are constantly absorbed by the soil, a perpetual source emanating from the earth; not only the stones of the ruins, but also the fresh flows of raw material”. We imagine the soil as an immense sieve that absorbs parts of matter, carries them into the earth’s core and ejects



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them from volcanoes in the form of humus, regenerative and full of life. These 'clods' of ink that Simon cultivates on each work are both selection and transformation of matter, a metamorphic history imprinted on paper.

In a recent interview, Katherine Jones tells us that '*our eyelids close to protect our eyes from sunlight*'. From the moment we are born, our eyesight matures over time precisely because we have open eyes: we raise our eyelids to receive light, we close our eyes - unlike other animals - to define depth, measure space and learn about it. The eyelid is therefore a threshold, an element of protection and passage, of defence against glare, and it is precisely this subtle limit which separates safety from danger that Katherine's work focuses on. The works exhibited are the result of a series of drawings that are made to settle in the studio and then selected at the right moment, on which she then intervenes with free and fast gestures, engraving the plates with dry point tools. The process of the works takes place within a protected environment, of selection: a habitat, an artificial incubator just like that of botanical gardens, zoos, aquariums, a space that reproduces the characteristics of an environment of origin. It is also a question of survival, capacity and instinct, which the domestication of nature and living beings other than man has progressively undermined.

On the other hand, the concept of protection has also developed over time in the fruits of cultivated plants, which, unlike wild plants, do not disperse their seeds in their environment, as might be the case for example with the squirting watermelon, which creates a pneumatic pressure in its fruits, so that when it is ripe it projects its seeds into space at a speed of up to ten metres per second. The tomato, the melon, the pumpkin, are fruits that contain seeds but do not disperse them, just like the protective environments that Katherine Jones presents to us in these works on paper.

Fruit-container and space-container have developed around cultivation and human needs.

The area we are crossing, between the protective environments proposed by Katherine Jones, the spaces between domestic interior and post-apocalyptic landscape by Simon Dean, and the traps of Edoardo Manzonei, revolves precisely around this boundary: freedom-captivity, security-danger, inside-outside.

It is in that crack between the domestic and the wild that Edoardo Manzonei enters, and he does so by presenting us with traps that do not blend into the environment. They lose their function of "bait", looking more like enormous 15th-century jewels made of poor materials, the same ones used to hunt wild animals. By subtracting the idea of trap, of macabre surprise, Edoardo reflects on two aspects that are central to all his work: desire and beauty, as if to say that in order to be desired, one must first know how to distinguish oneself.

One of the works in the exhibition, *Colpo di Vento (Argo Maggiore)*, deals directly with these themes, taking up the courtship rituals, typical of sexual dimorphism, which allow the male to show off during springtime by changing their plumage with extraordinary colours and shapes. In this case, it is the Argo Major that opens its tail like a large fan, in a sort of parade to attract the female. It is like clothing for the human being: it becomes a means of communication. And this is only one example, because we could think of the gardener bird, which sets up a veritable exhibition full of colourful objects as a means of attraction, or the peregrine falcon that presents its prey as a trophy, during spectacular aerial acrobatics, in order to become the prey of the female who chooses him for life.

One can be prey and predator for different purposes: to survive by preying, and it is a question of strength, or for the continuation of the species, and then it is a question of aesthetics. And often, in both cases, the modes of violence and seduction coincide.

As Emanuele Coccia teaches us: the whole Gaia system revolves around the relationship between what is beautiful and what is desired: each female chooses through her own taste; the result is a planet that has been shaped over time by this process.

We can therefore say that if beauty is what is desired, prey and trophy are also linked to the concept of beauty!

As we continue our journey, we find *Scena 6*, also by Edoardo, on the right-hand side. An enlarged reproduction of a hunting scene - taken from the Encyclopaedia of Hunting - in which we only see one of the animals in the scene: the victim or the trophy! Neither



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man nor dog are present, the latter has been removed from the image, and we only perceive part of the silhouette. However, I would like to focus on the first work in this cycle, *Scena 1*, in which there is always a daytime exterior, the vegetable kingdom, the animal kingdom, the hunt is always staged, but nothing happens. The main actors are missing here, all the animals are missing! We are faced with one of those works that speak to us of subtraction, absence and desire.

Hidetoshi Nagasawa often said: “From the very beginning, I wanted to make a work of art, the most important part of which was what cannot be seen”. In Piero della Francesca’s *Flagellation*, everything is seen and nothing is known, the scene appears frozen in space/time, but it is full of enigmas. As in Pistoletto’s *Oggetti in meno*, which “are liberations”, the “objects are not there”..

Edoardo’s *Scenes* lack everything that concerns the act of hunting. In *Scena 1* the dog is supposed to be the instrument to track down the prey, in *Scena 6* to bring it back, the so-called retriever dog, but all this is missing in the scenes, it is a ‘staging’. Falconry is an example of this ‘concert’: man is on horseback with the falcon on his glove, the dog searches for prey, the falcon is released, the prey flies and the falcon works to capture it by deciding autonomously the timing of action. It is a ‘concert’ of animals trained by a human to achieve a goal: hunting. .

But by removing the dog, there is no more scene. The dog is the element that activates the whole engine for the hunting scene. The dog does not know how to hunt, it does not act alone as a falcon or a cat might do. The dog is the instrument animated by man; it is the mobile prosthesis that stands between prey and weapon. Being the most faithful, it lends man scent and camouflage because man has not developed them to this extent. We are still analysing two figures that do not know how to hunt!

This is why there are also escape strategies, well present in the plant kingdom which, being sessile and therefore well rooted in the ground, cannot escape and has therefore evolved to defend itself. It uses some strategies in common with the animal kingdom such as the “honest signal”, a way of showing predators that it has strong energy charges. An example of this would be the gazelle, which at the sight of the lion does not flee, but starts jumping as high as it can to show its individual strength compared to the rest of the group. Deciduous plants change the colour of their leaves in autumn to differentiate themselves from other trees, thus showing their superiority to the insects that might attack them at one of the most delicate times of the year.

But man without technique is alone in the face of prey and is forced to flee for his life, when he succeeds. From predator he becomes prey, as Val Plumwood explains, who, attacked and wounded by a crocodile, reflects for the rest of his life on how man, who is an animal, can also be preyed upon.

Perhaps for this reason, man is only a fully-fledged hunter when he holds a weapon, and ends up behaving more like a cat, when he carries the trophy home rather than the man who had to invent the tool for survival-related hunting. In fact, today hunting is considered a sport. I would say an adult child ‘playing’ with firearms; Fleur Jaeggy would have called it ‘a vice’! In *The Finger in the Mouth*, he tells us that all the habits one had as a child turn into vices in adulthood..

Finally, Silvia Mariotti’s work seems to be a shadow cast by the lights of the planet-exhibition because it contains everything: natural and artificial, domestic and wild, myth and history, before and after, twilight and dawn, body and air.

“When, in addition to the figure, I can trace the atmosphere in which it is immersed, the colour that animates it, the perspective that supports it, the feeling that makes it beat, then I will make casts, as so many have done for years...” This is what Medardo Rosso answered when asked: “Why not simply trace?”.

In *Volume Notturmo* “the atmosphere seems to magnify the bodies that lose light” or perhaps those that will gain light? That atmosphere in which we are immersed inside and outside our bodies here takes on volume, acquires gravity, is brought down to earth and becomes a finite point around which the viewer revolves, as if it were a satellite within a spiral galaxy. Much of what is present in our solar system develops in the shape of the spiral, the plants themselves are contained in it in their vertical growth, phyllotaxis, etc.; most



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likely everything is related to gravitational force. Throughout the exhibition, the sun has been our fixed point, but here it is a nocturnal volume that is fixed. It seems to be the solidification of a portion of space, that volume that the wall “in Giotto’s blue” has always provided in the history of art, a volume to the spatialisms in the cosmic void.

The air created by the plant kingdom becomes volume here and takes on the characteristics of a plant: both are still and rooted by gravity. But is the plant a work of art?! Just as a plant remains a work of art even when it is pruned, so a work of art of antiquity without a head and without limbs always remains a work of art, even if it no longer has a known author! Nike is always Nike just as a Ginkgo Biloba is always a Ginkgo Biloba anywhere in the universe.

Leaning against the wall, we see a series of plants that have come to be known in the household as ‘house plants’ simply because they live very well indoors, even if there is little light. This is not, of course, an adaptation to our architecture. They already lived in the shadows of other plants in their place of origin and have adapted to this. Between the plants, on the wall, there are two photographic works from the Boutade series, which present us with a living nature recreated in the space of the artist’s studio, with the intention of stimulating the memory of a tropical landscape, imprinted in her memory from recent trips to Brazil. The atmosphere becomes a *Volume Notturno* (Nocturnal Volume) and the light of the photos becomes pictorial matter because the colour deposited on the paper by the heads of a plotter is much closer to the practice of painting or sculpture than to that of photography. The photographic process is given by a latent image of light, which is only revealed with photographic development. The plotter, proceeding rather by glazing, adds colour matter to the paper. And the image that is deposited on the paper is not in the paper, but in the colour, in the material. Silvia’s photos raise questions about what reality is, about its constructions, and about what is the actual moment of capture: are we close to night or to dawn? Everything moves in a kind of balance that always holds two worlds together.

The audience is also called upon twice to see the entire process of the work in the exhibition; the second step offers us the vision of a wall that acts like an enormous ccd or a large photosensitive surface on which the real plants that were part of the work in the first phase of the exhibition have been impressed.

In Silvia’s work, the shape of the plants, the result of the phytohormones that guide the growth of the plants, is projected onto the wall as the plants disappear.

Phytohormones and phototropism generate that ‘leaf-light’ which is the main subject of two works I have in this exhibition. In 2008 an event occurred that had never happened before in human history: the majority of people in the world no longer lived in the countryside, but in the city! Those architectures that had been built in the countryside, stable and long-lasting, were abandoned. When walking in the rural areas of Salento, it is common to come across houses that have been weakened by the weather, and as soon as a glimmer of light appeared, the seeds carried by natural vectors found fertile ground to grow. The house became the ‘cradle’ of plants that annihilated walls and ceilings, growing like wildfire. It is light, which through the process of phototropism creates the volume and shape of the plants, it is their image impressed on film.

Who knows if we too will return to the quest for natural light, like cotyledons outside of architecture, looking for a donor of time and light when the time to recreate natural balances is gone. The light will perhaps become too strong and warm for our eyelids or our skin. We will go back to looking for our history in the stratigraphy of a mountain. Will we understand that we are animals among animals, and not predators of our own kingdom? Will we gather those seeds that the fruits of the plant kingdom protect for us, without dispersing them, to reactivate the infinite rhythm of biodiversity?