

## **YELLOWSAKE - giallocanarino**

Fabio Marullo  
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*"L'uranio e il canarino" - testo di Elio Grazioli*

*Yellowsake*, not *yellowcake*! That's the title of the exhibition. Not a yellow cake, but a yellow purpose, yellow as a purpose. Everyone knows what *yellowcake* is, it's the condensed product of the purification process of metals containing uranium, but what is a *yellow purpose*? Let's see.

First of all, however, the subject is uranium, a rather original topic. To my knowledge, no artists have dealt with it, except perhaps Sigmar Polke, who apparently mixed uranium powder into some of his paintings. The reference, however indirect, is not far-fetched, as I will explain later, but the addition of 'yellow-canary' to the title, a color, is already a clue.

Visiting a mine was a revelation for Marullo. Who has not been fascinated by caves? One can invoke psychoanalysis, one can think of the origins of wall painting, one can recall Plato's cave and much more, but Marullo, in this case too, goes his own way. Instead of the confusion between reality and projected shadows or the thought of human origins, individual or species, uranium projects him even further back, much further, and at the same time into another dimension. He thinks about the planet's orogenesis and its perceptual effects. He thinks about the mixing of the primordial elements, water, fire, earth, air—after all, the uranium mine already combines the depths of the core with the name of the Greek god of the sky – and think about the intertwining of science, art, thought, and life.

Discovered in 1789 by William Herschel – coincidentally, the same year as the French Revolution – eight years after the planet Uranus, from which it takes its name, uranium is an extraordinary metal. Known above all for its toxicity and radioactivity, it is a symbol of threat and panic, but in reality, in minimal doses, it also has healing properties – remember the double meaning of the Greek *pharmakos*, poison and medicine depending on the quantity – and is present in many products we use every day. Its main characteristic is in itself a powerful imaginative charm, with connotations that border on the metaphysical: radiation has been a mystery for centuries, a form of magic, its meaning expanding to the very idea of energy and thought, beyond matter, beyond physics.

Everything changes inside the cave: space and time, and our perception of them. The space closes in around us and seems to go on forever, like a labyrinth. Time seems suspended, or stretched out to geological, primordial dimensions. As natural light fades, the rock walls reveal a fluorescent constellation of microparticles embedded in the rock under Wood's light, and the magic begins. The depths of the earth resemble a starry sky, while fascination is tinged with anxiety, fear of radiation sets in, breathing becomes labored, and perception falters.

Miners are well aware of this condition. Their history is marked by it, as the toxicity of uranium fumes was a major concern for them. Marullo has identified two issues in this regard. One concerns the effects of intoxication, or hypoxia, particularly the perceptual and visual effects. Several testimonies describe them as visions of "dark shadows closing in," so-called *tunnel visions* with colored halos, a gray-bluish blur with yellow veins, and "flashing yellow and blue lights" at the edges of the field of vision, known as phosphenes.

These colors vary depending on the gas and its severity, from blue/gray for lack of oxygen to green/yellow for excess carbon dioxide. These colors then become the main colors of Marullo's works in this project, including the phosphene and blurring effects that characterize vision. Light, color, matter, and form are at the center of the project.

The second theme is protection from the final outcome of poisoning, and this is where the canary comes in. Since carbon monoxide is transparent and odorless, miners sought a method to detect a leak before it was too late. First they used flames, which naturally went out in the absence of oxygen, then the idea of using canaries came to John Scott Haldane, a Scottish physiologist who invented oxygen therapy. Canaries are excellent early detectors of carbon monoxide and other poisonous gases, and their signals allowed miners to get to safety in time. In order not to sacrifice the poor little animals, Haldane had also designed a special cage to protect them, equipped with an oxygen tank that was activated to revive the canary at the first signs of suffocation. British mines stopped using canaries in 1987, when electronic gas detectors, which were much more accurate and effective, were introduced.

Here, yellow reappears as a color no longer associated with poisoning but rather as a tool for salvation. This is the "yellow purpose," the yellow of purpose and the purpose of yellow. The *yellow canary* (giallocanarino) in the title has this meaning, it is the indicator of the two sides of color, and at this point of the painting itself—and here is the reference to Polke—in turn poisonous and salvific, in turn uranic.

The exhibition will feature a real taxidermied canary (with every guarantee that no violence was perpetrated on the little animal) so that the reference is clear, materialized, even dramatized in its position and expression, not left implicit. Because Marullo has this vision, *tunnel vision* in turn, we might say, of art that is not only open but consubstantial with scientific, historical, and anthropological research, which for him constitute the necessary expansion of that aesthetic. His projects are always structured in such a way as not only to highlight this preliminary research, but also to incorporate and amplify it aesthetically, thereby integrating painting and sculpture into the immediate contemporaneity of their most recent developments, emphasizing their appeal rather than their claims.

The exhibition, which revisits a project begun several years ago and still in progress, is divided into four rooms-sections, a layout that is at once a journey into the bowels of the earth and also into oneself and art, an alchemical, initiatory, and aesthetic journey. Each room has its own dominant colors, reflected in the walls, floors, and spaces that are darkened or enhanced by their light. It speaks of the processes of transformation of matter in relation to the space-time dynamics of our physical and psychic reality. In the exhibition project, Marullo investigates chemical-physical phenomena related to the natural world, transforming their internal and invisible energy into metamorphic images.

*Yellowsake – giallocanarino* (Yellowsake - yellowcanary) initiates a reflection on our relationship with the Earth, inviting us to consider matter not as an immobile reality, but as an active field traversed by processes of latency, accumulation, and transformation. Uranium, invisible but active, becomes a paradigm of a reality that exceeds human control, opening up to an original dimension in which imagination, perception, and knowledge intertwine.

The first room evokes the orogenesis of uranium, from interstellar space to the core of our planet, the primordial matter forged by cosmic explosions and arriving on Earth, incorporated into the minerals that gave rise to it.

The large main painting, a diptych entitled *Origine cosmica* (Cosmic origin), immerses us in a primordial nebula of gas, liquids, and cosmic dust that float, collide, and condense. At the same time, this painting already evokes the cave, the grotto, the mine, as well as tunnel vision and blurred phosphenes. Two other smaller canvases evoke a sky scattered with primordial stars, as the title suggests, and the other a tondo that prepares, both in form and in evocation of liquidity, what will be found in the next room.

This room is accessed through a curtain that acts as an initiatory threshold while serving to darken the interior. It is like entering a vision and entering the vision itself. The theme of this second room is water—a theme very dear to Marullo, who has also explored it in other projects. There are two spherical sculptures in blown glass containing liquid with fluorescein, which glows bright yellow in the blue room. Placed on two pedestals, they create an oxymoronic contrast between the fragility of the container and the potential danger of its contents, which is explicitly stated in the title: *Non sono lucciole ma uranio* (They are not fireflies but uranium).

Leaving this section, we move on to the third section, which focuses on the gaseous state and with it the effect of cerebral hypoxia. We are faced with a large, almost monochrome painting, almost indecipherable, with a paradigmatic chromatic tone of white tinged with yellowish pink. It is entitled *Albedo*, which refers to light radiation but also, in alchemy, to the second stage of transformation, intermediate between nigredo (black work) and rubedo (red work), and symbolizes the washing away of impurities, the beginning of purification.

As soon as we turn to the side to continue, we see the aforementioned canary placed on a pedestal as if suffocated to death. I deliberately use the adjective ‘placed’, which refers to deposition and sanctifies this figure a little, while at the same time playing on the difference between placing and exposing: technically, the question arises: can it be defined as ‘sculpture’? In this guise, its presence takes on a strong symbolic as well as perceptual value, forming a liminal point, a threshold that sees the alternation of the state of control and that of risk, also signaled by the yellow color of the pillar next to it, after which one enters the second part of the large room. Here, a new tondo welcomes us, a synthesis both in terms of color and the blurred treatment of the image, as well as the characteristic shift-blurring at the edge, of the altered vision, As in a fog, indicates the title, which marks the anticipation, or rather an attempt to approach the gaseous state of a portion of earth in the mine. Here, both space and time seem to disappear, leaving only emptiness.

Meanwhile, two other canvases complete the room. One evokes the formation of condensation, a crystal of uranite that seems, if only for a moment – *In un solo istante* (In a single instant), as the title suggests – to be subject to gravity, while the other depicts a landscape studded with *Bagliori sottili* (Subtle flashes), again referred to as such in the title.

In the last room, we are at the peak of the process and find, once again immersed in the darkness of the black-painted walls, the so-called *yellowcake*, the final product, as already mentioned, of the purification process – where this word now resonates in all its multiple meanings – of the extracted minerals containing uranium. It is a sculpture made of mica powder mixed with a yellow oxide. The canary yellow returns here at the end of the journey and acquires its value of rebirth. Here it is up to man to intervene in the uranium processing process and it is up to him again, according to Marullo’s proposal, to rework the meaning of the entire journey. In short: transforming the instability of uranium, of nature, of human nature itself, into a resource, an original resource, for one’s own fulfillment.