

Equal to the octopus

Critical text by Irene Sofia Comi

I visited Bea Bonafini last summer in Brescia. I remember that morning Bea elaborated at length on the many references in her research. Multiple strands of themes emerged. Among other things, we talked about the octopus, an animal with an extraordinary intellectual ability, capable of using its memory like humans and of changing its skin colour one hundred and seventy-seven times an hour. And about taphonomy, the study of what happens to organic matter after death. We touched upon astrological symbolism, before moving on to the *Axis mundi*, and its cosmological and mythological ramifications. It brought to my mind the theory of subtle bodies, invisible to the naked eye - a derivative of Chakra theory.

At first glance, these disparate elements seem to have little in common with one other. But the more I think about it, the more I am reminded of the Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge, a 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia' described by Jorge Luis Borges in his essay "The Analytical Idiom of John Wilkins", published in the book *Otras Inquisiciones* in 1952, in which he writes:

'animals are divided into: a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) suckling pigs, e) sirens, f) fabulous, g) stray dogs, h) included in the present classification, i) frenzied, j) innumerable, k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, l) et cetera, m) having just broken the water pitcher, n) that from a long way off look like flies.'

This taxonomy may not seem very faithful to reality; the comparative method used by the writer sounds unfamiliar. Such is Bea's poetic: it collects and mixes stimuli from different contexts, entrusting its coherence to the work's methodology, its specific techniques and its processes.

Bea's research materialises through two core expressions: on one hand, the tapestries are large scale works that often function as installations, capable of enveloping the visitor. The process involves the inlay of mixed carpet fibres enriched with pigments, collected by the artist from industrial production residues. On the other hand, in addition to ceramics, are the chalk pastel drawings on textured card and the small scale engravings on cork, painted using multiple layers of liquid gouache and pencil. Amongst these works, we find ourselves at the centre of a disorienting symbiosis of forms, constituted by recognisable fragments and broken representations that act in unison, as if they were "foetuses intertwining in a womb." Layered bodies are deformed and then reformed, giving rise to enigmas that are principally cultural, and subsequently formal. They are extracted from disparate worlds: from a fictional and personal imaginary to the symbolic power of the archetype, and from the collective unconscious and scientific studies, to our archaeological and art-historical past (the remains and iconography of archaeological finds are some of the artist's recurrent visual references). This process of synthesis is common to all mediums, whose languages end up overlapping. Thinking mathematically, the cuts of the inlayed tapestries are to their pastel pigmentation, as the bold frames and shaped contours of the paintings and drawings are to multilayered coats of pastel and gouache. Following from the artist's analytical reflection, the work becomes a

coexistence of dense and identifiable figuration, and of enigmatic abstraction. The new body of work in *Full Moon (Empty Stomach)* performs exactly this: a vortex motion navigating through different stages and phases, each of which is in continuous change. Forms mutate, evolve and expand until they disappear. When confronted by the work, one becomes part of a continuous motion between life and death, which the ritual of the artist's hand gestures has transformed into immortality.

The works presented in the gallery are like organisms, conscious of their visual and conceptual strength. Through these representations, Bea overturns the roles that characterise society and humans' relationship with the world. In overturning them, she gives life to disjointed interactions, seemingly disconnected but capable of rendering with greater veracity the complexity of the historical moment that the contemporary individual is going through, now aware that behind an increasingly homogeneous reality lies a latent disorder, which has always existed and can no longer be concealed. The world is turned upside-down. Female or hermaphrodite figures seem shaken, sometimes caught in violent acts, or in situations where eroticism, sexuality and animality overlap. Inserting herself in the debate of well established gender theories, the artist imagines women who, like the penitent Magdalene, suffocate from the tight grip of animal claws, which in turn are formed by their own long, loose hair, twisted around their bodies (*Pray, Prey*); in other cases, she draws entities that inhabit enclosed spaces, without arms or legs (*Air, Unravelling*). These identities are the offsprings of a context and a socio-cultural history that is in some ways catastrophic, which today is being redefined. "Like Carol Rama, I paint to heal myself", the artist confides.

Lingering between dreams and nightmares, the drawings, engravings and tapestries oscillate between a complexity of references and a formal stylisation, softened by sensuous mark-making. These marks form the figures, which are themselves tender. They conjure a state of lightness that is embedded in dark humour, typical of masked, grotesque or carnival contexts. In *I Carry You Inside Me*, a monumental tapestry of contrasting colours, we see the skeleton of a part-aquatic and part-anthropomorphic giant, perhaps the fossil of a creature in transformation. Sinuous lines are engraved in cork in *Stripped to the Core*, reminiscent of the traces of a prehistoric labyrinth carved in rock in the Val Camonica valley. It seems to emerge from the bowels of the earth or from a seabed, swallowing the undulating silhouettes of fish skeletons. They rise in a spiral movement, their bones turning into the stylised motifs of thin half-moons, reiterated by the work's overall form of a full moon split in two. In another pastel drawing, *Everything is Alive*, another skeletal fish flaunts its physical remains with a hypnotised gaze. As the etymology of the term suggests (from the Latin *monstrum*, "prodigy"), these are monsters that do not frighten, and are composed of elements contaminated by the unnatural and the otherworldly. In a perpetual reversal of meaning, the cyclical use of the "skeleton" is a means for the artist to free herself from a static shell and to change form, becoming a mass of soft tissues - "you can think of my work as an octopus, a soft materiality that contracts and expands depending on the space it has available," she tells me.

Bea's research is indeed a living organism, in balance between yin and yang, a system where everything works thanks to transitions between states of being, or, to borrow a term dear to Chakra theory, thanks to the action of the "Nadi" (Sanskrit for "tube", "channel"), subtle bodies that carry the current of energy inside the physical body.

Similarly, in her solo exhibition *Full Moon (Empty Stomach)*, Bea Bonafini projects the gaze towards an environment made up of vibrating fragments, in a play of colours and symbolism that envelops the works and creates a space that is in continuous evolution. One is no longer sure of where one is, whether inside the belly of a hungry giant or in a mysterious astral dimension - a parallel world in which everything is connected in an enigmatic and labyrinthine vortex that sees no distinction between human, animal and environment, between living entities and dead residues, or between terrestrial reality and otherworldly dimensions. A place where even a human being can have three hearts, like the octopus. Between sky, earth and abyss, to redeem oneself from fears, through consciousness.