

It is a relief to find in the words of others the chance to read and analyse an artist's work, especially when the dots appear to connect in bizarre ways and at odd times, yet unexpectedly seem to ring true. Alongside *Immagine negata* by Manuela Cirino, a composite project that began in 2012, of which this text does not speak except by extrapolating a portion of it, appears the image of the fire described by Gaston Bachelard:¹ a large fireplace in a poor house in which the flames roar up under the hearty breath of an elderly woman. In the fireplace, B. tells us, everything is cooked at the same time, spuds for the pigs, finer potatoes for the family, sometimes a soup of bread and milk, more rarely an egg. In the frugal and hungry state of waiting, the exact cooking of the egg could be verified by observing the evaporation of a drop of water or saliva on the surface of the shell. B. concludes: "the intensity of fire cannot be measured by the egg timer," as if to say there are various temporalities, not only that marked by a measuring instrument. This is the first thought to be borne in mind to understand Cirino's work.

In the passage from B.'s writing, there is a bad-tempered and impatient child who does not care for soup and throws a whole ladleful of it into the fireplace. But children are not always capricious, and gifts are to be given to them whenever one can, like a waffle, cooked on the lattice of a griddle. Rectangular in form, writes B., "it would crush down the fire of thorns burning red as the spikes of sword lilies." Other clues are provided: whether it is the ability to observe or translate a form into an expression and vice versa, or the relationship of two entities coming into contact.

"And soon the waffle would be pressed against my pinafore, warmer to the fingers than to the lips. Yes, then indeed I was eating fire, I was eating its gold, its odour and even its crackling, while the burning *gaufre* was crunching under my teeth. And it is always like that, like a kind of extra pleasure – like desert – that fire shows itself a friend of man. It does not confine itself to cooking; it makes things crisp and crunchy."²

Hence, fire is not just a medium that facilitates a utilitarian process, but it grants us something more. This can readily be observed in the metamorphosis of clay. This further aspect is – let us say it unashamedly – unnecessary. Indeed, with great conviction, B. concludes: "The conquest of the superfluous gives us greater spiritual excitement than the conquest of the necessary. Man is a creation of desire, not a creation of need."

Immagine negata stems from the need to give form to this kind of desire. According to Manuela Cirino, it is the form of a series of works presented as simple wooden or fabric boxes, in variations of cedar, walnut, MDF, maple, each with different colours and patterns.³ They are inhabited by presences, by surprises: ceramics, a leaf, its print, moss or bits of paper. When they are exhibited, only one aspect is shown. It is the trigger of desire. To get to know the work, it is necessary to have it with you and to reinforce the relationship, at a time and in a way that is different for everyone. The fundamental element is the work's waiting time when it leaves the atelier or the art gallery and above all leaves its creator to join those who will look upon it.

Boxes are places where two interiors meet. Delacroix already thought so in reference to painting: "I have told myself a hundred times that painting – i.e. material painting – is but the pretext, the bridge between the spirit of the painter and that of the observer."⁴

In one of these outer shells – the elegant shade of paper used to absorb the grease of fried fish – shapes materialise. Through enchanting variations, they bend, curl up, multiply, swell, inhabit this cubic space marked out by slits, through which light passes. Little shelves offer support and the small sculptures – everything here is intentionally minute – offer themselves up to the eye. They are white, the white of the magnolia flower, not the calla lily.

A few years later, for a new exhibition event, they reappear dark this time – it is not embellishment but experimentation – acrobatically perched and unfolded in the geometric landscape of ever more open structures, made of very thin wooden elements that coagulate in a multiplicity of layers and connections.

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964 (originally *La psychanalyse du feu*, Gallimard, Paris 1936), p. 15.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

³ The project had two editions, the first in Turin at the Galleria Martano in 2012–13, and the second in Milan, at the Galleria Milano, in 2014–15.

⁴ Eugène Delacroix, *Diario*, Lamberto Vitali (ed.), Einaudi, Turin 2002 vol. I, p. 331 (18 July 1850).

They germinate, seeming almost to regenerate in perfect harmony with their own slender mechanism, their own apparatus (*Cattivi pensieri*, 2019–2023).

The wickedness of the title, which Cirino steals from Paul Valéry, lies in knowing how to capture the clumsy aspects of reality, its distortions, and knowing how to record them in glacial formulas that can simultaneously crush and invigorate the spirit. This is the writing with which Cirino tries to familiarise herself, when it is so accomplished, so quintessential as to be almost inaccessible. The approach strategy is to translate and betray these icy expressions of thought into a shifting set of forms.

Even in a series of her drawings (*Nero su bianco*, 2000–2007), a figurine that is a tad Steinbergian and just little bit Signor Bonaventura, made of a line of felt-tip pen, utters refined melodies: “*Tutto è stato detto ma siccome nessuno ascolta bisognerà ricominciare*” (“Everything has been said but since no one is listening, we will have to start all over again”). Which is all in all a short sentence, a fleeting condensate of meaning.

In *Come dire che due ragazzi* (2023), two hollow forms, made of nothing, wait. They are leaning on different planes, one is as if facing a small balcony, a balustrade; ahead of the other, however, the emptiness immediately begins. They are the two boys from a poem by Mario Benedetti walking up a short slope and, with them, is the walking night. It is the image of time mentioned at the beginning, of the short time of a short climb and how it may be calculated differently.

So intimate is Cirino’s dialogue with literature and poetry that in the words of Stendhal, one might say: “*si la vie cessait d’être une recherche, elle ne serait plus rien.*” The quest may indeed be the ultimate aim of Cirino’s activity, so prodigious is her disposition to streamline, always tending towards elimination of the superfluous. Tomasi di Lampedusa, in his lectures on the French writer, relates a universally known episode from *The Charterhouse of Parma* as an example of this quality that reaches its highest artistic effect there. When Fabrizio finally manages to penetrate Clelia’s room, Stendhal writes only five words: “*Aucune résistance ne fut opposée.*”⁵ In Manuela Cirino’s touch, we can glimpse the same sobriety and accuracy, perhaps a desire for exactitude: not cold but vital, and without ostentation.

The two cavities of *Come dire che due ragazzi* form a couple. Louise Bourgeois says it wonderfully about one of her works, *Twosome* (1991): “A couple is a closed world. Two people constitute an environment. As soon as you take an interest in the other, an environment is created that includes not only you, the one contained, but also the container.”⁶

Cirino also speaks of the relationship between things rather than the things themselves. The relationship between a structure that carries and the objects carried in these recent works, the gesture of welcoming in *Fold* (2021), of making space to contain, or in *Due metà* (2018), which preserve the memory of an instrument that is no longer there, the interdependence of the endangered forms of *Inclinare l’orizzonte* (2023) or *L’instabilità* (2023), the translation of the movements of the body in Claude (*Studi per Claude*, 2022), the authentic reconfiguration of the act of looking that the sculpture and woodcut of *Se stesso* (2020) grant us.

In those same years – we are talking about the transition between the mid-’80s and early ’90s – in which the events and behaviour of Italian art were displaying a certain restlessness, in the sense of a radical reconfiguration of its modes of expression, Cirino was content with very modest desires, or rather, with a certain reserve of classical taste and a commitment – a progression of the artist in terms of her knowledge and expression of the world – which she still retains to this day.

⁵ Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Lezioni su Stendhal*, Sellerio editore, Palermo 1987, p. 13.

⁶ Louise Bourgeois, *Distruzione del padre / Ricostruzione del padre. Scritti e interviste*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2009, p. 230.