

MYSTERIES OF THE SOTOPORTEGO

From January to June 2007 I stayed in Venice as a guest of the Fondazione Forberg-Castelforte.

During this period I presented the exhibition *Mnemosine per Venezia* at the Church of St. Stae.

The exhibition was the conclusion of a very personal theme arising out of a stroke that I had suffered in 1999. In fact, I presented 1,040 *Teste arcaiche* as though exorcizing the physical and psychic problem that had affected me. During my six-month stay I discovered a Venice with a human dimension, far from the tourist circuits.

Contact with Venetians and frequenting the surroundings of the common people gave me the opportunity for the sort of cultural and artistic investigation that is closer to my world.

After having decanted the theme of the archaic heads, as I wandered through *campielli* (little squares) and *calli* (lanes), treading the *masegni* (stone pavement slabs) pregnant with experience, I discovered something typically Venetian by which I was attracted:

the Sotoportego, covered passageways, in the form of a portico, opened up for the sake of convenience under private buildings to provide a short-cut.

In these places, normally pitch-black recesses, I have the sensation of having crossed a threshold on entering and feeling a little anguished and fearful, whilst at the end of them light is to be seen, the exit, to me the hope of life. Moreover, every Sotoportego bears its own special name.

All this intrigued me and I carried out a brief, on-the-spot census of as many as 240 Sotoportego, as many as exist in the *sestrieri* (neighbourhoods) of Venice.

I was also lucky enough to come across a reprint of Giuseppe Tassini's book *Curiosità veneziane*, in which there are descriptions of *corti*, *calli*, *campielli*, *rami* and Sotoportego, with their history.

All these clues encouraged me to take up the theme and produce twenty Sotoportego in the style of triptychs.

The side pieces are composed of plates of metal, oxidized so that each one is a different colour.

The central part of the work deals with the theme chosen. The three parts are crossed by modules forming an architrave which supports them visually. The composition of the architrave follows a sinuous rhythm, in waves, as a reference to water.

As well as the study of form and colour, in the central part a realistic object is included - a novelty in my artistic discourse - which, in iconographical terms, is reminiscent of the subject of the Sotoportego. Each Sotoportego also includes a religious symbol as a homage to the thinking in Venice at the time. Another symbol, this time a personal one, included in each Sotoportego is the *filo di ferro spinato*, or strip of barbed wire, an emblem introducing the problem of our society's daily tragedies.

The Mysteries of the Sotoportego - this is the title of my exhibition - are completed by a narrative piece by the Venetian writer Alberto Toso-Fei, who presents ten imaginary anecdotes relating to ten of the twenty Sotoportego in question.

The works, which measure 200 x 310 cm, have taken three years of daily creative work to complete.

This has encouraged me to carry out constant research and analysis of a *work in progress* filled with cultural and historical surprises linked to the past of the lagoon

city.

The opportunity to present this specific work on something as special as the Sotoportego at the Scuola Grande della Misericordia crowns the artistic efforts I have made in the past few years of intense work.

Pierre Casè