

Pierre Casè's "Bestiary"

One of Pierre Casè's prerogatives as an artist has always been to investigate the most deeply hidden origins of things, so as to discover a reason for existence and contrast a world like the one we live in, which seems to intend neutralizing the signs of the past to the advantage of a present to be renewed day by day. The "walls" of his house, a daily mirror to be peered into, have become a personal awareness or, better, the environment in which to identify himself, the point of departure for every adventure in thought and action. The wood, metal sheets, dust, rust and stagnant water have travelled down through time to him, to be re-created in thought before becoming images. Truth always dwells beyond appearance and beyond the image decreed by custom, habit and the routine of behaviour that brush against life without living it, without fully possessing it. Now is the time for his "Bestiaries", a great branch growing out of the main trunk of his investigation, enriching it with new forms of interpretation.

In the Middle Ages "bestiaries" were books that described real or imaginary animals capable at times of assuming certain peculiar aspects of humankind's behaviour and character. Between the two kinds there therefore existed a close link which has been lost over time, though lasting up until a few decades ago in some rural or mountain areas where life proceeded along parallel lines between the animal and the person tending it, or those who lived close to it or were familiar with it.

In "Ancient Presences: the Bestiary", it is Pierre Casè's intention to emphasize, through a sort of visual trauma, this moment of crisis which closely regards him (he lives in Valmaggia, in Canton Ticino) and reflects on us all, destined as we are to become increasingly detached from the rhythms, behaviour and seduction of nature. His artistic stance in this case arises out of a precise consideration: the horned cow, a Swiss myth, no longer exists, since the two bony stubs sprouting on the head of the new-born calf are cauterized immediately. Thus, once they are adults, the bovines can be packed tightly into stalls without harming the other inmates. And there is no longer any transhumance: today's cows are not capable of moving over long distances.

Then again, some behavioural changes in the animal realm regard the whole world, with consequences for consolidated attitudes and deeply rooted customs: for example, the huge loss of bees in China has created a new profession, that of the pollinator.

And so, continuing along a creative path concentrating on the materials chosen, which began three years previously at the Scuola Grande della Misericordia on the occasion of the Venice Biennale, and was repeated in the important exhibition at Castelgrande di Bellinzona, Casè once again turns his hand to rusty sheets of metal, where the bold, "sharp", shimmering colour is caused by the oxidation and blooming of the iron. Following the rhythm of the things that nature transforms, giving various shades to their states of decay, he narrates the history that is abandoning us, consuming us and being consumed. He does this by using suggestive and traumatic installations. Not without a good deal of effort due to bureaucratic obstacles, he has collected animal skulls (cows, bullocks, goats, sheep, donkeys) from the pastures in his territory and those of pets, such as dogs and cats, as well as other wood- and rock-dwelling creatures (foxes, badgers, wild boars, stags, ibex rock goats) to include in his challenging report.

Ten human skulls also make their traumatic appearance. Vertically arranged, the latter are shown in couples or alone at the top of blanched sticks and act as the

sinister central nucleus of flowers surrounded by petals of wavy metal with the addition of barbed wire. These panels, standing alongside one another, are arranged in a circle and seem to close around the visitor, multiplying his sense of both oppression and guilt. At the centre of the scene emerges a book of poetry dedicated to animals by Angelo Casè, Pierre's brother. Lastly, profiles of bodies or heads belonging to the fauna are cut out and inserted in the jagged story narrated in matter, offering more grounds for reflection and disorientation, as though the magma of memories had flowed down to us from a time abandoned by memory, mercilessly confirming our debts towards the nature we have betrayed and abandoned whilst pursuing a delirium of omnipotence and self destruction.

The sense of steadily advancing drama is broadened and completed in the sequence of large, horizontal metal sheets harbouring and spelling out, step by step, glance after glance, the stages on a path of guilty nostalgia with the bare, sinister, shiny display of skeletal animal remains. The white heads, cleansed of any organic residue, rise in fragile, marble-like mimicry from the pierced base securing them and seem to steal our sight from orbits that have lost their sight. Other memories are conveyed by the horns rising proudly on the heads of those who once bore them, or the row of teeth, set in a mocking grin, leaving no escape to the observer. The observer might dwell on the sharp, curved teeth of the wild boar or the curiously pointed skull of the badger, the sinister smile of the horse or the vain display of ramifications on the stag's head. We are you, they seem to say, and the ex-voto accompanying these tablets of guilt seem to be the last haven of unlikely, and in any case tardy, repentance. Repentance that should also regard the loss of our bees due to growing atmospheric pollution, which involves not only China but the whole planet.

And here, as a corollary and reminder, Pierre Casè has created a hundred or so small reliefs using the wax produced by these hymenoptera, mitigating somewhat the optical and tactile effect of the corrosive and (literally and metaphorically) grating materials that accompany and distinguish his work.

In his provocatively ostentatious stance, the artist from Canton Ticino intends pursuing a thorough investigation of the matter that in certain situations connects back to our memory, our consciences, our lives. From the walls of the ancient homes in Maggia, marked by centuries-old history, he has moved on to the rusty life history of the metal sheets that reconstruct the magic age of some places: Venice is a seductive symbol of unattainable beauty and its corrosion. It is no coincidence that for him this is a privileged and recurrent (mental and physical) place for observation and exhibition.

And now we find ourselves before the imminent, interrogative and disturbing aggressiveness of these skulls with their surrounding legacy of trifles pertinent to them or which complete their reflection, as well as finding ourselves facing the issues linked to them and delving further into our consciences. These are all chapters in the same book of life, its regret and its guilty loss of direction. Pierre Casè makes use of formal and perceptive contrast in order to inflict wounds on our eyes, to move our consciences and raise a cry of alarm, to rip the veil of superficiality and indifference. So that humankind can conserve its most authentic sense of self.

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