



MICHELE CIACCIOFERA

**FRAGMENTS OF NATURE
AND OTHER STORIES**



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curated by Marco Izzolino*

Special thanks to...

*Terry e Richard Demarco,
Giulia e Angelo Crespi*

*Fragments of nature and other stories,
04.10.2017 – 04.01.2018*

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RICHARD DEMARCO

In 1975, I led an expedition from the Celtic world of Scotland to the equally mysterious world of Sardinia, via Sicily, Malta, and those parts of the Italian mainland linked to those civilisations older than that of the Roman Empire.

I was particularly interested in Sardinia because of the underground tombs known as Domus de Janas. They take the form of domestic spaces for the dead; therefore the interior of these spaces would be furnished with tables and chairs and spaces for household and votive use. They belong to a pagan world in which the concept of an Earth Goddess was dominant. This concept of a Mother of Creation dominated the spiritual life of these early inhabitants of the Mediterranean. The Domus de Janas were literally designed as dwellings for those who would inhabit the after-life. I had already explored the temples and tombs on Malta under the aegis of The Demarco Gallery's Edinburgh Arts concept of a university of all the arts, likened to Black Mountain College in North Carolina. The word 'Janas' defines what we know now as 'Fairyland'.



There are few manifestations of this ancient culture in the work of contemporary artists living in today's international art world. It is therefore a source of inspiration to me that the art of Michele Ciacciofera is a manifestation of this most ancient European Mediterranean culture. His cultural heritage links him to the islands of Sardinia and Sicily. I instinctively associate his art with that of Joseph Beuys. Like Beuys, Michele Ciacciofera is a good example of homo ludens rather than homo sapiens. Both Jung and Nietzsche associated our childhood world of play with that of the mature artist. This instinct helps to set free the power of the imagination which is our human birth-right in our childhood. I regard Michele Ciacciofera's work as a most serious and insightful exploration of the reality of a world which our materialistic world tends to ignore. At the heart of his serious endeavours, there is a spirit of playfulness which causes all his art works to have the mysterious attraction we associated with our childhood.

My Italo-Celtic ancestry obliges me to take most seriously the art of those contemporary artists who can transport me back to my earliest childhood memories. Like Joseph Beuys, Michele Ciacciofera is the personification of that rare and invaluable artistic expression.

– *Richard Demarco CBE*
Kingston University Emeritus Professor of European Cultural Studies

MARCO IZZOLINO

ART OF THE MEMORY

Every single artefact by Michele Ciacciofera in this exhibition – it would be reductive to define them merely drawings, paintings or sculptures – comes to the eyes of the public as the tip of the iceberg. There is the visible part and another – larger and deeper – part which remains invisible. On the surface they let a very slow and pondered process of image construction show through, which connects these artefacts to very old cultural references that, nevertheless, are present in contemporary reality. His works are such that they expand the space and the time of the depiction, by relating to signs and meanings which belong to a memory shared by several different cultures, even very distant from each other nowadays. Before being depictions and tales, they are representations of belonging to the ancient and archaic culture of the Mediterranean basin, that Michele Ciacciofera identifies as the common root that connects peoples who speak different languages, practice different religions, have very different social and political structures, and so on.

Referring to a concept by Gottfried Boehm, what we defined as the invisible part of his works – meaning the part that does not relate to their content but rather to the references which contribute to a correct interpretation – has something to do with the ability of Michele Ciacciofera to activate an idea of time other than the one taking place while observing his works. In addition to the movement, the materials chosen, the presentation, the combination of signs and colours provoke an inner sense of time in the public, meaning the possibility to interconnect past, present and future things. In his works, Michele Ciacciofera focuses on the accumulation, thickening and stratification of the signs of the time.

SPATIAL METAPHOR OF TIME...

Either two- or three-dimensional, these works are a spatial metaphor of time, that is, they use the dimension "space" as a mechanism to trigger the memory. Signs and shapes act as the trace that preserves and reiterates the past in the present, by allowing the public – as the Benjaminian flaneur – to spatially recall the past in the present. The trace represents the idea of a passage (of a man, of an animal, of something that left a mark) which is not visible any longer. Passing by and leaving a mark are equivalent in the trace; furthermore, the idea of passing by also underlines the dynamic nature of the trace, being the element which relates different moments.

MEMORY RECORDERS...

The media used by Michele Ciacciofera to present his works act as memory recorders, that is, artefacts that bear the traces of a past which is not clearly identifiable. They show the traces of their lives and the stratification of past uses. From this standpoint, they differ both from the concept of ready-made and of "poor" materials (used by the Arte Povera's artists), since they are not objects having a new aesthetic or dialectic meaning vis-à-vis the works they are coupled to, but they magnify the traces and the memory they are bearing, by recording their previous and current effects on them.

CONTAINERS OF A PROCESS...

In reactivating the memory, the story taking place through the work does not show as a mere tale, but rather as a complex new representation of events conceived as experienced first-hand. By emphasising the construction of the object over time rather than its shape or function (the production of a ceramic object, the effect of water dehydration on a surface, the perfect structure of a beehive or a fossil, the carving of a natural surface as a mark of presence, and so on), Michele Ciacciofera builds coherent abstract models which allow the public to visualise events, to recall aspects of the past learnt in a story without information, worked out to get a meaning. By doing so, the artist – through the filter of his own action – triggers an almost endless process which leads to the awareness of how one intervenes in recalling the past and building the memory and the story in the viewer.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION...

Michele Ciacciofera is aware that the first motivation towards cultural diversity comes from nature, adapting oneself to different natural conditions; for this reason, in order to refer to a shared memory, he has to start to observe, analyse and interpret nature again, like he is doing in this exhibition, where he speaks of his relation with nature through the filter of his artistic practice. Therefore, his research cannot be included in a defined scheme or model. The methods by which he builds his works can hardly be defined: they are technical procedures and manipulations that do not only concern artistic research and representation, but also scientific investigation, study and representation. Just like an ethnographer, he performs a participant observation: he travels, searches for and collects natural elements and ancient artefacts there where they originate or were created. Some of these items remain the subjects of observation and study; others are re-interpreted and portrayed on two-dimensional surfaces; others are broken up – so that they lose their entirety or physical nature – and then put back together in a newer and more abstract way, but which can still be traced back to the most archaic memory.

FRAGMENTS...

Memory appears in his works as fragments, having the intensity of a glare, limited but still illuminating. A detail, or a group of details, which is capable of triggering the stream of memories. Each fragment, when it stands surrounded by blurred colour or matter, relates to a missing totality. It shines as a metonymy vis-à-vis the whole. There is only a trace of a picture, of a sculpture, which contains extremely significant signs: details that can be demonstrative. Chiselled details, intense peculiarities that work on occasion, like when they re-emerge to our memory.

The research by Michele Ciacciofera cannot be expressed within the limits of a defined medium; it has to react in a versatile manner to the need of connecting a concrete detail with an occasion which, in some cases, can be evoked as the trace of an event and, in other cases, can take place by creating an harmony (that same harmony we can find in those ancestral signs from archaic cultures)



THE VALUE OF MEMORY...

Michele Ciacciofera's expressive versatility is based on a steady cornerstone, the Mediterranean basin, focal point of the history of western civilization: a collection of signs, shapes, myths and legends, from where the artist can draw and that he can reinterpret with critical sensibility, looking at today's events. Actually, his research pays careful attention to the modern environmental, social, anthropological and political issues; his look, by tying together the archaic world and the contemporary world in an invisible way, is always focused on the present.

He maintains that he always had an anthropological approach to the life of the Mediterranean basin, the history of the artefacts created in this area, because the value of the memory of our common roots lays in the collective use that can be made today of this memory: it must not be preserved but it has to re-emerge and it has to be reinterpreted so to find a new key to read it and adjust it to modern life. Memory depletes when it is not able to transform itself and be the source of change.

In trying to explain why Michele Ciacciofera gives value to the memory, to the importance of recalling those aspects of the past that have accumulated and contribute to give a meaning to today's life, I would like to resort to a famous quote from "Tristes Tropiques" by Claude Lévi-Strauss, that I write down here:

«In Martinique, I had visited rustic and neglected rum-distilleries where the equipment and the methods used had not changed since the eighteenth century. In Puerto Rico, on the other hand, in the factories of the company which enjoys a virtual monopoly over the whole of the sugar production, I was faced by a display of white enamel tanks and chromium piping. Yet the various kinds of Martinique rum, as I tasted them in front of ancient wooden vats thickly encrusted with waste matter, were mellow and scented, whereas those of Puerto Rico are coarse and harsh. We may suppose, then, that the subtlety of the Martinique rums is dependent on impurities the continuance of which is encouraged by the archaic method of production. To me, this contrast illustrates the paradox of civilization: its charms are due essentially to the various residues it carries along with it, although this does not absolve us of the obligation to purify the stream. By being doubly in the right, we are admitting our mistake. We are right to be rational and to try to increase our production and so keep manufacturing costs down. But we are also right to cherish those very imperfections we are endeavouring to eliminate. Social life consists in destroying that which gives it its savour.»

In this short story about an apparently fortuitous experience, the French anthropologist is able to describe the paradox regarding the approach to modern western culture vis-à-vis the other cultures, but also vis-à-vis its own past. As the rum from Martinique, the works by Michele Ciacciofera have an ancient taste which seduces – because they show the signs of an archaic culture that wraps us up and the persistence of a memory which is familiar to us and brings about feelings of belonging – but at the same time they are, in a critical way, the alternative to a production system of images and artefacts that aims at destroying the imperfections and at forgetting history.



THE WRITING ON CERAMICS...

I would like to close this analysis about Michele Cacciofera's work by speaking about some of his peculiar works: the ceramic tablets on which the artist has represented an abstract (archaic?) form of writing. They bear an ethical message which has very ancient origins but which is still worth today as regards the management of the political and economic balances throughout Europe and in the Mediterranean basin.

The form of these works and the signs carved on them summarise the idea of an ancient written tablet (wax tablet or carved stone slab) and the more modern idea of written or illustrated book. Their peculiarity is the unique likeness that they show between figurative form and written form. What we interpret as writing is not something to be read, it is subject to the condition of image and, therefore, it is something to be seen. The writing only bears the value of the gesture, of the rhythm, of the sequence of signs which plays between the awareness and the unaware randomness, and its interpretation fluctuate from the idea of a text, of a diagram, of a subtle trace, of a scheme or metric calculation. For the creation of the works and the memories they recall, it is important to consider the material they are made of – ceramic – and that all the signs remain hidden: it is the effect, like a palimpsest, of a process of stratification. Whatever they show, it is not a permanent action but the dynamic result of a process.

Ceramic and writing are the symbols of the merger of different cultures which took place over a very long period of time (between the VIII and III century b.C.) which saw the Greek and Phoenician cultures blend with those of other native populations of southern Italy and other areas of the Mediterranean basin. The Greeks introduced the use of the alphabet (and, subsequently, writing) into Italy and the use of systems for a large-scale production of ceramic (for example, the pottery wheel). The communications and the possibility of exchanging with the others were the basis of prosperity and development for the Greeks and Phoenicians. Perhaps Michele Cacciofera built his own "tablets" based on them, where there are not written rules to be transmitted but only the value of diversity and exchange of knowledge.

MICHELE CIACCIOFERA & HANS ULRICH OBRIST

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: So, are you preparing for a new exhibition?

MICHELE CIACCIOFERA: Yes, I have been working on the subject of memory for several years and I recently developed a new collection of works on the ancestral and contemporary relationship between humans and a kind of mysterious past, inscribed in our memory, which we often fail to recognize but which is part of us and has always governed the cosmic order.

You paint, draw and sculpt, and you also collect pottery and fossils. How did it all start? How did you come to art? How did art come to you?

I began when I was 4 years old. It was still something vague in my head, but I drew all the time. My family origins are twofold. My father's family is Sicilian and my mother's family is Sardinian. Art and culture are part of the family dna on my mother's side. One of my mother's great aunts was a very well-known writer from Sardinia, Grazia Deledda.

Of course, I've heard of her! She won the Nobel prize in 1926. So you grew up in a literary environment.

My great uncle was Salvatore Cambosu, another famous writer. I dedicated a work to him, some honeycombs turned into imaginary books, which I see as depositories for an ideal nature. Salvatore Cambosu inspired the work of another Sardinian artist whose work I really love, Maria Lai, who died a few years ago. I consider Miele amaro by Cambosu to be a real masterpiece: shortly after reading it I began to reflect and developed a great fascination with the incessant activity of bees. I think they're practically perfect creatures, emblematic of a higher order. Look at the structures created by bees. They're surprising and they are part of my *A Dialogue with Hans Ulrich Obrist* vision of the order of the world and the universe. These objects recently inspired me to bring different organic materials together to make some books.

You also produce sculptures, pottery, installations.

Yes, I also produce pottery sculptures. For example, I recently made some ceramic pieces that in a certain way recall trilobites, a type of three-lobed fossil. I have some trilobites in my collection, but they primarily feature in my imagination. Collecting them is a kind of mania—they are beings/objects with what I believe to be a perfect shape, but science is not yet able to tell us everything about them, making them mysterious and fascinating. They led me to the philosophy of the scientist and Nobel prize winner for physics, Wolfgang Pauli, one of the fathers of quantum physics. Pauli discussed the question of the past with Carl Gustav Jung, saying that science develops ideas and theories that, at a certain point, cannot be explained further. This led his vision of things to draw closer to that of the Swiss psychiatrist, especially with regard to the theory of mankind's ancestral memory. I'm certain they were right. I have recently produced an abstract piece of pottery, which resembles a tree trunk with slender, wire-like branches. When doing some research on the internet, I came across a practically identical shape in a 450-million-year-old fossil.

It is at this point that your collections become part of your work. You collect fossils, and also insects, in particular butterflies.

Yes, the work *From the Eternity of Life* (fig. 1) features a fossil with a butterfly and an insect placed on top of it. So you combine your works and your collections. Exactly. In *White Folk of the Earth* (fig. 2), you can see some terracotta beads secured to a wooden panel I found and then engraved with symbols, which I use extensively in my work. In *The Politics of World-Building* (fig. 3) I used wax to join some honeycombs together. I like the relationship between materials, and what I really like is to put them back into play. Wax comes from nature, but then becomes a commercial product. I wanted to undo this shift from nature to industry. *Rock Containing a Language* (fig. 4) contains a fossil with two leaves alongside elements I created by pulverizing some limestone.



Fig. 1 – *From the eternity of life* (2015), wood, bee, fossil, butterfly, limestone debris, 15 x 15 x 3,5 cm



Fig. 2 – *White folk of the Earth* (2014), wood, plaster, terracotta, 35 x 35 x 6 cm



Fig. 6 – *Single-hearted endeavour* (2015), concrete, pigment, gold powder. 30 x 7 cm



Fig. 3 – *The politics of World building* (2016), honeycomb, wood, iron, gold powder, 47 x 32 x 3 cm



Fig. 5 – *The dream of a Sherden child* (2012), pigment, limestone, 26 x 16 x 2 cm



Fig. 4 – *Rock Containing a Language*, (2012/2014) installation; limestone, acrylic, ink, concrete, gold powder, fossilized leaves, stone

Fossils could be described as readymades. They're part of collections and archives, but they also provide starting points for your artworks.

*Yes, they are both of these things. They act as an archive because they encompass memory, while on the other hand these fossils inspired me to start reconstructing forms that are also the result of the psychological processing of reality. In *Dream of a Sheidan Child* (fig. 5), I have pulverized some limestone and then reconstructed it with a bonding agent, adding some ink and acrylic paint. In fact, another thing that really interests me is the possibility to destroy and recreate something else to achieve a sort of order, which is naturally a mental order. For *Single-Hearted Endeavour* (fig. 6) I used cement and sand to create a number of shapes, which I then engraved.*

It's magnificent. How does it work?

I create a form that is normally quite typical, such as earthenware resembling a plate or a bowl. I recreate this form with cement mixed with pigments and dusts, including gold dust, but I make some morphological changes, just as would occur in an alchemical process, and then I use a nail to engrave it with symbols. In my personal vision this is linked to language and the earth, as well as to the universe.

They're cosmic objects in a certain sense.

Certainly.

How do you display them?

They are often traces, combinations of fossil elements and fragile objects. Do you use cabinets? The smallest are normally in display cabinets. Otherwise I create white bases or opt for tables where I combine some of my works with fossilized sea urchins or trilobites, or stones found in the natural environment. Then I put them together. Meanwhile, my drawings on paper offer a parallel reading of this process.

Indeed. You never stop painting and drawing.

*A drawing went on to inspire a kind of basrelief, *Saturn's interiority* (fig. 7), a piece created in limestone that was ground down and then reassembled, which I then inscribed with symbols. It was as if I was continuing the drawing process. I also created some movements when casting the material to create a surface that is never completely even. It's a bit like life, where irregularity is an ideal. I searched for natural elements, which I then treated with clay to turn them into something new. Obviously, these also feature in my drawings.*

Your sources of inspiration include Cambosu, literature, and many others, all of which have strong links with local contexts. Edouard Glissant writes in *La Cohée du Lamentin* that we cannot help but think on a global or world scale from a viewpoint that is probably extremely local. Glissant spoke of a rock, which was the *Cohée du Lamentin* in Martinique, and for you is Sardinia. Can you tell me something about it?

It's both Sardinia and Sicily.

So a dual source of inspiration.

Yes. I am often asked whether I'm Italian. Effectively speaking I was born in Italy, but I am rather son of two parts of Italy that do not resemble the other regions of the country at all. These two islands are poles apart. One of them, Sardinia, has a very important ancestral history with its nuraghi and the Shardana people, people of the sea who are still a mystery today. I spoke about them in Scotland during an exhibition, with Richard Demarco. Today Sardinia is deemed to be a very closed region. However, in ancient times the Sardinians, the Shardana people, used to travel everywhere: North Africa, France, England, Scotland, Ireland..., this is also part of my way of life. I have spent all my life travelling, going to different places, carrying out research. However, wherever I go, I continue to see things from a local point of view. My background in Political Sciences, specializing in sociology and anthropology, continues to be fundamental to my research. Since the age of 18 or 19 I have felt a stronger link with writers and anthropologists than with those working in my field, that is to say other young artists. I am very well acquainted with the circle of writers around Leonardo Sciascia and the anthropologist Nino Buttitta. When I lived in Sardinia, I often went out looking for inscriptions on stones, ancient symbolic writings. I have always tried to bring these symbols back up to date. I have memorised this sort of abstract graffiti, which has only been partially deciphered, in order to find its meaning. I associate it with everyday things. One day, walking in the countryside around one hundred kilometres outside Paris, I found some stones on the ground. They had a very special shape, which recalled the Great Mothers in my mind. These stones enabled me to establish a reconnection with my context and my origins.

Yesterday I saw Bernard Lassus, the great landscape architect who turns 86 today. He spoke to me about his idea that we analyse in order to invent. Therefore, to quote Marcel Broodthaers, we tautologize, preserve, sociologize, with found objects— traces, insects, collections, etc. We use all this as a basis for invention. Is this the case for you too?

Exactly. I memorized the engravings on the stones so as to reinvent them or bring them up to date. I use the expression 'bring up to date', because my vision is closely linked to the contemporary world. For me, memory is a mosaic that allows us to manipulate time, going beyond the limits of mankind. Man's greatest limit is death and so I seek to go beyond this. Invention entails reusing materials that have nothing to do with the past, in order to construct something that communicates with these objects I collect, or others that I simply look at. The creation of a dialogue that does not seek to find answers. I don't look for answers, but instead prefer questions to be triggered by my work.

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Let's look at the paintings and drawings.

*I create the large paintings with lots of layers of material, which often contain an element that resembles certain animals or things. A good example is **I've Been Around the World Several Times** (Fig. 8), that canvas with the bubbles, in which I feel myself to be incorporated. These bubbles evoke the human condition, in which glimpses of drawing can be seen. My work is always based on drawing.*

Where does the link with pottery come from? I know that in Italy the Albissola pottery was associated with the avantgardes of Situationist International and the Cobra group when they arrived in Liguria. Asger Jorn was the one who did the most work with pottery. Do you look back to this context, or does the inspiration for your pottery come from your islands?

It actually comes from my islands, particularly Sicily. Just think of Caltagirone, Sciacca, and all the pottery production during the Greek period... Sicily is fundamental, a real open book when it comes to the history of pottery. I have always handled clay in the countryside, so it was a natural process. I was always fascinated by potters and this is another reason why I started collecting antique pottery. The emotions they trigger in me have enabled me to create something new. This Mediterranean context also inspired my use of gold in my works on paper.

Does the inspiration come from Sicily or Sardinia?

From Sicily. The difference between Sardinia and Sicily lies predominantly in the fact that Sicily is an open and rich island, while Sardinia is a very reserved, closed island, with rules that need to be deciphered. Sicily places everything on the table. In my drawings I use different kinds of paper with very little color, but there are often traces of gold dust to be found. On my canvases, which I lay out on the floor, I instead apply hundreds of layers of water, which leave limescale behind as they dry.

As regards these glazes, layers or multiple strata in your work, the prehistoric context and the almost archaeological finds, I think there is a link between the great acceleration of today's world and the long term. I get the impression you're strongly interested in these long durations.

I'm interested in time in general, and therefore also in long durations. In fact, the layers in my work are like fragments of stories, hence the relationship with time that I have always wanted to be able to manipulate. It is their conceptual link with time that, according to my way of thinking, transforms them into deposits of memory, magical talismans of a sometimes parallel world on which I seek to mark out a human message that forms part of the history of the cosmos and is targeted at the future. My interest in memory is born out of several considerations, but first and foremost out of the awareness that our identity is the history of the generations that preceded us, written and told in and by the system of tangible and imaginary symbols that represent it. To this I want to add, by way of an example, something that I believe to be strongly linked to what I said before: ever since the unification of Italy in 1860, ongoing attempts have been made to wipe out dialects. There are twenty regions and therefore twenty or more different languages and cultures. For example, in Sardinia, the real Sardinia is deemed to be the central part of the island where I was born, Barbagia. The rest of the island is a bit different. So, in both Sardinia and Sicily, several islands exist alongside one another within the islands themselves. There are different languages, different symbols, and all of this is very fragile. By this I don't mean it is all disappearing, but I think that today the language of art can seek to recover linguistic values. Deep down, languages are symbols, pillars of identity, which are threatened with extinction, but which can be relaunched as part of a harmonious temporal vision, in keeping with art.

Definitely. The spectre of extinction is very present, not only for different languages, but also for human beings. Let's take bees as an example, as they face the risk of extinction. As the artist Gustav Metzger said, we are experiencing a sort of potential mass extinction. An extinction not only as end of our existence, of our personal life, but potentially the extinction of our species. It is an extinction of microorganisms such as bees, but also a cultural extinction. As Susan Hiller demonstrates in her magnificent film on languages, languages disappear every day.

It's true. Going back to bees, their construction processes are the result of agglomeration. Bees' nests are the result of these incessant processes. This continuity is comparable to the history of humanity. As regards history, I think it necessary to seek to frame it within a process, a continuity that has to consider the past in order to be able to bring things up to date and, as I said before, to be able to look to the future. Here is a piece of 13th-century Sicilian pottery from my collection (fig. 9). Drawing helps me explore it and, although my drawings and this piece are in relation to one another, the production of the former is independent from the latter. I see something in pottery, which subsequently becomes integrated with and comes back to my memory and my story. This is how my creative process starts.

The idea is that the future can be invented with fragments of the past.

Exactly. I am not looking for perfect objects. I am looking for things that are testimonies of life, things that are depositories of the past, depositories of a story. That which I call memory is, effectively speaking, the direct line that helps me look to the future.

Where are your collections?

The pottery is in my studio in Sicily, although I would like to bring it to Paris. The trilobites are in France, because I often need them. It's not a physical need, but a mental requirement.



Fig. 7 – Saturn's interiority (2012), installation detail



Fig. 8 – I've been around the World several times (2015) gold pigment, charcoal on canvas. 103 x 212 cm

This idea of long duration or of long term in an increasingly fast-paced world also takes us back to the subject of slow food. I read that you were a Slow Food partner.

I've always been interested in food and I love cooking. Many years ago, a left-wing movement developed in Italy called Arcigola — originally affiliated with Arci, a cultural association with close ties to the country's biggest progressive party. There were very few of us to start with, just a few hundred people. I was very interested in the question of cultural research into food and wine, the produce of the land, and, above all, small-scale local production, which was totally opposed to the large-scale production chains. Sicily and Sardinia both boast a very important gastronomic culture and therefore this theme really gripped me. The movement went on to become global and I have never lost interest in it. Unfortunately the slow food philosophy is not very well-established in France. When in Sicily I always seek out small-scale producers and purchase their products in order to contribute to what was the original spirit of slow food.

It is your movement too.

(Laughs) I create a personal movement. I also wanted to show you this pot from Caltagirone (fig. 10), dating to around the 16th century, which forms part of my collection. The Arabs arrived in Sicily before the 10th century and their presence was felt on the island for long, despite the arrival of the Normans. Then the Sicilians forgot Arabic writing and its characters. The decoration on this pot is called 'Siculo-Arabic'; the potter had tried to create designs that recalled kufic characters, but without giving the object a complete meaning typical of writing. We spoke before about the disappearance of languages and here is an example, which is linked to visual memory through symbols and writing. This is why I am very attached to the book as an object too.

We are holding an interview that will be published in a book and I would like to know whether there are already books on your work.

There are several. One of them regards my visual interpretation of Goethe's journey to Sicily around two centuries ago, which was a twofold experience for me. The first was Goethe's journey and then his book, the other was the series of personal reflections that it aroused. I was struck by the meteorological description of Goethe's two-month journey around Sicily. In relation to climate change, about which we talk so much today, I wanted to assess the possibility of comparing the weather from the two eras, that of Goethe and the present day, in the same area and at the same time of year. I followed in his footsteps on the same dates to discover that there are not significant meteorological differences between then and now. Back then too there were major changes in weather conditions from one day to the next.

Goethe knew a lot about economics. I have studied ecology and economics and I know he was implicated in the same matters very early on, when he was Minister for the Economy.

It's true. Two years ago I exhibited in the recently restored Palazzo Montalto, a 14th-century building in Siracusa. I placed four old tables with objects and drawings in a large room. These objects were pieces of pottery and found objects. For example, I had salvaged some bricks from a house being demolished and I put Indian ink and other materials on them. This was how I created the Sicilian Footsteps (fig. 11) series, building a story and giving a new life to these objects that had emerged from destruction. For another exhibition held in New York last year, at 20th Street Studio Projects, I combined my own pottery with 16th century Chinese pottery, grouping it together in cubic containers open at the front and hanging from the wall.

When you create installations by combining your pottery with antique pottery, does the chosen pottery become part of an artwork or does it then go back to your collection?

It is part of the artwork.



Fig. 9 – Basin made of archaic majolica, Sicily, 13th century



Fig. 10 – Albarello, Caltagirone, 16th century



Fig. 11 – Sicilian footstep (2011), gold pigment, acrylic, brick, 28 x 13 cm

Like Ai Weiwei, who used pottery shards to create new pieces. You produce new works using old pieces. As a result your collection doesn't grow, but could actually get smaller.

In effect the collection grows smaller (laughs). What's more, they're fragile objects, so there is also a chance they might break. The collection is never static, but is continuously in evolution. This is why I never stop looking for new objects and things in order to revive it within a dialogue with my works.

What role does memory play in all of this? These footsteps are evidently symbols of memory. We live in an age in which we have more and more information available to us, but this does not necessarily mean more memory. Perhaps this is why art focuses on memory.

I find that the hyper-production of information in modern society tends to lower our level of perception and, above all, our grasp upon memory. More information in no way entails better information quality. Through memory, we naturally select everything that continues to have a meaning in our life. Everything irrelevant can be forgotten. Our head helps us to make this selection. The bombardment from the information society poses a risk that this ability to be selective may decrease and our memory may become a space in which information is forcibly inserted; if we exceed the capacity limit we risk to lose also interesting information.

What amazed me when I worked in Italy, precisely in Milan, was that the entire cultural context, everything extraordinary that happened in art and design in the 1960s, was closely connected to certain Milanese communist bookshops. This link with communism seems to play a role in your work too.

*I was an activist when I was in high school. Italy was going through a very particular period in the 1970s, marked by great social tension, with all the power firmly in the grip of the Christian Democracy and the other central parties. The so-called *conventio ad excludendum*—an agreement to exclude the Communist party from the government—was something absurd. At the time I was fascinated by Enrico Berlinguer, who had attempted to break this circle of exclusion to restore the progressive ideas of the left to the heart of the country's decisions, by seeking political agreement and dialogue with the other dominant powers. At that time, I was also studying another person, who was also Sardinian like Berlinguer: Antonio Gramsci. Naturally I never met him in person, but his thinking strongly inspired my work. My admiration for these men has always led me to react against power. In Italy, as you have rightly said, there were organizations that published books in Milan, and elsewhere too. This was the result of postrevolutionary dissatisfaction, if that is how to describe 1968, with subversive organizations such as the Red Brigades, which used violence and terror to try to change the state of things in their own way. All this failed to achieve anything, except for very bad memories of that period. However, I feel there was something positive in all of this, given that Italian young people played the biggest part in this political battle and were very active at the time. It was a very particular situation, as was also the case in other European countries, such as France and Germany which had activists and organizations with similar aims, although the Italian situation was far more explosive. I have kept my ideas, although I have moved away from political activism.*

You have lived through a personal drama that brought you face to face with a political intrigue. Your brother Antonio was assassinated in Cuba twenty years ago and it is incredible that what has just happened to the young Giulio Regeni in Egypt is almost the same situation.

I find the fact that the story is identical to be very disturbing. Even the fact that when the police told us about my brother's death they said it was a car accident. We only learned afterwards that he'd been tortured. It's always the same story. Did your brother go to Cuba for political reasons? No, my brother was a great traveller. He was a year younger than me and had been following a similar path. We never used violence, but we were heavily involved both intellectually and socially. We accepted the car crash story initially. It was only afterwards that we learned he had been tortured and his organs had been illegally explanted.

Was this during the time of Fidel Castro?

Yes. The judiciary opened an inquiry. Given the case, it was covered by the international press. Numerous questions for the Prime Minister were raised in the Italian parliament, but no conclusive answers were received and our family friend Leoluca Orlando, mayor of Palermo, wrote to Fidel Castro. Castro had sent out his ministers and officials several times to provide proof of the traffic accident. On each occasion, Interpol and the competent magistrate discarded as fakes these elements of proof, which included photomontages of the accident, video montages of the autopsy, false medical records, etc. It was a state affair and we were informed indirectly that it was a crime that had nothing to do with the accident. At that point Cuba decided not to provide any more assistance in establishing the truth and so the magistrate had to dismiss the inquiry. Cuba and its president imposed a silence that remains in place today.

Did you never find out what happened?

No. We know he was tortured and his organs were illegally removed. We were only able to identify my brother through an X-ray of his teeth.

This seems absurd. He didn't go to Cuba against that government.

Absolutely not. As I have already said, we never considered using violence as a form of protest. Ideas and words are sufficient. In this case he was on holiday.

It was evidently a decisive experience in your life.

It had a great impact on my artistic production. After the death of my brother, of whom I was very fond, I had a problem with myself and the rest of mankind. I emerged from this by producing a series of figurative portraits, which I worked on in secret for many years.

You channelled your grief, if that's the right way of putting it.

I produced the Silence! series. It was a paradoxical reflection on torture as an absolutely normal and acceptable part of human behaviour. I did all this with heads I produced. I used modern materials such as plastic and earth to obsessively create heads that looked around.

Very intense. In what year?

Starting from 1998, that is to say four years after my brother's death. I needed a few years to process everything. I was so focused on this issue that one day I picked up a copy of the International Herald Tribune, which featured a photo on the front page of an American prisoner who had been tortured in Iraq. I looked at the photo, which was really beautiful, albeit dramatic, and I had the immediate impression that it was a false. That took me back to the photomontages produced by the Cubans.

It took you back to those false ones.

So I painted over the newspaper photo with red watercolor and exhibited it in New York in an exhibition at the Italian Cultural Institute. In this series of watercolors on newspaper pages, I re-established a connection between human suffering and the drama of torture. Just four or five years ago, an American soldier revealed that a planned series of photomontages was produced, to be shown to the world as a whole via the media, and they included this photo. I'd felt it immediately, at first glance.

The trauma of your brother's death led you to figuration.

Yes, it led me to figuration. I spent a certain number of years looking back at the pictures of my brother's autopsy and everything written in the police reports on the presumed accident. I created some images in my head on the basis of these documents. It was through this figurative process, linked to my work as an artist, that I managed to get through the most dramatic aspect of my life. I have to thank art, because it is thanks to it that I was able to get over Antonio's death and do not nurture hatred in my heart.

So, by processing your grief you were able to overcome it.

However, it was also a work at various levels.

This is what Marlene Dumas says too. She talks a lot about her state of mind when she speaks of torture, violence...

These memories continue to live on in my head, albeit in a slightly romanticized manner. The story of my brother's torture and death is linked to a more general story, to everything that happens in the world, to war in general, to the ongoing violations of mankind. All that continues to live inside me today, but I eventually got over it. Art was a means for me, or even a real requirement, in order to be able to handle this experience. I didn't realize at the time, but drawing a given situation, writing, painting, taking photographs, and so on, had become almost an obsession. I did a fair bit of photography at the time, but I moved away from it after my brother's death and because of it. I had seen all the photographic documentation on his death and at that point photography became unacceptable for me.

Photography lied to you in a certain way. Photography was used as a lie. Is there anything we haven't discussed? Do you do public commissions? Do you have any utopian projects, or any projects that are too big to make? Do you have any dreams, any projects that have proved too expensive... As you may know, a recurring question in my interviews regards projects that have never been developed. A few years ago I started working on the subject of migrations, but linking it to a utopia.

Have you ever heard of Atlantropa?

No, I know of Atlantis, the project of the gallerist Hans-Jürgen Müller in Germany, who wanted to create a sort of utopia before his death, but I haven't heard of *Atlantropa*.

It was the project of the German architect Hermann Sörgel. His wife was a gallery owner and she provided the financial backing for her husband's research into developing his utopia, namely Atlantropa. It was presented to the whole world in 1929 via the international press, and it featured a dyke to be built in the Straits of Gibraltar, and weirs in all the large rivers running into the Mediterranean, in order to cause the land in the basin to re-emerge through evaporation. On the one hand, the project wanted to reclaim land for agriculture, while on the other it aimed to create links between Europe and Africa in order to establish a single continent. Sörgel also foresaw the consequences of the climate changes that would derive from this largescale evaporation and which would, in his opinion, succeed in reversing the processes of desertification. The massive public works needed to build the dykes and the connections with Africa, in accordance with Sörgel's plan, would have taken the world economy out of the widespread crisis, resolving the employment problem which was particularly dramatic back then too, as well as the problem of energy production. In fact, the dykes were intended to be used as enormous hydroelectric plants. Perhaps, through the development of this utopia, the world would have been able to aspire to balances that are very different from those in place today.

Hans-Jürgen Müller's project, Atlantis, is from the 1980s and I think it must have been a revival of *Atlantropa*.

I think so too. Atlantropa was in 1929. Consider that one of Sörgel's assistants, picked to design the new cities, was Le Corbusier. The project involved a very interesting group of thinkers. However, Hitler had plans for Africa too, albeit plans of military conquest, and he therefore ordered the production of a film, which won an award at the Venice Film Festival, not for its quality I would imagine. Through his film, Hitler aimed to put a stop to the growing enthusiasm for Atlantropa. Sörgel continued to publish his books, so he was arrested by the Nazis. At the end of the war he carried on looking for financial backers in order to attempt the creation of this utopia. Unfortunately, while cycling to a conference in Berlin, he was hit by a car which drove off without stopping.

Perhaps it was murder.

I'm sure it was an assassination. I was fascinated by Atlantropa as a large utopia, designed for the old Mediterranean, now at the centre of a huge crisis. I painted a watercolor for the Atlantropa installation, which would have been created with jute sacks, a large gilded ceramic olive, flags on the walls, also made from jute, and some honeycombs placed on small shelves.

So, this was your utopian project.

Yes. Jute sacks are still used to transport goods between Africa and Europe. The flags are those of a country that does not exist, which does not need symbols or borders, just like the olive tree, represented through the gilded ceramic, which has been a plant of peace throughout the Mediterranean since antiquity. But, above all, it is the sublimation of the idea of the journey and this idea of utopia, embodied by the perfect product of the activity of bees, which represents my greatest dream: a peaceful world, without borders, in which the work of man and nature can live alongside one another in harmony. This dream was also interpreted in a major exhibition called "Nel Mezzo del Mezzo" ("In the Middle of the Middle"), organized by three curators (Christine Macel, Marco Bazzini and Bartomeu Mari), who developed my idea, inviting eighty artists to the Museo Riso and other places in Palermo last year. This is a utopia that has been achieved!

MICHELE CIACCIOFERA

*1969, Nuoro (Italy)

Lives and works in Paris

Upcoming

2017

Solo exhibition at MAN Museo, Nuoro (December 2017)

Selected solo exhibitions

2017

Fragments of nature and other stories, Senesi Contemporanea, London (curated by Marco Izzolino)
Catalogue with text from Richard Demarco, Marco Izzolino and an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist)

2016

Enchanted Nature, Revisited, CAFA Museum, Beijing (curated by Wang Chunchen)
Catalogue published by CAFA with texts from Christine Macel, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Wang Chunchen)
Enchanted Nature, Revisited, Primus Capital Art, Milan (catalogue published by Johan&Levi with texts from Christine Macel, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Angelo Crespi)

2015

Carta Bianca Fine Arts, Catania
20th Street Studio Projects, New York

2014

I hate the indifferent, Summerhall, Edinburgh
Musée en Herbe, Paris (showing with Malachi Farrell)
Odio gli indifferenti, Palazzo Montalto, Siracusa
Artycon, Offenbach

2013

Tell me a story, Magazzini dell'arte contemporanea, Trapani
Onishy Project gallery, New York

2011

Mining memories, Light of Creativity, Miami Beach
No man's land, Museo Civico, Noto
Fondazione Sambuca, Palermo
The triumph of death, Epicentro Contemporary, Berlin

2010

No man's land, Galleria André, Rome
ARTI-FICI: argonauta, Galleria Civica d'arte contemporanea Montevergini, Siracusa

2009

Silence!, Italian Cultural Institute, New York (curated by Renato Miracco, catalogue published by Charta, texts by Miracco and Lance M. Fung)

Silence! – drawings, Palazzo At Borgia del Casale, Siracusa (curated by Carmelo Strano – catalogue published by Erreproduzioni)

2007

Viaggio nell'immagine sulle tracce di Goethe, St. John's College, Santa Fé (New Mexico USA)
Prigionieri e deserti, Palazzo del Governo, Siracusa (curated by Ornella Fazzina, catalogue published by Erreproduzioni), Siracusa

2005

Galerie Vlierhove, Blaricum (Netherlands)
Dentro il paesaggio, Complesso dello Spasimo, Palermo (curated by Aurelio Pes, catalogue published by Edizioni La Rocca)

Selected group exhibitions

2017

Biennale d'Arte di Venezia Viva Arte Viva
Documenta 14 Athens – Every time a ear di soun
Documenta 14 Kassel – Every time a ear di soun

2016

J'ai rêvé le goût de la brique pilée, ENSA/La Box, Bourges (curated by Natsuko Uchino and Sophie Auger-Grappin)

2015

Nel mezzo del mezzo, Museo Riso, Palermo (curated by Christine Macel, Marco Bazzini, Bartomeu Mari)
What we call love, IMMA Museum, Dublin (curated by Christine Macel, co-curator Rachael Thomas)
Art Bridge Center, Beijing

2012

Endless summer, White Box, New York

2011

Barocco austero, ex Monastero dei Benedettini, Catania
Carta delle circostanze – frontiere liquide, Teatro Verga Ortigia, Siracusa
54 Biennale di Venezia – Padiglione Italia, Corderie dell'Arsenale, Venezia
Sicilia sopra tutti, Galleria Civica d'arte contemporanea Montevergini, Siracusa

2010

Suite 13, Centro d'arte contemporanea Nostra Signora, Palermo
Icona Magnifica, Palazzo della Cultura, Catania
Llibres D'artista INTRAMURS, Refectorio de Real

Monasterio de S.ta Maria de la Valldigna, Valencia
 Neoiconoduli-figurazione internazionale complessa,
 Museo Bellomo, Siracusa
 Terzo Rinascimento – linguaggi della sensibilità
 ibrida, Castello Normanno Galleria Civica d'arte
 contemporanea, Acicastello

2009

Salvados por el arte, el viaje artistico de unos libros
 condenados a morir, Istituto Cervantes, Palermo
 Porta della Bellezza, Librino/Fondazione Fiumara
 d'Arte, Catania

2008

Trinacria: Gambadoro, Ciacciofera, Roccasalvo, Le
 Ciminiere, Catania

2007

Contemporanea, Palazzo del Governo, Siracusa

2006

Ratio Naturalis, Biviere, Lentini
 Pluralità segniche: Ciacciofera – Pasini – Roccasalvo,
 Church of S. Salvatore, Caltavuturo
 Migrazioni, Palazzo del Governo, Siracusa
 La visione negata, Church of S. Nicolò dei Cordari-
 Parco Archeologico, Siracusa

Grants and awards

2016

Award and residency session of self directed studio and
 work time at Civitella Ranieri Foundation (New York)

2011

Green Vision Prize, Teatro Ambra Jovinelli, Roma

2010

Winner (in a work-group with architects and engineers)
 of both competitions held by the Port Authorities of
 Palermo for an 'artistic-architectural project to reuse
 two loading cranes in the harbour of Palermo as a
 symbolic place for the future of harbour-city interaction'

2007

Public competition for artists held by Italian Ministry of
 Public Works, Rome
 Trinacria, contemporary art prize for 50th anniversary
 of European Union, Università di Catania

2005

Public competition for artists held by the Italian
 Ministry of Justice, Rome

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FRAGMENTS OF NATURE AND OTHER STORIES



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