

## **Antonella Zazzera. A conversation**

*by Ada Masoero, Antonella Zazzera, 2016*

Ada Masoero: We are presenting the recent results of your work in this exhibition but I believe that it is important to understand the stages through which you came to arrive at these results, starting from your years in the Fine Arts Academy "Pietro Vannucci" in Perugia. What was the "spark" that set off your career?

Antonella Zazzera: At the root of it all is my passion for drawing and the study of chiaroscuro. Since my time in the Academy I have often copied and recopied Caravaggio's paintings in pencil to take possession of his light and shadow. At that time I created my first Rilievi which I consider my first "finished" works. They were shown in local exhibitions of course, in Umbria, but I consider them fundamental for my career because it was at that time that I first dialogued with space: the professor showed us where they would be displayed and we created them with this in mind. This was at the end of the 90s. Later I started to work on those that I call Moduli, sculptural and pictorial works at a time, in which I made use of the process of sedimentation, that represents my space/time.

AM: Let's talk about Rilievi and Moduli. In what way was painting and sculpture woven into them?

AZ: The first Rilievi were three-dimensional elements born from observing bodies in motion, where I started to portray the dynamics, the vibrations in order to capture their imperceptible energy.

It was through the work on that "body of energy" that I started to relate my person to the work; so the determination of the size and space of the Rilievi, as with the Moduli, were parts and movements of my body. They comprised layers of sedimented plaster on a base of wood, engraved and furrowed by black and white strips joined to each other and joined to the layers. To determine the depth of the surface there was, as background, the chiaroscuro (obtained with charcoal) with its values of light and shade. The Rilievi became the Moduli, because I had started to confront myself with the space that generated and welcomed the work.

In the Moduli, created in groups or fragmented to be scattered, the pictorial aspect of the chiaroscuro disappears: the works become monochromatic white, grey and black where only light, penetrating the signs and modulating the surface, determines the tonal variations and the chiaroscuro aspect.

AM: With the Madri-Matrici can we see a clearer "return to painting"?

AZ: The Madri-Matrici that I started in 1988 are more pictorial works, it is true. I consider them like huge "shrouds": they were gauzes on which I deposited layers of glue, tar and chalk with strong but contained gestures, they were structured according to the lines of force and energetic correspondences linked to my body and space. I based them on my height, on the reach of my arms and traced signs that corresponded to these and then I joined them. They were signs that had always been part of my work but at that point I wanted to "name them", give them a name that corresponded to me I called them Segnotraccia because in them I see the fusion of the "I" with the artistic material. As I see them they carry within themselves the identity of the artist: her uniqueness and individuality. Inside is the individual. I don't always, however, base myself on the size of my body; sometimes I feel the need for more freedom: In this case more gestural works arose: That of the Madri-Matrici, is, anyway, a strongly "earthly" material: it is heavy, linked to the "womb" of the earth. The move to Frammenti was fluid and natural, because Madri-Matrici gave birth to the Frammenti, which are nothing if not their surfaces, divided by cracks that cross them, and distanced from me by a "ritual" process. These are irregular, jagged shapes that possess the essence of what (and who) generated them.

AM: When did you start working with photography? I'd like to talk about this as it was a seminal moment in your life, fruitful for later developments. But also, in my opinion, a time of high aesthetic quality.

AZ: When I was working on Frammenti (at the end of the 90s) I started, at the same time, to use photography. I copied my signs onto the metal plates of Vetronite and then photographed them.

AM: One moment, what is Vetronite? I don't think I've ever heard of it before...

AZ: In fact, it is a little known material: made up of two thin copper plates joined by a compact layer of glass powder. I didn't know about it either. I found it in a shop selling materials for modelling and was immediately struck by its luminosity. I traced my signs for Segnotraccia on the Vetronite, furrowing the copper plate down to the tiny prisms of glass. Then I photographed them. The light penetrated them and thanks to the reflections and refractions, generated shapes and colours that were invisible to the eyes, but which were picked up by the sensitivity of the photographic film. It was an unexpected and revelatory discovery: the light gave life to pure and spontaneous forms that animated the colours and exalted the curvature, which in fact, is the most widespread shape in nature, and I favour them for this. At the beginning however I knew nothing of this, I adopted this material solely because I love experimenting and I don't want to follow paths that others have trod. I remember that even at the Academy the others used clay or plaster. It bored me. I wanted to use something that was mine: I've always looked for my language, because I wanted to represent the uniqueness that is with each of us. The work of art, after all, is the artist.

Getting back to photography, if I initially entrusted myself to the film speed, I soon started testing outcomes at different times of the day, with different lighting conditions and incidences, in such a way to "control" and determine the outcome.

AM: How did the conversion to copper wires and sculpture come about, that you baptized Armonici and that is now a large part of your work? Which year did the change take place?

AZ: It was in 2004. Again, everything happened very naturally, consequentially: the transition to the third dimension in fact happened through photography. The sign engraved, gouged, scratched on the copper surface of the Vetronite, which when photographed "gave off" light, became a material, three dimensional sign translating into the copper wire. We can say that these signs and shapes were materialized in space, that "took shape" thanks to the copper wire. The Armonici are the three dimensional heirs of photography. The photographic Segnotraccia became real in the bright wire, and settling created dynamic curved structures. Shapes that, with sunlight became strips of light and turn into reverberating amber bodies, in colours that rhythmically punctuate time and into bodies of energy enlivened by light.

AM: Copper again: apart from its luminosity, (and light has always been essential to your work), is there any other reason that pushed you towards this material?

AZ: Copper has become my main means of expression because it is the earthly symbol of heat and light. It is a pure element, an excellent energy conductor, that absorbs and reflects the light in such a way to trigger the tonal vibrations that bring the Armonici "to life".

AM: Sure, the Armonici. These works of yours, made up of dozens and dozens of "steps" of copper wire stretched on frames then "stitched", involve a very slow laborious process. Does such painstaking work also have a "conceptual" meaning for you?

AZ: Yes, of course: all my career (and most of all sculpture, of course) moves with natural rhythms. Everything comes together and "matures" at the right time. It is a dynamic that is in step with human rhythms tied to the rhythms of nature; a slow and thoughtful process that allows for a sedimentary construction. My sculpture contains my space/time: my totality. It contains the months I've spent at its side. The actual movement of "passing the thread" translates my presence into a physical body. Nothing mechanic. And in each of them is the extent of my time, my body, my person.

AM: The time aspect, however, does not affect just the time of the design and the creation of the work but also the moment of its "use": for example, varying the lighting conditions during the day modifies the brightness of the copper material.

AZ: Yes, every job becomes a sort of time machine, which absorbs, assimilates, transforms; It can change at any time, from morning to night, constantly transforming itself in relation to the light's intensity. Time is a crucial component of the work, in all its stages, so that even at the design stage I try to take it into account. Only with the final step that I perform on the sculpture do I determine the optimum orientation of the light. And when I sell a sculpture, I suggest the way in which it should be installed, so that the light can best shape its surface. Because it is light that makes my works "take flight". It is thanks to the different nuances of the copper wire I use, and thanks to their tones, more or less similar to each other, that the luminous vibrations change; a bit like in Divisionism. Yes, we are talking about sculpture but here we move into a more pictorial dimension. At the same time, however, I am referring to Medardo Rosso, who photographed his sculptures and identified the ideal lighting for each one. For me, for example, the work should almost never be viewed from the front, except for some works, but from the side: each should be discovered from the ideal visual angle that I imagined and according to which I designed it. In my opinion this is a very important, but often overlooked, point: every sculpture becomes known starting from the angle that I conceived, to respect their dynamics. Only then you can move around them.

AM: In a previous interview with Federico Sardella, you said: «I calculate everything. At the beginning there is randomness, then I want to have full awareness of what I do...». But I struggle to find this randomness in your work.

AZ: Randomness is only related to photography; or rather, to the beginning of my work with photography. As I said, the discovery of certain forms and certain colours was completely random. Only later did I also experiment with photography, and I learned to govern these phenomena. Already at this stage of my photographic work, but mostly in the rest of my work, there is a very strong control. And particularly in sculpture.

AM: I would like to explore the theme of the relationship between the work and the space that welcomes it.

AZ: Space is where the idea of sculpture germinates. When I go into a place, I see the birth of the work, I see it take shape according to harmonic principles that are established between me and the surrounding space. But space also exerts an influence on the shape of the installation itself. The sculptures are transformed according to the principles of equilibrium, that from time to time are found in relation to the place. Only rarely is the work just the result of a project. Because, as I said, what matters most to me is the balance between my work and the place that welcomes it. It is a kind of instinctive perception. I'll often go into a park, see a tree and think immediately of my work for that tree. Not for a nearby one. But the same perception can also occur in contact with architecture, or with a wall, on which I can see the shape that will inhabit it. I cannot, for example, think of a show based on a model. For me it is essential to stay in the place and perceive it, through getting in touch with the physical space.

AM: In addition to Armonica and Naturalia, we have some Carte/ Scultura in the exhibition. Let's talk about them.

AZ: For me they represent a moment of reflection on the "superficial" part, the pictorial aspect, as it were, of the sculpture. The Carte/Scultura contain horizontality and verticality, they have a large texture that shows the direction of signalling and pictorial strips. They are "three dimensional drawings" which are completed by the shadow cast on the wall. I distance them from the wall depending on the type of shadow that I want to obtain, that I calibrate in relation to the lighting. So the shadow becomes an integral part of the work itself. These textures, which already have "multiple" signs by their nature, are enriched with further signs that, as shadows are, so to speak, virtual, but which are nevertheless part of the sculpture. In fact, the Carte/Scultura are designs that become sculpture thanks to its three-dimensionality, but also by virtue of the "added" three-dimensionality generated from the shadow.

AM: When did you start these works?

AZ: Towards 2008-2009. The idea was already there, but I had to experiment for a long time to create them. They arise out of my drawings, which I draw constantly, leaving the gesture free. The control over the initial design is less rigid. Then on the Carte/Scultura planning takes over from spacing or the rhythm of signs.

AM: You often speak of energies. With copper, light becomes matter-energy. And already the Academy, working on the human body, you were looking for the "vibrations". I feel a close relationship with the principles of Futurism, with the lines of strength; in a word, with the will of its exponents, to translate the image into energy.

AZ: When we worked from life at the Academy with the model, our teacher suggested us not to portray the body, but to realise the feeling that that body suggested to us. I was well aware that for me the dominant feeling was that of movement, dynamism, energy emanating from the body. So, I reproduced the body gestures: moving lines, around which revolved the movement of light and shade, the chiaroscuro. And it's true, the Futurists were models for me, the beloved masters.

AM: Let's talk then of the other ideal masters. Which are the most important to you?

AZ: Surely Caravaggio, from the start, I was trying to reproduce light and shade with chiaroscuro. Even today, come to think of it, the rigorous black and white of my Carte/Scultura refers to the chiaroscuro of the drawing, which for me remains linked to Caravaggio. And, similarly, in the Madri-Matrici the colours were white and black, with the brown of my land. The only vivid colours that appear in my work are those produced randomly by the prismatic effects of light generated by the sun's rays falling on the tiny glass prisms in the copper plates of the Vetronite. And in any case the modules were either white or black; and so were the fragments. Moreover, even in copper sculptures there are vortexes of shadow and peaks of light: the positive and the negative, as in the drawing. It's something I have inside, which is part of me. Then, came the Divisionists, surely: especially Previati and Segantini, and of course Balla. And then Dorazio, who felt like Balla's heir, but unfortunately never knew him personally, though he lived in Todi like me and I worked in the "Extra Moenia" gallery, owned by his wife, Giuliana Soprani. But I always saw his work, and also my real teacher, after the Academy, was the painter Mauro Salvi, who was his engraver and knew his work like few others. But for me Giacometti was also very important, especially Giacometti as drawer who I was able to study in the collection of a couple of Umbrian collectors, before approaching him in the museums. My drawings owe him a lot. And, for the period of photography, I cannot forget Hartung: for the sign/scratch and the colours. But often I only later found an affinity with certain artists and then I got to know them in detail.

AM: Did you call your sculptures Armonici because they have some relationship with music (like, for example, for Kandinsky, with his improvisations and compositions) or to allude to your constant search for a harmonious relationship with everything?

AZ: These works are the result of research on the "harmony of being" that I underwent myself: I went in search of what I call the "harmonious man", that is, a being who is distanced from false values, in contact with nature and in equilibrium with the earth. A being who found himself in the natural rhythms. The Armonici come from a close relationship between Man and Nature. There is therefore no direct relationship with music. However, in everything I do, there are references to music: the structure on which I create my copper wire work is like a harp and at certain stages of processing my sculptures can "play". The taut vibrating wires emanate sound. And some cards appear to be musical scores. It's no coincidence that the Philharmonic Academy of Rome wanted pictures of my works in their program. So, although I do not consciously think about it, you can say that, yes, music enters into my work.

AM: Now a curiosity: when did you decide to become an artist?

AZ: It was a thought that I expressed at the very moment I started talking. To those who asked me "what do you want to be when you grow up?", I answered "a painter". After middle school, my family forced me to attend the Scientific High School. I was upset because I wanted to attend an Art Institute, but actually I was really helped by following these type of studies: studying philosophy has allowed me to explore and to think more clearly about my work. Then the Academy and the association with the artists who gravitated around the "Extra Moenia", the gallery where I worked, did the rest.