

Armoniche tensioni. A conversation with Antonella Zazzera

by Federico Sardella, 2008

Federico Sardella: Your art has developed through various groups of works. Intuition takes on a form but is still not complete: it sparks off a complex itinerary where experiences accumulate and experimentation concerns the natural evolution of an initial hypothesis. From the *Madri Matrici* to the *Frammenti*, from the photographic works to the paintings and drawings, your work seems to be characterised by continual variations imposed by the change and development of a mark, a mark you have called a *Segnotraccia*. Other more recent works of yours, the *Armonici*, which began life in about 2004, are closely linked to the *Segnotraccia* that characterised your earlier output. In what way did you start off this series of sculptures and what was the reason you chose the title which, flanked by a progressive Roman numeral, distinguishes them?

Antonella Zazzera: The idea of the *Armonici* evolved with my need to bring Being back to its original dimension, to that of Nature. In nature, humankind rediscovers itself, rediscovers its own rhythms, and identifies itself through curves: these are an expression of the totality of Being and a concretization of its cyclic and harmonic structure. This way of thinking led to a pure, spontaneous, and instinctive mark: the *Segnotraccia*. This represents the close fusion between the Self and the material of art which is the real engine of uniqueness, a visual and sensitive archetype that becomes completely identified with the development of being. In this specific case, the idea of the *Armonici* derived from the need to confer three-dimensions, and therefore a body, on the photographic *Segnotraccia*. Experimenting with new materials has led me to make use of *Vetronite*; this consists of two thin sheets of copper united by a compact layer of fibreglass, the surface of which I have scratched and furrowed. Light penetrates it and, through reflections and refractions, generates pure and spontaneous forms, as well as colours imperceptible to the naked eye and that I managed to capture only through the sensitivity of photographic film. Afterwards, those marks and forms of light materialized externally and took shape. The *Armonici* are a kind of materialization of the marks present in my photographs; the photographic *Segnotraccia* are concretized in the slender luminous threads and, as they deposit, create dynamic structural curves.

FS: When looking at your sculptures I often have the impression of not dealing with a work of art in the strictest sense but, rather, with a work/event or with genuine installations. What relationship exists between the *Armonici* and the space in which they are shown? What are the main problems that you have to deal with while you plan and complete a work to be placed in an interior rather than outside?

AZ: What is fundamental for me is the relationship between sculpture and space. I create the *Armonici* in close contact with the place which is to display them; I do so through a study of the relationships of balance and harmony. It is space that impels me to continue and which dictates the progression and transformation, both inside and out. I prefer to make sculptures for the outside, in a garden or a park; once installed, in those areas where the copper threads are thinner and blades of grass superimpose themselves on them, each mixes with or influences the progression of the other. In internal spaces I feel myself more limited; the conditions are different but, all the same, I am interested in confronting and relating myself to the architecture and structures created by others.

FS: Do the limitations you feel when you are working in a closed environment also depend on the fact that the works will be illuminated by artificial sources, differently from what happens outside where the surfaces of the *Armonici* are inebriated by light, to the point where they seem to be on fire?

AZ: My forms were generated by light. Having been born from light it is right that they return to the light and, thanks to this, they live. Sunlight materializes the *Armonici*, moulds their surfaces, makes them light and vibrant, exalts their purity and colour. Light insinuates itself between the copper and the rest, makes my forms become non-forms; it

defines them, determines them and, at the same time, makes them vague. In the summer, as a child, I would often play with a bowl full of water. I moved the water and the light drew new forms. The more I agitated the water the more the forms changed, and were transformed in continuation. At times I think that the Armonici have the form of light's caress...

FS: The first one of the Armonici series is very small, a kind of nest, a space gathered together and delimited by the threads of copper, while the one you made shortly after consists of three elements, two of which are over three metres long, almost as though you had immediately sensed the need to deal with large dimensions.

AZ: Each time I begin a new series of works, the first one is usually small, though not a sketch for some future sculpture. However, I immediately feel the need to relate myself to larger sizes. This is what happened in the case of the Armonici, but even the Madri Matrici evolved in the same way.

FS: What links, and what divides, the first of the Armonici to these ones I see under construction in your studio?

AZ: They differ above all in the depositing of the texture. In the first it was almost transparent and gave the impression of being the immediate consequence of drawing or of a simple gesture, perhaps a lightly defined one; now it is far more constructed and complex. And then, over time the thickness of the works has notably increased and so, as a result, has their sculptural body. In the most recent works there is also a knowing study of colour. If at first I used copper thread with a single tonality, now I have a real colour range. My bobbins are the colours that I use and mix.

FS: From what you say, it seems that the moment you began to see the Armonici move - as a result of their characteristics, size and presence - towards sculpture, you also inquired into the possibilities that they had to relate to colour and a certain kind of painting...

AZ: When I am working I do not pose myself questions about what I am doing - whether it is painting, sculpture or whatever. I work and that's all: alone and in relation to the history of art. What I do grows from within and develops over time. Painting was the first tool to allow me to make art, and the final phase of working on one of the Armonici has a lot to do with painting: I use copper threads of different tonalities and I combine them so as to create reflections and vibrations... the Armonici tend towards monochrome, but combining threads of various hues and thicknesses generates a kind of movement over their surface. When I work I have in mind Divisionism - the large canvases by Segantini and Previati - Futurist painting - Balla's studies of light - and Dorazio's deposits of mark/colour. In fact I think about painting while I am making sculpture.

FS: The way in which the Armonici take their place on the floor or on the wall, the forms they design and the space they create, lead me to think of Robert Morris's felt pieces and of their being sculpture and painting at one and the same time, even though the Armonici do not have the same listlessness. They also remind me of Pino Pascali's silkworms and their existence as magical and poetic creatures. I could also find other assonances with other sculptors and their forms and styles but - perhaps due to their highly personal technique of creation, or perhaps to the way your works take their place only with difficulty in the fashionable contemporary panorama - I can see no direct link, no obvious blood-line.

AZ: Robert Morris is one of the artists it seems correct to refer to, even if I only came to know his work after having begun the Armonici. I have not particularly studied him or any other sculptors. With some there might be formal affinities, but nothing else. I have looked at the beliefs and not the result of many artists. Without any direct confrontation with anything contemporary, I construct with my material and confer a form on it. I start with a copper thread which is never plaited but is either superimposed or is deposited. The space below the surface determines the movement and vibrations of the upper part. Once the work is finished, the thread/mark takes its place, find the right accommodation and, inside, moments of tension and of calm are balanced.

FS: Your references to the calm and tensions that are balanced in the Armonici lead me to think of their slow and demanding construction which is marked by different phases, the last of which is when the work is freed from the canvas and takes on its final form. The tension is lessened... but this continues to characterise the work, to make it live: it is tense in itself and tense towards the viewer.

AZ: The tension you are aware of is extremely important to me. When I make a work it is full of tensions, and not only structural ones. The state of calmness, of harmony and easing, arrives later on. What's more, the state of tension corresponds to the moment of creation. I am also physically involved in the construction of the Armonici, and only at the moment when I detach the work from the stretcher is the tension annulled. Everything relaxes and distends, at least in part.

FS: How much of your experience, daily life, meetings, or what you read enter into the Armonici? What does the copper absorb from you and jealously keep within it?

AZ: My work and me are a single thing. The work of art is the artist, and this creates a union with the material that is so strong that it moulds and unites with it through the Segnotraccia. What I feel, who I am, and what happens to me every day is wholly reflected in my works, on their surfaces and depths, in their totality.

FS: When did you realize what you would do? Was there a particular moment in which you decided to be, or understood that you were, an artist?

AZ: When I was tiny I used to manipulate everything: clay, sand, earth, wood... I drew a lot and if they asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up I would answer that I wanted to be a painter. There was no precise moment in which I became aware of what I was doing or wanted to do: it came about gradually. After high school, going to art college led me to concretize various ideas and to deal with techniques and materials and, most fundamental of all, with art history and drawing. Chiaroscuro enthused me with its possibility of moulding forms with light. I copied Caravaggio's paintings in pencil. I have always been fascinated by the contrast between the darkness and light in his canvases, his capacity to exploit light and to use it to determine the basic event within the work.

FS: What is the fundamental event that comes about in your works?

AZ: The fundamental event is determined by the vibrations generated by the light and it is linked to the consequent transformations which involve and stimulate the surface. Depositing, which is the process through which the Armonici are formed, is for me a measure of time; it is distinctive of my work and marks the space-time of the artist and my actions. I think of my works as a time machine. They are modified with the passing of the hours of the day: clear tones in the morning light; bright, almost dazzling, at midday; and slowly dulling in the evening - naturally, inevitably. The Armonici are creatures that live alone in the light. They are forms that I can compare to nothing that is known. They experience independently their condition as unique, lyrical, and unrepeatable bodies.