

Sculpture's possible nomadism

by Marco Meneguzzo, 2015

In about February some years ago, in Saint Petersburg on the Baltic Sea, I happened to see those wavelets that ought to have "died" on the beach but, instead, were perfectly still a short distance away from dry land, crystallised in their literal "waving": they had been frozen by the cold. Thinking now about the work by Antonella Zazzera, that episode comes to mind as an analogy for the inherent nature of her works, for her mental process, and for the effect that these always cause in the mind of the viewer. In fact, before anything else, our wonder is renewed by something that seems to be fluid rather than solid: her sculptures, the high-reliefs in copper thread or other materials, are interwoven in such a way as to suggest a momentary crease, the flow of a wave, a puff of wind, while in fact they are there, solid and immobile for a length of time that seems eternal if we think of the robustness and long-lasting qualities of the materials they are made from. So is it a simple question of perception, a visual trick that is immediately revealed and, therefore, inefficient?

Not exactly. For instance, such simple perceptive phenomena as these are always repeated, even if we know about them already. In other words, if we know the work by Antonella Zazzera and we expect to see one soon, despite this foreknowledge, the sense of amazement will be renewed yet again and will only partly be lessened by our expectations and awareness because our physiological response is in any case more intense and deeper than our knowledge - which in this case tells us that copper is solid and that we are dealing with a perceptive deception - and above all, it is quicker. And so this impact does not disappear after a first observation but is repeated each time before the mechanism of cognition or, rather, of re-cognition can be sparked off: the memory of the work by Zazzera and its constituent elements, in other words. In this her work touches a deep level of perception that has nothing to do - so far - with the mimetic aspects of art. We do not, that is, have the same attitude as the one we have in front of a well-painted "seascape" (to go back to the initial anecdote...) because the moment we look at one of those, we know we are dealing with a fiction - we see the surface, the paint, the frame, and we know we are in a room and not at the seaside - and our mind activates other interpretative levels. In the case of a work by Zazzera we simply see a form and a material that do not coincide, with a tiny distance between the perception of the one and the other that establishes a perceptive short-circuit. We might well say this is one of the peculiarities of sculpture, and in fact Zazzera is a sculptor, also and above all in her wall-reliefs (just as Castellani is, instead, a painter even while using three-dimensionality...), because when it comes down to it we are dealing with form and material, with the adherence to reality that is greater than that of painting, if for no other reason than its being in a real space and not in the "protected" space of a canvas and its boundaries, perhaps further separate from the world by a stretcher and frame.

But Zazzera's work is not all about perceptive artifice, however knowingly employed. Once that inevitable moment of amazement has passed, there begins the advance of culture, of what we know and of what we add as a result of that work; and at once we find ourselves in front of a second ideal short-circuit, that of "woven sculpture". It is inevitable that we call gender into play, in this case, and that sense of tranquil patience so well symbolised by the classical figure of Penelope: this is also to be found in Zazzera, just as it is to be found and was found in the case of many female artists who have made thread - here it is copper or aluminium, but this (almost) doesn't matter - their favourite tool, from Maria Lai to Ghada Amer, but it might be useful to indicate other applications closer to mental weaving than to the proverbial female patience (and resignation, and Intimism...): medieval iron chainmail was made by smiths and is overtly masculine, even aggressive and combative; instead, the metal plaques on clothes by Courrèges were forerunners of the metal knitwear by Armani and hint at a Barbarella - like future with a sinuous, dangerous, and cold serpent - like skin to cover the female body. So the question becomes complicated, and this work by Zazzera avoids rigid and explicit categorization and is subject to purely formal considerations which in this case - and more generally when speaking about art - mean anything but "unsubstantial", as is unusual in everyday speech.

I have already spoken about the perceptive paradox of a soft and apparently momentary form crystallised in the solidity of metal; now, though, it is time to speak about it at a level of consciousness and awareness, at the level of knowledge and appearance. Appearance because, for example, in the case of many works by Zazzera - for instance the huge Armonici series - the sculptural category they belong to can slightly shift from the traditional ones we are used to. In an analysis of her work, the idea of "closed form" or "open form" becomes one of "rolled-up form" and "extended-form", as though from one moment to the next the meaning of the works could change and they could be transformed into their opposite: in fact, in her case it is completely unthinkable that the works could not be manipulated and changed, even though this might never happen. In other words, her works suggest the possibility of a change of form, that was closed might be unrolled, that is become "open", and the form might change with a mobility unthinkable for sculpture; nor is it of much importance if some eventual lucky owner hangs the work permanently on the wall, as can happen with someone with a fine carpet who is not a nomad and so is not habituated to rolling it up and moving it some miles further on. But there remains the possibility that could indeed happen, and that is enough for art or for the revelation of mental processes, or for intuitions or the impulse that lies behind them, and now, thanks to that form combined with that material - deep down, this is always what sculpture deals with... - this is what we see in front of us. A kind of possible nomadism, yearned for with a touch of nostalgia that comes from who knows where, but one that is made solid and certain by its (for us) inevitable and irrevocable identification with the Western art tradition.