

## **Antonella Zazzera. A Divisionist sculptor**

*by Ada Masoero, 2016*

Antonella Zazzera is an artist who is liked by artists. A not insignificant fact. In fact, it is well known that it is often the artists – well before and more sharply than the critics – who recognise the value of their fellows' work: it happened with Cézanne and van Gogh, who were ignored by the critics and the market but known as masters by successive generations, and it has also happened with their artist contemporaries, some of whom loved to report their merited colleagues to the gallery owners, even at the risk of allowing possible rivals into the same "team".

Well then, having paid my debts and duties I will point out (Antonella Zazzera has still much life and work ahead of her and it would be quite inappropriate to compare her to those "monuments") the texts that other artists, from Enrico Castellani and Nicola Carrino, to Carmengloria Morales, have written about her. Not least important was the invitation by Arnaldo Pomodoro to exhibit a work in the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, in Grand Rapids, Michigan (where young artists can enter only if they have been proposed by the great artists already present) or the poems that Antonia Mulas dedicated to her. These are further confirmations of the quality and solidity of her research. Hers is a research quality manifested in her perfectly finished works, that demonstrates itself with a calm and certain assertiveness, without any emphasis.

Nothing is further from emphasis in Antonella Zazzera's nature, who, not by chance, has chosen to continue living in the countryside, in the spacious family house standing in the fields on the hills facing Todi. And who has set up her artist's studio not, as is common in the city – in a loft or a piece of abandoned industrial architecture, but under the big tree in the courtyard in the summer, and in winter in the largest rooms of the farmhouse, whilst the old hay barns play the natural host to her sculptures, which, just like hay itself seem to be generated by the earth of the surrounding fields.

It is useless to search for old artefacts or other objects of affection in her studio, figurines<sup>1</sup>, old worm-eaten pictures, mannequins, architectural models; those artefacts, so often found, even today, in the studios of many artists, are not here. Instead there are twisted branches enveloped by dry vine stems, small wrinkled stumps, twisted roots. And nests, in some of which, among the stems and twigs, shine her copper wires. They are the remains of her work, that lie in the grass, in the farmyard, and that the blackbirds and other birds instinctively recognise as excellent "building materials", no different from those found in nature. It is difficult to imagine a more persuasive confirmation of the close bond – "of blood" we could say – that binds Antonella Zazzera's work to nature.

Born and raised in some of the most beautiful and untouched countryside in Italy, where man's mark is harmoniously and respectfully balanced, Zazzera is deeply attached to the agricultural tradition of her family. Her life, therefore, is authentically shared with nature, that seems to repay her when, for example, it "colonizes" her sculptures left on the lawn, forcing grass through the narrow gaps in the copper wires ("the first time this happened was an unforgettable experience", she remembers) or when it "includes" some of her work that she conceived to be "worn" like cloaks for trees, as if it were their extensions.

Nature, her first teacher, at the same time source and "accomplice" of her expressive vocabulary, which, not coincidentally, is based on the curved line (because «the curve is the greatest expression of cosmic harmony», she explains), also dictates the time and rhythms of her work.

In fact, the large Armonici can only be created in summer, when she works outdoors, the same also happens with the velvety Carte/Scultura, made of metal wires dipped in cellulose pulp and then left to dry in the breeze and warmth of the sun. Whilst the smaller Armonici, the Ri-Trattiche and the Naturalia shaped like nests inhabit the coldest months of the year. There are also the times when she has the leisure to trace, in countless notebooks and notepads, her fluid drawings, to which she applies herself daily: «I consider drawing a "primary instinctive discipline". Drawing is at the heart of art. It is the building block of the artist's expressive identity, who later expresses herself through instruments that she has more affinity with»<sup>2</sup>. The same notebooks repeat the meticulous, laborious projects of her work, always

accompanied by measurements and records, with notes on the angles of the curves and vectors. And between these pages the theoretical reflections («there is a time for words and time for work», she justifies) the clippings, photographs, combination of images, that now become the comment on her artistic work and now the explanation of the creative process that generated it.

Hers is a slow time, «or rather, it's natural time» she clarifies, punctilious. If she refuses to hurry it's because this condition is part of a reality – the modern one, urban and hyper-connected – that she does not love and shuns, but also because it is important for her to exercise constant control over her work, leaving nothing to chance; which implies a willingness to accommodate the time necessary to “mature” ideas and then the slow, patient composition of the body of the work: «physicality is the way to materialize ideas, the way which the Space/Time of the artist becomes the Space/Time of the work»<sup>3</sup>. Because as I always say, «I identify the work of art with the artist».

At this point it is clear that behind her work there is a thought process, a reflection, a lengthy and continuous conceptual elaboration. Zazzara's deep bond with nature is anything but a sign of an instinctive or naively spontaneous work, nor a lack of culture. Everything, indeed, in her work is calibrated, thought out, studied, meticulously planned.

«I calculate everything», she says. For each work she designs the project, accompanying it with measurements and notes; she plans the curvature, the bends in different variations, and pins the samples of chosen materials onto paper (it's easy to say “copper wires”: wires can have different textures, flexibilities, calibre and even different colours, from pink to brown). She then creates a scale maquette in cardboard and with it stubbornly experiments the layout and twists that she aims to achieve.

It's also necessary to create the frame and the size of the finished work, and drive the nails into the perimeter that will anchor the copper wires in their busy workings. It's only at this point that she can start to lay out those wires, crossing them, layer after layer but never weaving them, however: «we are not dealing with warp and weft; it's not a fabric because the copper threads do not intersect; rather we are dealing with a sedimentation, a stratification, that step by step, gives “body” to the work», she explains.

This is the craft phase of her work, where hand dominates matter: a fundamental step for Antonella Zazzara, who cultivates dexterity and technical capacity with the same passion with which she reflects on the conceptual principles. «For me a good technique is the basis of doing art. In fact, it is thanks to the thoroughness of the technique – of a real technique united and merged with the idea – that the idea, the concept, flows spontaneously».

But why copper? Antonella Zazzera admits: that she has always been seduced by the natural element of light; ever since she was tiny when she played with a bowl of water, enchanted to follow the reflections of the sun on the surface rippled by the movements she imposed. Thus after High School when she started the Fine Arts Academy in Perugia (convinced, however, to become a painter and not the sculptor she would become) she chose as her ideal masters those artists who created their works with light. First of all Caravaggio, whose secret of light and shade she wanted to fathom: «I reproduced Caravaggio's paintings with a pencil, in black and white. I drew them constantly and studied their chiaroscuro».

Later she would turn to the paintings of who, as the Divisionists had between the 19th and 20th centuries, worked around the luminous vibration, relying on a technique that at that time was innovative and dictated by science. Which was based on the juxtaposition of pure colours placed on the canvas in tiny touches and not previously mixed on the palette, as had always been done.

Arranged in thin lines, those “complementary” colours – as the scholars of optics and perception had recently discovered – reinforced each other with an intense and powerful luminosity, producing a sort of “inner glow”.

Segantini, Previati, Pellizza da Volpedo and their companions were anything but the typical 19<sup>th</sup> century masters, at least in the negative understanding that the word has acquired over time, but rather they were radically innovative<sup>4</sup>, so much so that they became the recognised masters of such a rebellious band as the Futurists.

For the Futurists too, light, understood as vibrations and energy, took on a central role, as part of that vital «universal vibration»<sup>5</sup> to which they, with their art, proposed to reconnect. And if Boccioni proclaimed them in his manifestos and

placed them as part of sculptural and pictorial practice, the bodies penetrating the surrounding atmosphere through the «lines of strength» emanating from the bodies, Balla was more seduced than him, by the luminous vibrations, that he masterfully translated in the paintings and pastels of the Divisionist season<sup>6</sup> and then in Futuristic works such as *Lampada ad arco* or on the paper of the *Compenetrazioni iridescenti* where light was the absolute protagonist. And all of them, at least in the early years of the avant-garde adventure, would look to Divisionism as the principal route to translate those universal energies into images<sup>7</sup>. The same energies that guide the work of Zazzara, who often refers in her writings, notes and discussions to the «energy exchanges», to vibrations, to the continuum of energies in which we are all immersed (but only a few are able to perceive and capture, we might add).

Those masters to whom the young Antonella, still a student, dedicated all her attention, established their lesson in her, guiding her first to photographic research<sup>8</sup> and then informing her current artistic language in a deep and lasting way. Because her copper sculptures are literally made of “threads of light” densely juxtaposed, and in a range of different colours, albeit not complementary, but only because there is no need here: the intrinsic nature of the material in which they are made is in fact the bearer of light which the paint pigments must in fact acquire through the laws of optics.

Later came Piero Dorazio’s lesson, Todi’s real *Genius loci*, having lived and worked there for many years, and whose paintings Antonella Zazzara got to know at first hand, having worked as a student in the “*Extra Moenia*” gallery, run by his wife, Giuliana Soprani Dorazio. His engraver, the painter Mauro Salvi soon became one of her masters after she paid repeated visits to his studio. And in turn Dorazio had no hesitation in declaring his devotion to Giacomo Balla, whom he had met as a boy, at his house/atelier (a real and colourful “magician’s workshop”) in via Oslavia and from whom he adopted his passion, all futuristic, for light and motion<sup>9</sup>.

Alberto Giacometti’s teachings soon arrived: especially those of Giacometti the prodigious painter and illustrator whom she approached and studied through the collection of a pair of Swiss collectors who stayed in Todi during the summer. To him can be added Enrico Castellani, for the dynamics of light and shade, Carmengloria Morales, for the sedimentation and stratification of the layers, and Nicola Carrino, for the relationship between space and sculpture.

All these artists<sup>10</sup> are united by the use of a “bundle” of signs rather than a “plaiting”, as the lines in their work appear juxtaposed, overlapping or even coiled – “bundled” in fact – and not woven together like the warp and weft of a fabric<sup>11</sup>. The same thing happens in Antonella Zazzara’s work, which are certainly luminous “bodies”, but, at the same time, sedimentations of time and memory, layers and layers of “lived” moments, accumulated in her own time and in that of the generations which came before: they are the translation in body and image of her Space/Time of person and artist.

The Arnaldo Pomodoro prize was set up by the great sculptor to confirm the validity of a young artist’s research, someone who has already overcome the first trials of an artistic career. The exhibition we present now, in occasion of the awarding of this prize, doesn’t mean to be a mid-career retrospective of her work to date but rather presents the current production – now almost a decade – of her work, concentrating on the copper wire sculptures (the *Armonici*) and the *Carte/Scultura*, which are a sort of free offspring.

We need to take a step back to talk about her “mature” work, to the phase between 1998-2003 when she worked with photography: here, *Segnotraccia*, the archetypal form of Antonella Zazzara’s work, first makes an appearance.

The transition from painting to sculpture comes from photography and the *Segnotraccia* (which is how she defines the spontaneous and “very personal” sign «that represents the close fusion of the I with artistic material» and with which, she often repeats, she expresses her own “individual uniqueness”), because the copper of the sculpture, is nothing if not the «materialisation of the forms generated in the photograph by light».

Very personal, the result of her need to follow unbeaten paths and use “heterodox” material to explore her expressive potentiality, the big photographs of that time are anything but naturalistic or mimetic images: they are shots that Zazzara performed on her work created with *vetronite*, an industrial material made of two thin sheets of copper welded to a layer of compressed glass powder (even then, light +light, in hindsight).

She would etch her signs, her scratches, her “primary” tracks on those copper sheets – the *Segnotraccia* – down to the glassy material within them, and then she photographed them. And with amazement, once the photos were developed

she found unexpected colours and shapes, generated by the light that, striking the small glass prisms, refracted and reverberated according to their laws, giving life to visual "events" not perceptible to the human eye but clearly recorded by the photographic film.

«The light – she says – created pure, spontaneous shapes, it animated the colours, emphasising the curves. Later those signs and shapes were materialized outside, they took shape, thus giving birth to the Armonici sculptures: structures created with the same generating material, copper. The photographic Segnotraccia is materialized in the luminous thread, and layering them, she started to put together dynamic curved structures<sup>12</sup>.

The Armonici, are therefore at the heart of this exhibition, together with a rhythmic sequence of black Carte/Sculture. But to welcome the visitors are two Ri-Trattiche, the oval shapes of woven copper wires, inaugurated in 2008, that the artist wanted to place at the entrance, almost as if they were the figures of the Lares and Penati placed to protect the inhabitants of the houses in ancient Rome.

The setting up of the exhibition was the result of a visit, a real "site survey" that Zazzara made along with myself, to the exhibition site, the managers of the Foundation and Arnaldo Pomodoro himself.

It was immediately clear that once she had "taken possession" of the area and her spatial relationships, she was going to decide how to display the works, most of which would be created as site-specific works for this place. In fact one of her "necessities" was to form and transform her sculptures based on where they would be hosted, «so that the space becomes a maternal womb for them».

So the Ri-Trattiche were chosen by the artist to be positioned at the start of the route, almost like beneficial talismans. Because, in her experience, those ovals evoke the old portraits of 19<sup>th</sup> century ancestors: those sepia and slightly hazy faces always placed in pairs – the husband and wife, the "founders" – who, until a few decades ago, dominated the farm houses, a daily reminder for the inhabitants of the roots from which they sprang. And although, being aniconic, they are devoid of any relationship with reality, for their dim light, for their "primary" oval shape, made even more "maternal" and embracing by the slight indentation that the artist has impressed on their surface, these works nevertheless bring with them the tremendously warm and nurturing value of the "family".

Then the Naturalia are on display, primary shapes too, because they are inspired by nests («nests and maternal womb», she says) but not an end in themselves like the Ri-Trattiche ovals, but related to the surrounding space through filaments left free that, like the Futurists' lines of strength (but also as happens in nature, with the outermost twigs that make up the nest), they branch out from the nucleus with a centrifugal motion.

Whilst also being generated by the weaving wires, as in Armonici and the Ri-Trattiche, these works, started in 2011, have a separate life from them. Or, rather, they have a much closer relationship with nature than the others do and, at the same time, appear much "freer": «the Naturalia are less calm – the author reflects – more mysterious and disordered, more dramatic... They represent a development of the "bird's nests" analysed in some previous sculptures, and are dynamic forms that extend through space through the shadow, which is the extension of the sign and is part of the work itself».

Shadows are also part of the work in Carte/Scultura, where Zazzera explores the dynamics of the sign referring back to the practice – continuous and constant for her – of the design, but forcing the line again, pushing it from two dimensionality to three dimensionality.

As always with this artist, the technique that she has invented to realise her idea is singular. And, as always with this artist, the material with which she covers the copper wire is natural. She uses cellulose, now white, now black (almost as if she wants to highlight the close relationship between this work and a pencil drawing on paper), to cover her structures, made, in this case, with a large mesh, traversed by air, and armed with a lively motion. She structures them with copper wire and then plunges them in large tanks full of cellulose pulp. And it is this thick paste that, once the works are extracted and left to dry in the sun, will cover the surfaces of the metal wires, dimming most of their luminosity (only a small number of wires remain uncovered, in their natural state) but at the same time covering them

with a new "skin", mellow and velvety, which places them in "another", albeit contiguous, territory, to where her other works live.

She explains herself: «the Carte/Scultura are copper lattice structures, where the cellulose pulp sinks in, layering itself. The need to go back to drawing, to the lightness of the sheet of paper, led me to think of cellulose as the base on which to develop and highlight the naturalness of the sign which releases itself through a strong painterly gesture».

Held away from the wall, the Carte/Scultura are completed by the shadows, which differ according to their intensity and the path of the light that they project onto the wall, taking on a further three-dimensionality, stretching out to go beyond that delicate copper wire, to assert itself in space. This exhibition contains Carte/Scultura Nere, placed according to a precise rhythm and created specifically for this place, using a brown hued copper wire, which does not clash with the black of the cellulose. Black, which in its turn merges with the colour of the shadow in a harmonious continuum, the result of a precise planning. In this way, Zazzara clarifies, «the combination of the tones makes the whole work homogenous, which in the third dimension becomes one body».

However, it is the Armonici that dominate the exhibition, in the same way that they are quantitatively dominant in her current artistic production, imposing themselves on all the other works for the planning process and workmanship that they bring with them.

These are large or very large works (one of these, created especially for this space, scrambles up the wall for almost three metres, after being folded on the floor), all laboriously created by "throwing" the copper wire in long dense ranks, from one end to the other of the frame, in countless successive layers, dense with symbolic meaning but capable of generating unimaginable games of colour and light on the dense composite surface of the work.

On closer inspection the Armonici could also be defined, paradoxically, as "three-dimensional paintings": but Divisionist paintings, as mentioned above, built up by combining filaments of light-colour that in their apparent monochrome reveal, at closer examination, countless shades.

It is our retina in fact that, just as in the Divisionist canvases, dissolves the differences of colour in the various filaments into a virtually uniform tone. And it is just these differences that breathe life to the vibrant energy field generated by these works.

To achieve them Antonella Zazzera makes use of several large, industrial reels of copper wire that, treated with different finishings (created, certainly not for aesthetic reasons but for practical needs, connected to the conductivity and other characteristics of the metal), take on different shades, from the pinkish base colour of copper to gold in all its various shades, to a brown that can change into purplish black: «Yes, those reels are my palette», she explains softly. That I then "sew" those bundles of wire with a rhythmic series of points, using a large curved needle once used by mattress makers, during an authentic and exhausting "hand to hand" with the work.

Yet the visual outcome of such hard work (and occasional physical weight: the largest works come close to 200 kg) is extremely light, and the reason is that these massive, dense, compact "bodies", thanks to their material, are dematerialized before our eyes by the light they give off.

Everything starts from a basic geometric shape, an irregular rectangle, slightly arched at the top and slightly hollowed at the bottom, that tapers towards the base. This is the primary form of the Armonici (the "archetype" is on show in the exhibition), whose basal measurements (in some cases) are dictated by the body measurements of the artist. Sometimes this shape is left lying or folded, "draped", in an only apparently casual way, in reality being heavily controlled, the result of a precise plan that dictates the process from the moment the frame is designed and assembled, according to the development of the finished work.

All the "naturalness" the apparent "ease" of Antonella Zazzara's work, on closer inspection is shown to be the result of a close and controlled project. And it is perhaps from this weaving together of Nature and Culture, of seductive, perceptual stimuli (what else, more than light, feeds our life and spirit?) and a rigorous thought process, that her works, so singular, so unique in the panorama of today's art, releases a fascination on the senses and intellect from which it is so hard to escape.

<sup>1</sup> See for this, also: F. Sardella, Antonella Zazzera. *Le origini del fare*, exhibition catalogue, Todi, Palazzo Morelli Fine Art, 6 December 2014 – 31 January 2015. Federico Sardella is the critic who has followed her most carefully and assiduously.

<sup>2</sup> From an interview by A. I. Ingria (University of Perugia, Faculty of Art and Philosophy), recorded in January 2015 and discussed in a dissertation in July 2015.

<sup>3</sup> From an interview by A. L. Esposito (Brera Fine Arts Academy, Milan), recorded in February 2015 and discussed in an exam.

<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, at their first public appearance during the 1st Triennial Exhibition in Brera (Milan, 1891), they suffered violent attacks by critics and the public.

<sup>5</sup> In *La pittura futurista. Manifesto tecnico* (11 April 1910) pamphlet, signed by Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Dalmazzo Carrà, Luigi Russolo and Gino Severini, one reads: «Everything moves, everything runs, everything changes quickly. [...] Because images remain imprinted on the retina, objects in movement multiply, deform, following one another like vibrations that travel through space». And again: «the sixteen people around you in a moving tram are one, ten, four, three: they stand still and they move, they come and go, bouncing on the road, devoured by a sunny area, they come back and sit, persistent symbols of a Universal vibration» (italics by author).

<sup>6</sup> It was Balla, in Rome in the early 20th century, who taught the Divisionist technique to Boccioni, Severini and Sironi, ten years younger than him (see: G. Severini, *La vita di un pittore*, with an essay by M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, Milan, Abscondita, 2008, p. 23).

<sup>7</sup> «There can be no painting without Divisionism», wrote the five signatories of *La pittura futurista. Manifesto tecnico*, cit.

<sup>8</sup> Between 1998 and 2003 Antonella Zazzera practiced photography in a highly original way. See the following pages for her artistic career.

<sup>9</sup> «Light and movement are the essence of reality, everything else is illusion, appearance», wrote Dorazio in 1994 (P. Dorazio, *Quello che ho imparato*, Mantua, Maurizio Corraini Editore, 1994), in an assertion only apparently paradoxical.

<sup>10</sup> Except for Balla's *Compenetrazioni iridescenti*, based on the study of the light spectrum (in fact he called them "rainbow").

<sup>11</sup> Also Piero Dorazio's work of the 60s-70s was commonly called *Reticoli* (nets), although for the artist they were *Sedimentazioni* (sedimentations)(in F. Sardella, Antonella Zazzera. *Le origini del fare*, cit.).

<sup>12</sup> From an interview by A. I. Ingria, cit.