

"Il Respiro Nascosto Delle Cose": Studio La Citta, Verona, Italy

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An armoire, a mattress, a few stools, some plates, a steel table, and a mirror--the objects almost add up to a household, or at least a room. One could imagine living in the world of "Il Respiro nascosto delle cose" (The secret inspiration of things), though it would be very modest living--the simple white dress in the armoire was made of paper; the stools were old and worn; the plates were mismatched and lay on the floor.

An air of quiet mystery suffused these objects. Inside Lena Liv's Senza titolo (armadio) (Untitled [wardrobe]), 2001, a white dress, possibly a hospital gown, hung next to a large plastic funnel. The purpose of the funnel was unclear, its presence unsettling. The black figure of a rabbit perched atop the armoire and a vase on a shelf at the rear of the structure, ghosted by a photograph of itself, only deepened the mystery. Richard Wentworth's Terra e terra, 1997--dinner plates lying on the floor among irregular pieces of brick--appeared to be debris but was actually a surprisingly stable, if enigmatic, interlocking structure. The large stool at the center of Mirco Marchelli's Sgabello, sgabrutto, sgabasso (Stool, ugly stool, low stool), 1999, was flanked on either side by smaller ones, one supporting a bundle of mildewed homework papers. Each of these sculptures seemed like the remnant of a way of life long since abandoned and no longer fully understandable. Each rendered common objects uncanny through unexpected juxtapositions with other objects and arrangements that encouraged close examination of things normally overlooked.

The sculptures also drew attention to another characteristic of the objects--the elemental beauty of the materials from which they were made. Several works that do not incorporate found objects distilled similar material qualities abstractly. Lawrence Carroll's Senza titolo, 1992, in oil, wax, and canvas on wood, is a torn, lopsided, off-white rectangle that stands out from the wall like a piece of some other, longneglected building, each crease and stain contributing to its subtly articulated surface. The surface of Nanni Valentini's Piastra bianca (White tile), 1978, is of gesso built up so thickly as to become sculptural; a mass of orange-brown stoneware is stuffed into a hole in its cracked, pale gray surface, suggesting a decaying structure that has been roughly patched. Like the more literal works incorporating objects, these pieces are restrained and contemplative: They reward close looking and celebrate the low-key virtues of a muted palette and of surfaces that seem worked and worn, cracked and scarr ed.

Among the dozen pieces included here were works by Mario Merz, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and Giuseppe Penone, whose association with arte povera provides the exhibition with an art-historical reference point. Their inclusion along with Italian contemporaries and younger artists from Italy, England, Australia, and Russia in a group whose works collectively span nearly thirty-five years argues convincingly that arte povera is not just a historical phenomenon but an ongoing sensibility. Alongside artists pursuing the flashy, ironic, and sensationalistic styles that have flourished in the international art world since the late '60s there have always been others working in subdued vocabularies, seeking to reveal the mysterious poetry of everyday objects and the sublimity of unpretentious materials. Often overshadowed by their trendier colleagues, these artists had a well-deserved forum in this intelligently curated exhibition.

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