

Florence

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MEDIA RELEASE

Fabio Viale
Acqua alta High Tide
Essay by Sergio Risaliti
Opening Saturday 22 February 2020 6.30 p.m.
22.02.2020 - 16.05.2020

Fabio Viale (Cuneo, 1975) returns to Florence with a solo show at the Galleria Poggiali. The show *Acqua alta High Tide* will open on Saturday 22 February 2020, at 6.30 p.m., running up to May 2020 with free entrance.

In the new Florentine show the Piedmont artist displays two separate installations: one for the premises in Via della Scala and the other in the Via Benedetta space. The show will be accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by Sergio Risaliti, artistic director of the Museo Novecento in Florence.

The bricole (dolphins)

The Via della Scala premises will host a series of sculptures that the artist produced specifically for the Venice Pavilion (in the Gardens) of the 58th International Art Exhibition – the Venice Biennale, which closed in November 2019 after attracting a large number of visitors.

The sculptures consist of around a dozen stone monoliths that are life-size replicas of the posts, over three metres high made of oak or chestnut wood, that emerge above the water in the Venice lagoon. These dolphins are locally known as 'bricole', and act as signposts for the vessels in the lagoon. The replicas created by Viale imitate the wood so realistically that one could easily believe that they are casts.

The current display resembles that of Venice, with the addition of a topical element that has regrettably transformed the virtual into real. In the Pavilion in the Gardens the original seascape – namely that of the Venetian canals and lagoon characterised by the *bricole* – was evoked through a multisensory installation that immersed visitors in a realistic environment, where the floor was covered with a carpet of low water and the fog effect produced by sheets of slightly opaque plastic separating the observers from the stone posts.

The drama of the high tide, which gives its name to the current show, changed everything, proving that reality frequently supersedes imagination. The high tide that flooded the whole of Venice - and of which it has become an increasingly characteristic feature - also seeped into the pavilion where Viale's sculptures were still in place, although they have now been transported to Florence safe and sound. This gave Viale yet another reason to maintain the original idea in this display in Via della Scala: namely, to emphasise the emergency we are living through in connection with the raising of the sea level, climate change and the unbridled progress that is wreaking havoc with the natural equilibrium and landscape all over the world. The layout of the show thus pivots on the monumentality of the impact, constraining the observer to establish a physical relationship - at once unequal and familiar, as a result of the verisimilitude - between man and the power of nature. Conceived in this way, the layout acquires a dramatic aspect that effectively links the disturbing events of recent times, caused by climate change, to the experience of Florence in the autumn of 1966 when the Arno broke its banks and the river stormed into the city centre with all its devastating fury, reaching a level of several metres in certain districts of the city, such as Santa Croce. There are still stone plaques in Via della Scala and in Piazza Santa Maria Novella recording the level of the tidewater which reached over two metres, disfiguring the lower parts of priceless frescoes and valuable marble sculptures.

Stone "Emergences"

The highly dramatic tone of the layout in Via della Scala is further accentuated in the Via Benedetta space, where Viale has dumped 18 tons of stone chippings and marble sculptures, almost completely filling the 15 metres of length of the gallery and the entire height. This is a transposition of the *Root'la* performance carried out in the Gioia quarry of Colonnata on last Monday, 3 February.

The performance began in the morning and took place in the section of the marble quarry called the *ravaneto*, where the unusable rubble and chippings rejected during the quarrying are traditionally cast downhill, creating a steeply sloping incline.

Repeating a mechanical gesture that has been performed for thousands of years, Viale hurled down several marble statues, previously purchased, determining an action of a conceptual character. As a result, the statues suffered cracks and damage that roughened the shape and mutilated parts of them. The artist accompanied the sculptures on their downward fall, making sure that they rolled right down to the bottom of the slope. The artefacts, disfigured copies rendered partially shapeless, were then retrieved and touched up in preparation for a monumental display.

The genesis of the project is linked to Viale's passion for the quarries, which he shares with the great sculptors of the past. The idea of using the *ravaneto* as a sculptural tool belongs to history: from Michelangelo to Arturo Martini, many artists have shared the idea of tumbling sculptures downhill with the idea of purging them of defects, as if every blow enhances rather than destroys them. Now the artist has gone beyond imagining to acting.

After many years' absence in first person from the quarries, Viale has addressed a process of return to the source and moulding of the artefact-work. The adjustment of the sculpture takes place on the rugged downhill slopes of the *ravaneto*: the accidental alteration of the form and the surface, bashed and beaten by the impact as it careers downwards, far from reducing the importance of the sculptural work actually enhances the vital power inherent in the material.

Sheared of every figurative quality that linked it to the model, the sculpture now shows itself to be authentic, having become a metaphor for human experience: like the *ravaneto*, life with its incidents and accidents scores the surface of the artefact while absolutising the essence.

Finally, the title refers to the phonetic and semantic association between the English word Root and the Italian verb *rotolare*, meaning to roll. Hence, the communion of words and actions is between the root of Viale's action, going back in time, and that of the symbolically disinterred sculptures.

The marble detritus was collected from the so-called *ravaneti*, the slopes down which the waste from the marble quarrying activity is dumped. This consists of useless chippings and rubble produced by the cutting of the stone, which then shatters as it careers downhill, creating what look like authentic waterfalls of marble and, seen from the sea, resemble ancient glaciers that have somehow survived the rising temperatures.

Here and there, from amidst the formless mass of rubble that seems like a river carrying all in its wake, there emerge truncated statues, shards of marble vessels, limbs and heads of stone, weathered by time and by the tumbling fall. *The Three Graces* have been reduced to fragments; the picturesque figure of a Moor wearing a turban seems to have returned to the original rough shape of a boulder; a graceful Apollo is missing arms, legs and head; a Molossus is restored to nature as a stream-smoothed stone.

Cast into a *ravaneto* as waste, these statues of poor-quality craftsmanship are then retrieved by Viale and 'redeemed' through their new display in the gallery. Viale flaunts them now in their novel status as 'works in the round', having reworked the formless character they acquired by hurtling down the slope and rolling in the rubble, correcting the damage, the amputations and the defects, thus transforming these shapeless commercially-produced forms into 'noble' fragments.

The cloying beauty of these objects purchased on the market underwent an initial transformation through the fall, followed by a redemption produced by correction and re-elaboration. In both the first and the second event, however, the *deus ex machina* is the artist, who has 'guided' the result from the very start, integrating even the accidental effects on the form caused by the fall in the quarry.

The layout in the Via Benedetta space therefore recreates a portion of the *ravaneto*. A species of long wave of rubble greets the visitor who, passing through the space, then recognises the different sculptural forms adjusted by Viale. Their dramatic appearance is in some cases shapeless, and in others that of sublime fragments or even of roughed-out forms. The scene therefore illustrates a process of decay and reconstruction, of fall and redemption. While the slope of rubble recalls a river carrying in its wake entire segments of civilisation, in general the landscape may remind us of the inevitable tragedy of the future that returns everything to dust. In the Renaissance, the impression of transience and finality – even the end of empires and glorious dynasties – was conveyed through significant images and symbols, such as broken pillars, ruined buildings, sculptures rendered shapeless by the slow and relentless labouring of time. The fascination of these figurative admonitions, with their hidden moral meanings, was triggered by the contrast between the beauty of the artefacts and the perfection of the craft and their opposite in the decay. As if a beautiful countenance, bright with grace, should simultaneously reveal the spectral and repulsive appearance of a decomposing skull.

The artist

Fabio Viale has been working with the Galleria Poggiali since 2014; in the summer of 2017 he presented his works in the solo show at the Fortino in Forte dei Marmi (*Door Release*) and in early 2018 he inaugurated the gallery's Milan premises in Foro Buonaparte with the project *Lucky Ehi*. Last summer, as well as displaying in various venues in Pietrasanta (exhibiting works including *Kouros* and *Infinito*), he was also the protagonist, in Munich, of the *In Stein Gemeisselt* show at the Glyptothek Museum and of the connected installation of the work *Laocoön* in the Königsplatz, the square in front of the museum, the opening of which was attended by the German Minister of Culture, Marion Kiechle.

SHOW INFO

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Galleria Poggiali Florence

Via della Scala, 35/Ar | Via Benedetta, 3r, 50123 Florence

Free entrance

Every day 10 a.m.-1 p.m. / 3 p.m.- 7 p.m., Sundays by appointment

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