

Francesco Bocchini

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MIX OF THESE OVERLAPPING SHREDS OF LIFE
AND MEMORIES AS HE TRIES IN VAIN TO GIVE MEANING
TO THE FRAGMENTED STORY TOLD
BY THE KALEIDOSCOPIC ARRAY OF OBJECTS
AND MEMORABILIA, A REAL FEAST FOR THE EYES.**

The world of Francesco Bocchini is inspired by the little things, small gestures that encapsulate a microcosm in which silence is worth more than a thousand words, a glance more than a thousand cheap utterings. His studio contains a multitude of experiences, experiments and materials, thickly-layered, well-ordered and catalogued with the careful eye of an archivist. There are **PHOTOGRAPHS OF PEOPLE STILL ALIVE AND TALKING, AND THOSE WHO MAY NO LONGER BE WITH US BUT REMAIN IN OUR MEMORIES AND STILL SPEAK TO OUR SOULS.**

Ornate, cracked and tarnished mirrors multiply the reflections, adding to the myriad sensations and moods in the old windmill covered with American ivy, which Francesco has chosen to house his creations. One of them, an egg-shaped stove, dozes quietly in the corner, its generous heat belied by its rusty appearance. On the walls are pictures, notes scribbled in pencil and magazine cutouts. Above the sink is an interesting display: a majolica tile, a cork, a small statue, a toothbrush and a photograph portraying a youthful Francesco standing next to the painter Luciano Comini, with whom he developed his artistic career, and the esteemed Academy lecturer Carmen Silvestroni.

There is nothing casual about this place where time seems to stand still. The visitor is trapped by the fascinating mix of these overlapping shreds of life and memories as he tries in vain to give meaning to the fragmented story told by the kaleidoscopic array of objects and memorabilia, a real feast for the eyes. Equally bewildering are the titles of Francesco's works. Somehow elusive, their meanings entice you to find

a solution - any solution - to give reassurance and create the illusion that you have grasped their semantic meaning.

In fact, all you can possess is the pleasure of looking, as your gaze wanders greedily from one room to another, from a large box marked FRAGILE (who knows what wonders it contains) to an assortment of sheets of metal featuring the most bizarre of folkloristic characters, an advertisement with the innocent air and naïveté of by-gone times when the main attraction was not the product itself but the advert's ability to inspire the imagination. Francesco shows me some tins intended for Sicilian tuna, featuring beautiful but inexplicably exotic designs intended to extol the virtues of the product: lions and tigers strolling proudly amid elaborate frames.

IT IS THE POETRY OF THE ABSURD AND THE IRRECONCILABLE WHICH IN ACTUAL FACT HAS ITS OWN MEANING, WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED.

The closer you look, the more you realise that superficial observation can be damaging to the artist's expressive purpose.

His works tempt us,
creating the illusion that his approach
is playful, entertaining, casual.

Do not be deceived by first impressions: try for yourselves. Turn the handle of a sculpture and it comes to life with a schizophrenic, jerky movement, awakening a fractured, wayward material, stripped to reveal its oxidised essence and life as a reject, miraculously touched by the hand of the artist.

The beauty of the shapes, the harmony of each piece, regenerated and filled with colour and spirit, contrast with the cacophony of these ungainly pieces of metal, a confusion of mechanisms busily clashing and grinding. The result is a bittersweet sensation, a strange feeling that enthuses yet disturbs. You feel as if you are watching a kind of magnificent stutter, the works come to life at the touch of a human hand but their voices are oscillating, uncertain. Despite this, nothing of their magic, their splendid epiphany, is lost.

Francesco has customised his studio, which extends over three levels, and filled it with mechanical creations from floor to ceiling,

each has its own story,
each has a handle waiting to be turned:

instead of the repetitive music-box tune you might expect, their clumsy movements are accompanied by the words of Francesco, as he provides valuable insight into the workings of each one.

On the top floor there are more works of art and other pieces made from scrap metal, a collection of wind instruments on a table, and three trumpets, evidence of an unbridled passion linked to a dedication that sometimes eclipses all else.

The air is filled with music, which only now do I recognise as Miles Davis and Chet Baker, and match to the carefully-stacked piles of CDs placed next to the Indian dolls on a shelf on the ground floor.

The pilgrimage doesn't end there: we walk through the countryside of Emilia Romagna with its joyful eruption of yellow flowers, as the wind bends their stems and ruffles our thoughts. Francesco tells me that on foggy days you can hear the raucous blare of the lighthouse - the sea is just a few miles away. There is a faint hint of brine in the air and the light is different, harsh yet generous at the same time. We reach an old country house, home to the new studio he shares with his friend and fellow artist Mattia Vernocchi. Here there is more room to display his works, the walls are larger, the rooms more spacious and he can move freely, just as this austere, isolated farmhouse is free.

A building that used to be a mill and now guards Bocchini's works is also home to some extremely valuable A4 Pigna notebooks with black covers. They have an air of the 1950s, although he assures me that "these aren't original, I looked for them everywhere, till I found out you could get reprints". They are more than just notebooks - they faithfully catalogue all the works completed by the artist to date, including details of the measurements, colours, notes and sources of visual inspiration that went into the work, cutouts and pictures: a miniature reproduction of the complex laboratory and Francesco's approach to his work, based on a systematic condensing

of pieces chosen with the meticulousness of a herbalist. They could quite accurately be described as tiny museums of memory, herbariums of the imagination. I note that the details include the date and time when each work was finished, and ask why: "There will be a reason, sooner or later". He is right, there is a reason - however obscure - for everything.

For *Steellife*, Francesco has created a large-scale installation called **BELPAESE**, I get a preview at the studio of two friends, Verter and Emanuela, also true creative talents capable of forming incredible biomorphs out of resin.

A cleverly-calculated exhibition of faces parades before our eyes, some of them complete with a nose worthy of Pinocchio, others with the features of Death, laughing silently and sadistically. Some have a neck, and at the bottom there is a sequence of two-dimensional faces painted on tin, whose three-quarter profiles look at each other from two opposing ranks. In the middle are some invitingly sweet ice-cream cones. The first impact is a pleasant one: lots of colour, lots of lively clown faces - apparently playful, joyful. Apparently - that is the key word.

Once again, we are asked not to stop before we reach journey's end, before we have a firm grasp of the meaning. As with dice, shaken and thrown onto the gaming table, the artist has scattered the fragments of meaning of this piece onto the wall. But, while you cannot predict how dice will fall, with this work there is a carefully-constructed, premeditated plan.

You need sensitivity and concentration to put the puzzle back together. We are guided by the title, the words that adorn and dominate the entire composition, underlined by the orderly sequence of circles of sky.

WHAT IS BELPAESE? OR SHOULD WE SAY WHAT WAS IT?

It was a place loved and envied for its artistic, natural and archaeological treasures, the home of artists, inventors, scientists and intellectuals.

A country once included on the *Grand Tour*, an important part of a person's cultural education, our country: Italy.

Visitors have included the Frenchman Stendhal, who wanted his tomb at Montmartre to bear the words "*Henry Beyle milanese*", Goethe, not forgetting Mozart, Byron, Dostoevskij and Nietzsche. The list of illustrious names could continue at length, even going back to earlier centuries, including artists such as Dürer, Rubens, Van Dyck, Velázquez and Goya. Even before that, the term "*bel paese*" was coined for the first time by Dante Alighieri ("*Del bel paese là dove 'l si sona*", Dante, *Divina Commedia - Inferno*, c. XXXIII, v.80) and Petrarch ("*il bel paese | Ch'Appennin parte e 'l mar circonda e l'Alpe*", *Canzoniere*, s. CXLVI).

Today, this *Belpaese* is represented by an orderly sequence of the heads of dead people, not only in the true sense of the word but also metaphorically.

It refers to an Italy which, over the past few decades, has cultivated managers rather than new creative talents, artists and poets - the lifeblood that makes this well-loved boot-shaped peninsula such a unique and indispensable country.

The faces are baptised by names attributed at random. Only occasionally is there a true similarity between the name and the person portrayed. The names were chosen by the artist who has diligently catalogued them, dividing them by type and talent. Poets, writers, intellectuals with (Pinocchio's) nose, artists and poets who committed suicide without: a parade of designers, architects, fashion stylists and directors, reproduced on tin. A kind of modern Encyclopédie by Diderot and D'Alembert or perhaps a pseudo-clinical ID parade in the style of Lombroso.

Some of them are still alive, others not. All of them have the ingenuity typical of Italy, and most of them have already marched beyond the biological limit of youth through to late middle age, often without leaving behind any talented successors able to continue their work.

The installation becomes a collection of paradoxes. **BELPAESE IS A PARADOX OF ITSELF, BECAUSE IT NO LONGER IS IN THE SENSE IN WHICH IT WAS ORIGINALLY DEFINED.** Death with the nose is paradoxical, as if we could still tell lies; the ice-creams, whose powers of attraction rival those of the seductive *Grand Tour* of the past, are another paradox - the bitterness increases with the mirage of pleasure.

Two languages, two codes live serenely side by side. There is a playful sense which stops with the multifarious, multicoloured epidermis of the sculptures, and the controversial side, which demands reflection. Although the ultimate sensation of this work is intricate and complex, the lightness of Calvinian memory remains, that surreal, visionary tension which only in great men is an instrument for telling the most unsayable truths.

DOMATORE ALFABETICO in many ways is similar to *Belpaese*: the same scientific discipline in cataloguing the names, the same dreamlike capacity for invention, the same density of meaning.

A three-storey metal structure contains a display of hats belonging to revolutionary, anarchic types, inspired by the collage *C'est le chapeau qui fait l'homme* by Max Ernst (1920). They are distributed in strict alphabetical order, but lean awkwardly in a precarious equilibrium. Next to them are the heads of the scientists, chemists and physicists whose discoveries revolutionised the modern world. They include Jöns

Berzelius who discovered thorium, A.G. Ekeberg who discovered tantalum. Rhodium was identified by William H. Wollaston, europium by E. Demarçay, uranium and zirconium by Martin Heinrich Klaproth. They are followed by other pillars of the world of discovery: Carl Wilhelm Scheele, André Debierne, Marie Curie, Henri Becquerel, Joseph Black and Gustav Robert Kirchhoff. The bread stacked on the top level symbolises the importance which German philosophers and thinkers, such as Nietzsche and Marx, gave to this food in terms of sustaining a new society, seeing it as essential for survival. 176 pieces, including 114 hats, 48 loaves, 11 heads and 3 differently-shaped hats: all cleverly mixed together in the perfect doses, creating a work that is veiled in a melancholy gratitude.

Last but not least, the exhibition would not be complete without at least two base-mounted mechanisms: **UN BALLERINO NON PENSA MAI ALLE PROPRIE GAMBE** and **TESTA DI UN PICCOLO PROPRIETARIO TERRIERO.**

They are as enigmatic as the bachelor machines of Duchamp - particularly his *Grand Verre* which defined the "bachelor machine", ingeniously contrived from an assembly of parts chosen and put together, such as *Merzbau* by Switters, emblematic of an "other" beauty of industrial residue. They elude a straightforward comparison with other machines of the Noveau Réalisme, although, like the kinetic sculptures of Tinguely, their playful veneer hides a dramatic poetry of jerky, inarticulate, discordant movements - perhaps a metaphor for that unstable equilibrium that governs the fate of mankind and technocratic progress.

As Dubuffet used the imaginative graphics of children and outsiders to give substance to his *Art Brut*, Francesco Bocchini constructs **WHAT ARE APPARENTLY INNOCENT GAMES BUT WHICH IN REALITY HAVE SHARP, POINTED CORNERS**: machines that sail through the world of fantasy while bearing a heavy poetic and moral cargo, objects that demand physical interaction but which, conceptually, are absolutely untouchable.

Joy and pain, light and shade, clarity and perplexity: they all coexist in this metallic skeleton assembled, welded and enamelled with rare skill, forming polysemia nourished by the gaze of the onlooker, the source of ever-changing echoes and patterns of meaning.