

LUGANO: REFLECTIONS OF LIGHT

Curated by Eike D. Schmidt

Helidon Xhixha: The fading steel

An anomalous wave ripples the tranquil surface of Lake Lugano: it is the split shape of *Drifting Icebergs*, an updated version of the solitary block, *Iceberg*, which floated on the Venice lagoon for the 2015 Biennale. The almost regular prismatic shape, from the slightly rippled surface of the Venetian work, as if the mass of ice had just begun to melt, now matured in the sculptor's mind, it underwent a dramatic evolution and was reborn in this new version. It appears as if it had split down the middle in two elements, the ridge has eroded and has taken the course of two mysterious geological concretions.

Wherein Venice the milky light of the lagoon, multiplied by thesea, became protagonist of *Iceberg* together with its matter, in Lugano, steel simultaneously interacts with the water of the lake and the surrounding mountains, and immediately becomes a monumental testimony of this natural scenario. It is complementary to Nature understood as architecture, a plastic union of light, color (therefore, painting) in the surrounding space that integrates the central concept. In this respect, the work clearly stands out from other examples of sculptures of this type such as, for instance, the famous *Light Architecture* group, a model for a floating research station launched in 1976 by Heinz Mack in the waters of the Arctic Circle.

In that case, it was architecture in the strict sense of the term, which contrasted skyscrapers and miniature buildings to icebergs and the surrounding environment, focusing attention on the disparity between man and nature, between artificial and spontaneous geometries. *Drifting Icebergs*, on the other hand, like the previous Venetian example, merges into the ecosystem and becomes an integral part of it, even suggesting the liquefaction of the ice.

Every work of Xhixha is a monument, in polysemantic meaning: the dimensions, first of all, are always grandiose; the material – mainly steel, sometimes combined with marble – is made to withstand over millennia; there is a profound meaning and a commemorative or deeply committed value already offered by the titles given by the artist to each installation or sculpture, a linguistic concept, which pushes the observer to an interpretative work between symbolic form, language and content, with very often non-univocal results. *Drifting Icebergs* is an ecological warning in an era of global warming, the sore memory of the polar ice pack that crumbles and shrinks more and more: or are we, ourselves, at the mercy of events, unable to control the direction that our life takes from day to day?

In the case of *Conoscenza*, the rays of large steel blocks are a metaphor for the multiplicity of directions towards which we can direct our knowledge, and the undulating course of forms, the curling up of the surface also reminds us of the inevitable push-ups and crises in the progress of the soul towards knowledge. But it is also an allusion to the infinite universe: according to the vertex of the rays, one has the feeling that the wavy masses continue in space as far as the eye can see and without interruption, crossing the sky. Or is it a representation of a religious sentiment, of a need for faith that instinctively finds expression in the impetus of the gaze upwards? There is a powerful religious content in every sculpture of Xhixha, neither of which can

prescind from a reading in a spiritual and often fideistic key. The poetics of light, on which the artist himself insists, is closely related to the axiom of light as a divine manifestation proclaimed by Abbot Suger in a theological key at the end of the twelfth century. In the works of Xhixha, the assumption becomes ecumenical, embraces the centuries and the different beliefs and coagulates in magic symbols, in shining signs of a new cult, in harmony with nature and the whole universe.

The shining blade of *Riflesso Lunare*, a pagan totem that rises on a corner defying gravity, is the contemporary response to megalithic stelae and shares its spiritual implications: the slender mass that seems to want to reach the sky contains all the ancient wonder of man for the mysteries of the stars. He evokes the magical rites of antiquity and above all lights up a pantheistic feeling in those who observe the slender silhouette. As in the case of the *Terraferma* installation, this represents a solid mass anchored to the ground almost resembling a worrying remnant of a modern Stonehenge.

Xhixha has chosen to make the megalith in corten, giving up the reflections of polishing and the seduction of light, in favor of a reddish and almost porous effect which is an explicit reference to the soil's qualities. It is a geological poem that starts from the rocky central corrugation and ends in the structure's rugged hilly landscape: and in the powerful starting parallelepiped we find the hardness of the stone and the softness of the clay, the smell of the mud and the solidity of the soil, but especially gravity to the highest degree. These are installations – together with *Conoscenza* – which, in order to be fully understood, require a strongly involved presence of the viewer and are intended as a personal experience, they are “works to inhabit” or even to touch.

In *Torre di Luce* the element celebrated in the title by paradox finds its exaltation thanks to its opposite, by virtue of the shadowy densities at the center of each face of the parallelepiped. These beds become the real plastic material, the absolute coefficient, to the sides of which the metallic mirror surface slides and reflects the light that erodes the contours. Thus, the tower seems to dematerialize on the sides and merge into the atmosphere, reducing itself to a dark column: the light that it seems to invoke is an atmospheric one, diffused in the very space in which the observer is also immersed. The same principle is expressed in *Ordine e Caos*, created in 2017 for the major exhibition in the Boboli Gardens in Florence. As in *Torre di Luce*, the supporting idea is based on the contrast between a generative nucleus excavated on each face of the parallelepiped, and the resolution of the form within the limpid and perfect contours of the geometric structure. The vertical crack, in which the metal implodes and wrinkles, is a metaphor for the primordial chaos, which then ends in the order suggested by the smooth surface around. But duality can extend to other fields of thought, *ad infinitum*: the shadow is the wound of imperfection in the intact structure of the primeval world; it is the Evil that contrasts the Good; it is the sin that violates innocence. But everything is resolved in the perfect, mathematical order of form.

Xhixha's new spatialism starts from where the movement's founding fathers left it. Consider his approach to the spherical shape, for example, (in Lugano, now exposed are *Big Data* in Piazza Dante, *Simbiosi* in the Railway Station lobby, *Illumination* in Riva Paradiso in front of Palazzo Mantegazza, *Rapture* in Riva Antonio Caccia, *Inner Peace* in Contrada di Sassello and *Satellite* in Piazzetta Maraini) and how the Albanian artist manages to give a different meaning to the gesture of corrupting it and invading its integrity, compared to for example – the spheres of Arnaldo Pomodoro. For the latter, they are metaphors of the destructive power of the unknown, which breaks out from within and pierces the surface – perfect but fragile – of the solid, eating it from the inside with metal teeth, diabolical wheels, chasms. *Big Data*, the sphere positioned by Xhixha in Piazza Dante, seems instead to spontaneously open its liquid smile in an interactive and communicative way: the image of the observer and the surrounding world appears multiplied, distorted and fragmented on the shiny and moving surface of the interior, combined with the large green patch of the lawn, but it is always a reassuring presence. Where Pomodoro's frightening recesses are nightmares and fears, transpositions of the fragility and complexity of the world, or of a nagging unconscious, the large and luminous opening of *Big Data* offers an interpretation of reality that could even be described as ironic, but that is after all totally positive. As for the rest – and the title already announces it – is the bearer of a message of serenity: *Inner Peace*, a half sphere whose inner face comes to life like the surface of a rippling sea. The effect produced by the emergencies and recesses therefore appears almost mimetic, but by approaching, one discovers a very shrewd balance of the volumes, an almost mathematical calculation in the succession of full and empty spaces, which in a key, we may call

naturalistic, resembles once again Heinz Mack and his experiments with light on metal surfaces in the various examples of "Lichtreliefs" of the 1960s. Moreover, they also resemble the last paintings of Enrico Castellani – especially in reflecting the analogy of color, *Superficie argento*, 2018.

In *Satellite* the lesson of Lucio Fontana, absorbed and monumentalized, brings the spatial concept to its extremes, since the irregular and very deep wound on the steel creates a sudden, three-dimensional void on a material that rejects its own nature and confuses. The mirror-polished surface, in fact, automatically abolishes the boundary between inside and outside, turning into air and landscape, so that only the excavated shape, paradoxically, emerges, becoming a "sculpture of emptiness", in negative – as on the other hand it also happens in the case of the self-portrait now at the Uffizi Galleries.

The movement adopts the shape and at the same time, allows exploring the concept that was central to the great Argentinian artist in an entirely original way. Xhixha's steel giants deny the distinction between sculpture and painting: the color that the surface takes on each time we face it, automatically turns it into painting. At the same time, a three-dimensional depth of the image is created, which enters the space occupied by the work. This is the case for the grooves dug in the parallelepiped of *Ordine e Caos*, or in the center of *La O di Giotto*, both works of 2017, reminiscent of Fontana's cuts as Barnett Newman's "zip". These vertical wounds reinforce the optical effect of mixing between the domains of the earth and the sky, obtained through multiple reversals of the images reflected on the stainless-steel marine mirror, on which even the sun's rays explode in a myriad of different sized light points.

In contrast to the poetics of the Baroque sculptors, who tried to solidify and eternalize the light and fleeting matter of water, clouds, light clothes waving in the air, transforming them illusionistically into hard marble or bronze, the works of Helidon Xhixha seem to liquefy and become ephemeral, absorbing the physical quality of water, light and air. In this respect, they develop a fundamental concept expressed by Constantin Brancusi in *Uccello nello Spazio* (1923), which through the form and the material used (bronze with highly reflective mirror coating) does not actually evoke the bird itself, but its flight. As an observable movement in the sky, the subject in that case relies on both the live object in movement and the landscape and sky that surround it.

Precisely because of the mirror technique, Xhixha's sculpture is indeed polychrome. Polychrome, albeit in a symbolic way, even when using corten to tell the evolution of the Earth, or when marble joins with metal – the two materials are enhanced and take one another's color. And for this reason, it is classic in the most strictly philological and historical sense, since we know with certainty that all the great masterpieces in marble and stone of antiquity were not at all white, but intensely, distinctly painted. The sculpture of Xhixha, however, has many more colors, because it varies them, it changes them depending on what appears before it. A child's red shirt, the green of a meadow, the gray-green of the lake's water, the blue of a car that passes nearby: Xhixha's sculpture becomes painting because it interprets reality by reflecting and deforming its surroundings.

This happens in the case of the large metal casting of the *La Famiglia* (2018), on the lakeside Riva Vela, which really becomes a group portrait in color for the viewer, when seen frontally. However, in the accentuated deformation of the basic flatness of the block and in the volumetric, vertical allusions it evokes, transposed into the colossal format, the scanning of figures in the Roman sarcophagi of the end of the third century AD, of the type known as the Muses, other known as of Annona, kept at the Museo Nazionale Romano at Palazzo Massimo in Rome.

As mentioned, there is a religious sentiment that permeates the poetics of Xhixha. A feeling free from any confessional intent, which draws on antiquity and includes the largest areas, which from the Paleolithic menhirs spread throughout Western Europe leads as far as the Moon-Selene cults of the Hellenistic world, in turn derived from those of Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. However, the sculptor's vast culture cannot be separated from his roots in his own homeland, Albania, the ancient Illyria which was later incorporated into the Byzantine possessions, strewn with stones and archaic symbols including the disk of the sun, which is a point of referral for sculptures, such as for example *La O di Giotto*, of 2017, now exhibited at Rivetta Tell, or *Fragments of Lights* in the Parco Ciani.

The knowledge of the art of the Christian East could explain the unique explicit sign created by the artist for a place of strong sacred significance: the great cross, *Luce Divina* – of the so-called Armenian type, with the ends of the flared arms – installed in Piazza Bernardino Luini. It is shiny, but on its front face the material tangles and thickens into a tormented vertical shape. We are at the limit between pure abstractionism and a very careful return to the figurative, due to the explicit suggestion of a figure of Christ crucified that is about to materialize and of which we clearly see the round imprint of the head just above the crossing of the arms. Or it could also be an allusion to a Byzantine cross of the gemmed type in the sixth century mosaics of the dome of the apse of Sant'Apollinare in Classe near Ravenna, or the simpler one in the barrel vault above the choir of Santa Sofia in Thessaloniki. It is extraordinary how in this great Christian monument, erected in the center of the most western Lugano, but also in all his work, Xhixha is able to transfer and transfigure in a modern key the concept of eternal painting of mosaics and cloisonné enamels brought by Byzantium into the Balkans and Illyria. The bridge is created by the fusion of light and color, light fragmented by reliefs, depressions and undulations applied on steel, multiplied infinite times by the shiny surface, as happens with the golden tesserae of a Byzantine mosaic. The color of the enamels, instead, is given by the beholder's image and by that of the world around, which are reflected on the metal emerging recognizably although modified in ectoplasmic forms.

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