

MASSIMILIANO PELLETTI. LOOKING FORWARD TO THE PAST

“Antiquity does not exist as a concept until the modern mind constructs it as such.” Novalis

The body of works that makes up Massimiliano Pelletti’s first exhibition in the region of Calabria spells out a hypothetical journey through the well-structured concept of classic that breathes life into the artist’s poetics and within his multi-layered and complex creative and mythopoeic universe.

A journey back in time, but also into the collective memory within which the image of the classic became stratified. A pilgrimage to the places of iconography that have inspired Pelletti’s work and given it concrete shape.

A journey – interwoven with nostalgia – into the halls of memory, a travelling without moving into the spirit of Xavier de Maistre⁶, once again emphasising the mental nature of the journey.

The visitor-spectator is invited to take an active part in this journey, which also serves as an antidote to the syndrome that has prevailed ever since the Internet and social networking have narrowed and standardised the physical world. Pelletti urges us to rediscover the role once assigned to travel literature, which today has become dystopia, while differences have become widespread familiarity: a battle against the so-called programmed obsolescence of images⁷. The exhibition housed in the magnificent museum setting of the MARCA also embodies the in-depth reflection – especially from a metalinguistic point of view – of an artist who, with an artistic career already spanning over 20 years despite his young age, analyses progress and achievements and, above all, trains a magnifying glass (his own and the public’s) on the topoi, the cornerstones of his poetics and the artist’s role in the current socio-cultural situation, imagining future hypothetical developments and expressive journeys.

The artist chose the Calabrian museum as the perfect venue in light of this thematic focal point, also by virtue of the region’s historical ties to the ideal dimension represented by Magna Graecia, with that aura of cultural ancestral origin, with the Megalithic Hellenism mentioned starting from the Greek historian Polybius in the 2nd century B.C. Proximity to places like Scolacium, the strip of land between two gulfs where the Odyssey recalls Ulysses’ passage and the echoes of an age-old classicism – a nostos returning these artworks to the land to which they have belonged since time immemorial.

Moving forward without ever losing sight of the rich heritage of the past while freeing himself of a conservative, “dusty”, archival vision of tradition at the same time, transforming it into the driving force behind creative production... this is what lies at the root of Pelletti’s vision.

A vision the artist has skilfully renewed and strengthened in light of his multi-faceted interests. Design and architecture as well as sculpture: within this framework, Pelletti has absorbed the positions of Carlo Scarpa, who looked “abrasively” to the past in a modern guise, and of Aldo Rossi, who looked to modernity as an ancient illusion.

A lively approach to past and future simultaneously, to the heritage of both Western and non-European art, is the hallmark of Pelletti’s expressive stride, perfectly symbolised by the sculpture of Janus on display (which also crystallises in itself the classic Western and African dimensions).

Here, Janus – the Roman (but also Latin and Italic) deity of material and immaterial beginnings – looks towards the past and the future, to Greece and to the ancient African continent whence the human race comes, at the same time.

The artist’s vision aligns with that of Novalis as well as with that of Mahler, according to whom the driving force behind artistic production lies in the safeguarding of the creative spark rather than in a sterile adoration of the past – a canon that is aesthetic and conceptual as well as ethical, and instrumental to our understanding of the Zeitgeist and in guiding future generations.

In the words of the artist himself: “Classicism, like mythology, is a concept inherent to all civilisations and cultures, all over the globe: no one – neither civilisations nor artists – can think of themselves unless in relation with another civilisation and another art form that serve as a basis for comparison and for the construction of an identity”. Pelletti’s syncretic vision brings together the shared cultural and artistic roots of the Western world, ab Homero principium, and those of a cultural and anthropological nature which, with the contribution of the ancient cradle of culture and trade represented by the Mediterranean, spread to Africa and the Near East following the words of Phyllida Barlow – a key figure of the British Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale: “Sculpture is the most anthropological of the art forms”.

The artist gives rise to his own personal mythopoeic universe, wherein iconographies found at different latitudes coexist and act in synergy to offer viewers a complex, well-structured perceptual journey.

Within this dimension created by the artist, Phidias’ sculptures interact with Fang sculptures from Gabon, Polykleitos’ Canon coexists with works by the Baule people from the Ivory Coast or the Dogon tribe from Mali, poems by Hellenic Callimachus coexist with poems by Senegalese Birago Diop.

From a conceptual and stylistic perspective, Pelletti has managed to create a synergy between Winckelmann’s sensitive, analytical experience compared to Laocoon and Lessing’s “speleological” experience – a quest for original, archetypal images.

Thus merging, in his process of aesthetic and thematic study and reworking, the historical and diachronic dimension of Kronos and the timely and appropriate one inherent to the single exhibit-image of Kairos. The widespread concept of classicism sees it as that which comes first and reveals in advance, outlining the categories of the original and paradigmatic drawn on by the many “classicist” waves that will follow upon one another with a karstic trend throughout the years.

Within Pelletti’s conceptual approach, classicism aligns with Paul Valéry’s theory, voiced in his 1944 *Varie tés*, according to which “The essence of classicism is to come after. Order assumes a certain disorder to be overcome”. “Sooner or later, anything that is simply modern is overcome, and antiquity assumes its full purpose when it resurfaces from a period of oblivion, to become even truer and more present,” says the Tuscan artist.

In short, the artist sees classicism as a bent for the constant testing of new formal solutions capable of generating order, a structural complex with its own rules, so as to homogenise heterogeneous demands and harmoniously assemble pushes towards entropy.

This idea of classicism also influences the artist’s relationship with personal and collective memory and with time – an active relationship consistent with the principle that we can define as of vivid memory, as explained in detail by Italo Calvino: “Memory truly matters only if it binds together the impression of the past and the project of the future, if it enables us to act without forgetting what we wished to do, to become without ceasing to be and to be without ceasing to become”.

This, then is the meaning underlying the ensemble of works on display: elements belonging to collective memory and to the artist’s mythopoeic universe alike – that is, as conjecture of new shapes corresponding to contemporary sensitivity and to the zeitgeist.

For Pelletti, classical art is far more than a vast and invaluable repository of exempla of aesthetic and technical solutions; it is also, and first and foremost, an ethical – rather than aesthetic – stance and inclination. Which the artist is called on to shoulder, as suggested in Novalis’ words chosen to introduce this essay.

Every area models a specific idea of classicism to create an identity of its own.

This phenomenon illustrates how the concept of classicism is not limited to the past but, rather extends to the present – therefore projecting a light onto the future. This process encapsulates the meaning of the artist’s taking up the legacy of classicism so as to pass it on: his ability to grasp its inherent message – the spirit of the time – causing it to interact in a synergic fashion with the linguistic demands of contemporaneity and with his own expressive urges at the same time.

Over time, this synergy between artistic demands creates a hybridisation that stands for the historical crystallisation ²¹ and the generating demand that spreads to the future of classicism.

As mentioned early on, the artist’s mythopoeic universe is also defined by the memories and experiences collected throughout his childhood and adolescence when, under his sculptor grandfather’s aegis, he would visit the artisan workshops and plastic art studios, the foundries and marble quarries, the antique shops and plaster cast galleries of Pietrasanta, establishing a one-to-one relationship with classical antiquity, with its materials, techniques and practices. Pietrasanta and the district of Apuo-Versilia plastic-artistic production where Pelletti grew up and was trained symbolise a sort of widespread academy that helps build up and strengthen ties with the past and with classicism as seen in a broader meaning.

A meaning that ranges from the ability to produce and convey knowledge from one generation to the next; a know-how that is nourished and comes alive thanks to the abstraction-production and artist-artisan dialectics, spreading to knowledge of the materials in their organoleptic and physical-chemical properties – all the way down to the inherent expressive potential – and to familiarity with the different working techniques. All this reassembled under the aegis of a widespread propensity towards beauty and harmony.

This sum total of phenomena has spread throughout the ages ever since Michelangelo came to the Apuo-Versilia area to select and work exquisite local marbles for his masterpieces, collaborating with skilled local artisans.

This know-how, handed down from one generation to the next following a pattern already used in Renaissance workshops, envisages a synergy between the abstract-design component and that of technical knowledge – the so-called “mestiere”, or “craft”.

The artist-craftsman and master craftsman-apprentice pairings are the two poles that fuel this production of knowledge and its handing down over the centuries. And Massimiliano Pelletti was trained in light of this phenomenon.

Over the years, the artist has skilfully blended this “informal” knowledge typical of the homo faber – gleaned through experience, an unflagging practicing of sculpture and habitual visits to the agents of the plastic environment with devoted study and the search for sources – with special attention to techniques and materials.

The latter are an aspect that goes widely beyond the mere dimension of expressive medium to become a driving force behind the creative process and co-authorial demand.

Thus, the artist assumes an “oriental” stance, conferring a creative responsibility and a sharing of authorial responsibilities with the artist on reality in its manifold expressions.

The artist cannot make any progress – as regards elaborative, technical and design processing – without firsthand knowledge and experience of the challenges posed by the materials and by the productive processing procedures.

The artist firmly believes that ideas and the training process connected to them arise from knowledge of the materials and of the accompanying wide range of solutions.

With their chemical-physical properties, their irregularities and, above all, their flaws and encrustations (all phenomena caused by the passing of time), the materials offer formal and compositional hypotheses, whispering processing options and indicating the techniques to be used.

In order to exploit the expressive potential of the materials themselves, the artist is called on to display an ethical inclination towards listening and humility.

The know-how to interpret dictated by in-depth study added to an inclination towards experimenting, completed by humility which allows us to share the authorial stance with the very material dimension.

As Bachelard claimed, works of art are born of the encounter between the artist's imagination and the imagery inherent to every material, governed by the primary categories of soft and hard and by the generative metaphors of concave and convex. And, above all, they are fuelled by the confrontation-clash between artist and material. Creativity is seen as an idea taking shape through the harsh energetic contrast between the homo faber and his material, punctuated by a series of stages characterised by the dialectics of attraction versus aggressiveness.

All this is subject to an ethical stance that supports Pelletti's poetics, which synergically blends with the drawn-out timing and settling underlying the artist's self-discipline; these conditions are essential to the interpretation of the evocative power of the materials, of a change of mind.

This approach charges the artist with complete control of the creative process, from the abstract-design phase to the coordination phase where the work is carried out. In other words, a full – and elastic – command, thanks to the intelligence of the method, in line with Leon Battista Alberti's thought: "tūm mente animoque diffinire".

Within this framework lies one of the principles underlying the artist's creative strategy, which views the process as equally important as the final product.

Pelletti follows the mapping of the marks left by the tyrant Kronos on the skin and in the structure of the materials. White onyx, travertine, North African black fossil marble, calcare grotto, emerald onyx, light blue onyx and several marbles and stones that remain unknown because the quarries have been closed for years and even centuries... but Pelletti's never-ending quest is often rewarded with fragments and small blocks – often unsuitable for industrial or artistic-academic production, yet perfect for someone who listens to the very atoms of stone.

In choosing techniques and materials alike, the artist does not follow pre-established rules but, rather, principles inspired by artisanal production processes – the very concept thus described by Pareyson: "Formativity is a way of creating such that, while one creates, one invents the way of creating".

This element also introduces what can be defined as the value lent to mistakes which, within the Tuscan artist's poetics, become a force driving the creative process.

Flaws in the materials and the "deviation" from standard paths activate novel conceptual paths and stimulate creativity. And, above all, they force the artist to lay out strategies and solutions that further enrich his wealth of experience.

For example, Pelletti has studied African art in depth, applying the same analytical criterion as the one used for classical – Greek and Latin – art.

In other words, freeing the art of the Old Continent of the subordinate and colonial role that for centuries relegated its expressive production to the rank of handmade artefacts of documental and anthropological value.

In the manner of a philologist, Pelletti has probed the depths of African expressive production in search of topoi and recurring symbols, of techniques, materials and, above all, canons.

The concept of classic rooted in the Tuscan artist's plastic research evolved from his admiration for Greco-Roman sculpture and that of its "prophets" (Michelangelo first and foremost, followed immediately by Canova and Bellini – including the allure of the poetics of the fragment and the non-finished they reflected), so as to attain a critical comparison and an in-depth study of figures "closer" to us such as Rodin and Medardo Rosso who, straddling the 19th and 20th centuries, spearheaded a new concept of plastic writing and a connection to the spatial framework and perception-fruit.

These artists also embodied a bridge towards a study aimed at non-European forms.

Pelletti's admiration for Michelangelo and then Canova, thanks to whom sculpture reached the height of its aesthetic purity, has not kept him from analysing the various forms of progressive dissolution of the plastic structure, the methods used by artists as they began to erode and scratch the shapes in the early 20th century, when ideas and their technical translation began to shake hands and to create a symmetrical relationship soon to be celebrated by the historic avant-garde movements.

A progressive process of erosion and corruption and the relevant loss of the pedestal and celebratory dimension to which Pelletti has devoted great analytical attention, all the way down to extreme outcomes – from Arturo Martini's cry in 1946 ("sculpture, a dead language") to the footprints in the wake of Manzoni ("Magic Base", 1961), by way of the fetishism of the consumerist object of Pop art and that of Neo Dada and Nouveau Réalisme, reaching Arte Povera and beyond.

The Tuscan sculptor is especially drawn by the freedom from linguistic and thematic patterns and biases that can be found in the sculptures of "painters" such as Gauguin, Picasso and Matisse (especially the works produced between 1890 and 1913), to whom we must add Derain, Vlaminck, Renoir (his late-in-life plastic experiments), Degas and Bonnard, who all shared a fascination for tribal sculpture. An example of the evolution of the concept of classicism (posture and a blend of idealism and realism) is Edgar Degas' *Petite danseuse de quatorze ans* (a 98-cm wax statue of a girl wearing a real tulle tutu, satin ballet shoes and a silk ribbon in her hair). The statue, first displayed in 1881 at the sixth Impressionist exhibition, inspired Joris-Karl Huysmans to describe it as "the only truly modern attempt I know of in sculpture".

Separately, the artist has also studied figures like Jacob Epstein, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner e Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, in addition to studying the experiments by figures such as Brancusi and Modigliani, with their macroscopic references to tribal art.

While the artists straddling the 19th and 20th centuries viewed tribal art as an achievement of the desire to pinpoint a repertoire of shapes and a wide spiritual appeal that was radically different from the European tradition of weary academic sculpture, for Pelletti, on the other hand, non-European sculpture (Oceanian as well as African) represents a release from the strict, ready-made expressive and linguistic patterns of much contemporary sculpture. Late 19th-century artists meant to free the language of sculpture from the theatricality embodied by naturalistic verismo, by stylistic mannerisms and technical virtuosity. Pelletti, on the other hand, wishes to free it from a paradigm of shapes and expressive models reinterpreted stereotypically throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (also in light of marketing and advertising), as well as to draw on a repertoire of free expressive and spiritual shapes and solutions. Within the framework of analysing the language of non-European sculpture, the technical aspect also takes on great significance for the Tuscan artist.

Most archaic, popular and so-called primitive sculptural forms feature direct carving, a widespread technique from prehistoric times to the Middle Ages which became obsolete during the Renaissance, replaced by more complex and elaborate execution methods stemming from the secularisation of statuary.

Direct carving is deeply rooted in civilisations geared towards a spiritual life, where artistic objects perform a role that is religious and/or ritual (like in archaic civilisations) or even socio-relational (like in Pietrasanta or the Apuo-Versilia district).

In addition to recalling the primeval feeling of material touch, of physical clash between artist and materials also described by Bachelard⁸, the direct carving technique builds a bridge leading back to a titanic past that inspired Baudelaire's famous words spoken at the 1846 Salon: "La sculpture est un'art des caraibes.., "a discipline of barbarians and primitives"⁹.

The technical aspect of African sculptures contributes greatly to their nature as independent objects, as well as providing their forceful impact and man-made plastic presence, strengthened by hieratic frontality.

Pelletti's analysis of African art touches on a wide range of iconographies: from the pre-dynastic Egyptian schistose stone sculptures of the 4th and 5th centuries B.C. to the ivory Sapi sculptures from Sierra Leone of the 15th-16th centuries A.D., by way of Guinea's Baga bulinits wood sculptures dating back to the 19th century, all the way down to the 18th-century Nuna sculptures from Burkina Faso, to the late-19th century Baule sculptures from the Ivory Coast (terracotta, metal, wood...) and the iron and wood sculptures devoted to Ogun (god of iron and war) from the Republic of Benin.

Though the list could go on, this repertoire assembled by Pelletti throughout his studies must certainly include Nok sculptures, which date back to a period between the 5th century B.C. and the 5th century A.D., and Sokoto sculptures – both made of terracotta and both from Nigeria – and wood Bangwa sculptures from Cameroon.

These studies go beyond the dimension that sees African works as unchangeable over time, when they actually possess an antiquity and classicism of their own (the earliest classified sculptures go all the way back to the 1st century A.D., as attested to by the works exhibited in anthropology museums), and are characterised by an evolution in the use of materials – from wood to skill in sculpting with terracotta – which, far from being anonymous, has its own acknowledged masters (for example, the Master of Tara or the so-called Master of the Waterfall Hairstyle).

A variety of – often female – figures which also had a ritual and religious role, like Venus in Ancient Roman culture. The "eroded" Venus exhibited by the artist reveals the relentless work of time which, in addition to the materials used, also erodes sculpture's implied concepts and values, which melt away over the centuries within the framework of Western civilisation.

Venus – who corresponds to the Greek Aphrodite – is one of the most important Roman goddesses. Canon of beauty and Eros, she was considered the ancestress of the Roman people (through her son, Aeneas) and embodied a key role in their festivities and religious rites – just like some of the figures sculpted by the Fang people of Gabon to guard their shrines.

The choice underlying the set-up (or installation, in some cases) is also linked to a specific strategic option pursued by the artist with expressive goals.

In Pelletti's poetics, the expressive importance taken on by space is comparable to that of the materials and technical solutions adopted.

The so-called "background", the spatial environment housing the sculpture, becomes one with the work itself, so as to enhance its expressive potential to the utmost.

Pelletti organises the syntax of space, opening a dialogue between the sculptural and architectural dimensions so as to broaden the user's perceptual possibilities.

Freeing the latter from the so-called "slavery of the right angle" that places human beings within the contemporary context, isolated from the naturalistic dimension and perceptual subjectivity, to be "contained" within the architectural dimension. Offering the latter – by means of the sculpture-architecture debate – a wide range of perceptual opportunities and aesthetic stories in order to build its own personal, fruitful map.

The installation aspect of the exhibit housed at the Calabrian museum expresses the sense of a journey which sees the ruins (physical and cultural alike) and the heritage of the past, as well as on the experience of the present, as a springboard to the future. A pyre – ruin of former glory and ancient peoples – strewn with portraits, icons and symbols of beauty produced by archaic civilisations which continue, from the distant past, to perpetrate a message of beauty, taking on the role of coryphaeus for the creative power of the individual and his ability to give order (both ethical and aesthetic) to chaos.

Though corrupted by the passing of time, the Venus emerging from these ruins still functions as a symbol of beauty triumphant and salvific. An optative image that symbolises and foretells continuity with classicism and its message of harmony for the future. Despite the mighty waves of entropy linked to human nature, this beauty and this creative power span time like a vessel to reach us, bearing a symbolic message and a noble heritage so as to carry on the journey towards the future, as attested to by the sculptural complex on display here, which showcases a series of heads of various shapes and belonging to various iconographies. A vessel bearing a precious cargo that has reached us over the centuries: a syncretic treasure – both cultural and aesthetic – that blends cultures and iconographies, cardinal points and myths, folklore and rituals, Europe and Africa, overcoming a host of barriers: ethnic, cultural, religious and artistic. With their original arrangement in space and by the will of the artist, these works also reassert art's ability to colonise space, to powerfully connote it, repeating – yet again – how much we need the creative act.

Thus, art as the fulfilment of the scopic drive genetically inherent to all human beings ever since the dawn of time. Last but not least, as per a conversation with the artist, a few words on the dimension linked to the actual event. For Pelletti, the planning and construction of an exhibition represents the attainment of a liturgical dimension that suspends (the work and spectator alike) circadian rhythms – and the ordinary – by charging them with an intense, hieratic surplus.

A rite within which neither the artist – and the works in his stead – nor the viewer-user in the role of co-producer accept copies, reproductions or repetitions.

The artist orchestrates his works like a sequence, a procession of scattered epiphanies and considerations that harmonise works and viewers alike in a different division of what can be perceived by the senses and the tangible world. ²⁵ A ritual fuelled by anticipation that is choreographed and distilled, burdening itself with nostalgia for a hypothetical dawn of time. Hanging over it all, the spell of the ritual offering embodied by the work of art, wherein ancestral questions – dormant yet still alive – reawaken.

All this to remind us, in an amplification of the concept of classicism, that the past contains the probable seeds of the future – a future still firmly anchored to the past, with a present suspended between the two.

In the words of T.S. Eliot: "Time present and time past are perhaps both present in time future"¹⁰.

This enables us to state that Massimiliano Pelletti's works thoroughly satisfy the gaze understood in its broader meaning, thanks to a skilful harmonisation of the instances that come from the rich legacy of the past and the artist's aptitude for never-ending experiments and his ability to bring together collective memory and personal experience, biographical dimension and universal reflections.

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