

The importance of the empty spaces

Critical essay by Giuliana Benassi

“This is what I thought I had understood in that distant journey of mine to Isfahan: that the most important things in the world are empty spaces”.

Italo Calvino, Collection of Sand (Essays).

In 1975 Italo Calvino noted this sentence down in the notepad that he put together during a trip to Iran as a comment on architecture and, at the same time, on life.

Opposed to the “fullness” of the world, this assertion sounds like a calling to reflect on emptiness.

This same thought accompanies and has always accompanied Stefano Canto in his metropolitan “journeys”: walks mainly undertaken in Rome, during which the thought of the artist focused on architecture and nature, on the mutually syncopated union that only cities are able to host. At the sides of the streets, on the sidewalk and in some corners near green areas, Canto encountered tree carcasses, eradicated trunks and logs hollowed by “caries”; themselves a result of the ecological work exerted by fungi and bacteria, which takes place within the tree marrow and is the result of degradation in the lignin and cellulose. These are the empty spaces where the artist has installed his germinal architectures, the spaces where the vision of a reciprocal intertwining of architecture and nature has immediately been sedimented before our eyes in recognition of a new archeology, one that fossilises contemporary artefacts, crystallising them in our present.

Elsewhere, “archeology of the ephemeral” has been cited in relation to Canto’s research (cf. Stolfi), an idiom that may be defined as an archeological approach, that in this particular set of creations, presents itself as the metaphorical rescue of nature enacted by architecture itself, almost overturning the existing power relationship between the two. The real rescue, however, is enacted by the artist who collects the logs and takes them to the studio wrapped in protective cloth. Arranged in the studio, with the meticulousness that distinguishes Canto’s *modus operandi*, we can envision the logs laid out on the granite floor, stacked as if they were coring elements. Those withered logs, those emptied out trunks, suddenly become a depository of ideas and reasoning for the artist, a source of inspiration for drafts, an occasion to experiment with new materials and a site for constructive investigation. Just like the work of the fungi in the tree marrow, slowly digging at the wood, Canto’s artistic process has required an extended timeframe of action and reflection.

The works displayed at *Matèria* - marking the opening of the gallery’s new Rome space in February 2021 - are thus the result of a process dating to 2009, an extended body of work developed by the artist alongside his numerous other projects; a series of sculptures he has worked at with consistency throughout the years, in his the studio, surrounded by the bulky companionship of the tree carcasses. Canto didn’t simply elaborate a thought process confined to filling out the void, moreover he activates a process of regeneration and construction that finds its inception in emptiness. With architecture as his accomplice - the backbone of artist’s practice - the works are created through the research on the void’s matter and are born out of the peculiarity of each single tree cavity.

In opposition to the destruction of the vegetal marrow, Canto has grafted a discourse of construction, utilising the material that can be identified as the closest to our contemporary architectural language: concrete. Trees and concrete - the two big contradictory elements present in the contemporary metropolis - are mixed and mutually sustain one another, giving life to a new and multifaceted scenario where, in some cases, the cavities of the logs welcome architectural grafts, while in other instances the sculpted

presences are nothing but the soul of the cavity itself born out of the bark which has been used as a mould.

The series of works presented under the title *Carie* - the term also chosen for the exhibition - holds within itself the presence of a sickness, one that devours, tears and hollows out. A disease that, in the eyes of the artist, represents a real sign of the mutation of matter, yet simultaneously embodying a signal of something missing, a nostalgia for what has been lost. It is the symbol of our contemporary age, of the "era of emptiness" (G. Lipovetsky), of a disillusioned society, of indifference and the lack of ideals and projects that don't pertain to life in the present.

Within this temporal hyperbole, the artists's thought process operates in an attempt to reconnect what is lost and what can be born again, what is found between death and the bud of a new life. Thus, each piece becomes simultaneously today's memento mori and monumenta of the contemporary post-human, a vision of a new landscape that adopts empty spaces, the vision of that Third landscape characterised "by architecture inserted within the green, architecture that integrates itself and does not destroy, architecture that hosts and does not isolate". (L. Caffo).

Thus, the large logs laid out on the ground are their own spectre, their soul captured in the concrete that allows for the retention of the nuances and details of the bark's pattern. A tree is suspended, pierced and simultaneously supported by a ledge that mirrors the jagged slit cutting across it lengthwise. Other blocks of concrete build their geometry through the invasion all the way into the log's core marrow radius. The subtraction of matter is transformed by Canto in a compounding of materials, to the point that a unique and unseen form is created: a new connection: that between nature and architecture, sublimed through art.

Such a link coincides with artistic process, gesture of meditation and action. Moreover, Canto's research is directed towards crystallizing in a sculptural-architectural form the becoming of his artistic process, to the point where it coincides with form itself. The exhibition space seems to transform into a landscape, one that is not idyllic, but punctuated by the constant dialogic parrhesia between nature and architecture; where one takes inspiration from the other and vice versa. It's the void's vitality that triumphs, its immanent sculptural presence invades the gallery accompanying the visitor into a forest of works that architecturally redesigns the gallery as a large scale site-specific installation. In fact the exhibition space, before being such, functioned as Canto's a true studio, resulting in a number of works conceived entirely with the gallery walls, making the space somewhat of a participant in the artistic process through the suggestion of forms and the creation of a silent dialogue with the sculptural installations.

Seen from the outside the gallery looks like a ship, its prow's silhouette emerging at the corner of a square in the neighbourhood of San Lorenzo in Rome. On board, the visitor can undertake the journey referenced in the opening of the essay, where one is invited to mindfully navigate in the immense ocean of empty spaces.

Marc Augè, *Rovine e macerie. Il senso del tempo*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2004

Leonardo Caffo, *Fragile umanità. Il postumano contemporaneo*, Einaudi, Torino 2017

Italo Calvino, *Collezione di sabbia*, Garzanti, Milano 1984

Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'era del vuoto. Saggi sull'individualismo contemporaneo*, Luni Editrice, Milano 2013

Carmen Stolfi, in *Concrete Archive*, pp. 90-98, DRAGO, Roma 2016