

Published in *Elisa Sighicelli, AS ABOVE, SO BELOW*, Silvana Editoriale, 2022, on the occasion of the exhibition at GAM Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milano.

Back to the present

Paola Zatti

NEW PERSPECTIVES

The work carried out in recent years in the sculpture storerooms of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Milan has focused on the study of a large and historically significant patrimony (almost a thousand works, including maquettes and finished pieces, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in bronze, marble, plaster, and wax, belonging to the most varied iconographic repertoires) and its conservation, remaining within the regular programming required of a museum institution. *Cento anni. Scultura a Milano (1815–1915)* (2017) was the exhibition that acknowledged an important campaign of restoration (one hundred works in marble and plaster), providing, in the catalog, a series of useful insights for future research in an area that is still full of surprises such as nineteenth- and early-twentieth century sculpture in Milan. The project commenced an intervention linked to the maintenance of the patrimony that is still active, allowing for new attributions, re-evaluating almost unknown artists, reconstructing events that could expand the story of the museum's collections, integrating the path of the works on display to the public.

The work in a storeroom cannot and must not be univocal. The storeroom is the place where skills, perspectives, responsibilities but also creativity come into play. It is the invisible soul of the museum. It is complicated, because it is much more mysterious than what is on display, which is always well known and highly selected. But at the same time it is fascinating because of the scope of its references, often surprising, and the potential of its memories.

The refurbishment of the rooms destined for the GAM sculptures and their forthcoming reorganization is about to erase all traces of an obsolete and uncritical arrangement of the works, to which we were nonetheless accustomed, and which never ceased to amaze us for the fascination of its random juxtapositions, but with an extraordinary expressive charge. It was a world whose memory we wanted to preserve. It wasn't a question of documenting that reality, those spaces, those groups of works, with an obvious and ordinary photographic campaign, but of actually bringing it back to life. Only the eye of an artist could interpret its potential and transfer it into a work destined

to flow into a new work of art, stimulating the visitor's gaze in a journey through history, memory, and the present.

This exhibition entrusts Elisa Sighicelli's gaze with the task of dialoguing with a world of about eight hundred sculptures with which she engaged, investigating the expressiveness of single faces, figures in pairs or groups, caught in their casual but interactive combinations and moving in a subterranean, difficult space, in search of secret ties, of presences and absences. This is a space destined to change, erasing those interweavings and those dialogues forever. This is a world that Sighicelli manages to enliven, searching a balance between the distance of the past, the dust stratified on the surfaces, the missing pieces, the thousand signs of time, and the actual presence of the work, its weight, its relationships, whether evident or just hinted at, in little less than thirty photographic shots. Photography characterizes her entire creative path in a sophisticated and complex experimentation, which in the past has been able to couple ephemeral images with hard and stable materials, as in the case of the prints on travertine presented in 2018 at Villa Pignatelli. In a series of brief notes that the artist made available to me I read, "We usually imagine works of art preserved in the ideal world and suspended time of the museum, but in reality they also have a concrete existence as objects subjected to the aggression of the passage of time, as the works I photographed testify."

SCULPTURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY.

SHAPES WITHOUT STORIES

"Despite the charm of the place, I did not want to make documentary photographs or insist on an aesthetic of the fragment. Instead, I focused my attention on the possible relationships between the sculptures caused by random proximity."

The power of these images lies in the defeat of that sense of removal that usually cloaks what's invisible in museum storerooms. She does it in a decisive and rigorous way, without nostalgic languor, but transferring volumes, signs, perspectives, dynamic but always balanced glances, which are not only memory but above all present. The sculptures come alive, they dialog in a sequence of unexpected sceneries, never static in their ability to suggest imaginary stories. "I photographed the sculptures," notes Sighicelli, "trying to animate them, to make them human. For this I used dramatic lighting, which seems to create a freeze-frame effect and pushes the work into a flow of time of which the photograph is a snapshot. The focus of this exhibition is in fact the relationship between photography and sculpture, between image and object." It is a form of photography that allows matter to assert itself and catch the eye, both when

the support is the very sensitive cotton paper and, even more, in the only case in the exhibition of a print on plaster, where the game of chiaroscuro is highlighted and manages to soften, following the material's imperceptible irregularities, its different density and tactility. An unprecedented and precious experimentation, which delicately marries the vivid and immediate image of photography with chalk, a material traditionally linked to the first compositional idea. Even in the enigmatic nature of some combinations, deliberately left to our free interpretation (some works are even photographed with the tag of an old inventory, left almost as if to increase the sense of an anonymous humanity) because the artist distances herself from narration, something that does not worry her at all, there is nothing ambiguous in Sighicelli's work: the image is there, suspended (because it is not narrated) but clear, explicit in its forms and blended with its support. Her training in sculpture is evident in the sensitivity of her gaze, so that her work succeeds in conceiving a photographic image in full continuity with forms and matter. As Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has written, "In juxtaposing the photographic representation with the nail or the cloth hanging on the nail, Sighicelli is placing the corporeality and the bodily embodiment of the image at the center of her work" (C. Christov-Bakargiev, "The Transitional World," in *Elisa Sighicelli, 9 years, 2020*, p. 268).

CORRISPONDENCES

As Above, So Below is the title chosen for this project, after floating between silent conversations and questions of glances, *omissis* and life secrets. "As above so below, as below so above" is the guiding principle of Hermes Trismegistus (thrice great), a mythical character of Greek-Egyptian origin, God of the creative word. Herodotus was the first who spoke of him in 450 BC, when he translated Egyptian astral knowledge into Greek. On his principle of "One Only Thing", of harmony and uniqueness of the cosmos, of the correlation between earth and planets, cosmos and man, have been based thousands of years of alchemical, esoteric, astronomical, and astrological theories. It seemed ambitious but not inappropriate to recall this principle that binds in our case the emerged to the submerged, the visible to the invisible.

The profound sense of this journey through the eighteenth-century rooms of the museum with an articulated series of creations—from life-size printed photographs to plaster prints, from diptychs playing on the similarity between retored/dusty sculpture and photographic positive/negative to the large metal installation conceived as a prism of images visible front/back—lies entirely in the artist's words: "I use sculptures to talk about human relationships, to openly suggest new narratives, but also to reflect on

themes such as memory, the function of museums and collections, the choices of cultural identity, the construction of value, the monument, the role of figurative sculpture, representation of gender in the history of art, animism, empathy between humans and statues, and the border between reality and representation”.