

## In Praise of Imperfection

Notes on Matteo Sanna's recent works by Angela Madesani

In the face of any work of art it is almost impossible to exclude the autobiographical component. Every work is affected by choices that are part of the artist's existential heritage. Matteo Sanna is no exception in this sense, quite the contrary. However, it should be said that there is never any question of this component leading to a form of intimism for its own sake. His art is not so much a form of narrative autobiography as a metabolization, a linguistic transformation of his life, of his experiences.

The works on show include *Autoritratto al buio* (Self-portrait in the Dark), a series of paintings completed before and during the pandemic, when our existence was endangered. A situation that none of us had imagined, one which some saw as an opportunity for improvement, although that improvement has proved elusive. Every instant of life is unrepeatable, nothing will ever be what has been. "These paintings stop at the moment before the dark, the moment at which the light is about to disappear. However, they can also concentrate on the moment in which the light of understanding succeeds in piercing the moment of total darkness, a veil in order to return to shine through our emotions. In the dark we are all equal, undefinable, the differences and imperfections that make us unique are annulled. Our body no longer has importance, all that remains is the essence of the person."<sup>1</sup> Sanna has used a spray paint, simultaneously light and dense, which references a certain lyrical abstraction. The paint covers what was previously on the canvas, cancelling it completely. What has been will never be again. It is definitive. Time passes, cancels, looms over. The artist freezes an instant. He reaches a hitherto unknown profundity.

It is as if we abandon our bodies. The total disappearance of the light creates a reaction. Our shadow also abandons us. We are naked, in a metaphorical sense, alone with ourselves, stripped of the trappings that characterise us. It is a kind of resurrection, like the phoenix: *post fata resurgo*. At times, looking back helps us overcome the difficulties of the present. He is exhorting us to have faith in ourselves, to understand that we do not need to transform into followers of a more or less authentic leader.

In many of his works Sanna uses canvases that have already been painted, by him of course. While in the self-portraits in the dark we are faced with a total overlaying of what is already on the canvas, almost always landscapes, with *Ladro di fiori* (Thief of Flowers), this is not true: traces of the underlying work show through. Traces that are like psychic, mnemonic references, in which nothing is ever completely cancelled. Here the artist has employed flowers rather than a brush. All the flowers used are about to die and through his actions are rendered immortal. Some of them are hemlock flowers, one of the very few plants capable of surviving the Sardinian summer, the poisonous plant responsible for Socrates' death. The reference to the philosopher of γνῶθι σαυτόν, know yourself, is by no means casual.

The flower is charged with paint and laid on the canvas. Sanna uses paint and water, which veils but does not totally cancel what is below, creating palimpsests. The flower leaves a trace, in a sign-like, indicial sense, as in the photographic incunabula of the botanist Anna Atkins of William Henry Fox Talbot. "The reasoning from which I started out was that we all try to leave a trace of our passing"<sup>2</sup>. The flower is an emotional "object", symbolising love, gratitude, closeness and even death. When freshly picked it is strong, vigorous, vital and brings colour, but as soon as it wilts it takes on a deathly fragility. Its trace on the canvas is imperfect: like life itself.

The partial cancellation of the original work depicted on the support underlines the precariousness of existence. Behind an initial appearance, there is a clear desire for internal analysis of the very meaning of our existence present throughout Sanna's research.

We give flowers to our loved ones to communicate messages, but above all positive emotions.

When briefly presenting his work, the artist wrote some time ago: "I undertake anthropological research that delves into the collective memory to restore a sophisticated narrative through images that reveals my close ties with nature, my surroundings and above all my homeland. Photography, sculpture, drawing and installations,

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<sup>1</sup> M.Sanna, working notes.

<sup>2</sup> M.Sanna, in conversation with the author, February 2023.

created using supports that range from wood to neon, from plastic to recycled waste materials, are suitable for reflecting on first person experiences and investigating the concept of detachment as a sense of loss, as an event that shapes up as experience, evolution, and growth, through to detachment as a passage from life to death. Between nostalgia and rebirth”<sup>3</sup>. The surroundings are those of Sardinia, with which Sanna has close ties, the land of his birth, where he works and which he more or less explicitly speaks of in works with a very strong evocative dimension.

*Persi nell'evoluzione (fiori blu)* (Lost in Evolution (Blue Flowers)) is a work on paper, the empirical part leading to the paintings mentioned earlier. “I was very interested in communicating two elements that frequently coexist in nature, the flowers on trees, the trees on wood, the wood is transformed into paper, through this action they are brought together again after a rift.”<sup>4</sup> Sanna is interested in the moment of preparation, of experimentation, of thought; everything that precedes the realisation of the work is in certain ways more important than the work itself and here he renders us participants in his working process.

Since 2017, Sanna has been working on *Fragili fraintendimenti* (Fragile Misunderstandings) for which he uses vases with which their previous owners have decided to interrupt their relationship. He buys them at flea markets or is given them by friends and acquaintances. Those presented in this exhibition are in vitreous materials from the Sixties and Seventies. At least fifty years separate them from us.

Guido Cabib, who has followed Sanna closely in recent years and has written about his work on several occasions, states: “With his typical delicacy, the Sardinian artist guides the observer through the difficult themes of imperfection, of error and self-acceptance, reawakening in us the memory of lost innocence. With this series we find ourselves in a blocked time and in a more defined space. They are portraits of human life.”

<sup>5</sup> Here too, the tie is with his homeland, where the practice of ceramics is widespread.

To create these works, he uses plaster of Paris with which he makes a kind of past that he then pours into the ceramic or glass vases. Due to a chemical reaction generating heat the vases break and shatter. The vase is then repaired but all the cracks are visible. The pouring is the experience of life. The acceptance of imperfection, of breakage is a proof of maturity, of existential awareness. Error creates the difference which makes us unique. Fragility is a key element in the artist’s research. It is the unexpected event that shows us for what we are and stimulates our acceptance of circumstances.

*Fragili fraintendimenti* is a work that cannot follow a design, the component of unpredictability being predominant.

This is true of the white sculpture with the dog, *Guardiano del tempo* (Guardian of Time), which represents the artist in a perennial wait for change, true, however, to his convictions: another experiential work. “There are things that I would never have thought of doing, which I didn’t think possible, but which happened through a kind of misunderstanding which in reality I didn’t take into account.”<sup>6</sup>

The title of the exhibition is *Sunglasses*. “I like the idea of having a reflection what the others are looking at, of details that frequently escape us. More often than not we fail to understand what the gaze is directed at, what detail it was that caught their attention”. The reflection, in fact, is not truth, but rather a lie.

Returning to *Autoritratti al buio*: “It’s often said that in the darkest moments of our life even our shadow abandons us, leaving us alone. A condition we’ve all found ourselves in at least once in our life. However, it’s actually alone, through our own actions, that we’re capable of tackling life. Not by seeking approval through the eyes of others and not our own, as with reflecting sunglasses that show others what is in front of us but not where our interest is directed; alone we are capable of realising that we are able to tackle life independently and to take care of ourselves by putting ourselves first, giving us the opportunity to look back at ourselves and see what we have been, discovering ourselves to be stronger.”<sup>7</sup> In Sanna’s intentions, the exhibition should be an account of his surroundings, through the eyes of others too.

His research in its entirety is focused on time, on precariousness, on the transience of phenomena, in which the personal becomes collective. Nothing endures absolutely, but nothing disappears completely, through the

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<sup>3</sup> Matteo Sanna, GAI - Giovani Artisti italiani, self-presentation.

<sup>4</sup> M.Sanna, working notes.

<sup>5</sup> G.Cabib

<sup>6</sup> M.Sanna, in conversation with the author, February 2023.

<sup>7</sup> M.Sanna, working notes.

paintings-palimpsests we spy traces of what has been before. The research as a whole takes form through diverse materials and languages, but it is all tied together, as in a personal memoir, by a common thread that runs from work to work.

*Come la salsedine sulla pelle* (Like Salt on the Skin) is the title of another series of works, with the reference being obvious. Left on the skin after a day of sun and sea is visible evidence of what has been experienced, just like tears on a face. According to recent scientific theories, water carries memories. These are works created with water soluble coloured crayons and sea water collected from various beaches around Sardinia that are particularly dear to him.<sup>8</sup>

The artist brings together on the paper, colour, sea water and salt crystals, some from the sea, others from a salt pan close to his home. The process he uses is always of a chemical nature. Here too, we are faced with a trace of what has been. The attractive, sparkling salt is created through the evaporation of the sea water and the addition of crystals obtained through a process of precipitation. The support is watercolour paper: here too there is a close tie with the concept of imperfection, but also with the acceptance of ourselves and our surroundings. The lived experience remains through the testimony.

The artist is seeing interaction, a sharing with the spectator who has to emancipate themselves from their purely passive condition. As he himself admits, Sanna's research derives from more or less fortuitous encounters.

I think we can trace in the very short video *Libellula* (Dragonfly) a kind of summation not so much of the work, as of the sentiment of transience that runs through the artist's research. The plot is simple: around a lightbulb, in an old chandelier in his mother's house, a dragonfly buzzes without settling. The lightbulb is its sun, its point of reference. At a certain point the little creature stops, freezes, everything finishes and is silent.

It is the fragility of the vital actions in which we hardly not retrace our universal spirituality, that which mark the simple and incommensurable poetry of nature, to which we owe so much and contribute so little.

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<sup>8</sup> Each watercolour takes the name of the beach from which the seawater was taken.