

INTERVIEW WITH GIAN MARIA TOSATTI

Since 479 b.C. Catania has been reconstructed nine times, due to wars, natural disasters, volcanic eruptions and violent earthquakes. In fact, the arc of the Garibaldi Door, the former entrance of the city, erected a few years after Palazzo Biscari, bears the inscription *Melior de cinere surgo* [I rise stronger from the ashes] – the motto of the phoenix. The rise of a new civilization, stemming from the ruins and based upon the sepulchres of a previous one, is the core thematic of *My Heart is a Void, the Void is a Mirror – Catania Episode*.

Would you like to talk about it?

A city that has been rebuilt for nine times almost sounds like a biblical myth.

Gore Vidal, in *Roma* directed by Fellini, is waiting for the end of the world as if it were a sort of paradox, a contradiction in terms. He explains that Rome has already witnessed the world's end several times. Indeed, we are situated right at this point. Between myth and History, between epic poetry and chronicles. It is right at this point of friction that we can find a *fil rouge* that follows the path of human history, an adventure of great edifications and collapses, such as the Tower of Babel, the Fall of the Roman Empire, and ultimately, the decline of our civilization. These rises and falls are the very destiny of flawed creatures such as men, which have the feeling of eternity without being made for it.

I prefer to think about this in other terms, to shift perspective. We are like flowers that wither after having shown their beauty, yet they will flourish again. They will be different, but does it really make a difference? What really matters is their beauty. This is how we – as modern men – are. We have gone through history, we made it shine at some stage. Now that time is gone. The dusk has come. As the elderly, we begin to feel more comfortable at funerals rather than at spring fairs. Our acropolis has turned into a necropolis. Think about the sea surrounding this island. We turned it into a cemetery. Everything resembles our old age. The paleness of death is spreading within us. Even if we attempted to make up our mirrors, art can still speak the truth, with a cruel portrait, like the story of Dorian Gray. This work is conceived as such: an intimate, solipsistic moment to face ourselves.

This environmental installation is shaped as an oneiric, haunting, and cruel scenario that clashes – perhaps only apparently – with the atmosphere evoked by a baroque ballroom. Normally your installations are conceived for abandoned buildings, deprived of their original function, but loaded with historical memory. Does it also hold true for Palazzo Biscari?

Sometime ago, I wrote that Italy does not exist. If a country doesn't have a plan, has no vision of itself, is no more definable as a State,

what is left are just historical remains. A carcass, left out to dry under the 'sun of History'. Its inhabitants are... well, who lives in a carcass? Parasites. There are carcasses of whales, of dogs. The former evokes a sense of awe, the latest one mere pity. Italy is the wreck of a big white whale. It can even be enough to be proud of, but...

Palazzo Biscari epitomizes Italy's exceptional culture, yet it has also drifted away in time, divested of its own *raison d'être*. The fact that Palazzo Biscari is still kept as an historic mansion helps me to point out how paradoxical this *vanitas* is. Beyond its decorative surface, the palace gets older, darker and gloomier. It conceals the marks of its ageing with makeup, as an old woman who tenderly tries to disguise herself.

This is our host, a gigantic whale's womb. The very moment in which we face and admit the cruel *truth* of its decadence, of its decay, we can finally question who we are and why we are here, now. We were builders, now we are parasites, guardians of the decay. We are like night watchmen in a never-ending night. Always on the ground floor. Wandering around in silence or falling asleep in front of a closed-circuit television. We have become *la civiltà degli androni*.

You firmly requested the audience to enter the installation one at a time. The individual experience of the viewer is a recurrent condition in your works, but how does it matter in this case?

This specific work demands an act of sincerity so intimate that solitude is the only condition for this to take place.

You stated that "My Heart is a Void, the Void is a Mirror" (the title is a reference to Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*) is a project/pilgrimage that will bring you across Europe. Can you already tell how you intend to carry out this journey, this experience?

The project I've just started is conceived as a large *fresco*. Many portraits, many episodes that will merge into a single story on Europe's true face. It should be an iconostasis of the present that can allow us to enact a collective ritual, possibly an exorcism.