

maria cristina carlini

The new monumental of Maria Cristina Carlini

It does not happen so often that the attribute of “robust” – in the best sense of the word – is used referring to a work of our times: in other words, not characterized by a brutal and vulgar nature, but with compositional thickness and autonomous peremptorily.

Well, in the case of many works - especially the “monumental” ones – by Maria Cristina Carlini, this is precisely the first adjective that flashed through our mind. Moreover, even the “monumental” qualification I have used, and which so often is full of empty rhetoric and grandeur, is seldom used with a positive connotation: on the other hand, it is true that the first “function” of sculpture of all times was celebrative exemplifying of something “aere perennius”.

Here, then, as a first comparison with some of Carlini’s big-sized sculptures, destined for the impressive shows in Madrid, Paris, Strasbourg... and now presented in this volume, which involves, precisely, the use of the above-mentioned word.

However, the real feature of these works, of course, lies much more back in time, going back to a “plastic” activity that begins works of quite a different nature: more “domestic”, more feminine, especially related to the ceramic material, then used almost exclusively by the artist, and where they were already present, or were starting to emerge, some of the key points in the art of sculptress.

“Sculptress,” I said, but maybe – hinting at the earlier stages of her work, I had better say a “potter”, were it not that this “qualification” very often denotes a lesser artistic presence, more connected to crafts, to the creation of everyday objects or decorative compositions. Quite the opposite of what, from the beginning, Carlini’s work was: always interested in using earth and clay in a way anything but “feminine”, always in search of the “materiality” of the expressive medium, of spontaneous chromaticity, of its use precisely “robust”, not mawkish or ornamental, but rather architectural.

Having used this ancient and very noble “medium” as “construction material” (especially after her long “perfecting” and activity period at the Californian College of Arts and Crafts (1983), allowed the sculptress to succeed in “elevating” this very ancient material to the level of a monumental work, and what is quite unusual, she did it without neglecting the use of another – quite opposite – material like iron, sometimes for similar works (as in the case of the “Fortresses”, that she realized precisely in two different versions in the works presented here).

Being able to use different expressive means, maybe even opposite according to the occasions and opportunities, is another of the greatest qualities with regard to the activity of Cristina Maria Carlini, who, for example, has succeeded in treating ordinary clay according to the most varied needs, very often using stoneware (given its particular “strength” – here is once again this well-known adjective!) – And that’s not all. In fact, sometimes she succeeds this goal by alternating different modes of “firing“, through which she obtains peculiar chromatic effects – e.g. using manganese, which provides “terracotta” with particular chromatic intensity.

The variety of ceramic techniques, including alternated with corten steel and sometimes with wood, explains how her current works of stoneware have nothing to envy in terms of “power” to those of iron and plate (corten). On the contrary, it is precisely the encounter of different materials that constitutes one for the reasons for their success.

Just think of her work “Abbraccio” (“Hug”), where the jagged stoneware sphere is precisely “hugged” by a wooden composition, creating a particular effect of lovingness. It is no accident that Claudio Cerritelli in his comment observed that: “stoneware dialogues with iron and oxides in an obsessive way; the relation presents continuous changes in the chromatic moods and plastic thicknesses; the reciprocal action of these nutrients expresses the vibrating sense of the earth that prevails on the matrix effects of the other components.

While in her clay works there is always a hazard quotient due to the mixture, firing and colour, which constitutes the “dangerous” but also exciting aspect of these works, this randomness, on the contrary, is never present her metal works; this usually allows the result to match more clearly the conceptual idea of the artist.

You can see, for example, in the monumental compositions of the “Fortezza” (“Fortress”, 2006) and “Identità inesplorate” (“Unexplored Identities”, 2006), both made of sheet iron, and even better in the “Muraglia a Gaza” (“Wall in Gaza”, 2005).

In all these works, the huge steel buttresses, their silhouettes - sometimes straight, some other times curved, create volumes whose spatiality is dominant on the surrounding environment with exceptional peremptoriness. This is what happens in the “Identità inesplorate” (“Unexplored Identities“, 2006) the huge triangle that “opens“ the structure announces the plates lying behind; and also in the (metal) “Fortezza” (“Fortress”, 2006), a sort of outpost implying a higher involvement of the observer, and in the “Muraglia a Gaza” (“Wall in Gaza”, 2005) .- which is perhaps too symbolic, given the presence of a double labyrinthine curvature that “hugs“ and probably “rejects” the visitor).

The values - symbolic rather than descriptive - of these works are then even further enhanced in the big sculptural group of “Trinacria” (from the ancient name of Sicily). This monument (and it is here that the word “monument” appears indicative) is made up of a row of six steel pillars resting upon a metal - and partially ceramic - platform and is certainly mindful of the atmosphere of Sicily and its temples of Agrigento and Selinunte. What is most surprising in such a seemingly elementary structure, is the perspective effect of the “columns“, which is obtained through a skilful dimensional artifice based on their different heights, which creates a perspective significance which, otherwise, would be unlikely from a short distance.

Despite the “narrative” effectiveness of these works (as, on the other hand, of many others present elsewhere, namely: “I fantasmi del tempo” / “The Ghosts of Time”, “Omaggio a Brancusi” / “Homage to Brancusi”, etc.), I believe we should not insist so much on their symbolic value, because - unlike what often happens as regards a large number of sculptors of our time (just think of the great Chillida and his “Combs” in San Sebastián, or also of Arnaldo Pomodoro’s spheres), in the case of Carlini, the works are almost always “denotative” rather than “connotative”.

In other words, the “Trinacria” is actually a “temple”, just like the “Fortress” is a stronghold. There are equivocal appearances that should be interpreted metaphorically, as it often happens in many achievements which deem to “sublime” through the darkness of their meanings.

On the contrary, it is in some dimensionally “lesser” works where symbolization takes greater importance. This is, for instance, the case of “Africa” (2006), one of her most intense ceramic works, where stoneware was used with exceptional technical mastery, through the construction of chipped spheres, almost eggs of mysterious exotic animals and where the earthenware takes on the aspect of organic and vibrating matter, and where one of the problems which in our days is usually left unsolved is finally solved: that, precisely, concerning the presence of a “narrative” factor that emanates from the structure of the work itself, even without an explicit figurativeness and without recourse to “academic” virtuosity. However, we should not forget – with regard to technical mastery - the other unusual and almost paradoxical work, always in ceramic: the “Stracci” (“Rags”, 2006): these thick flaps seemingly of a soft fabric, folded and suspended like a “normal” rag, which, on the contrary, consists of the usual ceramic material treated with extreme and patient virtuosity and “sewn” using staples.

However, if in a complex and “tender” composition like “Africa” the subtlety and fringing of the material and its chromatism are crucial, in other cases - as in the Fortress and Wall in ceramics and above all in the “progetto per una rotonda” (“Project for a Roundabout”) the rawer quality - more less differentiated from the material – makes the architectural and constructive aspect prevail on the tonal and timbral aspect of chromatism.

And that is how the project for a roundabout the monumental and at the same time “rotatory” function of the work, where the shape similar to double tongs is to count more than any material refinement, is justified.

The same can be said about some lesser works, such as “Crollo del tempio” (“Collapse of the Temple”, 2005), in stoneware and travertine, or “The Wall” in iron and stoneware (2006), both based on the use of fragments of bricks, stoneware and some other materials in order to get a sensation of a wreck rather than of a accomplished and vibrating structure.

My brief comment on the series of “Great Works” by Maria Cristina is obviously not sufficient to describe its scope, but I would like at least, - referring to what I mention at the outset - to highlight their strength, particularly their stylistic consistency: anything impromptu, no fall in tone, compositional oddness.

In my opinion, the linearity in the development of a specific guiding idea, that is embodied in the most suitable materials, is perhaps the greatest quality of these important works, which certainly represent a reference point in the troubled scene of the art of our time.

Gillo Dorfles