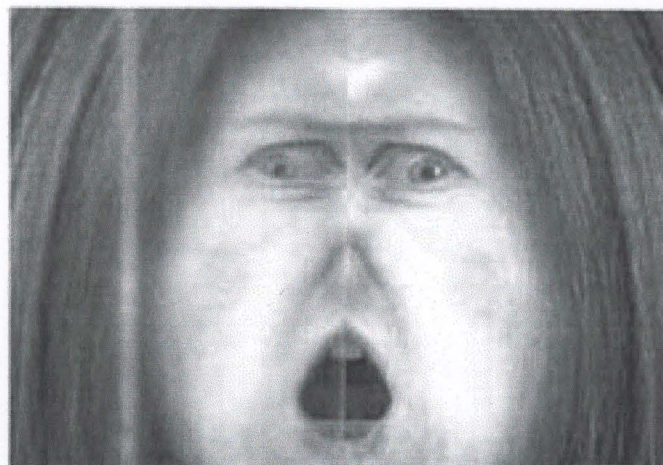


Officina America



Stacey Lancaster
 Untitled One, 1999

Stefano Pasquini

Over three years ago, the Bolognese curator Renato Barilli entered into the monumental venture of organizing a survey exhibition of over sixty artists from North America to be held in Bologna and its provinces. Apparently, he went back and forth between Bologna and America, knocking incessantly at young artist's studio doors, checking out galleries and group shows. "Officina America" (American Workshop) is what came out of it. A huge exhibition in four different venues, in Bologna, Imola, Cesena and Rimini.

Something of this scale dedicated to youngsters and unknowns in virtually a first for Italy, or at least something you don't see very often. The show follows "Officina Europa" and "Officina Italia" and, for the lucky ones who had the chance to see the precedent exhibitions it becomes a clear reflection of the general twists of contemporary art, the one that mirrors a "warm up" of the cold actual conceptual situation, too restricted for many artists. "The globalization we hear so much about", writes Barilli, "makes sense and takes on a positive aspect only if it involves peer dialogue among the various world cultures, only if our occidental culture manages to give up any presumption of superiority in order to welcome the proposals that come from other continents". Hereby the idea is to have "Officina Asia" and "Officina Africa" to follow this survey in the future. Quite an ambitious task, I'd say, especially since the curator works mainly by himself and with very limited council money.

So I imagine this old man with a strong Italian accent knocking at all these studio doors to check out the work of unknown and well known artists in the US and Canada. And the Canadian works was what struck me the most: artists such as Anitra Hamilton, Marla Hlady, Stacey Lancaster, Alain Paiement, Kim Adams, Myfanwy MacLeod and Nicolas Baier were the real revelation for the local Italian public who took it upon themselves to follow this "caravan" of arty people across the region for the openings in the four venues.

Certainly the US artists were also well worth the visit: above all the beautiful paintings of Karen Kilimnik (every time I see them I love them, so fresh and simple looking that makes you wanna start painting again), the disquieting baroque sculptures of Bonnie Collura, the amazing post-everything painted installation of Jean Lowe, the new way of looking at murals of Santiago Cucullu, the delicate embroidery of Angelo Filomeno, the military locusts of Ethan Acres, the disturbing felts of Arturo Herrera.

At Villa Delle Rose, the Bologna venue, the entrance hall had one side covered with highly decorative wallpaper by Francesco Simeati: only at close range one could see the insert of military images within the decoration: a tank, a faraway explosion, an Afghani soldier. Upstairs the videos of Stacey Lancaster had a huge crowd watching them: all I saw was someone wearing a huge box running on the beach, but that was enough to make me want more. I shall return to the show to enjoy her videos in quiet solitude.

I absolutely loved the mirror sentence by Rob Wynne: "I saw myself see myself", made out of handmade mirror letters. Such an intimate thought on such a grand style, it held the whole of Sartre's "Nausea" within, as far as I'm concerned.

Marla Hlady was the winner at the Imola venue. Her room had small electrical looking things on little shelves across the walls, with switches. Only by turning all the switches on you'll get the full scale of the parade: birds singing, trills, tunes and plain noise would fill the room in a rally of intimate protesters.

Alain Paiement makes huge scale photographic montages of an apartment in its messy splendor: by taking many photos of each detail of the house and assembling them together again he manages to recreate the spirit of the place in its fullness.

Anitra Hamilton's "Bombshell" is a real missile bomb covered with eggshell, and "Parade" - at first sight a series of color stripes on MDF wood - is a study of the colors of multi-decorated generals that become, to cite Barilli, "a sumptuous fabric to hang on the wall with purely ornamental intent."

The intimate research on materials and its intrinsic qualities made the work of Emil Lukas stimulate my curiosity. "Air under glass" is a cast of air that was briefly trapped under glass, just in time for the plaster to dry up: the fact that the glass had a tint on it, and the whole composition has years of formal geometric abstract research behind it matters not: the importance is all in the air that got trapped between glass and plaster, and how it ever got out.

Myfanwy MacLeod presents a huge mascot costume aptly titled "The Mascot". Its beauty lies in the huge head on the side on a pedestal. Its expression is of a cheerleader after a game that was lost.

The overall most troublesome piece to me was Judie Tallichet's "There's Honey on The Moon". The 1999 work sees the Empire State Building doubled in resin to resemble the Twin Towers: sound comes out of the large scale sculpture and within the noise of the opening it sounded like a cry for help. Once again, like many times in history, the artist strikes his or her vision straight to the point in an unwilling prophecy.

Overall it seemed amazing to me that one curator alone could complete the task of such a huge show in such a provincial environment, a show that completely overshadowed the concurrent art fair and finally showed some refreshing artwork to Italy. Artwork that young Italian artists can relate to and learn from, and that has the distinct, honest scent of a new millennium. o

The artists:

Ethan Acres, Kim Adams, Polly Apfelbaum, Nicolas Baier,
Ellen Berkenblit, Michael Bevilacqua, Ginny Bishton, Blue
Republic, Ingrid Calame, Andy Collins, Bonnie Collura,
Santiago Cucullu, Lucky Debellevue, Lydia Dona, Geoffrey
Farmer, Angelo Filomeno, Naomi Fisher, Jérôme Fortin,
Barnaby Furnas, Luis Gispert, Susan Graham, Kate
Grinnan, Anitra Hamilton, Jacob Hashimoto, Arturo Herrera,
Olivier Herring, Marla Hlady, Evan Holloway, Cannon
Hudson, Jay Isaac, Jim Iserman, Brad Kahlamer, Marina
Kappos, Karen Kilimnik, David Korty, Stacey Lancaster,
Julian Laverdière, Jean Lowe, Emil Lukas, Fabian
Marcaccio, Virgil Marti, Myfanwy Macleod, Jason Meadows,
Sandra Meigs, Jeff Ono, Alain Paiement, Erik Parker, Larry
Pitman, Monique Prieto, Stephanie Pryor, Jeffrey Reed,
Michelle Segré, Amy Sillman, Francesco Simeti, Cynthia
Sisson, Sarah Stevenson, Judy Tallichet, Shirley Tse, Jay
Wilson, Rob Wynne.