

## ***Jonna Kina. Cultural heritage, profanations and the ineffable of reality***

There's a very famous Greek fresco painting from the early 5th century BCE that shows a man diving into a body of water. The representation is rudimentary and almost abstract: one can see the naked body of the diver stretched like an apostrophe and suspended in the air at the centre of the picture; below him an outline of blue waves, slightly arched; a schematic of a tree on the left side and a trampoline-like structure on the right. The fresco was discovered in the late 1970s inside the tomb of a small necropolis not far from the ancient Greek city of Paestum in Southern Italy. Most archaeologists and scholars who have studied it, currently agree on the symbolic significance of the scene: the man is diving into the afterlife, he abandons the dry land of human knowledge to plunge into a deep, liquid and unfathomable *unknown*.

I've always been fascinated by this uncommon decoration that tried to capture the meaning of a mystery which was difficult to express with words. In fact, for many ancient civilizations death represented not an end, but a mysterious threshold, that people were supposed to cross in order to access another dimension. In this passage, the feeling of persistence was stronger than the sense of break, because existence in the afterlife was intended as the continuation of the earthly one that had just ended. For this same reason each individual needed to bring with them in the grave their basic belongings and other everyday objects.

An ancient Faliscan piece of pottery, originally intended for use in the afterlife, is at the origin of the creative process that led artist Jonna Kina to realize the two films *After Life* and *Red Impasto Jar*, that are conceived as a diptych. She happened to see the item in a small museum during her stay in an artist residency in the northern part of Lazio region, at the end of 2017; she was deeply impressed by it. The piece, which dates back to the 6th century BCE, currently appears badly damaged, since it had been looted from its tomb and then cemented into the wall structure of a house, presumably as a decorative element, before being recovered and included in the museum's collection. Kina was intrigued by its curious nature, which seemed to hold and tell multiple stories about earthly existence and the afterlife, about the passing of time and our relation with distant cultures, about profanation, the sacred and the aura of an (art) object. These are also the stories explored and expanded by the two video works, which have been shot by the artist after a long period of reflection and research, in the fall of 2020.

*Red Impasto Jar* is a blunt, single-shot filmic portrait of the piece of pottery, presented and enhanced in the metamorphic qualities of its shape and essence. Placed on the rotating platform of a robust industrial motor, it performs a slow and accurate choreography in front of the viewer's gaze, making a 360-degree revolution on itself and standing out against a uniform, neutral background. As it progressively rotates, its structure begins to disarticulate, revealing an exploded backside which feels like a wounded body. The first time I watched the sequence, the tone of which is gentle and sharp at the same time, I was reminded of a sentence Kina said to me when I interviewed her a couple of years ago: "Objects look back at you, they have a life of their own". Indeed, I had actually felt observed by that strange relic which exposes its vulnerability to the observer.

The film *Les Statues Meurent Aussi* (*Statues Also Die*), which in the early 1950s offered some critical considerations on the effects that colonialism has had on the perception of historical African art kept in Western museums, begins by stating: “When men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into art. *This botany of death is what we call culture*” (emphasis added). In the opinion of the three film directors Resnais, Marker and Cloquet, a statue, or more generally an object, is dead when it is deprived of the living and active gaze that used to rest on it, that is, when it is removed from the context in which it was born and separated from its original anthropological function and significance. Thinking of the piece of pottery portrayed by Kina, I'd say that it has already died at least twice. The first time, when it was illegally taken by clandestine diggers from the tomb for which it had been intended and then made part of the wall of a private house; the second one, when it was recovered and then confined in the timeless temporality of the museum. With each new life, the object has reconfigured its own meaning and possibilities, transforming itself from ritual furnishings into a decorative item and then finally into cultural heritage. One might ask how its value was measured and changed according to its various modes of existence. It is interesting to note that, in the end, it came to be inviolable again, as it had been conceived initially – sacred again, in the holy space of the museum.

The aseptic atmosphere and suspended time that characterize the object's documentation in *Red Impasto Jar* are contrasted by the lyrical intonation and temporal flowing of *After Life*, which provides a testimony of the context in which Kina's narrative originated. The work is structured in a series of short fixed camera shots, which depict the ruins of a small Faliscan necropolis and its natural surroundings, located in the same area of northern Lazio visited by the artist. The three tombs visible in the shots were discovered during a recent excavation campaign held in 2015; they, too, had been looted by clandestine diggers, like most of the archaeological sites in the region. However, there is no evidence that the museum's jar was stolen from this very location. The sequence begins with some glimpses of a verdant forest, and the sounds of nature softly guide the viewer into a contemplative state. The thresholds of the large, rock-cut chamber tombs appear only halfway through the montage and disappear after a few shots. Then we see the woods again, and a body of water, finally, a concluding bird's-eye view showing the crowns of the trees from above and from afar. At the end, one gets the feeling that the three mysterious rocky entrances were swallowed by the dense web of nature, or that perhaps they were nothing more than a dreamy vision. The sound of the water, which accompanies much of the filming, emphasizes the passage of time, the quality of which seems to be that of an inner, circular rhythm rather than a historical, linear one.

The two works, both shot on 35 mm, are seemingly very different in tone and approach, but when juxtaposed they generate a mutual tension and enrich each other. Both of them equally reveal some typical traits of Jonna Kina's artistic practice and language, such as the ability to activate the viewers' perceptual apparatus, the elegance and clarity of the images, the precision of the gaze, which analyzes and penetrates things and events without ever being excessively cerebral. On the one hand, her careful way of observing reality suggests a documentary sensibility, yet her way of processing and conveying the material she collects often opens up towards an imaginative dimension.

In a passage from the book *Autoritratto (Self-portrait)*, written by the Italian art critic and feminist activist Carla Lonzi at the end of the 1960s, which I happened to re-read recently, the author recalls that, as a young girl, she had approached religion before art, as a dimension in which to seek confirmation of the existence of deeper layers of reality. In Lonzi's personal journey, religious experience soon gave way to cultural commitment, but the basic desire remained the same: to contact with another way of feeling, to receive a deeper initiation into existence. From my point of view, this is the most powerful quality of Kina's works. They allow people to get closer to secret places that are not to be found in another space-time, but right here, nearby, in deeper layers of reality; they subtly lead us to a hidden elsewhere that lies between the realm of the invisible and the ineffable, and that cannot be described but only perceived.

– Marta Federici

MARTA FEDERICI is an art historian.

She lives in Rome, where she works for Gavin Brown's enterprise