

Imperfection is the summit

*There was this:
You had to destroy, destroy, destroy.
There was this:
Salvation is only found at such a price.*

*You had to
Ruin the naked face that rises in the marble,
Hammer at every beauty every form,*

*Love perfection because it is the threshold
But deny it once known, once dead forget it,*

Imperfection is the summit.

Yves Bonnefoy (1958)

The sky is blue when we begin the ascent to the summit. The air is pure and the sun warms our skin this October Sunday. The crest of the mountain beckons through the golden leaves of the trees that enclose this trail in Lunigiana. A sweet and luxuriant nature welcomes us, inviting us upwards, but as we walk, the forest greenery begins to abandon us rapidly, and is soon replaced by the stony colors of the mountain.

The surroundings gradually dry up and every organic element disappears. The trail beneath our feet starts turning white: we realize we're walking on crumbled wet white Statuary marble debris, and entering the quarryman's world. As if attracted by the ashen faces of the mountain's walls, gray clouds appear, enshroud our view, and begin stinging us with invisible drops of rain. We're following a path in an evaporating landscape, lit only by the blush of the occasional sunbeam filtering through the clouds that tinge the misty blanket enwrapping us.

Above the clouds, the surroundings change again, growing harsher. This section of the mountain is defined by an alien presence. Massive concrete blocks suddenly appear hold tall, slender pylons and dish antennas, modern totem poles left behind in witness of the passage of contemporary giants: inhuman tools built not to human scale but rather to the bulk of the Moloch of progress that wanders on these trails in the Higher Apuan Alps.

As the idle guardians of the mountain walls sliced perfectly smooth, steel cables and ladders, cranes, pumps, and pools of standing water herald our arrival at the marble quarry's entrance concealed in the mountain's flank. They appear as verisimilar cathedrals cut into stone, chthonian caverns where the Leviathan of marble industry takes its rest. The noon's dim light reveals rock walls 20 meters straight up before us, and square corridors with no exit. The walls and support columns filter the rain through their cracks and protuberances, filling the silence of this unknown monument whose pained beauty was born in the encounter of the noisy power of Man and the more silent power of Nature with the lumbering echo of countless drops of rain.

Weak monuments

A marble bas-relief embedded within the wall stands hidden from the negligent gaze of hurried visitors. Its camouflage is accentuated by its reduced size that recalls an old photograph, and by the shades of white concealed in the tints chosen for the walls available.

A closer look reveals how the raised white folds that make up the main subject, a portrait of mountain with quarry, rest on a second darker layer of gray marble. In addition to augmenting the depth of image, this Bardiglio marble recreates the temperature of a sky heavy with emotion and renders the chromatic variety of the places it depicts. The mastery with which the white marble was worked to the thickness of a sliver is no mere expression of technique as an end in itself. The transparency obtained serves to transform, as skillful veiling does in an oil painting, the original whiteness into a vibrating chiaroscuro thronging with detail.

The subject is no whimsical fantasy, but a real landscape, Mount Altissimo and its Tacca Bianca quarry in the Apuan Alps. These are the surroundings where Fabrizio Prevedello lives, works and continues exploring. This is his subject, his container, and his raw material. The artist continues observing its complexity through the eyes of his primary medium, sculpture, rendering this portrait directly into the material he is portraying live.

The decision to render this landscape in such a non-easily malleable material also allowed the artist to prolong the physical nearness necessary to capture his subject: a tactile and visual proximity that brought him to sculpt the mountain directly on its summit. This direct contact is reflected in the attention lavished on details and in the respect for the view that emerges from such close observation. If we take the time to look at it closely, we are invited to ascend – at least with our gazes – up the hilly paths and along the crests, and reach the entrance to the quarries that by now characterize this area. For both the artist and we that observe it, this sculpture is an instrument of mediation, a preparatory to our participation in this complex site where geological eras, art history, and world wars are laid down alongside the quarryman's daily labors in the layers of a tortuous material and epistemic magma.

The practice of embedding images into buildings is probably as old as marble quarrying itself. This desire to present a bas-relief, however, was born after the encounter with a commemorative plaque to the memory of the passage of a division of the US Army during the Italian campaign along the Gothic Line that ran right through these valleys and mountains¹. The size and the method of presentation of this bas-relief is a tribute, and as such this sculpture assumes the value of a commemorative image: it also recalls a passage, a weak, portable monument dedicated to its own execution. It's a cast, a trace left behind of the activity of Man on these mountains. The depiction of this ancient and classic landscape has, in fact, been interrupted by a recent gash in the side of the peak that penetrates it through and through, and it will be the same again. The marble has succeeded in registering, with its last forces, the memory of its place of origin. This landscape, inevitably destined to change, is in this way preserved in the material memory of this modern effigy.

Bachelor machines

Two blocks of concrete with rounded edges, bearing the marks of the wood of their own formworks, stand on two wooden beams inserted beneath them to assist a possible relocation.

A long iron arm divided into three parts protrudes from the block on the left. The arm's triangular structure recalls the boom of a crane, but the presence of horizontal rungs suggests its use also as a ladder. The boom rests firmly against the wall before extending lifelessly onto the ground, awaiting new destinations.

This second sculpture is a *bachelor machine*, the masculine counterpart of the feminine portrait of the mountain. It's a synecdoche, a gathering of images, instruments and experiences originated once again by the passage of Man through the Apuan Alps. It's the daughter of the steel cranes and the ladders we happen to find at the quarries, but it's bachelor, to the extent that it is not associated with any function of machine in our material world.

Not only does its boom rest listlessly without destination on the ground, its reduced scale precludes all possibility of profitable mechanical use. On the contrary, like any bachelor machine released from every linear destination², its value as a metaphoric instrument allows us to continue our

¹ The 92nd Infantry Division of the 5th US Army that served in Italy in 1944-1945 known as the "Buffalo soldiers", a nickname given to the Afro-American cavalry soldiers by Native Americans in the 1800s. This plaque – originally embedded on the walls of a home near the artist's studio – is no longer available because it was forcibly removed and stolen soon after the artist saw it. A copy survives on paper thankfully through the artist's *frottage*.

² On this topic, *The bachelor machines*, edited by Harald Szeemann (1975), for example: "Unlike real machines and even the majority of imaginary machines [...], to begin with, the bachelor machine appears first of all as an impossible, useless, incomprehensible, delirious machines. [...] This is of little importance. The bachelor machine has no reason of existing in itself, as a machine governed by the physical laws of mechanics or by the social laws of utility. It is a semblance of machinery, of the kind seen in dreams, at the theatre, at the cinema [...]. Governed primarily by the mental laws of subjectivity, the bachelor machine merely adopts certain mechanical forms in order to simulate certain

mental journey through this emotional landscape. “A machine is an apparatus designed to produce, to communicate or to transform movement. Whether or not the machines in question happen to be materially feasible makes no difference to their essential nature. They are first and foremost *mental machines* the imaginary working of which suffices to produce a real movement of the mind” (Michel Carrouges, “How to place the bachelor machines”, in *Le macchine celibi/The bachelor machines*, 1975, pp. 43-44).

If we come closer and observe the structure in its detail, we can see how the concrete front, with its modular, construction site aspect, conceals one side that is more sheltered from the hurried glances of passers-by. Inside, the sculpture opens and reveals a rise composed of three steps cut into the concrete with the insertion of splinters of marble of a size sufficient (no bigger, no smaller) to contain the artist’s work boots.

This ascent invites us to a new movement, a new mental and empathetic exploration through the potential ascent this structure offers. The use of slabs of marble found lying around the artist’s studio recalls the practice commonly adopted by quarrymen of inserting work scrap in the concrete and marble steps they built into the mountain’s walls to make their daily climb to the workplace easier. This idea of achieving the maximum result with whatever is available is one Prevedello holds dear. The artist rarely seeks the skills of others in the creation of his works, which are often composed of scrap material themselves recovered from disused quarries, mills, or hardware abandoned throughout the area. At the same time, we are invited to experience both the quarryman’s poetry and precariousness: the sculpture re-traces the long hike he makes daily, in the rain under a gray sky, up Mount Altissimo’s sharp slope.

The fragments of marble, horizontal here against the vertical plane of the bas-relief, evoke more pressing and humble needs than sculpture’s higher, classic purpose of portraiture. This juxtaposition has no intention of denigrating or lowering the value of these steps. It demonstrates instead the respect the artist has for this material, which is capable of both representing the mountain to imperishable memory and transporting us physically and mentally upwards. The desire to do justice to this material is, in fact, the force behind the turning of the cogs of this symbolic machine. Such mental landscape develops before our eyes as we walk and continue ascending the steeper and steeper rungs of this interrupted ladder in which our sculpture is concluded.

For this reason, the silent presence of the sculpted mountain is important. She is fixed, immobile, far from all the fuss we make with our transitory constructions. Together, the two sculptures compose a single apparatus capable of transporting the viewer’s experience towards potential emotional and physical scenarios, filtering it through the rarified gears of this bachelor machine that includes all the elements present: marble, Man’s work tools, and the sky that shelters both.

The continuing activities of destruction, transformation, and human activity in the territory is suggested and represented by the encounter between different natural and industrial materials. The emotion aroused by exploring these places – romantic by tradition but critical in application – tightens the chest, awakens the mind with oxygen, and moistens the eyes that observe all this beauty. Such is the raw material with which Fabrizio Prevedello models his sculptures: they are aesthetic objects capable of generating consciousness by means of the not accidental encounters between different kinds of materials and stories. These sculptures are matter, but also figures of rhetorical expression. Silent poems reified in concrete, marble, and iron, dedicated to both the beauty and the brutality that defines the climate of this Italian landscape.

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mechanical effects. Only when the signs of this subjective determination are gradually revealed does the fog of absurdity lift and the dawn of an implacable logic begin to rise” (Michel Carrouges, “Directions for use”, in *Le macchine celibi/The bachelor machines*, 1975, p. 21).

References

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