

S.M.A.K.

12.10.2003... 18.01.2004

Luigi Ontani

Genthara

The work of the Italian artist Luigi Ontani (°1943, Vergato - lives and works in Rome and Vergato) is extremely multifaceted and eclectic. In the shadow of the Arte Povera movement, he was working in several fields and in a highly personal manner as early as the nineteen-sixties. His extensive body of work comprises an exceptionally large number of influences, translated into various disciplines: he does paintings, sculptures, photos, ceramics, glass, installations and performances. They always refer to various iconographic elements and unimaginably fantastic images. Ontani's work has a diversity at whose centre he always puts himself.

The exhibition in the S.M.A.K. will bring together about more than two hundred of Ontani's works from between 1967 and 2003. Thirty of them were conceived and made for this exhibition. Various aspects of his work will be examined exhaustively in this exhibition. Throughout his career he has touched on numerous subjects and media which were far ahead of their time and were later explored in greater depth by other artists. His tableaux vivants can be seen as a milestone in performance art. In search of the notion of identity, both in his life and as an artist or model, Ontani makes artistic choices that form the basis of his work. For example, he travels across the Atlantic by ship like Columbus, reads Tarzan stories in public while playing Tarzan himself, or appears in India as a reincarnation of Krishna. He sees his art as a form of intimacy: 'I have lived through the images inside me'. By staging and manipulating his own body as an historical, mythological or religious personality, he breathes new life into references to the past. He does not use photography out of a desire for realism, but as an instrument for transformation and to represent well-known figures from the past. In his photographic works - usually with added watercolour or oil paint - he poses as, for example, St Sebastian, Pontius Pilate, or David and Goliath. He uses his own body to express his personal feelings: 'Posing is a way of expressing myself, a form of 'being' and speaking. I am the translator of my ideas.' These re-creations of characters contain references to folklore, Art Nouveau, dandyism and exoticism. Fiction and history are interwoven and at the same time refer to the most recent trends, such as the hybrid, the androgyny, clones and mutations.

The quest for new expressive forms, on which he started after 1980, is also very typical of Ontani. He experiments with ceramic materials and glass (he creates candelabra, mirrors and even stained-glass windows) and on his distant travels seeks out traditional techniques. It can be clearly seen that he draws much inspiration from both Eastern and Western influences (cf. Japanese masks). The forms he creates on the basis of his own body also lead naturally to the adoption of new materials and techniques. His return to painting is a consequence of this; he has, among other things, done various small drawings in watercolour and ink, mostly of nude figures and fabulous, mythological creatures. At the same time, he commissions craftsmen to make his designs for masks and sculptures in glass and ceramics. The choice of contemporary techniques combined with age-old themes in which he himself has a key function form the core of his sculptural work.

After a few exhibitions in Italy, in the eighties Ontani started to cause quite a stir internationally and exhibited all over the world, from the Guggenheim and MOMA to New Delhi, Korea and numerous places in Europe. His work also appeared in no less than five Venice Biennales. In 2000 he was proclaimed 'Artist of the Year' in Italy. In 2002 the P.S.1 Museum in New York held a retrospective of his entire career.

The 'Genthara' exhibition will illustrate Ontani's whole career on the basis of photos, drawings, sculptures, works in glass and ceramics. In addition, a new group of works will also be shown. In the artist's own words, 'My memory lives of contradictions, it is imprecise and distracted, it is vague and grammatically incorrect. The Genthara exhibition is intended to open paths of visual, literary and narrative associations.' The 'Genthara' exhibition is co-organised and co-sponsored by ITALRE and Giulio di Gropello. It takes place as part of Europalia Italia 2003.