

## Antonella Quacchia. Short stories of feminine *agency*

By Chiara Canali

To frame Antonella Quacchia's art we must start with her eclectic and multifaceted personality and her professionally stimulating and culturally intense life. Since childhood (at thirteen she was removed from her family of origin and given up for adoption to her aunt) she has had the opportunity to live in different countries around the world "absorbing the colors, the music, the smells, the light, the landscapes of places so different from each other."<sup>1</sup> After graduating from Turin with a degree in Computer Science, she worked for ten years with CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research) and then for more than two decades at the ILO (International Labour Organization) in close contact with researchers and delegates from all over the world, dealing with an international and multiethnic environment that enabled her to develop "a great sensitivity to distant cultures and ways of life."<sup>2</sup>

If, in fact, origin and family status lead back, from afar, the basic anxieties, needs, and necessities, it is then the natural, social, and professional environment that shapes beliefs and ideologies and influences the individual value system, especially when it comes to the full and delicate sensibilities of an artist. But we must not forget that human personality is also a result of one's deepest condition and being, in which unconscious needs, unmet needs, dark anxieties, such as those of a woman, a mother and an artist, surface.

*"To us women they left our world of tiny letters, they left us to make jams, lullabies, lace, tapestries, because that is 'what women do'; it is not History, it is only Life. But we today want precisely Life. [...] We support our feminist consciousness, recover our creativity starting from our world of lowercase letters,"*<sup>3</sup> said artist Cloti Ricciardi.

Although it is evident from Antonella Quacchia's biography that she has played a high-profile role in international organizations, having worked in management positions at CERN and the ILO, with the opportunity to leave her own mark of passage in "History" (with a capital letter), nonetheless, a constant dissatisfaction and desire to evolve and change her condition emerges, which will lead her, in 2019, to submit her resignation from the ILO to devote herself totally to art and creativity.

Her personality, therefore, is not only identified with that of a public and institutional figure, but also with the more intimate, subjective and familiar one of a woman, who wants to immerse herself in the flow of life and existence, with her own more emotional, visceral and feminine consciousness.

Emerging, then, for Antonella Quacchia, is the need to define her own artistic language and a feminine pictorial production, originating more from the daily life of a woman immersed in her era than from professional and work experience. In this sense, Quacchia's poetic and expressive world is not the violent, shouted and masculine world of big stories with "capital letters," but rather a domestic, daily, delicate work, made up of small daily stories with "lower case letters."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://artslife.com/2023/05/17/antonella-quacchia-tra-paesaggi-e-forme/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

According to the author, art is the tool that can awaken consciences through a different feminine approach, composed of gaze and memory that, by touching the chords of imagination, can reach out to engage the beholder with effectiveness and depth.

As Anne-Marie Sauzeau Boetti states, “I call female ‘art’ a ‘professional’ production based on the summary organization of a new expressive potential, that is, certain areas and figures born in the ‘interior’ of the female imaginary. This expressive potential directly related to the body and memory is a precious trace [...]: it is the guarantee of a female culture (in the broad anthropological sense) that today attempts to emerge as the other polarity in the body of the dominant culture that already contains it but insofar as it is removed.”<sup>4</sup>

The object of investigation of Quacchia’s “women’s art” are memory, real experience and imagination, especially in the *Our planet and Floating forms* series of paintings. The first works, which are distinguished by the splitting of the canvas into two chromatic parts, are landscapes of the soul that lie on the border between heaven and earth, between representation and abstract vision, where flat backgrounds of color are contrasted with informally reworked areas and free forms, suspended in space, become moving clods of a metaphysical nature. Color here, goes beyond the reproduction of the sensible data, it becomes physiological sensation, psychological and emotional interpretation that affects the viewer irrationally and subconsciously.

In the second cycle *Floating forms* the artist pushes beyond the boundaries of the usual and the known to explore bizarre but possible combinations of the real and the imaginative, gesture and matter, color and surface, to invent new modes of communication beyond the boundaries of the infinitely small and the infinitely large. In these works we can from time to time glimpse a form in the unusual play of clouds or the tangle of waves, or we can see a microcosm living through a lump of matter or a mass of color. These are works that, according to the artist, should open the doors of the imagination to touch the private experience of each of us.

In both of these cycles, Quacchia makes use of the liberating power of painting and material. Colors and other physical elements, the moment they become part of the artwork, change in nature, float in space, become a fluid, liquid matter that gives access to a completely new expressive world that is released from everything.

This process is even more evident in the recent series of works titled *Serendipity*, made with resin and salvaged everyday objects such as old Bohemian crystal plates or other household provisions found in markets between Vienna and Prague (where Quacchia now lives).

They are again “short feminine stories” that use, as a fluidizing material, resin and that incorporate and freeze within themselves various objects, figurines and symbolic figures, like shipwrecks sailing from the archaeology of the past to the dystopia of the future.

Small, three-dimensional stories that rise as paradigms of the human condition and take on the task of staging the representation of universal archetypes: the story of the polar bear clinging to an ice floe made of earth and moss as he gazes anxiously at the Arctic sea in which the ice has now melted; the story of the piglet smiling over a slice of Prague ham; the story of the thirsty horse and the story of the entangled chameleon...

With these little stories, Antonella Quacchia dives into the contemporary debate of global warming and the climate crisis to come up with a tale that, through some pleasant and unexpected discoveries (*Serendipity*), also has the ability to make the audience think about some pressing social issues of the day.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

Also belonging to the same strand of works is the group of three-dimensional paintings made of epoxy resin, transparent or colored according to different hues, which incorporate within them theories of equidistant ducks, immersed in the internal fluid of the resin, in memory of the underwater experiences of youth. According to the artist, there is no species that does not change its ecological niche more than humans, with negative consequences that will affect the human condition of future generations. In this sense, Antonella Quacchia's art reinterprets the posthumanist paradigm and emphasizes the urgency for humans to become aware of the fact that they are not autonomous agents, but belong to an ecosystem, to an extended system of relationships and plots (such as those she weaves among the rows of ducks in her resin works). The ways in which human beings live on this planet, the food they eat, the means they use to travel, how they behave, the relationships they have, create the web of who and what they are: this is not a disembodied web, but it is a real, material web whose agency transcends the political, social and biological realms of the human understood in the narrow sense, as New Materialism thinkers point out.

In this extended horizon, the task of the artist for Quacchia is thus to maintain a critical and conscious gaze of the past, while at the same time nurturing thoughts, reflections and alternatives for the present and future. In this perspective, Antonella Quacchia's art offers a unique balance between memory imagination and agency in order to constitute harmonious legacies in the evolutionary ecology of existence.