

Wood and iron, space's bond

Niccolò Mandelli Contegni belongs to the new sculptors' generation whose wish is facing material's tangible potentialities, methods and times for the work's manufacture more connected to the experimental tradition of the twentieth century than to immaterial hypothesis of the current technological and virtual wave.

His idea of sculpture is aimed at emphasizing the shape's essential route according to a plastic style that originates from his articulations, through junctions responding to the natural breath of wood and to the mythical energy of iron, images of plastic-primary feel, dialectical polarities between archaic and modern. Formal solutions in fact emerge from the observation of old beams and oak woods, that the artist let communicate with iron elements, in an exchange of energies, that are the concrete action of their construction.

Wood and iron, even if when they seem finds sublimated by the artist's manipulation, are respected in their natural shape and so have to be considered raw material. In this sense N.M.C. first of all interrogates their original identity in order to entrust them to a new formal destiny, union always in tension between the hot sensuality of wood and the cold determination of iron.

This means amplifying the correspondences between these materials and the plastic plan that the sculptor wants to carry out, in accordance with the intuitive synthesis between organic shape and natural colour, constructive abstraction and cosmic empty space, duality that complements every combination.

In order to achieve command of the means, N.M.C. always proceeds by degrees, passing from the material's dream to the need to convert its pre-existing aspect into lively and active language. Each sculpture, in fact, embodies a different fantasy, emerges from an unique vision, places itself inside a creative plan like a passing point of a movement, that shows itself in following plastic metamorphosis.

In the creation's process of each work have to be considered some manufacturing mechanisms that the artist prefers during his work, both in case he relies upon modulations only of wood both in the way of doing combination of wood and iron, in a incessant balance of weights and measures, between hard tactile textures and clean visual cuts.

Also the cracks of wood or the unevenness of iron have a good play in this search of primitive values and of essential cores that communicate the wish of exceeding the limit, to assert – almost thinking of Brancusi – that sculpture belongs to nature's space, expressing a common view of observed and lived shapes.

While trusting to wood's plastic entirety we can feel the weight of tradition and, especially, of the symbolic values gathered by the sculptural making of primitive sign, like a sort of plastic-physical tension, where figure elements turn into fluid joints of full and empty, in which material enters or emerges.

There are wooden sculptures which seem prepare themselves to the insertion of iron, even if they are formally independent, they indicate the points in which metal signs could fit in, without spoiling their breath.

The wood-iron dialogue is sometimes constituted by a couple of dissimilar shapes, balanced on a inner ridge played on full/empty rhythm, with tendencies recalling the deep joint or the simple contact between these two materials. The feeling is that they always are on the point of meeting, even when they are only close, in fact there is an implicit strength, which connects the plastic and chromatic qualities of wood and iron, through a perceptive magnetism that follows the space's bonds, both when they soar vertically and when they take an horizontal position.

If the artist preserves and exalts the intrinsic natural instinct of wood, as to the iron, he creates structural lay-outs, that cross and are composed according to strong impact solid geometries, so that the contrast-accord between emotion and rationality is the bearing synthesis of every work, its essential origin.

In other works predominates the permeation's sense through the insertion of iron bars inside the wooden body, in its turn modulated and bored to let them enter while they bend and emerge from the other side, in the right point of their course.

In a work which deviates from all the other ones, the sculpture recalls the image of a wooden sarcophagus, on which there are curved and opposed irons, with a symmetrical connection that however never reaches minimalist results, they rather express expression and vitality's impulses.

Another junction mechanism can be noticed in the gesture of inserting a lightly curved iron patch in a piece of wood, that receives it like a blade squeezing, even if only a little, in the material's profile.

This mode repeats in other sculptures, played on the cutting effect of rough metal, on the meeting between a shape which attacks and the other one which resists, creating a single body, as synthesis of the opposites.

This dialectics is essential also in the works based on the circle's figure or on several simultaneous circles, solutions that for sure recall Ettore Colla's sculpture, especially when the space is crossed by transversal straight lines which enter into the limited empty space to throw themselves beyond.

To point out other references, closer to our sculptor's feeling, we have to consider also Giancarlo Sangregorio's constructive lesson, especially for the plurality of shapes contained in the work's plastic unit, but also for the invention of joints and connectors between a material and the other one, between natural and mental light.

In other plastic solutions, N.M.C. faces the union of materials with quiet harmony, interested in circular and wrapping movements of the parts, as well as in the solemn ambivalence of light and shade hidden in the shapes, even when they spread from the inside to the outside with calibrated oscillations.

Besides there are works, which are abstract iron cages that confine the wood in the pressing breath of their geometrical rhythm, this expressive situation reveals the anxiety of man kept in the world's obsessive grip, metaphor of an ancestral state, that makes itself clear in the impossibility to escape the pressures of contemporary life.

In the end it's different the attraction connected with other formal adventures, where the artist invents combination of anomalous shapes, strange disjointed bodies, figures hanged in the balance of the empty space, looking for improbable space anchorages.

They may be imaginary junctions that question the space from the point of view that Niccolò Mandelli Contegni is indicating today to the members of the audience, the one of instable balance, of suspended view, of shift from a point to another one of the adopted shapes.

They are potential icons, that can be planned or defined, figures emerged by imagination through slow sedimentations, synthesis processes between plan and fantasy, between formal calculation and intuitive knowledge, for a practice of sculpture as genesis of always different space relations.

Biography

Niccolò Mandelli Contegni was born in Varese in 1967. After having studied law, he began dedicating to sculpture full-time. He travelled all around the till he reached South America, where he settled at the beginning of the nineties, first in Brazil, Peru and Bolivia, then in Central America. There he realized very big sculptures, using several tropical woods. When he came back permanently to Italy, he devoted himself first of all to stone and marble's manufacturing and in the last years to iron, often used combined with wood. Now he lives and works in Varese.

Personal and collective exhibitions

- 2005 **"Sculpture"** personal exhibition – Mosaic Gallery – Chiasso, Switzerland - Catalogue, critical text by L. Cavadini
- 2005 **"Lombard sculpture in Seprio"** collective exhibition in Torba's monastery (property of the Italian National Trust Fund) – Gornate Olona, Varese – Catalogue by L. Cavadini
- 2005 **"From witnesses to witnesses"** collective exhibition in Ghiggini Gallery – Varese
- 2006 **"By wood and spirit"** personal exhibition – Zero Space Gallery – Gallarate, Varese
- 2006 **"Mimmo Rotella and the lake's artists"** collective exhibition – Voltorre's cloister – Varese – Catalogue by L. Schirotti
- 2007 **"Art for art"** collective exhibition – Giubiasco, Switzerland
- 2008 **"Bodies"** collective exhibition – Durazzo Villa – Santa Margherita Ligure, Genova
- 2008 **"The sound of silence"** collective exhibition – Imbonati Cavallasca Villa – Como – Catalogue by L. Cavadini

- 2009 **"Synthesis"** personal exhibition – space Cesare da Sesto Calende, Varese – Critical text by F. Marcellini
- 2009 **"2009 acquisitions"** collective exhibition – Parisi Valle's civic museum – Maccagno, Varese – Catalogue by C. Rizzi
- 2009 **"Four generations in comparison"** collective exhibition – Banco Santander – Varese
- 2009 **"Arianna's thread"** personal exhibition – Veratti space – Varese
- 2009 **"Space bonds"** personal exhibition – Temporary space gallery – Critical text by C. Cerritelli - Catalogue