

The obsession with storytelling

by Cynthia Penna

The art of mosaics can be traced back to ancient Rome, a civilization which has left us an amazing heritage in the form of mosaic floors that tell stories and visualize legends: testimonials of History. In the exhibition "Reimagining Mosaic" the concept of mosaic is reinterpreted in an ampler and more complex artistic expression: that of "accumulation". For that matter: what is a mosaic, if not a kind of accumulation of tesserae, similar in shape but different in colour?

The accumulation of similar or different objects in works of art has inspired many Twentieth-century artists, from Arman in France, to Daniel Spoerri in Switzerland, to Piero Gilardi in Italy. Their works have contributed to the creation of artistic movements as Nouveau Realisme and Arte Povera. In the USA Robert Rauschenberg and his "combines" have inspired a kind of accumulation of objects that have evolved into "assemblages" and "installations", two of the leading art genres of the second half of the Twentieth century.

In the exhibition titled "Reimagining Mosaic" the art of mosaics is revised and reinterpreted in new artistic forms and languages that are far removed from mosaic technique in the traditional sense of the term.

This new artistic language of accumulation of objects and materials becomes a way to communicate, to tell stories. Stories that used to be transmitted orally are now visualized: words become images, a visual means of artistic expression.

An all-female vocabulary; the exhibition features only women artists and is characterized by a distinct ability to give the stories that are visualized a powerful emotional content. The materials used by the artists are chosen, gathered, handled, torn apart, woven and recomposed in order to preserve a both collective and individual memory, and to visualize individual intimate experiences. This is achieved in different ways by the artists: by recomposing pieces of paper (Wulf) or plastic (Barnes). Insignificant fragments take on significance as parts of a whole, as the plastic sense of Barnes' sculptures which seem to embrace themselves and dialogue with the surrounding space, projecting into the room and conquering it with its newly acquired substance; space becomes means and end of Barnes' story, where individual electric wires, plastic fragments, threads of fabric, all of them with an own history, are united and broken apart in a continuous dialogue with the room, which is invaded by amorphous and vague forms that create a new story and "speak" a completely new language.

In Wulf's collages strips of printed paper, that have been torn apart and put together again, tell a story of stability and at the same time impermanence, the fleeting nature of existence and the solidity of memory. Her works remind of card houses that collapse on themselves at the smallest breath of air, yet require great skill and patience to build. In spite of their fragile nature they are testimonials of Time and memory. Or of works that evoke the ancient cities of South America, like Machu Picchu with its eternally solid walls, built as dry stone walls without cement. From the instability of buildings that seem on the verge of collapse and destruction to the solidity of walls that bring to mind books stacked on top of each other: solid walls of knowledge that bear witness to the passage from the written word to oral communication and to the visual messages conveyed by images, thus merging art genres and languages in an all-embracing act of meaning.

Art by accumulation can be linked to a kind of obsession: that of creating a meaningful whole from fragments that originate from another, chaotic and indistinct whole: an obsession with the repetition of a gesture inspired by a desire for assertion, an obsession with the expressive nature of a composite language, as assertion of a principle, a belongingness, an identity, a genre or an ethnicity.

Everything centers on language, verb, word, memory that is handed down, as in the tapestries woven by the artists of Shipiba where the repetitiveness of the graphic sign becomes a way to tell stories by images, or a visual story that serves to keep a heritage alive and to hand it down to future generations.

If one looks carefully at the fabric, dwelling on the patterns that are repeated again and again, it becomes clear that it is a matter of a visualization of the repetition by means of which a story is handed down by oral tradition: something that has characterized most cultures that have survived until our days.

Oral tradition has thus preserved and saved whole cultures from oblivion, and it is no coincidence that in many ancient cultures it was women who took care of transmitting the knowledge, traditions and rituals of the community, and this has been true of both small villages or large ethnicities. And this knowledge was transmitted precisely through stories, fables and myths.

The patterns woven into Shipiba tapestries and fabrics therefore do not only represent a mere repetition of a gesture: they transmit the archetypes of ancient Peruvian culture, capturing the sense of Time as intrinsic element in the act of transmitting, of repeating an infinite story. A time that is distant, yet constantly renewed through the word and the story, regardless of how much it is altered and transformed as it is handed down and thus kept alive.

Language is also a constant in the work of Lisa Bartleston, who in her obsessive accumulation of small, cubic sculptures evokes a concept of community, of a group one may belong to and identify with; in her case the single fragments of the individual sculptures carry the full significance of the whole; every single element points to the whole in its expression of sense, as a self-sufficient linguistic entity. One must not make the mistake of associating the cubic shape with a merely geometric significance, or focus on the relationship between the geometric shape and the space surrounding it; the meaning of these works is something completely different: these porcelain cubes are receptacles containing matter, relationships, affections, stories and dreams. When they are installed together the single elements form a collective entity, a whole that evokes concepts of family, community, country, nation and an entity that suffices unto itself, as that represented by a person's desires and creativity.

And so we may conclude that these new mosaics of the Third Millennium, these works created through accumulation and recomposition, are nothing but stories: personal stories about a formerly fragmented Self that has been recomposed; stories of a collective memory to safeguard and transmit; stories of personal identities and stories of "togetherness", of community. Regardless of how we want to define and understand the concept of "mosaic", it is a composition or recomposition whose significance is to be found in the recomposed whole. Through mosaic art we hope to "recompose" our individual existence or our feeling of community, and to achieve this we will in any case rely on Art, which above all is, and remains, an expression of Beauty.