

The making of Mom

Andrea and Davide arrived at blank in the early afternoon of Thursday 19th June, carrying with them some fairly heavy objects: a roughcast of a sculpture they were going to work on here, on the killing floor*; an 80-cm high stand made out of MDF and painted white, with a quadrangular base, its sides measuring around 40 cm; a bucket containing pieces of modelling clay; two hot-air paint strippers; other stuff. On arrival, the sculpture appeared only roughly outlined, even though one could already make out the shape of a bust; it was made out of two different colours of modelling clay – one, a deep brown, and the other a sort of red lead shade, a reddish-orange hue – applied to an armature built mostly out of little blocks of wood, held together by wire and screws.

First of all, the floor was covered with a large plastic sheet, in order to protect it whilst working; subsequently, they built a rudimentary barrier around the bust, on the stand, using two wooden strips, so as to contain the fluid substance as it fell from above. Many pieces of modelling clay were placed on the terrace - where the afternoon sun shone relentless during that season – so that they would soften before being added to the form, which was just a roughcast when it arrived here, and was to be completed in the course of the afternoon.

A couple of days before, Davide had told me about their new approach to work, about how the studio al mulino's role was no longer merely instrumental, as a neutral space where creation took place: on the contrary, it physically participated in the creation, with objects added to the sculptures during construction. These objects carried their own history with them, maybe not entirely intelligible, but always closely connected to the studio's past, to Andrea's and Davide's own personal experiences, as to those of the people who visited the studio and its owners. I imagined something similar would have also happened here, outside their studio, where they would have had even less control on the on-going creation. And, in my opinion, that would have been for the best.

That day, the whole thing took a little over three hours, and I witnessed – with as much discretion as possible – all the steps of the process, documenting them with a great number photos. The two of them walked around the sculpture, never letting it out of their sight, touching it in turns or at the same time, with a kind of loving force: it didn't seem, however, that there was any rivalry between them, and they treated the figure that was being created right before our eyes with great respect. Their gestures bore a sort of reserve – constantly contradicted, nevertheless, by their passion – which prevented me from perceiving my presence as an exercise in voyeurism. Though, thinking about it again, that is just what I was doing: I was witnessing, at some distance, something that was very private, which usually – when Alis/Filliol are working inside their studio, inside an ancient mill miles away from town – excludes the presence of anyone other than themselves.

The feeling was that each pair of hands, in constant motion, at the same time or separately, instigated or facilitated a sort of self-creation of the figure itself, which seemed to materialize inside a psychic field constructed by the combined action of the two authors. A human figure, of an indefinite gender, which incorporated many other figures, as seen in everyday life or especially in classical iconography: its dominant trait was a sort of detachment devoid of loftiness, as if to express a suffering which had been overcome, and had since transmogrified into composure and dignity. Endowed with a beauty which could hardly fall under any particular standard of aesthetics, it also expressed pride: however, none of these qualities prevailed on the other, and they each revealed themselves in turn, thanks to the encircling motion of the observer (myself, on that day) who could catch a glimpse of it as soon as they entered the space – from a distance of about ten metres – and could discover new and surprising peculiarities as they drew nearer.

From a certain point onwards, the two sculptors started to use the paint strippers, working on the form with slow and cautious gestures, but to great effect, nevertheless. I seemed to perceive a dramatic change in them and in the very atmosphere of the space/studio: this was the most powerful phase, which fascinated and, at the same time, disturbed me the most. I didn't lose sight for a single moment of what was happening (I took a great number of photos during this phase), intuitively aware that it was a violent and ephemeral event at once. An event which would leave tangible traces on the surface and on the form of the sculpture, but whose fleeting intensity would have been only vaguely imaginable, already starting from the following day, when the public was to come and see the work. Only the three of us will remember the experience, for we lived it.

In the end, the sculpture found its form, and only then did Andrea and Davide walk away – once and for all – from the place of creation.

Carlo Fossati, June 2014 (rev. February 2016); translated by Valentina Maffucci

*: killing floor II is a project by e/static in which other artists apart from Alis/Filliol were involved and took place at blank between 29th April and 27th June 2014 (please visit: <http://www.estatic.it/content/killing-floor-ii>)