

# PeRSONAe

The Latin word “personae” indicated, in Roman times, the masks of theatre actors. However, it then moved on to mean the represented character and, finally, the individual, the human being. Now in its second arrangement, this room finds its common thread in the “portrait” genre, the *ritratto*. *Ritratto* means, literally, the act of “pulling something out” of reality. Therefore, the exhibited artworks build a path in which portraits expand beyond their conventional form, reaching for times and modes of existence. Giuliana Rosso approaches the topic of the times of life through *Luna Azzurra*, an artwork representing the younger generations’ uneasiness, suspended between the search for a stable identity and the turmoil caused by one’s fears towards life and expectations.

On the contrary, Ryan McGinley’s works are fusional and evocative of a sense of community. In his research, the immersion of bodies in nature tells us of a vital spirit capable of comfortably moving across the time we have been given, restoring the dimensions of spontaneousness and fearlessness towards the future. Yet, nature is also a hybridization, the origin of stories and narrations, a projection screen of dreams. Roberto Kusterle embraces this artistic declination, giving voice to the human instinct for flying embodied in Icarus’ myth, conquered by technology yet still capable of poetic imagery. Also, in Jerez’s video *Lolita Lempicka*, the protagonist is the rhythm of time and the flow of images, where they combine and hybridize themes such as design or fashion, technology, and mutation.

Nonetheless, time relates not only to generations and great stories but also to history and art. So, famous figures such as Garibaldi, interpreted by Sisley Xhafa, present themselves through their first name, *Giuseppe*, to celebrate their everyday heroism, of which everybody is capable. To remove the hero of Italian Unification from his pedestal means, in fact, that all of us can meet the challenge and, moreover, that our true stature is not the physical one – Garibaldi was, indeed, short – but rather the moral one. Some faces do not belong to real people but to characters born from the brush of great Masters, successively re-elaborated in the context of contemporary art. This is the case of *L’era successiva*, the series Mariella Bettineschi dedicates to the women celebrated by modern paintings. Here we can recognize Caravaggio’s Judith: the double gaze and the white space hint at the ability to see, comprehend the past, and build the future through the complexity of inquietude and openness to the Other.

Like Bettineschi’s figures, the man painted by Antonello da Messina and then re-elaborated by Pol Bury with the photographic medium is also doubled. The figure is broken down, freed from the constraints of aesthetic standards to search for a new pictorial and formal sensitivity. Finally, the portraits by Yan Pei-Ming and Gelin are anonymous but by no means less powerful, sharing a robust material suggestion. The Chinese artist gives voice to the expressions of fear and vulnerability through the use of a severe monochrome, catching in the eyes of this *Victime*, *Juliette C*, the look of tragic and universal pain. Instead, the collective Gelin uses plasticine to give shape to a strongly characterized face that burst into the contemporary icons’ visual horizon and deconstructs classical portraiture once again.

Mariella Bettineschi (Brescia, 1948 – Lives and works in Bergamo), *L’era successiva* (Caravaggio *Giuditta*), 2015 / *The Next Era* (Caravaggio *Giuditta*), 2015

“I have been asking myself for a long time,” – says Mariella Bettineschi – “why do I choose renaissance women as witnesses of *L’era successiva*. Now I understand: because they are intact, they have not yet endured the fracture that would happen in painting; they look beyond. So, I give them custody of what is mysteriously approaching”. In this series of artworks, Mariella Bettineschi revisits several renowned masterpieces by Tiziano, Raffaello, Caravaggio, Palma il Vecchio, Bronzino, and Leonardo, doubling the gaze of their feminine subjects to elaborate a reflection on the past as well as on a future threatened by sociocultural, political, and environmental changes. The gaze’s duplicity, together with the printing on glass or plexiglass, emphasizes the ambiguity of vision and the absence of a univocal answer. The cut marks the break between the past and the present. Still, it can simultaneously be a meeting point, a double gaze capable of grasping and creating a dialogue between diverse perspectives on painting.

Pol Bury (Haine Saint Pierre, 1922 – Paris, 2005), *Ramollissement virtuel n°77/n°40*: Antonello da Messina, 2001

Starting from the Fifties, Pol Bury has turned his research to kinetic art, working with movement even when his focus is photography, specifically re-elaborated through a unique operation called *Ramollissement*. His first manipulations on vintage prints dated back to the Sixties, although his favorite subject since the Seventies has been photographic portraits. Punctuated by other artistic performances, the *Ramollissements* are never entirely abandoned; still, it is only in the Eighties that Bury starts infusing them with a meta-artistic discourse, thanks to his first manipulation of a painting by Mondrian. The photographic reinterpretations here presented are the result of extreme technical accuracy. The reinterpretation of Antonello da Messina’s painting *Portrait of a Man* (1475-76) seems willing to distance itself from the original, as if it was liquifying outwards, in a movement attributing new life to a piece of art over five hundred years old. Pol Bury seems to make fun of the renaissance’s concept of absolute beauty. Still, at the same time, he offers it the option to escape the boundaries of the canvas through the color’s motion, which appears to slip out of the figure’s edges yet simultaneously presents itself with clear and firm tones, evoking Antonello da Messina’s pictorial matter.

GELITIN (Vienna, 1978), *Roni*, 2006

The Gelin collective (composed of Austrian artists Ali Janka, Florian Reither, Tobias Urban, and the German Wolfgang Gantner) was founded in 1978 in Vienna, presenting its first exhibition in 1993. However, an actual definition of their work came only in 2005, with their participation in the Moscow Biennale and on the occasion of the *Dionysiac* project held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. In parallel to a purely performative artistic action made of spectacle, masquerade, and exaltation of the “dionysiac” pleasure, the Gelin experiment with a more traditional medium in the field of photocollage and assembly, in mixed-technique figurative compositions, always with a funny, ironic background. *Roni* belongs to a series of plasticine bas-reliefs portraying characters close to them as comical grimaces or flamboyant theatrical masks. Playfully reproducing the childlike use of plasticine, this technique expresses a pop heritage through its naive three-dimensionality and elementary and colorful shapes. Thanks to a deliberately excessive aesthetic, the Gelin aim to convey a polemic against conventional artistic techniques, to which they prefer a mixture of poor and often recycled materials.

Renaud Jerez (Narbonne, 1942 – Lives and works in Berlin), *Lolita Lempicka*, 2014

A low-cost production – smartphone cameras, VHS recordings edited with computer-generated images, and animated drawings – paired with sophisticated post-production gives shape to this video. Sometimes flowing hyperfast and sometimes with extreme slowness, it serves as Ali’s personal diary, a young rapper from Berlin and narrator of the story. Recording defects

become the narrative style of a generation of young people constantly balancing between “high-resolution” desires and a “low-res” experience of a sad and desperate world. But who is Lolita Lempicka? It is Josine Maryse Pividal’s pseudonym, a French fashion designer and perfume creator, evoked by the title yet excluded by the scene setting. Except that the same attention to detail is discernable in the video; in a creative mix, it brings out the various proposed topics as if they were different notes of a fragrance: commercial design, music and fashion industry, technology, mutation, disease, dirtiness.

Roberto Kusterle (Gorizia, 1948), *L’angelo della notte* (dalla serie *Riti del corpo*), 2002 / *The angel of the night* (from the series *Body rythuals*), 2002

The body, nature, the psyche, and the soul. These are the themes dear to Roberto Kusterle’s photography. The continuity between the human, animal, and plant world; the mediating role of the body; the denial of the gaze; the constant practice of irony, ambiguity, and metamorphosis. All of this gives life to an idea and, arousing wonder, finds its expression through a snapshot representing only the last step of a complex creative process.

This image belongs to the exemplary series *Riti del corpo* (1991-2014), which includes numerous photographs taken over a long period regarding the theme of the body and its hybridization. Against every purist idea on the verisimilitude of photography, the artist raises questions about the relationship between reality and fiction, history and myth, nature and artificiality, past and present, time and the contingency of living. Photography is conceived as the art of metamorphosis, language contamination, iconic references, and the need for depth to oppose the incumbent superficiality surrounding the contemporary man. Black and white photographs embody an inner exploration of existence in a suspended time in which the distance between dream, reality, man, and animal comes together with theatricality, giving life to ancestral, visionary, and imaginary appearances.

Ryan McGinley (Ramsey, October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1977), *Jake* (Cannes), 2005

Ryan McGinley digital photographs revolve around youth, freedom, hedonism, excess, the vital spirit, and the relationship between humans and nature. These are very powerful, compelling and fascinating works with an energy that expands through the figures’ surroundings. The artist creates a bond and reference between his work and the romantic myth of the “noble savage”, which has direct ties with Romanticism and the Romantic-Enlightenment philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the photograph represented here, it seems that man, immersed and almost incorporated in nature, innately strikes the right balance with the world in which he lives, observing the world with benign innocence. And the subjects of McGinley’s photographs seem to act according to their own instinct, which is harmonized naturally and necessarily with the reality they experience.

Yan Pei-Ming (Shanghai, 1960 – Lives and works in Paris), *Victime*, *Juliette C*, 2003

Born in Shanghai in 1960, Yan Pei-Ming moved to Paris in the early Eighties and began his research path within portraiture. He creates large-format works, in tones of black and white and red and black, portraying political figures or celebrities of the Eastern and Western world: Bruce Lee, the Pope, and European leaders, up to his consecration between the Nineties and the 2000s through the famous series of portraits of Mao Zedong. He matches a certain grandeur with a more intimate investigation, portraying the character traits and human moods hidden behind the public figure. Since the 2000s, he substitutes the already minimal range of colors with monochrome: the artist’s attention is exclusively focused on volumes and on the definition of a rough yet precise trait, almost delicate, with a uniform material consistency, realized with large brushes. Like that, the black and white become what Yan Pei-Ming himself defines as «what is necessary to express my range of emotions».

In *Victime Juliette C*, Pei-Ming deviates from his pop vocation of *celebrity portraits*, focusing on the depicted child and her expressions, revealing all the fear and pain of this unknown character, whose dramatic nature is accentuated by the black marks scattered on the canvas.

Giuliana Rosso (Chivasso 1992), *Luna Azzurra*, 2019

The artwork *Luna azzurra* (*Azure Moon*) and Giuliana Rosso’s research in general return a generational portrait in which you can note a human condition of constant uneasiness, drenched with contrasting feelings. The characters are intentionally portrayed without a distinction of gender or race, thanks to her peculiar use of fluorescent colors and black charcoal traces. They are often figures trapped in eternal adolescence, displaying attitudes attributable to that precarious stage of life strongly characterized by physical and emotional changes. They also have a paradoxical relationship with their environment, in which fears and imaginary presences are nothing more than a direct projection of their inner life. Her artworks focus on the surface and pay particular attention to their relationship with the space in which they are placed, often adapting themselves to angular shapes and recesses. Rather than windows onto the world, her canvases and papers physically irradiate themselves in the surrounding environment, in constant communication between her subjects’ inner world and the outer world in which the works are enclosed. For instance, *Luna azzurra* is meant to be installed in a corner, a meeting line of two walls yet, simultaneously, a place from which the artwork can embrace its surrounding space.

Sisley Xhafa (Peja, 1970), *Giuseppe*, 2007

In the City of a Thousand, the artist thinks about Garibaldi’s figure as a metaphor for the search for identity. Today’s identity is in continuous redefinition, in an encounter-clash among people from different cultures, often conflicting and involved in the great migration that, over the last decades, contributed to the transformation of this same identity and in which Xhafa himself participated. Born in Kosovo, he studied in London and Florence and now lives and works in New York. Garibaldi is not represented here as the “Hero of the Two Worlds” but as a simple man, as suggested by the artwork’s title, *Giuseppe*. The sculpture is not an imposing statue observing us from above; on the contrary, it is the figure of a man who, 5 foot 3 inches in height, does not lose the grandeur of his spirit and his moral stature, reminding us that any hero is a man like us. Ironically, Xhafa portrays Giuseppe holding some sugar cubes in his hand, looking for his horse, which acts as a symbol of the passing of time and, therefore, of the change that overwhelms our society, which Garibaldi must find again.