



GALLERIA CONTINUA | 30 YEARS

SAN GIMIGNANO BEIJING LES MOULINS HABANA ROMA

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ARMANDO TESTA

Le sirene di Armando Testa

Opening: Saturday 11 July 2020, Via del Castello, 11, 10am - 7pm
Until 6 September 2020, Monday to Sunday by appointment only

To guarantee maximum safety it's necessary to book your visit to the exhibition:
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Galleria Continua is delighted to host the exhibition "Le sirene di Armando Testa" by Armando Testa in its spaces in San Gimignano. The exhibition collects photos, sculptures and drawings realised in a time span of around 20 years that approach the theme of food. Since the end of the 1960s, demonstrating an ability to anticipate one of the trends of today, Testa has dedicated himself to this theme. He has a playful relationship with the image of food, he transforms it making it into a joke and simultaneously into a visual metaphor: "in my profession, every day, I have to enhance food from precious cutlery, to hungry mouths, to sparkling plates, but at times I feel the desire to give up everything, to shake hands with kitsch and interpret spaghetti, fruit, ham and eggs in free and voluptuous combinations and make visual art in the kitchen" (Armando Testa)

Armando Testa was a key figure for an influential generation that, in Italy, created an extraordinary crossroads between avantgarde and popular culture. Draftsman and cartoonist, director, painter, sculptor, architect, Testa is one of the pioneers and founding fathers of advertising. A "global visionary", according to the definition assigned to him by Gillo Dorfles, Ironic and forward-thinking, Testa distinguished himself for the minimalism of his graphic sign, for the communicative immediacy of his tag-lines (the brief and direct sentences that concisely summarise the vocation of a company), for his ability to interpret in an exemplary way the evolution of the advertising profession in Italy and the changes in society and the economy of a nation that lived both the "miracle" of the economic boom and the revolution of mass media television.

The indisputable quality of Armando Testa's advertising images is linked to his education and his simultaneous activity as an artist. In these images we find forms, suggestions and intuitions of the great masters of the 20th century that the artist-advertiser, with extraordinary visionary ability, has reinterpreted giving rise to a multiform selection of formal themes translated into an absolutely personal stylistic figure. His graphic inventions are in direct dialogue with the experiments conducted a few years prior to the historic Avantgarde movements (Abstractionism and Dadaism) and they anticipate or juxtapose Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptual Art and even some artistic innovations that developed in the decade after his death.

The title of the exhibition is inspired by an essay that Germano Celant wrote for the catalogue of the retrospective exhibition that in 1993 Palazzo Strozzi dedicated to the artist: "These creatures, composed and supernatural, like the sirens and the centaurs, are needed to enchant or educate, but also to free oneself from old ways and to get rid of a mummified order of communication that, in the post-war period, with the great diffusion of cinema and of television, had to "redramatize" itself in order to astound and seduce. (...) The tangle of dark and seductive forces, conscious and unconscious, sensual and intellectual, capable of soliciting the desire of the consumer towards a physical/participatory reaction, is based on the pleasure of devouring or swallowing, erotically, the subject. Testa therefore manages to "draw" the bodies of animals or people, the massing of objects or panoramic expanses giving them the consistency of food".

Around half way through the 1960s, Testa, using the fotocolor technique, began a personal artistic research: he creates a series of covers, photographs and greetings cards in which the represented subject – food – is taken

apart, analysed and immersed, through photomontage, in anomalous contexts in such a way that paradoxical situations are created. Starting from the famous “Lampadina Limone” conceived in 1968, Testa’s imagination had further examined all the inexhaustible potential of this theme, even managing to imagine mortadella and ham as perfect, sculptural drapery. Amongst these works, “La poltrona” made of ham realised in 1978, comes to mind, as well as “Invito al party” and “Tavolo con scarpine” (both created in 1980): the first represents some mortadella folded into the shape of an envelope, the second depicts a table covered by a table cloth of folded mortadella next to a pair of high-heeled shoes, concerning these works Testa affirms: “When I made the ham armchair I was very happy. Not only because it was an original idea, but also because it was sumptuous: the idea in itself of curling up in ham was physically new (...) That greasy fat from the mortadella table assails me, it’s a reality that I like ... I think how strange, how thick it would be if I put it on top of my hands.”

Armando Testa’s photographs therefore construct an imaginary world, the panoramas and subjects of which are entirely composed of food stuffs: ravioli are cushions on which two olives (Gli amanti) rest, a fried egg is an island (Isola di Breakfast), a slice of gorgonzola is an architectonic column eroded from the green veins of time (Colonna di gorgonzola), sofas made of potato shapes (Industrial designs), an asparagus is a monster that devours the beguiled and unprepared (Non ti fidarsi di un bacio a mezzanotte), Capri is transformed into two pieces of Parmigiano cheese (Saluti da Capri).

Linguistic deformation intervenes with the speaking lemons entitled “Espremiamoci di più”, the word that achieves its double meaning only thanks to a stretch in imagination. Another triple jump occurs with the sculpture “Stallone Sylvestre”, where the traits that form the images swirl together, as if they were brush strokes (green beans), the portrait subject (the stallion and wild horse), the title (which plays on the name of an actor who apparently has nothing to do with it).

“Armando’s works are icons. The god represented is not one, it can be a ham just as it can be a vermouth, a detergent or a diaper. (...) The gods are many, but the cult is one, only that of the icon. The communication icon, the icon that has always been the center of communication. Armando Testa was not interested in the products that with an “ingenious” spirit he represented, he was interested in art, in those signs that through the altars (religious and otherwise) of western culture had traced the becoming of art, complex, varied and even apparently contradictory. And to live peacefully the current conflict between an art for all and an art for art.” (Michelangelo Pistoletto).

Armando Testa (Turin 1917-1992) attended the Vigliardi Paravia Printing School where the abstract painter Ezio D’Errico introduced him to contemporary art, which he would then always look at with great interest. At the age of twenty, he won his first competition for the creation of a poster, a geometric design conceived for the house of ICI typographic colors. After the war he worked for important houses such as Martini & Rossi, Carpano, Borsalino and Pirelli. He also worked as an illustrator for publishing and he created a small graphics studio. Studio Testa began in 1956, dedicated to not only graphic advertising but also television. Some of the companies that used Studio Testa quickly became industry leaders: Lavazza, Sasso, Carpano, Simmenthal, Lines. In 1958 he won a national competition for the official poster of the 1960 Olympics in Rome. The image proposed by Testa was later refused and after a second competition was launched in 1959, he also won that. Then, between the fifties and seventies, images and animations filmed for television came about that then remained in the history of advertising, linked to slogans that entered common language: the graphic game between white / black and positive / negative for the digestif Antonetto (1960); the perfect geometries of a sphere suspended on a half sphere for the aperitif Punt and Mes, which in Piedmontese dialect means “one and a half points” (1960); the conical sculptures of Caballero and Carmencita for the coffee Paulista by Lavazza (1965); the spherical inhabitants of the planet Papalla per Philco (1966); Pippo the blue hippo for Lines diapers (1966-67); and then the actor Mimmo Craig struggling with obesity nightmares, with music by Grieg, for Sasso oil (1968); the handsome blonde Solvi Stubig for Peroni Beer (1968). As the first institutional recognition of his work, he was invited to hold the chair of Drawing and Composition of the Press at the Polytechnic of Turin from 1965 to 1971. In 1968 he received the Gold Medal of the Ministry of Education for his contribution to visual art, while in 1975 the Italian Advertising Federation pays him the Gold Medal in recognition of his achievements abroad. In 1978 Studio Testa became Armando Testa S.p.A. which in the following years opened his offices in Milan and Rome and continues to sign highly successful advertising campaigns. Since the mid-eighties Testa, in addition to advertising itself, has been involved in the creation of posters for cultural events and institutions of social commitment, from Amnesty International to the Red Cross, from the Festival of the Two Worlds of Spoleto to the Teatro Regio di Torino. He also created the brands that mark cultural entities such as the Salone del Libro and the Turin Youth Film Festival and the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art. His agency becomes the largest among those operating in Italy in that sector, with offices in the most important European countries. He devoted himself to a graphic and pictorial research of free creativity in the eighties and nineties. Advertising is now being studied as an autonomous form of expression and communication, and various Italian and foreign institutions dedicate anthological exhibitions to Testa which enhance his artistic activity. The Pavilion of Contemporary Art in Milan in 1984, the Mole Antonelliana in Turin in 1985, the Parson School of Design Exhibition Center in New York and Los Angeles in 1987, the Circulo de Bellas Artes in Madrid in 1989 should be mentioned. Also, in 1989 he became “Honor Laureate” at the Colorado State University of Fort Collins. Among the exhibitions dedicated to him after his death we mention the personal exhibitions of Palazzo Strozzi in Florence in 1993, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rivoli and Castel Sant’Elmo in 2001, at the Italian Cultural Institute of London in 2004, at MART - Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto in 2017, at the Royal Museums - Chiabrese Halls in Turin in 2018-2019. His works are also present in some important museum collections, such as the MoMA - Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, the Study Center and Communication Archive of the University of Parma and many more. In 2015, a public sculpture entitled “Sinesi 59” was dedicated to him in Turin where the artist died on March 20, 1992.

In compliance with the measures for the containment of the covid-19 contagion risk, the entrance to the exhibition will be limited.

For further information about the exhibition and for photographs:

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