

# At the heart of things

## Turning words to stone

by Laura Cherubini

*Knowledge is a relation of Same to Other, in which the Other is reduced to Same and divests itself of its alterity; a relation in which thought enters in a relation to the other; but in which the other is no longer other, as such – it is already own, already mine.*  
Emmanuel Lévinas

*Art cannot do anything. Which is not to say it is ineffectual or impotent – if anything, it means that art can, to the contrary, do everything.*  
Pietro Fortuna

### Against narration

All of the work of Pietro Fortuna moves from a rejection of the logic of representation. He seems to oppose that logic by some form of passive resistance. Eluding representation, the work of art gains resilience through a dogged opacity of sorts. The fact is, a narrator can hardly help from entering their own narrative, and this is exactly what Fortuna wishes to avoid. Narratives are located and develop within a timeframe, whereas the work of Fortuna condescends to inhabiting the most uncomfortable of times: the present. As Riccardo Giagni has written: “Each of Pietro Fortuna’s works, and his opus as a whole, seems to be generated by a work of deduction, an opting-out: he opts out of the claims of narrativity, of the literariness of the work, of the illusory dialectic of good and evil and of its representation by artistic means.” An unexpected parallelism is drawn by Fortuna himself: “My works are obstinately anti-literary, what they seek is a non-political primacy.” Art needs to be stripped of narrative elements because these, as Maurizio Marrone remarks, belong to the super-structure; the work “is never literary because the very category of referentiality, and thus the relation between model and representation is cut off at the root.” Literariness is replaced by literalism. Whilst rejecting literary mythologies and representational models, Fortuna does, all the same, speak of realism. It is just that his is “a *realism of initiation*, to be understood as a gateway to a form of life in which art, delivered of the promises of language and irreducible to words, manifests itself as glory.”

Maybe his purposive rejection of representational criteria is what draws Pietro Fortuna towards music. In the years of the Opera Paese experience, an interesting experiment in inter-disciplinarity, ample space was devoted to music, leading to collaborations with the likes of Philip Glass, Gija Kancheli, György Kurtág. In 2000 came the *Matan* project, a collaboration with musician Alvin Curran in which the latter composed a score upon which Fortuna based a video piece (*Matan*, incidentally, means various things, among which ‘madness due to meaningless strife’). “The images portray three children at close range, revolving like planets, leaning their heads, twisting their torso, as they are carried by the movement of the platform upon which they sit.” The children’s heads turn like spheres. Curran had chosen three sounds: two music chords, a sound of glass beads, a train breaking to a halt. As the video fades out, words appear on screen in fragmented, incongruous dialogue with the children’s faces, whose lack of awareness means they are also “blameless.” Those infant visages surface as figures of Otherness.

### Nostalgia of times to come

Glory was conceived for a cycle of exhibitions at institutions in Italy and abroad. Following on from the Glasgow Tramway exhibition in 2010, Fortuna is now at work on an installation

exclusively conceived for the Hall at Rome's MACRO museum; about 20 metre long and 5 in height, this project literally welds together three separate works realised for distinct settings over the 2002-2008 period into a single, organic body.

"This piece belongs to a broader project I have chosen to call *Glory*, and is a way of exploring a series of issues that underlie all of my work. With the project in Scotland I was dealing with the dialectics of singular and plural, individual and community. Here there's something else at work – says Fortuna in one of our interviews – because *Glory* incorporates new voices as it progresses. The subtitle to this episode is *The Tears of the Angel*: the Angel grieves because he knows that God's works will be lost and forgotten, that only a sense of mourning will survive them, as a foreshadowing of redemption. The Angel is the partner of God the Creator, is nearest to him in the work of creation and remains as creation's only witness. Humanity is the first destroyer of works (not only God's, mind) and then lives on in the wait of redemption."

The solid block of the installation cuts right across the open square at the museum's entrance, rotated only slightly along its axis so as to be taken in at one glance. The diagonal perspective condenses the complex and articulated structure into a single vision. In actual fact, there are three units, purposely welded together because each represents a moment in time; we should say they are replicas of three former works, each in some way accomplished, but also a novel creation in a certain sense. On one occasion Pietro Fortuna referred to nostalgia as an urge to recover our thoughts of times to come. Perhaps this is also a form of active and productive nostalgia, a manner of recovering past thoughts and giving them a future.

Inside a first metal block, as in a massive storehouse, or set of cells, the artist has stowed a collection of objects. They were all conceived previously, and have been re-elaborated, even re-created for this occasion. Firearms, twenty great plaster owls, and a steel frame (supporting a glass, which holds a pinecone, out of which a plant shoots out, as in a progression from inorganic to living). "A form of harmony which feeds a virtuous cycle: the plant shoots are nursed by the pinecone immersed in water inside the glass..." The glass is a kind of miniature still life – or better, to apply the expression Giorgio de Chirico used for subjects like these, a fragment of silent life (and a similar expression was coined by Marco Meneguzzo for Fortuna's opus as a whole). The glass is the vial that at once holds *in vitro* and displays the mystery of existence. It is a diaphanous microcosm stored in a transparent vessel.

The cage creates a sequence of transparent openings. Within it, a small bell and an electric flashlight, permanently lit, are rested in precarious balance; the beam of light defines the contours of things and then is arrested by the bell on which it shines, refracting in a glow. We see also a drawing/diagram (a list of names of benevolent institutions and criminal organisations – a taxonomy of good and evil). Sound, light, and a drawing.

Light to bring things into definition, then stop at the bell, making it glow. On the outside, the progression of grid / central body / envelopments corresponds to the alternation of transparency / opacity / transparency. On the inside, an essential catalogue of the things the artist has created, and now rest there.

Fortuna shoots the first picture of an owl in 2008, in a garden in England, arrested by the intensity of its gaze. One is reminded of a celebrated photo in which Alighiero Boetti, in the garden of the One Hotel in Kabul, opens his eyes wide in imitation of Rémé, an owl perched next to him.

The earliest rifles to appear in the work of Fortuna date back to 1977: they were "two crossed rifles, a bit like two oars, I drew for my personal exhibition at the Cannaviello gallery in Rome; I remember that Fabio Mauri, who was then a complete stranger to me, bought them together with another piece which for years remained in full view on his dining room wall – four small printed wings at the corners of a white sheet." In 1999 he realised a series of photographs of firearms for the Watertoren at Vlissingen in Holland; the idea, however, was already in embryo in an shot from 1976: that photo was taken at his house in Piazza della Regina, then empty except for one single piece of furniture. On its marble top, the artist had placed a gun. Another photograph from 1999 shows a rifle lodged on the antlers of a stag. The title is an ancient Hebrew phrase, *Ma 'asim zarim*,

which means ‘act contrary to religious law.’ “I placed onto the trophy the instrument of its death, though this, in turn, was being speared by the horns. Chance alone decides the outcome of the gamble between these two objects, each subtracted from a meaningful context and exhibited in plain naked form, in their bare essential weight... The rifle and antlers moulded into a single, bloodless, fleshless image; almost the petrified ensign of an act, of an existence that cannot be told, but only testified, in a challenge against time...”

It is a heraldic emblem, we might say, that is what it is, says what it says.

“The firearm lays bare its scandalous nudity. A weapon is always out of place because it belongs in a place which is out of sight... Sensing its presence is of itself a call to arms, foreshadows action.”

A weapon signals to the purpose of its construction, and yet also incorporates elements that are inessential to its function and become pure signs. What has always struck Fortuna is that someone took pains to make the weapon pleasing to see.

An episode Fortuna frequently cites is the fall of St Paul, the moment that determines his conversion. Saul takes his fall because blinded by a strong light – the light illuminates itself, in that he is no longer able to see anything else. That light, like the ornaments, speaks only of itself.

“All of this may be said to back up a persistent idea of mine: what the relation with the work of art determines, is not that you salvage it because it acts as its own custodian in presenting some reality: this cannot be, since I eschew representation. What you sense, rather, is that the work brings into the present the recovery of an origin. I’m firm on this idea of recovering a past. By making anew, as in a prayer, I bring to light, underscore, make visible that quantum of primeval state which is stored by the work itself.” (from a conversation with Pietro Fortuna)

The same occurs again in the central module of the work: this is a great construction of stacked cardboard panels, much like the Glasgow piece, onto which stands a structure a bit like a boxing ring – with rubber tubes resting on supports fixed onto steel rods. A massive frame with eight pairs of steel rods.

These two elements constitute the second and third modules of the work designed for the wide courtyard at MACRO. We are able to walk all round it in a complete perambulation, and so realise our perception along the axis of time: what is crucial, though, is that we are also able to grasp the work as a single unit, and at one glance. The eye takes in the work in a fast, sweeping flash: temporality collapses into the instant, duration is blighted in the fleeting moment, and yet the work is there as a fact and a presence. Paolo Aita has observed that in the works of Fortuna a perfect coincidence of presence and absence is realised. *Glory* is also attended by inscriptions, the titles of works by Fortuna, excerpts from the Gospels, and the Torah. “Each one of us in the future, each one of us in what has been.”

## **Two crosses**

All in all, the work of Pietro Fortuna seems to be the answer to one fundamental question: “How is one to be autobiographical and yet not talk about oneself?” Broadly speaking, the work of every artist is autobiographical; equally, though, his materials are elaborated, undergo a transformation, a metamorphosis: the biographical datum is thus made inconspicuous, or even invisible. Alighiero Boetti illustrates the case, if it is true (as his close friend and closer still interpreter Francesco Clemente maintains) that traces of his dna are disseminated throughout his work, though so encrypted as to be sheltered from indiscreet observers.

“All of my work is autobiographical. What I take from my being are the submerged resources of interior, psychological existence... I had a phobia when I was young: I feared the smallest jolt would make my eyes collapse into my skull. My very first photographs I took in 1975 (Achille Bonito Oliva saw them, too); I showed them at an exhibition in Trieste. I photographed the parts of my body closest to the camera lens, then moved further and further away, to my legs, feet, and over to the landscape beyond my body, in the background. The presence of my headless body merging with

the field of vision signalled exteriority, represented it almost dramatically. The gaze abandons the head, loses it in the exhilaration of vision. I see it as an almost autistic separation, which I have rendered into a kind of system, a structure, archetype: the descent or the field; the museum or the observatory; the cross or the voice. All of my work has in some way taken these disjunctions into account. The descent or the field corresponds to an emotional state of uncertainty or melancholy. Then, a bit like a stumbling block, a building full of windows falls between the observer and the horizon; that's us, standing in front of something we wish to observe, but at the same time it is our exteriority knocking at our door. We can see, of course it is possible; though only through a filter. Then, finally, comes the lightest thing of all, the one most intimately connected to the body: it is a tiny root that burrows into the ground, though also the cross, and also the voice. All these things have always been perfectly fitting to my work."

"The cross represents an absolute canon whose signs converge by linear progression." The cross recurs in Pietro Fortuna and even leads to the publication of a booklet, called *La Croce di Gino* (*Gino's Cross*). The title refers to a 1971 piece by Gino De Dominicis, a photographic print for the *Manifesto dell'Immortalità*; an 'X' bars a cross – or we might better say, one cross is laid onto another, rotating on the same axis. The two signs merge into one, so that "we'll never know which cross is barring the other." It's a bit like in *Ma 'asim zarim*: there's no telling which of the two elements composing the emblem shall win over the other, whether the rifle or the antlers. In either instance, the foregrounding acts as a threshold, making the solution to the conundrum unattainable.

### **A gaze deprived of vision**

Fortuna draws on a small repertoire of figures and objects, which are transfigured as they recur and accumulate. His well-poised (though never cautious) minimalism bears a clear intellectual mark. What Fortuna retains of minimalism is a kind of opacity, that state in which objects are mute. Also, according to Giagni, Fortuna appears to be striving against some limit, so that "the unlimited is encased in the work." In spite of the complexity of his installations, in a sense Fortuna has never ceased to be a painter. The quality of his painting had always tended to objectification.

The paintings exhibited at the gallery of Giuliana De Crescenzo (1980) were rather akin to drawings. A wide canvass depicting the Tiber traverses space, aloof. The vague image simply emerges from the empty background: no naturalistic element helps identify the subject. In the bends of the river we recognise nothing other than the strokes of the paintbrush: rusty, earthen marks, unconcerned with fluidity. It would seem that the interest is in the riverbed, not the river, in the unchanging structure: for in the same waters, we cannot bathe twice. A melancholy air emanated from the exhibition, signalled in objects of stark geometry. The idea of the limit subtended all those works, and still seems to recur in Fortuna's most recent creations.

At the Giacomo Guidi gallery in 2007 he strews the floorspace with cylinders of rolled-up photographic film, drawings, and photos. The coiled forms are suggestive of an interior existence, of a gaze from within onto which the images surface, of an absorptive look. The objects inhabiting the work of Fortuna are "presences that claim all time for themselves" (from an interview between Fortuna and Rossella Caruso).

At the Guidi gallery's new premises, in 2010, Fortuna exhibits a collection of two dimensional works (*Per esempio scegliere una maniera felice* – 'Choosing a happy manner, for instance'); here, "the artist makes parallel use of drawing and photography within a rigorous graphic layout which observes the logic of montage," As Aldo Iori observes. And further adds: "elements lifted out of the world as singularities (photos by the artist, personal belongings, geometric and free-hand drawings), details, not fragments, are pieced together... The montage always involves at least two images; Fortuna creates space, with them and among them, though carefully avoids hierarchy (symbolic, visual, or otherwise) and sensationalisms." In one of these works a black cross is superimposed onto a common artist's stool: once again the cross appears, once again the foregrounding technique

ensures the score is ambiguously even, with neither element clearly prevailing.

“At the entrance to the Nuova Pesa exhibition (2011) I had hung a great rolled up drawing, so that only the cross and a line of text could be partially seen at the loose end of the scroll. I’m writing a piece about the barred cross of Gino De Dominicis; I think its importance lies precisely in the fact that it is enlivened by a flaw... In the passageway I have rested my firearms onto a stack of old and new drawings. In another room there is a wooden table, onto which stands a glass with a pinecone full of green shoots. In the past, instead of selling these glasses I would rent them out for as long as the plant lived: two died immediately, so I lost the rent money; a third one went to an Englishman who phoned me three years later, concerned as to what he should do... There was also on display a cage with cylinders inside, and in the last room the owl on an iron perch. Then I produced myself in conversation.” (from an interview with Fortuna) Conversation as a work of art is a practice pioneered by Fabio Mauri.

It is a question of allowing the time of day to day life with the time of inner life. The otherness of absolute novelty springs (as Lévinas says) from transcendent temporality.

### **Being at one’s home**

“There are acts of ours which seek no retribution from time, neither profit nor compensation. They’ve nothing to ask of the future because they do not await fulfilment; they forsake knowing and possessing,” writes Fortuna. As presences, the works are poor, bare, essential as a sketch; they transcend temporality.

Because he drew, and, to a lesser extent, also painted, critics placed the work of Fortuna within the trend that in the early nineteen-eighties was returning to painting. The diagnosis turned out to be incorrect, however. “Mine was work entirely different in kind. I was only interested in painting in the sense that I would shift masses of colour from one point to another, period. There were talks also of the *informal* – that too was a misunderstanding. At any rate, I believe I produced some beautiful works that still await a comprehensive interpretation. Between 1980 and 1982 I produced very few works, which sprang from a quasi mechanical notion of painting: I mean there was no reference to objects, no representation, and many other elements that cannot be traced back to the manner of the informal, at once aspiring to disorder, and yet presupposing a remote order. No, my work then had nothing to do with that. What I wanted was, let us say, to experience greater freedom; I understood this much later, in seeing some old work by Gerhard Richter: there was a man with no preclusions, open to a wide range of experience, and able to make use of painting too. Let us not forget that Achille Bonito Oliva was the first to sense that my work and that of a few others, Francesco Clemente especially, was moving out of the conceptual stalemate; I mean that we would use drawing, and our drawings looked to the world. This was an absolute novelty, when contrasted with the analytic, clinical vision of conceptualism – devoted as it was to scientific verification. I remember an exhibition that turned out to be a landmark: it was 1979, at the gallery of Luciano Inga Pin, a man of great intuition... There were four artists on show, myself, Francesco Clemente, Mimmo Paladino with a photograph (since he was still a photographer to all intents and purposes), and another artist who also used photography, Alberto Garutti. That was the kind of atmosphere. But no, we drew an itinerary, a house, some personal pathway; that was truly a novelty, at a time when very few people would draw.” (from an interview with Fortuna)

We have identified nostalgia as a presence in the drawings of Fortuna, and there is a remarkable essay by Antonio Prete which argues that nostalgia attaches to time, rather than place. And we have further seen how Fortuna experiences time as time future, rather than time past.

“When I think of your work I realise that what first captures my attention has the customary traits of a drawing. And yet it is as though drawing were divested of its formal and expressive import, and assumed an aspect of motionless witness.” The insight comes from Maurizio Marrone, in conversation with Pietro Fortuna; Fortuna muses in reply that emptiness might well be the elusive

plus of drawing: “So, space now concedes a dwelling place for the drawing; the latter, thus, does not inhabit a void, but participates in the construction of a place.” According to Alain Badiou, the void is “absence of action, of an operation;” even philosophical categories are empty, in so far as we might say, with Althusser, that “philosophy is properly the place where nothing happens.” A void that is preparatory to action.

We might say that there are two elements to a drawing: emptiness and blackness. It is the same blackness which, as Fortuna observes, had expressed the radicalism of conceptualist and minimalist statements. “That’s how I came upon it, austere and purged of all rhetoric. More than a colour among colours, it is simply ink: viscous, tenacious; it supports the entire drawing, it is humble...” The drawing, thus, stands out as mental and physical at once; it is the subtle body of thought.

Fortuna has also noted the affinities between drawing and some forms of ornamental motif. He may be right, to the extent that ornamentation is free from mimetic constraints. “The drawings I obtained by filling in cut-out or perforated shapes are drawings in which the background participates of the presence of the figure; they are the outcome of an anchorage – though not in the artificial sense of a figure superimposed on the surface below. I have no interest in exhibiting the process by which it came to be; although I made them myself, I prefer to be rid of that stage and be left with the sheets to look at, see them suspended at the walls of one place and no other; I prefer the absolute oblivion of their genesis... What I mean by anchorage is the process of securing figure to background into a single frame of vision; it is an occurrence in which all semantic relations are stalled, an exhibition of unmitigated evidence.” In a documentary by Alessandra Populin, he also illustrates the ties between drawing, as a medium, and the sparse objects in his studio. The objects have entered a space without occupying it, have no resting place, do not generate a background. They are objects that go back to being drawings, drawings that are the anticipation of things, in the space between the act and a table.

### **The contraction of infinity into finite thought**

In other words, the finitude of being is pierced by infinity. Transcendence is infinite space, the same space that contracts until it inhabits a thought. “The space of transcendence is a *non-place*, a utopian *elsewhere*,” writes Franco Camera of Emmanuel Lévinas, according to whom the face of the other is placed in the trace of infinity, and God himself is at the limits of absence.

Although critics have located the work of Fortuna in the area of conceptualism, in actual fact his work instates a dialectic of the mental and the physical. “In art, the end is not extraneous to the practice; the end is the practice itself.” Each project must devise its adequate mean. Fortuna is all too aware of the limitations of analytical propositions and, as Maurizio Marrone observes, although he speaks the language of contemporary art, he doesn’t approve of its self-referentiality. Time is not the time of representation, but the “time of forever;” it is a notion of time, Marrone says, “suspended between future and future.” Art must not seize things and turn objects into images, Fortuna remarks: instead, it must “bring new objects, contribute new models and cast them onto a common horizon.” At bottom, it is a question of “bringing words near the state of things,” of turning them to stone.

According to Fortuna, the meaning of frontalism is responsibility towards the other “as though the other were a face before your eyes.” The other is the measure of my own existence, and is never all that far. Art is spirit, thought, an “amorous demeanour.” Its statute in time, Fortuna notes, is similar to that of another eminently unproductive activity, namely prayer – which some have regarded as the event that casts human beings in time. Silence, though, is here not merely absence of sound, but a form of the inexpressible, the impossibility of words. At the peak of their potential, says Fortuna, human beings are silent; and Marrone adds “alone, also.” Riccardo Giagni has remarked that the work of Fortuna “has the plain evidence of beautiful things, although its evidence is mute.”

“The work of art stages a ceremony, welcoming the glory of the inessential in the scandalous measure of paucity. Art springs from little more than nothing.”

The 'glory' in the title thus turns out to be entirely devoid of presumption; true glory is made of almost nothing, because less means more. Here is the true scandal!

Metatròn was the name of the angel nearest to God, the custodian of all images, a kind of "minister of communication," as Pietro Fortuna says. A drawing is a volume that sheds its body. Like an angel. In the words of Fortuna: "The angel of creation weeps because he believes that to be the place where nothingness is concealed – the nothingness to which all must return. The angel knows not, but believes."