

storie del giardino | *What plants do at night*

What a beautiful image they conjure: those little gods of Japan glimpsed near villages, weathered grey stone statues with a piece of cloth around their necks, placed before some offering, like children waiting to eat their soft-boiled egg. Their place of worship among us: these chapels whose rusted gates no longer close, where, as one passes, the faded scent of flowers mingled with leaves can still be caught, a half-withered fragrance of devotion.

Yves Bonnefoy, *In the Shadow's Light*

The dandelion has grown on the balcony, though no one knows why or where it came from. One could ask it any number of questions. Its world is unimaginably vast. Most likely, the wind carried it, dropping it from some distant sky before it found its way into the earth. In any case, when it arrived, no one noticed. The cars remained in their parking spaces, the children did not stop playing football in the churchyard, and people continued talking to one another as though nothing had happened. Hidden in the succulent shade of the aeonium, patiently counting the slender spines of the echinopsis, the dandelion put down its sturdy roots in pots already occupied by others.

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What do plants do at night, when it is usually pleasant to remember. As a layperson, I wonder what memories plants might possess. Do they carry with them, across sidereal distances, the memory of the seed dispersing or that of the earth enduring. And what is their sense of time, their measure of the expansion and contraction of space, their principle of coexistence and struggle. Whether, finally, in their most unfathomable recesses, they preserve an image of their origin, reaching back thousands, millions of years, or perhaps even a small fragment of what is yet to come. Something that returns to the moment when one thing came to an end in order to give rise to another. I hope they know. I hope they know how to imagine it. I wonder whether a common root might exist, and therefore be identifiable. Whether that part of our memories, no longer conscious, of animals wandering through nothingness might coexist with this long vegetal cycle of life and death. Whether some part of our deepest perception might retain an awareness of plants that have long since become extinct, their shape, their colour, their taste. I remember the plants that grew on this same balcony twenty, forty, perhaps sixty years ago, or even longer. The water that was once poured over them to help them grow can still be felt, in other forms and other consistencies. It remains as clear as if it had only just begun to flow, as if it were still slipping down the wrists. Cool and tinkling like an endless, slender string of pearls, it falls drop by drop from the fingertips that measured out the fresh, mineral-rich water. Those fingertips seemed to speak with the plants in a language entirely their own, a warm language. They exchanged quick gestures of understanding about what time or memory might mean, or what lay beyond death and life, ending and beginning. They spoke also of things closer, smaller. What it truly meant to feel an overwhelming affection or a tearing hatred. Whether to practise care or domination, forgiveness or cruelty, remembering or forgetting. They were, and somewhere still are, because that is how they appear in a strange sense of eternity, quick gestures belonging to a discreet alphabet. They barely stirred the still air. They usually took place as the sun was setting, when a reddish liquid seemed to seep from the scorched cracks in the walls of the buildings, as though it came from an ancient breath. It is at that moment that one waits for the answer to some important, fundamental question, at the end of the day, precisely when it is time to bring water to the plants. To quench one's thirst alongside them, wherever they may have come from.

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Now the dandelion's stem sways between the white railings of the balcony, its yellow flowers drawing the solitary dance of a wandering bee. These are the plants that grow without invitation. The wild blackberries and clovers, those that insinuate themselves into cracks in stone, that live their lives at the margins, following the smallest trace of moisture along roadsides, between peeling walls, in forgotten masonry, beside the hinge of a door that has long

since fallen out of alignment. These are the presences that inhabit Gianmarco Biele's practice, with the garden, understood as both a physical and mental space, at its centre.

Every garden is a cultural and social construction through which human beings attempt to establish a balance with other forms of life. Nature and artifice coexist within it without resolving into one another. Growth may be accompanied, contained, directed and classified, but every form of order already carries within itself the possibility of its own alteration. The garden that unfolds in Biele's work is a place traversed by oblique forces, by barely perceptible yet latent pulsations. It is marked by an evident vitality that nevertheless tends to escape attention. It is like a form of dark matter which, concealed among things, comes to shape the fabric of the observable and imaginable universe (Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, Neri Pozza, 2019).

The works presented at Alfonso Artiaco originate in a sustained observation of early painting. Biele focuses on what habitually remains at the margins of great representations: a leaf, a stem, an interlacing of branches, a detail that participates silently in the image. One example is the red flower almost concealed in the shadow of the frame in Andrea Piccinelli, known as Brescianino's *Madonna con Bambino e San Giovannino* (?), from the collection of the Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte. It is a reversal of perspective. What once appeared incidental acquires autonomy. The background emancipates itself from the univocal nature of the narrative. The horizon advances and becomes immediate. Time is suspended, and points of reference progressively lose their consistency until they take on the quality of abstraction. Form and matter, contour and colour, light and shadow, warmth and cold, above and below, fullness and emptiness organise themselves according to provisional and revocable balances.

To understand the garden, it is not enough to look at it frontally, as though it were a stage already arranged according to a hierarchical perspective. One must enter it, allow oneself to be enveloped by its weave, and relinquish established scales of distance. As in Leopardi's hedge, it is not so much what lies beyond the boundary that suggests the infinite, but the act of immersing oneself in the boundary itself. This happens when the boundary ceases to be an obstacle and becomes part of knowledge or intuition.

In the crystalline liquids of light filtering through the branches, in the fragmented geometry of shadows woven by the leaves, the structure of a continuous becoming is revealed. It is a secret matrix in which every form is contained and which anticipates the possibility of transformation. For this reason, the vegetation that occupies Biele's practice is not that of ornamental perfection, of the happy heterotopia (Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, Mimesis Edizioni, 2000). The poet and playwright Maurice Maeterlinck had already observed how the vegetal world, apparently so quiet and resigned, was in fact the site of the most tenacious revolt against destiny (Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Intelligence of Flowers*, Pendragon, 2019). In Biele's work, harmony does not coincide with a stable order. Rather, it emerges from the tension between the need to organise living matter and its irreducible capacity to elude any definitive form. Sustained by this play of balances, the works in the exhibition become active entities. They redirect the configurations of the gaze and produce a shift in thought, a displacement of memory, an intuition, a prophecy (W. J. T. Mitchell, *Pictorial Turn. Saggi di cultura visuale*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2017).

The vegetation portrayed by Biele is therefore tenacious. It is often anonymous, adapted to the most adverse circumstances and open to the unforeseen (Gilles Clément, *Manifesto of the Third Landscape*, Quodlibet, 2005). A root that, as it develops, fractures a stone. A shoot that finds space between two surfaces. A plant that reaches relentlessly towards its source of light. These are minor figures that survive at the margins, like small nameless divinities yet belonging to a genealogy of powerful symbolic intensity. They rest in the dusty cracks of forgotten devotional buildings. They bear stubborn witness to a form of devotion that has become unrecognisable, estranged from any ritual or tradition, yet continues to slowly inscribe itself into the very conditions of the space and time it inhabits. Biele's works seem to partake in this same subterranean yet emergent impulse. They are like seeds carried by a cosmic wind, arriving in distant, unimaginable and unpredictable places. There they settle, waiting for the conditions that will allow them to germinate.

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