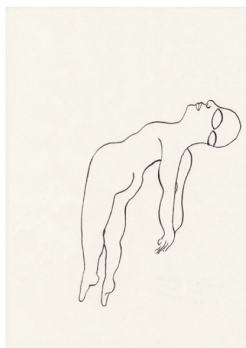


INTRODUCING

# FRANCESCO ARENA PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO



Francesco Arena and Patrizio Di Massimo talk about their respective artistic practices, which share – though in distinctive ways – material and conceptual characteristics that range from drawing to an interest in Italian history. In the conversation that follows, modernist nostalgia encounters family albums, and the headlines of the Seventies, those of the present day...



FRANCESCO ARENA: *I'd like it if you could tell me something about your drawings.*

PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO: Drawing is probably the reason why I became an artist. Like many other artists, perhaps, as a child I would be complimented on my talent for drawing. This was the beginning of a major gratification, perhaps the same one that motivates me today. Also, drawing is direct, there's no mediation. To my eyes, this makes it the truest medium – the one in which it is most difficult to lie. My favourite artists are draftspeople who later stopped drawing...

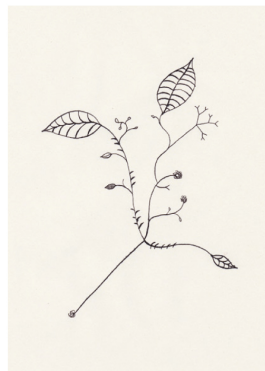
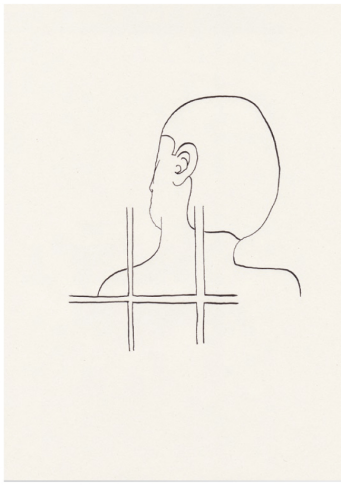
FRANCESCO ARENA: *I asked you about drawing because, I, on the other hand, am a terrible draftsman, even though drawing underlies my work. The sculptures themselves are treated like drawings; a cut has the speed of a mark, a structure of found objects has the provisional nature of a sketch. Drawing is like a piece of numerical data you note down so as not to lose it, one that sometimes requires tremendous in-depth work to be disassembled, analyzed, understood. That piece of data is the core everything is wrapped around, to protect it and let it take root; it is the only real element in provisional stories that can be transformed by interpretation, collapsing into memory.*

PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO: Are you referring to data as an element of historical proof? In my exploration of what it means to narrate an event, I've run into different interpretations: from the typically postmodern idea that there is no difference between rhetoric and historiography, to the Aristotelian concept that facts and data are the fundamental core of the historian's work. In my work, I can only highlight the points at which historical facts, which should be objective, for some reason become a tool of rhetorical appropriation, thus entering a completely different timeframe. You often transfer specific moments in the history of Italy (the death of the anarchist Pinelli) into formal transcriptions (etchings on slate). Are you interested in finding out the truth behind that incident and restoring significance to specific facts? What do you think of journalism?

FRANCESCO ARENA: *Journalism is crucial, it has the power to describe the world and distort it. In Italy, for some time now, the news, especially on TV, has been turning into propaganda and reinterpretation. Just recently, I was watching a TV show where they were talking about the death of Giuseppe Pinelli. A representative of the Milan police department said that Pinelli fell because he was leaning out of the French doors in Commissioner Calabresi's office, and the railing was just over 50 centimeters high. Actually, the railing was 92 centimeters high, that's 90% higher! This is just an example of how a simple, proven fact – like the height of a railing – can be easily manipulated to become ambiguous. When I choose a fact that informs the work, I'm not doing it to try to discover the truth, but to grasp a truth that, starting from the fact in question, becomes a tool for looking at everything else.*

PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO: When work starts as an analysis of social, political, or historical issues, it turns from an aesthetic experience into a cognitive act. For my sound installation *The secret proceedings in the trial at Benghazi, 15 September 1931*, I decided to use a document – the transcription of Omar Mukhtar's trial in an Italian court as the leader of the Libyan resistance – only because the interrogation itself was transcribed, almost like an exercise in style, in three different narrative forms. And so the document itself becomes the proof that the proof is unreliable. What do you think of the way that many artists nowadays use documents from the past?

FRANCESCO ARENA: *Facts are a wilderness where different views confront and oppose each other; facts interest me as units of measurement around which to build sculpture... a weight, a distance or a surface inform the work and determine its form or dimensions. The fact is there, open to interpretations despite its fixed nature; I decide whether to choose it or not, but what I choose is the fact in its abstract form, in its airborne, vocal state; even when I use documents I'm not interested in the original document, but in its contents. Many artists employ documents for their material or aesthetic nature, old photos, old books... sometimes this is necessary because the work demands that material element, other times it can be a choice of visual affiliation. But this is true of any material; it's interesting*



Patrizio Di Massimo, central and left paintings - *Four men series*, 2009.  
Painting above - *As every artist I am first of all a painter of women*, 2009.  
*Various drawings*, 2009.  
Courtesy: the artist and T293, Naples.

to question the wisdom of choosing one material over another, and personally I choose a material because it seems like the one that's right. I used slate for 18.900 metri su ardesia (il percorso di Pinelli) because I wanted to etch in lines, and I wanted them to be etched into a hard material; at the same time I was thinking of the rapidity of an ephemeral chalk mark on the blackboard, and that's how I decided on slate. When and how do you decide on the form of a work?

PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO: To me, working with themes from the past always means re-structuring them in the present. The only time I've used a document without modifying it was with a photo of my father. But that was because the document structured itself in the present on its own: even today, people looking at it think it's me, although almost three years have gone by since I was 23, the same age as he was in the picture. The things I'm working on at the moment are instead all images I created, even though in some cases the title refers to specific documents.

FRANCESCO ARENA: When you describe something that took place, you're actually describing the present. In talking about Pinelli, Moro or the balcony Mussolini spoke from, I'm talking about today, about what Italy is, because "every idea is unreal, unreal every passion / of this nation that has been unhinged / for centuries, whose dulcet wisdom / serves for survival, and has never set it free", as Pasolini wrote about our country.

PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO: Although our two paths of investigation run in different ways, it's clear that we both pay a heavy tribute to our nationality. This is something I work with a lot. At the same time, I sometimes feel like it's a limitation. To what degree do you think art bound up in nationality still has meaning?

FRANCESCO ARENA: I think that experiences and stories can be shared; a fact that might seem strictly linked to a local context can often be easily understood even by people who are unfamiliar with the latter, because the human factor involved in every story is common to everyone. There's definitely something more familiar about an American landscape found in advertisements, films and photos, than in the view from our own backyard, but that's because the experience of looking has shifted from outside to inside.

PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO: Yes, but for example, we European artists are historically more linked to our modernist past. A large percentage of artists my age are re-examining the failure of modernist utopias, without ever having experienced the exhilaration of them in any way. American artists my age, on the other hand, are exploring, characteristically, post-modern imagery, made up of videogames, low-resolution pictured, focused more on childhood and personal nostalgia. In short, two different flavours of "vintage". Is there any way we could combine the two approaches?

FRANCESCO ARENA: I'm reminded of that song by Grandaddy, Everything Beautiful Is Far Away. Every generation is nostalgic about the utopias of the past; contemporary failures seem pathetic to us, but that's as it should be, because legends are created by the distance in time and the irredeemable nature of what took place. Where does your interest in the rhetoric applied to an Italian and colonial context derive from, and how did you come to juxtapose the traces of Fascist domination with the Libyan resistance and the figure of Omar Mukhtar? I remember that Gaddafi had Mukhtar's photo pinned to his uniform when he came to Italy on an official visit.

PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO: By Rhetoric, I mean that intrinsic relationship between "how" and "what" which leads us to express what we think is of value through language. Going to Libya made me feel like a scrap of an old, oppressive ideology, and as a result, made me ask questions about the present. Berlusconi apologized for the crimes of colonialism. In response, Gaddafi, on his first visit to Italy, showed up with a photo portraying the hero of the Libyan resistance, who was hanged by the Italians. It's said that their relationship is based on a deal that's underway regarding a partnership with Arab public TV and new productions of pan-Arab films. And that the construction of the highway in Tripolitania, like the promise to curb illegal immigration across the Strait of Sicily, are the true reasons behind this *ad hoc* reconsideration. But I, who don't want to sacrifice light-heartedness, must ask myself: what do we have to do with all this? Nothing personal, actually, just a completely collective approach to History and its ethical landscape, because perhaps "innocence is a sin".

FRANCESCO ARENA: Joseph K., though he declares his innocence, does not know the grounds of law by which he is accused, and this makes him guilty.