

Viridis

Following her devoted relationship with nature, which has constantly inhabited her works, Silvia Infranco has been researching medicinal plants and their thaumaturgic power for the past three years. In her investigation, she emphasizes the relevance of the archaic healing process, a cure that through the senses and words acts on the psyche, playing a pivotal role in the therapeutic journey.

While looking at her recent works - which often include the herbs to which they are dedicated to – the viewer can still perceive or imagine the smells, the flavors and the stories connected to the ancient myths that have accompanied them over the centuries. Infranco's work is thus the bearer of both tangible and intangible dimensions, which are present in equal parts. Salvific plants are deposited in wax-covered caskets or chained in ampoules or mortars used to process them. Meanwhile, the hourglass marks the time of their sedimentation and the works hanging on the walls protect them with wax slurries.

Background.

During our conversations, the first step towards a more complex subject has been Infranco's fascination with Greek mythology. In the Hellenic myth, the metamorphosis into a plant was closely connected to the idea of "salvific", as it was conceived as a remedy and cure against a nefarious fate that awaited the human beings involved in the process. The artist discovered this "healing" power also in the medicinal virtues of various plants she found in pharmacopoeias from the Middle Ages onward. Thus came, of course, the discovery of herbaria and their consultation, mostly in ancient manuscripts and printed books, by which Silvia Infranco was fascinated not only visually, but by their symbolic references. Concurrently, her first readings, which are useful in systematizing her approach and interest, were: *Les Plantes Magiques* (Magic Plants) by Emile Gilbert, *Virtues of Herbs* by Odo of Meung, and *Le mani degli dei* (The Hands of the Gods) by Erika Maderna. Among the actual sources that inspired the project for the Venice exhibition, with particular reference to the recipes, are: *The Book of Creatures* (or *Physica*), *Causes and Cures* by Hildegard von Bingen and *De materia medica* by Dioscorides. These sources deal more stringently with the process of healing through herbs. Subsequently, the artist addressed the texts related to the magical-symbolic process of activating the virtues of plants. While, on the one hand, it led to a "take-restitution" relationship from/to the earth, on the other it elicited an activation of the power of the plant world through the precatones, invocations recited during the harvesting, preparation and making of doughs in which the word was often administered along with the compound. The *Præcationes* (such as *Præcatio omnium herbarum*, *Præcatio Terræ*, *Præcatio Betonica*) are found in several medieval manuscripts including the Harley manuscripts in the British Library and were selected to create works for this exhibition. The special relationship with prayerful and healing language is a very fascinating aspect for Silvia Infranco. In fact, the artist devoted ample space to this relationship in her works, both in the dusting technique used to realise the two-dimensional works and in the works on paper she made. The latter are contained in special caskets (which are actually found and transformed objects).

The cure.

Silvia Infranco focused on certain plants whose active principles are capable of acting on the nervous pathologies that afflict contemporary society: lime, St. John's Wort, sage, mallow, mint, rosemary, liquorice, violet, galanga, nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves, pulego,

saffron, which were formally declined in different ways in her works. The artist told me: "With regard to the *Remedia*, the preparation against headache caused by melancholy (taken from Hildegard's *Causes and Cures*, the first source I worked on) impressed me because I find it very interesting how Hildegard in the 12th century often pays attention to the subject of melancholy almost holistically. In this recipe, the breakdown of equilibrium is traced back to the head, thus emphasising a strong connection for this pathology between physical and psychic components of which the mind/head is the primary source. I also found the writing on the thaumaturgic ring made from lime tree fascinating for the close connection it expresses between *viridis* and symbolism. The symbol, like the ritual, and the *precatio* become a sounding board, a vehicle, an enhancer of the active vegetable principle. "

Processes and formal solutions.

Therefore, the exhibition's focus on the man-nature relationship is placed in the phytotherapeutic approach, with particular attention to the magical, symbolic and alchemic implications that have accompanied these healing processes over the centuries. Ancient sapiential texts have been recovered and updated, crafting a continuity between the magical past and the scientific present. An intervention that was aimed at regenerating the man-environment relationship in a contemporary perspective. Attention to this therapeutic aspect of the natural world today generally stems from a renewed interest in archaic healing processes for the body and the mood, also thanks to the validation of their efficacy by modern chemical studies. At the same time, they envisage a rituality in the activation of plant power that can reconnect us to an attitude towards nature of 'harvest-restitution' in a constant search for balance with the nurturing earth. The encounter with the images and texts contained in the volumes she consulted - together with the frequent inclusion of herbs in his works - have guided the artist's work both in the realisation of two-dimensional and sculptural works and in her photographic experiments. In fact, her research is modulated in various mediums. Works on paper, collages, artist's books, wood plates, sculpture and Polaroids inhabit the gallery spaces. In particular, the plants mandragora, centaurea, artemisia, betonica and sage have been chosen by the artist for the papers (***Precatio Betonica, Mandragora, Artemisia, Centaurea***) and waxes called ***Herbaria*** in which the *precatio* or "dissolved" image favours the activation of the healing power of the plant.

The former was made on set paper, the latter on a wooden board. For both, the artist employed the dusting technique by using and superimposing images from ancient herbals or precatioes. Here, the matrices of the dustings can be traced back to medieval manuscripts dating back to the 11th and 15th centuries - the Harley MS 1585 kept at the British Library and Cod.It.Z.78 kept at the Biblioteca Marciana - with the addition of oxides and natural pigments in powder form protected and consolidated by wax. At first glance, the works appear to be formally close to abstraction. On closer inspection, the layering of materials accommodates and veils words and images. The working process is a progressive sedimentation: an eternal movement of addition and subtraction that emphasises the idea of continuous permutation over time. In all these works, language becomes image. The texts of the ***Precatioes*** are also encased in cylindrical structures covered in natural wax as if they were votive candles, while a composition of wooden boxes, called ***Remedia***, contains recipes and preparations with plants from the writings of Hildegard von Bingen and Dioscorides, together with mixtures of exsiccate herbs, wax and essences. As previously stated, the plants are those that act on the nervous and mood balance: lime, sage, mallow, liquorice, violet, galanga, nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves, pulego and saffron: by opening the various boxes, it is possible to perceive their aromas. A composition on libation, called ***Tellus***, consists of five sculptural bodies made of barley,

wheat and wax mixtures and evokes the ritual of returning to the earth what was taken from it during the harvest. The sculptures *Mortarium* and *Ampulla* - the latter consisting of an iron core - are covered with a mixture of clay, wax, oxides and dried herbs (mint, lime, St. John's Wort and mallow) and narrate the process of maceration and distillation in close relation to time marked by the hourglass (*Time of memory*) dedicated to the rosemary plant. Rosemary is also the protagonist of the sequence of polaroids (*Rosmary*), grouped in a series of nine, generated by superimposing images from different herbaria from the 12th century to the 16th century. The exhibition also includes: an **Artist's book** dedicated to sage, in which the paper was made using a special maceration process and fumigation of the plant, and a series of collages (*Belladonna e Giusquiamo*) - presented on paper supports - real indexes of two plants capable of altering states of consciousness, namely belladonna and henbane.

Time to make and time to experience.

The temporal rhythm in the execution of each work is dilated. It respects the limits established by the material and the need to process the artist's experience in the course of her process of 'making'. As always in Infranco's research, the work encapsulates and becomes a depository instrument of memory. In all her works, the inventory of original forms, meticulously organised, is released in formally 'liquid', almost indistinct images, the result of a physical and mental osmotic process. It is no coincidence that the artist speaks of her work as a "ritual metamorphic narration" (as occurred in ancient healing processes) to emphasise the evolutionary and entropic nature of life. Her research thus substantiates an attempt to stop time through images, to obscure oblivion. At the same time, it expresses the need for a detachment so that memory can germinate and continue to grow, re-actualising itself.

The intimate relationship of Silvia Infranco's with nature - a true life companion - is accompanied by a posture in which time and ritual evoke its sacredness both in the processes observed and described and in the phases of production of the works. An aura of mystery permeates her art, which becomes at the same time a bearer of memory and a new look at the needs of our time, focusing on the generative and healing power not only of nature but of art as a whole.

Art can reconcile the relationship between matter and spirit, between the natural and the metempirical for a new aesthetic in which the process is a questioning bridge that absorbs within itself the reasons of matter and body together with the tension of knowledge/belonging with a gnoseological flavour.