

Presentation: Visual Art as a Vehicule to Protect a Natural Place

A visual art show has its own voice. Metaphors intermingle freely and fully, wordlessly. But certain ideas are in orbit, gathering there as well. These naked thoughts, without the shell of representation, strive to express themselves.

This presentation, in words, is a continuation of the visual.

The "writing" we can find in the forest awakens our curiosity, our intellect. This brings a visual experience one step further. We realize we can discover more than physical masses, even more than the graphics themselves, because what looks like writing implies emergence of meaning. Beyond the beauty of natural phenomena, we are able to discern the illusion of a hidden message.

As we walk in the forest and observe, we gradually acquire a visual language. This is like opening up a book, with all the pleasure this implies.

If each trip to a familiar place in a forest could stimulate our intellect as well as our senses, we would appreciate it all the more. That would motivate us even more to protect it.

I would like to share the story of this exhibition with you. More than 5 years ago, I suggested the idea of a group show about the forest to H el ene Maggiori, cultural attach e to the town hall of Fontainebleau. I felt that the more we were, the stronger we stood as protectors of the environment. This is the spirit of the Barbizon painters in the 19th century. There are signs we are moving into a less individualist era, where we learn to promote the benefit of collective work and solidarity, in order to ease the environmental crisis.

Hélène helped me understand how individual work can also generate more strength in a certain way, even appear more fertile than group work.

I realized then that one can draw an analogy of the forest with artists. Artists group together to become stronger, just as trees in the forest look out for each other through their roots and their leaves. The solitary artist, whose works can take on symbolic and universal richness, produces another type of strength, just like a tree by itself with its branches growing freely, horizontally as well as vertically, taking on a dense and well-proportioned shape. We are captivated by this tree, and its beauty can sometimes protect it from getting cut down.

I chose to collaborate with an artist who has accompanied me for more than 20 years, Livio Ceschin. This show celebrates our friendship over time, a dialogue between two different esthetics, which, together, create a unity in itself.

The works here represent views of the Fontainebleau forest especially. I have my favorite places and paths, like the Route Louise above all, the Route du Faon, the Mare aux Evées, the Mont Saint Louis. And Livio shares the same taste for these places. In this collection of paintings and etchings you can also find views outside of the Fontainebleau forest, such as the protected area of Livry, behind my village Chartrettes, the forest of Sintra, Portugal, Fontainebleau's twin town, the Beresinskaya forest in Bielorrussia, even the woods around Assisi, Italy. For Livio, there are views of the snowy forests of the Italian pre-Alps.

I like to represent the interplay between wild nature and manicured nature, between the Fontainebleau castle park and forest behind the town. I was able to perceive a similar dichotomy in Sintra, the forest of Sintra and the relatively wild Pena park around King Ferdinand and Queen Amelia's fairytale castle.

I'm imagining this installation as a forest in itself. At the same time, I'm hoping to bring the elegance of an interior to life. Here it is the great hall of Fontainebleau's theatre with its chandeliers, red curtains, views of the town and castle from the large windows. This reminds me of Henry David Thoreau, who saw furniture in the forest. The idea of luxury can be redirected to organic forest.

Indeed, if wilderness becomes rarer and rarer in the world, it also becomes more and more precious, almost paradoxically so.

I would like to give the impression of a workshop interior as well, where artistic work is still in progress, with its easels, palettes, work table, writing table, and other accessories, blending these objects with natural elements.

Some suggest we embrace our anthropocene era: I hear this often during lectures. Others talk about the imminence of the human forest, as if the human forest is welcome to take over the trees. I rebel against this acceptance, which is a form of complacency. We cannot allow ourselves to abandon our visceral plea for the wilderness, just because it is a comfortable intellectual notion.

I'm not sure of taking action in the most effective way, and continually look for solutions. In this hall I look for visual richness, which mirrors biodiversity, with a blending of forest elements and hand-made objects. I don't shy away from technique diversification, for it reflects nature's own versatility. This show is a different one from a traditional one, where paintings and objects are relatively of the same kind, as if to reassure the visitors that all was produced by the same artist. I support variety, and in the manner of progressive farming, keep away from "monoculture".

What brings the two esthetics together yet what distinguishes them from each other, is our approach to detail.

Two types of writing can be found in an etching or painting: the over-all composition and the detail-work. I'm looking for a certain succinctness, so that the writing is as clear, as direct, as communicative as possible. This corresponds to what strikes me when I first look at a scene in the forest. Once I've transcribed the calligraphy of this scene in its most concise form, I'm then confronted with a technical difficulty: that is, how to fill the space around this essential message, find a background that brings this writing forward, because otherwise the image will appear empty. Detail-work then can sometimes become important. In other paintings, such as "Lichen", intricate brush-stroke presides. Here there is slow and patient, highly pleasureable movement. Livio prizes detail-work, both in his observation of nature and in his etch. We are stimulated by his line, as if we were reading it.

What brings us together is a sensitivity to "humble" nature. In my painting, "Wild Garden", everything; clover, twigs, moss, lichen, that many gardeners try to get rid of, becomes an object of beauty. In Livio's work, daisies become as sensational as dahlias.

Our work becomes a map of everything that has captured our attention. We put the pencil, dry-point and paintbrush to work, and they vacillate between realism and abstraction. Light creates joyful abstract forms, such as curved trapezoids and elongated hearts. Leaves transform into birds, sometimes even into animals, humans or letters. By drawing and painting them we notice this, and we end up transforming the shapes into more complex species without intending to. We are led into the 7 days of creation with our own creation. In nature this process can be beheld in just one view, such as leaved trees toward the sky.

What a wonderful idea for Fontainebleau and its forest of rocks that make us think monsters and animals lurk among the trees! You can also see bird and animal shapes the shadows of leaves or roots on the forest floor. Deer running along the trees and animal tracks on the snow contribute to the literature of the forest. They are letters of an unknown alphabet.

In Livio's etching, there is dream-like realism. If you observe his detail-work closely, he also points to the beauties of abstract shapes, in the manner of nature herself.

I also enjoy showing in my work how light can bring out abstract shapes in figurative work. Light, whether we reproduce it or invent it, brings life to a composition.

Inversion is a central theme in my installations. One of these inversions is

matter and light. For example when a leaf is lit up by the sun or the moon, it also becomes a source of light in a composition. In my etchings, branches become illuminated writing. There are other recurrent inversions in this installation work: sky-earth (ex. paintings on the ground), interior-exterior, (example: hemispheres). These inversions can introduce an element of sacredness into the work as well as create a link with the idea of protection. Open hemispheres reflect this as if they were open hands. I see artistic inversion as healthy. It can empower us, because it allows us how far inventiveness can lead us. Yet strangely enough, it also can humble us. Because everything that brings us "upwards", also lends us a feeling of belittlement, as well as a notion of weight and roots, of movement toward the earth, of symbiosis with her.

In art, we are actually freer than we think. Here are other examples.

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In painting views from the bottom and the top we break traditional landscape codes.

Writing we find in the forest is not necessarily linear. It can be circular or spherical, and we can also represent it that way.

With the concept of time, we are also freer than we think. We can bring in the seasons, the light of the evening and the morning, in one work.

With this breaking away from what artists are expected to do even today, at a time when we think all barriers have been brought down, we are true inheritors of the 19th century Barbizon movement.

Incorporating different seasons and different lights of day and night into a work is a way to follow the act of painting and the time it takes. A painting has its own agenda, and a painter learns to respect the time it needs. An image shouldn't have to represent only one second in a day.

A painting or an etching is like a performance. We have made videos of this; Livio with his drypoint and I with a paintbrush. I'm thinking in particular of a branch, painting it from the trunk to buds or leaves. Hand and paintbrush take the time to brush over a space, as if we were writing a sentence.

Visual Art as a way to protect a natural place

Never in the history of humanity have we been so concerned with environmental problems, although we have many traces of thinkers and artists who have deplored human abuse of natural space very far back in time. I'm thinking of the Italian playwright Goldoni, who complained about this in the 18th century, even before the industrial revolution!

Artists have played a role in sensitizing others, as well as educators. There has been so much progress these last 20 years. We need to go further, more deeply so, and faster, although art is a long process, and the situation is so urgent. How? Our helplessness has become a central theme in the battle.

Many thinkers suggest a change in philosophy. Humanity is so heavy; relationships between us even more so. Our complexity does not permit us to claim genuine simplicity. We can pretend to, but multi-dimensionality will take hold of us anyway. Art and closeness to nature, however, can lighten us, at least allow us to become more detached from emotional problems. This suppleness acquired through nature and art saves us from a lot of suffering. And everyone is capable of it.

What kind of philosophical change might this be? A passage from egocentrism to ecocentrism.

How can an artist contribute? An artist is being pushed into states of egocentrism, because name cultivation is part of marketing one's art.

An artist with a name already can help. In the same village where Livio used to live, Andrea Zanzotto, one of the greatest poet of late 20th century Italy, had his home. Next to this village, there was a forest that was going to be brought down. Thanks to his influence, the forest was protected. We see many of these examples. The forest of Fontainebleau would have been reduced to pines, if Rousseau and Millet had not gotten involved in saving the oaks, the beeches and the hornbeams.

We cannot underestimate the Barbizon painters' breadth of influence, which has extended to the rest of the world. Certain budding artistic movements in the United States, such as the Hudson River School in New York state, and the painters and photographers of the Far West, look up to Barbizon school artists' double identity as anti-academic painters and environmental activists and brought the Barbizon spirit to the United States. The region of Fontainebleau should be a mecca for artists today who are concerned about preserving their outside workshop in a visceral way.

If I paint a tree or a branch, a scene in the forest, I forge an emotional bond. If this is taken down, I 'm liable to rebel and do something about it.

Here is the very parental instinct of preservation and the birth of resistance.

Back to my question. An artist with a name has influence. But before finding recognition, how can an artist help?

Many artists form collectives in order to gather strength. An artist collective is a statement in its itself, the sign of anti-individualistic spirit.

Otherwise, there is an indirect path I am trying to define, in esthetics. A way that captures the unconscious of our public and encourages it toward resistance.

Before I develop on this point, I would first like to share Livio's point of view with you.

Livio distinguishes space, "spazio" from place, "luogo". A space is neutral, without history. For him, if a place loses its meaning, that is, loses its history, its value and its intimacy, that corresponds to the separation of a human being with nature. It is the artist's role to restore the place's true importance.

This thought in itself gives the artist a significant responsibility in times of environmental crisis, much more so than we realize.

Livio feels fortunate to draw and etch, because the act of copying allows him to experience the beauty of places in depth. He then feels responsible for them. When Livio draws, the place becomes sacred. He becomes a guardian of the place he draws.

He takes on the responsibility of drawing the place well. Good technique convinces others of its beauty. However, perhaps more than his unequalled technique, what we admire in him most of all, and what allows us to get attached to his etchings, is his ability to transmit his love for a special place.

All of this occurs in the realm of the unconscious.

The care we bring to a drawing or a painting, for example of a branch, is

analogous to the care we bring to the living.

Beyond care, I also like to allow chance to take over in my artwork. This is a way for me to bring in what I see as sacred, the true language of nature. By trying to control too much we distance ourselves from this possibility.

The more humans contribute to the evolution of the earth, during the anthropocene era, the more we need to pull away from this control. This retreat from an excess of mastery can be expressed in art. Art can then in turn serve as an attractive model for life, even as a counter movement.

That is why I say that the more we integrate the unexpected in our art, the more we arrive at what our public needs, because we are increasingly in need of the breath of nature.

Through this artistic process the public can become sensitive to its riches, its luxury, and it will nourish in people's heart an impulse to protect it.

It is clear we need artists to help increase the importance of nature in the human world and regenerate love for her.

Here again, the more we are the stronger we'll be, in the manner of a forest. However, the more personal and intimate we become, the greater our individual potential and vision also become, like a tree that extends its branches outward.

I ruminate a lot over these ideas, because the more I understand, the more effectively I can transmit their message.