



Artist: Barbara Nicoli  
Exhibition title: *'Nature, Interrupted'*  
25-30 September 2014  
Hong Kong Arts Centre

Barbara Nicoli's practice finds its poetic force in an assiduous and intense confrontation with what surrounds us. In her work, nature is not an abstract totality opposing the privileged distance of the artist acting upon it, but the physical dynamism and vital force that inhabit all things, and the artist herself, as their own secret.

As part of the exhibition *Nature, Interrupted*, on view at Hong Kong Art Centre from September the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup>, Italian artist Barbara Nicoli explores our relation with Nature in five different series of works that all embody the artist's dialogue with her surroundings. Her approach is not speculative, though the intention is that of a researcher that carefully selects and interrogates the empirical evidence.

Combining the slowness of traditional techniques such as intaglio printing with the sensorial intensity of performance art, Nicoli plays with different perceptions opened up by the shapes and colours of living organisms like branches, flowers and leaves, and establish with them a silent and intimate dialogue. The body and its performativity are the tools used by Nicoli to listen to what nature has to say, inhabiting with her gestures the void left open by the multifaceted veins of a leaf or by the delicate fragments of limbs and flowers.

Favoured by her past experience as performer, and of her studies as art historian, Nicoli comes to visual art as a result of her insatiable thirst for knowledge, and of her keen awareness of our contemporary incapacity to structure any perception of reality into a logic syllogism. She approaches nature phenomenologically, questioning how things came to be the way they are, and blurring the lines between their physical consistency and our interpretation of them.

The painstakingly textured shapes composing the series *Artifici* (2013-2014) are inspired by what found in the environment surrounding the artist's home in the Italian countryside. Both colours and shapes come from suggestions offered by nature itself, and then impressed onto the paper with a metal spike and colour ink. Through a physical intervention on found flowers, the artist deploys the same colours hidden in the petals and stigmas of these flowers to artificially re-create their natural shapes, literally turning their essence inside out and casting it onto the paper.

This series is delicate and nostalgic at the same time. The memory of this encounter with dead leaves or once luxuriant plants is fragmented in the thousands of little marks composing these drawings, a technique that comes from the ancient art of engraving. Nevertheless, their identity is not reproduced, but only suggested through the myriads of shades composing the different colours of these marks. The artist's intervention is not meant to replicate nature, rather to unveil what may be perceived, but that remains hidden at our sight.

The same process of making is turned outside down in *Espansioni* (2013), the second series of Nicoli's new works on view in Hong Kong. Here, the natural element –mainly trees' leaves- has been first impressed onto the paper, then reconfigured by the artist to manipulate and reshape the human perception of it. Scrupulously, the artist analyses what is already contained within the leaf itself, marking its veins and ribs and expanding them beyond the leaf's borders to invade the whole pictorial surface.

In her effort to listen to nature, Nicoli does not invent, nor add anything to the several forms through which nature manifests itself. Though the intervention is arbitrary, the result is not abstract, as the uniqueness of her approach lies in its sacral respect of the shapes and directions already manifested in the natural object. She follows its shapes and search for their inner colours, gently modulating her gestures on the surface and upon the object to intuitively actualize what is potentially already in there.

Such an epistemological journey at the very end of perception leads the artist to discover the essence of things not only in what is hidden, but also in what is absent. In *Scomposizioni* (2012-2013), the leaves have been impressed onto the paper not to invade its surface, as in a spatial explosion of their lifeblood, but have been isolated and deprived by some parts that are still perceptible in the empty space they have left on the paper.

Inspired by the ancient technique of intaglio printing, this series of works combines the meticulousness and slowness of encaustic painterly processes with a more contemporary sensitivity towards nature that here appears in its troubling isolation, and incessant caducity. The identity of things, as the identity of the man who needs to question the world in order to make sense of his existence, lies also in this lack of being, in this being a totality that does not result by the sum of its parts.

This dialogue with natural entities becomes even more personal in *Impronte Vegetali* (2014). Through the overlay of leaves' veins and ribs with human fingerprints, Nicoli gives visual manifestation to its query towards existence and its elusive meaning, showing how such different domains of the natural world –the animal and vegetable kingdoms- actually belong to the same inexplicable mystery.

These works on paper are not limited to the reproduction of the inner structures of the leaf, and of the human hands acting upon it. The intention behind them is to visually suggest the similarity of the two different 'natures' by letting them melt together in the opaque flatness of a print. Shining light upon the most intimate parts of the leaf and their affinity with the impressions of humans' personal identity, the series *Impronte Vegetali* stimulates a tactile understanding of our relation with nature, as well as the necessity to understand ourselves as part of it.

The complex identity of the leaf becomes materially dense, and the dance of the artist's hand on the paper takes the tangible consistency of a cotton thread in *Intarsi* (2014). Details of the inner structure of the leaf cast on the paper are extended till the very end of the paper, suggesting a relentless movement of its lifeblood to an infinity we cannot see.

The yellowed familiarity of this series speaks of our relation with nature by letting arise on the paper the complex circuit of relations that constitutes our *being-in-the-world*, in Heidegger's words. Orchestrated with a wise use of different materials, the work is an invitation to inhabit nature differently, to question our being in the world and the sense of everything by experiencing, and literally touching what connects us to such everything.

In Nicoli's oeuvre, the artistic gesture actualises the intimate conquer of a new consciousness, of a different perspectives on our *being-in-the-world*, given by our *being-within-the-world*. The slow time of intaglio printing, and the meticulousness of her performative approach to the natural object addresses nature as our most intimate dimension, a kind of secret we probably forgot, but still silently share with all things and beings.

Such a sensorial play enlivens all the works of Barbara Nicoli presented at Hong Kong Art Centre. The hyper-textured, yet extremely gentle approach to nature perfectly embodies the artist's intimate research on the meaning of existence. Tacitly, and humbly following what nature has to say, the sharpness of her metal spike and of her needle on the object cast on paper weakens the scream of the primordial question of the meaning of Being. It softens it by making visible the dynamism of a communal fate of finitude.

Vanessa Saraceno