

From the atomic bomb to the serpent without a face
A conversation with Stefano Minzi

By Manuela Pacella

Manuela Pacella: Let's start at the beginning, with your obsession with the atomic bomb, air strikes, the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. Some images - transmitted by the media - influenced your childhood imaginings that went on to become recurring dreams. These images were then analyzed and revised by you in your works.

Tell me then about these obsessions, and if you still have to deal with these nightmares.

You often speak of 'digestion' (it even being the title of your 2009 exhibition at Galleria L'Affiche, Milan). Had everything already been digested?

Stefano Minzi: There are things that a human being cannot digest. Nuclear testing, atomic bombs dropped on civilians stay forever. I think the very idea in itself and the realisation of devices on this scale is the cornerstone of our modern day political existence. There are many artists who are obsessed with or go back to the atomic bomb. It is an archetype of the folly upon which our society is based.

MP: Airborne invasion, however, was present in your previous exhibition, at the Galleria Lorcan O'Neill, called *Air*.

SM: I sometimes still have dreams in which the fear, anguish and the idea of devastation by war come back to me. However, the really important dreams are but few, nevertheless they are the foundations to all my work in this area, political-millennialist-apocalyptic.

MP: Are they recurring dreams?

SM: No, they are of specific cases and have been very intense, so much so that this entire strand of my work has been born from them. The first one I had was as a child and it was the training ground that led me from the more traditional form of engraving, on to the photographic image, in trying for years to express a single dream that, in the end, I have never really succeeded in doing. It was a dream I often had, every time I had a high fever. I was inside some kind of control room of a plane – probably something I had seen in a cartoon or movie - and I saw the needle on a dial going crazy, then stopping in the centre, indicating imminent doom. Then there was an aerial view of a small Lego village, or rather of Fabuland (a line of Lego for smaller children where the figures had the heads of animals). I could see this village from above, then the individual figures in their homes and realized that this calm, this idyll had reached its final moments; ending with the bomb. I was at an age - childhood or very early adolescence - where that naive idea of life that you imagine in your play collides with reality, with a news bulletin seen by mistake, or by its presence in the background during dinner or lunch. It was about already understanding that we lived in a world where the idyll could not be realised.

MP: This understanding, as you call it, reached children and adolescents through media images (news or cartoons) that our parents let us watch with much more freedom than today, still unawares of the impact they were having.

SM: Yes, we were exposed to reality through an advanced media system. Television in the eighties - as our political history teaches us – was an unscrupulous battleground.

MP: The Eighties prepare the grounds for Berlusconi. Your obsessions, in your career path, increase, then enters the figure of Berlusconi. Do you remember how?

SM: It was almost by chance that the photographic image of Berlusconi infiltrated, on an almost daily basis, my working and printing practices.

I moved to Berlin in 2005. At first, I devoted myself chiefly to painting, then I resumed printing and engraving, to which I had devoted myself much earlier. I started to work with photosensitive materials, therefore with photoengraving. I started experimenting with different images, including the atomic bomb. To test the technique of photoengraving on a piece of tetrapak, I took a photo of Berlusconi as a young man that had been cut from an English newspaper. In truth I do not really know my reasons for doing so. It was a spur of the moment thing, it was only a test. As it happens, the test turned out poorly. I was trying to apply a photopolymer film onto a plate composed of a Tetrapak - a flattened milk carton to be more precise - and onto this imprint the image of Berlusconi as a youth, then produce a small series. When I started printing, wanting to produce a series of 10 copies, I noticed that the film didn't adhere stably to the backing, and as I continued to print, it tended to disappear. At first I tried to understand why this was happening, and then I started having fun with it. At that time Berlusconi was not in power, so I said to myself: "Look, see, he is disappearing, we're freeing ourselves of him ...". I carried on printing, trying to figure out what was going on. I liked the idea of creating some kind of animation.

MP: Here we have two arguments: on the one hand, the book *The Giant Flip-Book* (2007-2008) that you exhibit at Ex Elettronica for the first time; and on the other, the techniques you employ. Indeed you moved from a more classical engraving technique, from abstract results, to a more experimental one that has paved the way for a new path in your work. In *The Giant Flip-Book*, for example, there is both the idea of disappearance, of the use of the same matrix to the point of disintegration and so the denial of seriality, and manual and direct intervention in the matrix.

SM: This really is something of a border work. Perhaps it was from that moment on that I stopped thinking in terms of series. Printing really fascinated me, but I found it frustrating to remain tied to that tradition of engraving which serves to create a multiple, which in reality - at least as far as I'm concerned - serves no purpose. It is more useful to the well known artist who wants to sell to a wider audience, but I always found myself, like so many engravers, accumulating dozens and dozens of prints. I enjoyed more using engraving or printing, the press, the inks, with the intent even of denying the technique itself.

MP: Also because you combined more interests in employing this technique: engraving, photography, and manual intervention.

SM: Yes, do not forget the link with the analogue, with the print, with the magic of seeing the result after a long process. Having that surprise at the end.

The Giant Flip-Book was born in that way, from this multiplication of an error. I had printed a test run of this plate, which gradually transformed by itself, until it disappeared. When the image had almost completely disappeared, I started directly intervening and the result was 50 prints gathered together into a unique piece that is this flip-book, a thumb powered cinema for a giant, because it is very large. The subtitle is *How I digested a media dictator*. Digestion makes a comeback, but in this case it was, more than anything else, an omen.

In detaching myself from the traditional techniques, I went in two directions. The first is the experimentation with photoengraving, with photopolymer films or blue films that allows you to mimic an aquatint on any material or surface you adhere it to, and I liked using the Tetrapak or the same plate of copper, zinc or aluminum. The other, however, is the one that has taken over owing to

its simplicity, versatility, economy and speed; it has to do with xerox transference or photocopy transference. It is a planographic technique – lithography's poorer and lesser known relative – that permits you to transfer a photocopy or a black and white laser print by way of an ink copperplate onto another material, which could be canvas, paper, plastic, or any other material which can pass under a press. And in the case of my new piece, even onto leather. It is an extremely crude technique, simple, very dirty and sometimes difficult to manage, because my matrix is wet paper that I have to move and apply to the object to be printed, and thus subject to many accidents; something which I've always loved. In some works - not in those on show at this time - I started playing with the four-colour process, trying to add to this crude technique a greater complexity and sophistication, almost with the intention of turning it into painting.

MP: *Ouroboros* was born with the spirit of drawing a line under your production centred on the figure of Berlusconi. The piece you are presenting is previously unseen and taking on this space has been a challenge for you, so much so that you have proposed an almost installationesque project. The only link with your previous works is the book which we have already spoken about. In your own opinion, will this show really mark a turning point in your career?

SM: Originally the idea was to create a sort of retrospective on the great amount of work I've done on Berlusconi and, more specifically, on the decline of political conduct in our country that this charismatic character symbolizes. It's never been a personal discourse against Berlusconi, but rather a continuing questioning into a surreal situation that has developed. Unfortunately, while Berlusconi was still firmly on the throne, I could not freely exhibit this body of work in Italy, because many people just were not interested in it. I've often heard myself say with contempt that we couldn't put up with it any longer; others came out with excuses, laying bare the system of self-censorship typical of the Italian Left. Actually, I would have preferred to devote myself to other things because it is not in the least bit enjoyable to continue working on the image of a character who embodies the black soul, one of the most dark and sordid aspects of our political history. Up to a certain point it seemed interesting to continue to press. Mine was a sort of warning cry, a somewhat appalled gaze faced with this abyss. The idea, so, of this exhibition was to finally show some works that no one had ever wanted to exhibit. As Beatrice Bertini had long demonstrated a real interest in this aspect of my work, we both finally decided to exhibit it. This is how the exhibition came to pass. The shift in events that were to follow have made it clear for many months now that this situation was drawing, in some way, to an end, and so did not interest me anymore. It seemed absurd to exhibit certain works when this change was already taking place. And so it was because of this that simultaneously the desire to present something new was born.

The more difficult question is whether or not this will indeed be the end.

MP: *Ouroboros* is the serpent that eats its own tail, the symbol of infinity. The representation of which is on display in the form of a seventeen meter long cloth snake that twists around the central column of the gallery. Tell me then, how did the piece come about and moreover, the reason you have decided to present it without a head. The four faces laying on the ground, the past, are of Mussolini, Craxi, Andreotti and Berlusconi.

SM: First of all I have been interested in snakes for some time now, both in the image in itself, and for its many symbolic meanings, which I am studying and still do not understand completely. In general, the serpent or dragon biting its own tail is one of the oldest symbols in the universe. The form, in its simplicity, is that of a snake biting its own tail and then is reborn, recalling the cycle of birth, death and reincarnation. In relation to this exhibition, the gallery is very beautiful, it has a very strong personality, and at the centre is a treelike column, so I was tempted by the idea of placing it around the tree, evoking other symbolic meanings.

The snake is very large, made of cloth, stuffed, decapitated, without its head. It represents, from a wider point of view, the idea of eternal return, but more precisely, the reappearance of the darkest soul of power that has dominated in Italy for at least some hundreds years now and continues to exercise power. What I wanted to do, therefore, is to embody this hypothetical and expected end to the Berlusconi era with a serpent that has just been beheaded. And so, it is a serpent with the decapitated head of Berlusconi on the ground alongside other faces, those of the political figures who have previously dominated the fortunes of Italy. Before this twenty year period of Berlusconi we had Andreotti, Craxi, even, going back as far as Mussolini. It's a kind of reminder. The most negative aspect of the exhibition is to suggest that, although these heads, with great difficulty, are cut off, they are then born again. Therefore the snake represents the body of Italy where this strong decadent power is always alive, eternal.

MP: The four heads on the ground, the past, are of different sizes and colours. Here we see yet another element introduced, the symbolism of colours, for which you turned to *La Via dei Tarocchi* by Alejandro Jodorosky and Marianne Costa for your inspiration.

SM: This exhibition is very colourful, despite my predilection for black and white. The colours add a playful element and perhaps lighten up a reasonably heavy argument. It is also a playful vision, not just dramatic. Just as in card games, this playful aspect adds meanings that are hidden, symbolic.

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest - thanks to people like Jodorosky - in the esoteric disciplines that, in reality, have always been part of the subsoil of Western culture and beyond. Assigning colours to these characters, underlaying a more or less hidden or more or less clear symbolic meaning. There are many ways to interpret colours, many traditions. For this exhibition I followed, as a general rule, one of the schemes proposed in Jodorosky's manual, which you already mentioned, and a book that has accompanied me everywhere for years. Every colour can have a positive and a negative meaning. The heads of the serpents, detached from the body vary in both colour and size, from a lighter shade to a darker shade, and from largest to smallest. The more recent the figures are, the more connected to our daily lives, the larger and clearer they are. The more distant in time they are, the smaller and darker they are. It is as if the heads, once severed, were rotting and, therefore, returning - as does fruit - to the ground to give new nourishment. Berlusconi is the largest and is black and white. The white, in its negative sense, is related to selfishness and the black to regression, the death drive. One of the positive meanings of white is immortality, something that Berlusconi himself seeks. Then there is the pale yellow of Andreotti linked to aridity in the negative sense, to cruelty, an arid spirit without emotion. From the positive point of view it refers to lucidity, to an active intelligence. The green of Craxi is linked to collapse, envy, and attachment to the mother. The blue of Mussolini, in its negative sense, is linked to despotism and tyranny, whereas in terms of the positive, to receptivity to earthly forces. It is interesting, even in the most extreme cases, to leave both interpretations. The colour symbolizes an energy that adds another level of meaning, which can, however, also be interpreted in various ways, such as when reading Tarot.

MP: The seventeen leather masks on the walls - of many other people, and symbolic of a different Italy - also have their own symbolism connected to colour, each one attributed to each mask (dominant energy, solar sign) and paired to a different colour of lace (ascendant). Can you better explain this aspect, and the criterion for the selection of names?

SM: Actually, despite there being a basic astrological metaphor, there is no clear link with astrology, compared to my other previous shows. The masks represent seventeen characters, of which only two are still living, that in some way helped build the Italy of today. They almost never represent power directly but rather the ordinary citizen, or rather the possibilities that open up in front of individual action or reflection. Clearly they have excelled. They are iconic images, people

who have left their mark and for some, have become examples; positive to some, negative to others. There is Pertini who was the President of the Republic. Here the two worlds mix. There are figures who have represented elements of the State. And there are others who were not able to do the same, because the dark aspect, the most negative side of Italy denied it them, think of Gramsci or Peppino Impastato. People who fought with all their strength against these dark aspects of power.

MP: And was it difficult to choose these characters? Indeed, I would think some of them are not entirely positive even for you.

SM: Yes, that is true. They are not saints and heroes. They are Italian men or women that have nevertheless through their actions tried to fight to improve this reality.

MP: You make an appeal to us, the ordinary citizens. The idea of the mask that can be worn has this intent, to call our attention back to our daily actions, however small they may be.

MS: Looking at my past work I've noticed that I have often concentrated on negative figures. I have rarely worked on characters who were for me positive examples. This was how the idea of the masks came to me, especially considering the political movements of recent months, from the Indignados to the various demonstrations of the Arab Spring, to those in America, to the entire Occupied movement that has spread around the world. The main symbol of this new way of protesting globally was the Guy Fawkes mask; Guy Fawkes, an eighteenth century English revolutionary, the perpetrator and in some measure the engineer of a foiled attack on the British Parliament. The film that inspired the use of the Guy Fawkes masks was *V for Vendetta*. The idea, then, comes from the possibility, the hope and the desire to oppose - with a strong democratic movement that draws inspiration from personages, even the extreme like Fawkes - a society oppressed by media dictators and a minority of individuals who represent the interests of multinationals and small groups who control the planet's key resources and wealth. In fact, amongst my masks, there is, for example, Gaetano Bresci, an anarchist who killed Umberto I. Yet, my message is not that of solving problems with violence. That said, there are those for whom the idea of wearing the mask of Gaetano Bresci might be one way for them to rebel, beyond that specific and extreme act. There are people even more discussed or more questionable. There is Carlo Giuliani, a martyr killed by police during a demonstration, but for others the image of the black bloc is also synonymous with violence. They are not clear cut figures, which I believe is part of being human, of political action, of social action. We are flesh and blood and constantly make mistakes. That is why I added the colours, because they bring with them some symbolic meanings. With the masks I did not want to limit myself to one colour that would have been easier to interpret. Adding a second to them, that of the laces, means remember, each time, that not only are there two aspects, the positive and the negative of the principal colour, but there are also those of the secondary colour. In some way the lace can be seen as representing an energy that conveys the principal action represented by the mask. For example, the Pertini mask is red and so it is action *par excellence*: red is the colour of blood, linked to the animal kingdom and to action. Pertini fought in the First World War, he earned honours which were later not given to him. He continued his political activism, fought against fascism, became a partisan, and lost a brother. In Europe, where war was fought on our territory is, fortunately, a thing of the distant past, so one loses that awareness of the bloodbath that action meant in such contexts. Pertini was a great partisan who led with great energy the struggle he believed in deeply, and then became President of the Republic and therefore embodied, also for institutions, the idea of a new and democratic Italy finally liberated from fascism and from all that it entailed. His lace is white and is here connected, in the positive sense, to immortality, to the purity of the thought which drove him.

MP: I think that for you the most critical moment of this exhibition was the decision to use animal skin for the masks, true?

SM: The idea of using leather happened instinctively. Years ago I bought a piece of leather at a flea market in Berlin because it fascinated me. Then when I decided to make masks, instead of using some sort of plastic material or cloth, this piece of leather sprang to mind. I was won over to the idea from the point of view of language, even though I've been a vegetarian for more than 10 years and I don't like leather. I'm not an extremist, but theoretically I don't like to use it. But this time I kept thinking about it and so I used some found scraps of leather. It seemed appropriate considering that the masks are people who have sacrificed themselves, that have almost always put their personal lives second to some higher ideal and often paid the price with their lives. I was therefore convinced of this idea, despite the related ethical doubts, because I liked that in the material itself there had been a blood sacrifice, that of the animal.