

In my beginning is my end
T.S. Eliot

Describing it may make it seem in some ways a baroque piece, and perhaps it really is: an enormous plastic serpent, seventeen meters long, twisted around the two pillars that articulate the interior space of the Ex-Elettrofonica. The serpent is beheaded: the severed heads being not one, but four, consisting of the photographic images of politicians printed on large pillows, depicting, in chronological order: Benito Mussolini (blue), Giulio Andreotti (yellow) Bettino Craxi (green) and Silvio Berlusconi (white). Completing the installation we find a further 17 portraits of mothers and fathers of the nation that, just like the statues in the courtyard of the *Romans of the Decadence* by Thomas Couture, contemplate the wreckage of a country mangled by the serpent, and the demise of the serpent itself. These portraits are presented in mask form, achieved by printing photographs of these people's faces on pieces of leather. Among them one can identify the faces of politicians and partisans, such as Sandro Pertini; Resistance fighters like Gina Galeotti Bianchi; and intellectuals, such as Pier Paolo Pasolini. The only two of this group still living (Rita Levi Montalcini and Roberto Saviano) have eyes, while the others have had their eyes cut out. All of them, it is said, contemplate the ruin of Italy and of those who ruined it. And despite the outcome to which invariably our country is driven by the recurrent temptation of having a "strong man" as a Prime Minister, history seems destined to periodically repeat itself, like the *Ouroboros*, the serpent that eats its own tail. The work exhibited at Ex-Elettrofonica is, therefore, a type of mock baroque allegory and possesses a marked theatricality given the number of personages and the incorporation of the three-dimensional space of the gallery. Looking at it, however, there is also another aspect, namely, the grotesque quality of the installation, which comes across, above all else, in the skin of the serpent, with its gray and pink tones in shiny plastic, filled with synthetic pillow stuffing and chips of foam rubber. This animal does not inspire the same terror as did the one that, emerging from the waves, attacked Laocoon and his sons, but instead seems to have emerged from the parody of a B-movie horror; and the masks that peer from the walls, held precariously in place by leather laces, do not have anything of the solemn about them, but are characterized by a dignified poverty, which seems to underline the distance from the glittering vulgarity of the serpent.

If artists, at least from Baudelaire's *Painter of Modern Life* on, cannot fail to confront the present, tackling politics is not for everyone, or even many. And if "history painting" is the highest genre of the academic hierarchy, when the academic authority falls down, history begins to speak through the "minor" genres: it can be seen to intermingle with political caricature, like in the lithographs (and in the sculptures) of the great contemporary of Baudelaire, Honoré Daumier; or, in the twentieth century, yet again with caricature, or as a sequence similar to that of the comic strips, as in Picasso's *Dreams and Lies of Franco*, which came shortly before his monumental painting *Guernica*. In short, "history painting" in the last two centuries seems more inclined to flirt not with the language of "high" art, but with the vernacular. It is in this latter form that Stefano Minzi carries out the works he dedicates to the penultimate era of Italian politics: the two decades largely dominated by Silvio Berlusconi. There is another work dedicated to Berlusconi exhibited at Ex-Elettrofonica that merits consideration in itself: the *Giant Flipbook*, the crowning point for the thoughts that, for a number of years now, have driven a significant part of Stefano's work. This work itself was preceded by other works dedicated to Berlusconi: the man which half the population identified themselves with, and yet was viewed as the embodiment of all that is wrong with the country by the other half. In a performance entitled *Villa Certosa*, put on in London in 2008, the 'Cavaliere' is represented by hybrid images resulting from the merging together of the two halves of different people's faces. In this way the face of Berlusconi is merged, for example, with those of Mike Buongiorno, Moana Pozzi or Elvis Presley. The Cavaliere's face also ends up on the pillows recently produced by Stefano, coarsely formed, not unlike the puppets on which Tony Oursler projects his personages: anthropomorphic screens, like those of Minzi's pillows. But the *flipbook* is a different thing in terms of thought, energy, concentration and technical

experimentation. It is about the metaphor of a (desired) disappearance. The work takes advantage of a random occurrence: the author realised that the photopolymer film used to imprint the photo of a young Berlusconi on a milk carton, flattened and used as a plate, did not adhere very well, and, after the first print, it began to come off in pieces. This produced an effect of progressive entropy, transforming into a sequence whereby the dissolution of the image is set in action under the eyes of the observer. Such a sequence can also be thought of as being in motion: hence the idea of the *flipbook*.

With the method just explained Stefano makes one of his many attempts to bring together graphic techniques and photography, a combination that has fascinated him for years and has found, from time to time, different applications. In this case, however, as noted by Annalisa Insana, Stefano renounces the reproducibility of engraving and photography: if every picture marks a step in an irreversible process of deterioration, it can only be unique and fill a specific place within a sequence. The purpose of each is to be an episode in a larger story that reads like a sort of *memento mori*, not unlike to what happens in the images of divas and famous women produced by Andy Warhol in the early Sixties. They had either just passed away (Marilyn Monroe), or were affected by serious health problems (Liz Taylor during the filming of *Cleopatra*), or were a symbol of mourning for an entire nation (newly widowed Jacqueline Kennedy). In these images too the entropic process is strong and is conveyed by the out of register effect that Warhol creates when he prints some portraits of Liz Taylor, or by the way in which Marilyn is presented in a columned series which is repeated, similar to strips of snapshots taken in a photo booth, where, however, with each repetition, the face fades a little more, until, at some point, it disappears completely. Stefano puts Berlusconi's face as a young man, with hair and no wrinkles through such an entropic process. Right from the first image, the figure begins to show flaws and gradually fades away. It is a work of gradual disassembly that rapidly approaches disfiguration: very quickly Berlusconi is just a shadow, the outline of the face. It is first topped in Donald Duck's hat; next is the turn of the "plate" itself - in truth a flattened milk carton - to be opened out, to lose parts and then be repaired, stitched up with twine: the result of each step of this process, a little paroxysmal and a little grotesque, is printed, and the sheets, therefore record not only the disappearance of the image, replaced by a diffuse background noise, but also the edges, the fragments, the stitching achieved by some form of do-it-yourself surgery. It reveals its nature as being shapeless and flat, quintessentially mediatic, artificial, two-dimensional not only literally, but also metaphorically: it is the body of the chief as described in a book by Marco Belpoliti that was on the bedside table of Stefano and on that of his friend and interpreter Riccardo Venturi since 2009, the date in which it was published.

The work stands at the crossroads of various languages, from the cartoon, evoked by the poor and primitive mode of *flipbook*, in which the images are animated by flicking rapidly with one's fingers through the pages of some sort of notebook; to that of the comic strip (that Stefano uses for his blog). But this polyphony of instruments has sunk to the key of "brutalism": the base was waste material (an opened tetrapak), the photosensitive gel does not stick properly, the seams are uneven, the restoration of the matrix holds only provisionally.

In this dimension of poor craftsmanship, from found objects and techniques characterized more by the transience of their products than by their permanence, a political adventure is brought to a close; and and, *pace* the *Ouroboros*, hopefully years like the ones we just had will not come back so soon.