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## *As Above, So Below*

### *Some thoughts on Elisa Sighicelli's new work*

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Sometimes, it's impossible to grasp that a sculpture is not breathing: our mind informs us it is so, but our eyes and hearts tell a different story. Marble can shine as softly as skin; bronze can swell with the voluptuousness of a body; plaster can capture the look in a child's eye. This is art as alchemy.

Elisa Sighicelli's latest photographs ostensibly focus on figurative sculptures from the 19th and early-20th centuries held in the storage rooms of Milan's Modern Art Gallery (GAM). I say 'ostensibly' because the images she has created are more than the sum of their parts. No longer considered important enough to be on display, while some of the sculptures are compelling, others are broken, clichéd or bombastic. However, spend time with Sighicelli's photographs of them and something shifts: they become less studies of a diverse group of sculptures than intimate portraits of living, breathing people, secretly observed. Different periods jostle together, various energies crackle through the air and contradictions abound: time is suspended, even as movement is implied. The robustness of the sculptures' physicality is challenged by the transformative power of the materials that surround and capture them: dust, a flash of light, a shadow as thick as mud, the click of a lens.

Women, men, girls, boys, athletes, saints and leaders – naked, veiled or dressed in the soft bows and loose robes of long ago – recline, gesticulate, whisper, sleep, oblivious to our scrutiny. Yet, even as they evoke other worlds and eras, and whether made from plaster, bronze or marble, they reflect something of the current moment. A raised hand, a soft look, closed eyes, a gesture of supplication; this is a dreamworld rooted in reality, a place in which history – as it always is – is in flux. Scale follows its own logic; sculptures loom and shrink in a heartbeat.

Although many of the works are damaged – limbs are severed, heads decapitated, fingers chopped – oddly, these newly calibrated bodies reignite and repurpose their expressive powers. Although many of them were commissioned to celebrate Mussolini

or to reinforce hackneyed gender roles – woman as demure, man as powerful – through her framing, Sighicelli has injected life into a tired language; she makes us see these sculptures anew: the nuances of their interactions are complex and startlingly contemporary. This is not only intimated in the 21st-century details – bubble wrap and tape on broken legs, a sheet of plastic concealing a face – but in the enduring nature of communication: strip away the bombast and a glance will always be enigmatic. The years have rolled by, and while many of these antiquated characters are covered, metaphorically and literally by dust, in many ways, time has served them well: as mad longings for power dissolve into irrelevance, individual personalities emerge from the shadows to restlessly haunt the present. A sense of spirituality – or, at least, the sense that the dead are still with us – lingers in the intimation of other realms. Defanged, set adrift from the constraints of their creator's expectations, hauled into our hyper-modern moment and seen in close proximity to other works, the sculptures bloom in surprising directions.

In one photograph, for example, a young girl – naked, her head at an angle, her body tired – sits with her eyes shut, a label ignominiously strung around her neck. To her right, an ambiguous figure, slightly out of focus, appears to be striding forward. Between the two sculptures is a glimpse of a man's bullish head, his lips pursed: Benito Mussolini. Long dead, all that the dictator now presides over is a dusty room of relics. With great delicacy, Sighicelli employs dislocation as a form of critical realism. She turns the tables on the nightmares of the 20th century, when fascism rendered people expendable, deprived them of their dignity, reduced their identities to numbers and their histories to the rubbish dump. The suggestion hums that very little we experience is straightforward and, although our wounds might not always be obvious, to be human is to be damaged. To suggest otherwise is to mislead.

From her first visit to the storage rooms, Sighicelli was struck by the unexpected relationships provoked by the apparently random placement of the sculptures, which have, for so long, been hidden from the public. Wandering from figure to figure, the artist was overcome by the strange sense that some of the characters were communicating with one another in their hushed world. She decided not to move any of them; when her assistant shone a spotlight in various directions, startling connections came into focus. Light transformed the storage room into a place as busy as a train station. Photography, a medium which is usually associated with freezing time, does the opposite here: it animates the inanimate, illuminating objects that have, for decades, languished in the dark. The camera catapults the sculptures into the future.

Sighicelli shot her 'portraits' from myriad directions: looking up at the sculptures, so they diminish us; zooming in close, in order to focus on the subtleties of an expression; sidling alongside, as if approaching a friend. The sculptures become stand-ins for humans; that they are silent is apt: after all, so much of our communication is non-verbal.

There are so many scenarios, so many possible stories here. They're like scenes from an untitled film, interactions spied through a window, fragments of a dream or a nightmare half-remembered.

A naked, smiling woman leans towards a wistful young girl, while another leans back, deep in reverie. It could be a study of friends relaxing on a summer's day apart from the fact that one of the smiling woman's arms is broken and appears to sprouting strands of stuffing.

An old, bearded man in a heavy coat sits deep in thought in the gloom. Behind him, an armless, headless, naked female figure glows like a broken promise of his youth. Another image of deep melancholy. A tall woman peers through a plastic veil; she towers over a naked young boy, his arm raised as if in defiance of the three cardboard labels strung around his neck. Next to him, a young woman bows her head, the embodiment of dejection. Around her neck, again, a label.

A stern young woman, her hair tied back, her dress modest, stares into the distance. A boy kneels in front of her; rather sinisterly, his hands seem to be tied back. His head obscures her hands. Next to him is a headless torso; string tumbles down his chest. A black goddess figure raises one arm; the other holds a bundle of wooden rods with an axe head: the Italian fascist symbol. In the foreground, brightly lit, a woman, deep in thought, possibly anxious, brings her hand to her mouth.

Sighicelli's is an art of suggestion: she privileges ambiguity, nuance and subtlety – in art, in life – over blunt statements of fact. Uninterested in imposing a single narrative on the images she creates, she focusses on objects in order to trigger something that an observer might recognise: not only a look or a gesture, but a desire for silence, perhaps, or to be understood without the demands of explanation, the solace of close observation, unjudged.

The artist has long been fascinated by thresholds – between physical and mental states, night and day – and the power of light to transform the familiar into something uncanny. The title of her exhibition, 'As Above, So Below', alludes to this. An esoteric phrase which originated in Hermetic philosophy millennia ago, it has myriad possible

interpretations – from the suggestion that what happens on earth is reflected on the astral plane, to the idea that macrocosmic views of the world cannot help but intertwine with microcosmic ones. In other words, ‘as above, so below’ implies that divisions are futile: everything we create is, in fact, connected.

Over the past few decades, Sighicelli has explored the creative possibilities of reflection and illumination from innumerable directions: lightboxes that glow like portals, projecting images of partially abstracted facades of buildings, bamboo scaffolding, icebergs beneath brooding skies, candles, clocks, chandeliers and carriage lamps. She has shot cityscapes, landscapes, advertising hoardings, doorways, lobbies, the interiors of homes, hotel rooms and palaces; antique glassware, windows covered with plastic and ancient mirrors in whose reflections rooms ripple like water. Her videos are studies in ephemerality: meditations on rivers and their echoes, the patterns of fireworks projected backwards, and the switching on of the lights at a Turin theatre. She often works at twilight (which she describes as ‘a sort of Magritte time’) and night: when a building or an object emerges from the darkness, we are more likely to notice it. (Night renders everything mysterious.) Until now, her images have been emptied of people – which is, perhaps, an odd thing to say, given that her new work focuses on sculptures. But this is what art does: it harnesses illusion to tell the truth.

Light is Sighicelli’s medium; in her hands, it suggests something or somewhere beyond the surface; a magic space, filled with transformative potential. In 2003, she created a work whose title is telling: *Lux in tenebris inest* – light is intrinsic to darkness. She also plays with the semantics

of looking by printing photographs onto the materials she is shooting: glass, satin, travertine stone. Reality – art – refuses to behave in an uncomplicated fashion: the image becomes the thing itself. Representation is as real as the things it purports to embody.

It is apt that Sighicelli’s display at GAM echoes the cryptic nature of her subject matter. The five galleries are filled with sidelong looks, oblique motives, unexpected angles; photography and sculpture dance around each other, and, at times, come together. Images – many of which are printed life-size – are displayed on both walls and metal stands, printed on plaster or matte cotton rag, and framed without glass, so that the experience of looking at them echoes that of looking at the sculptures. The artist has also moved a few sculptures from the storeroom into the gallery; one titled *L’invocazione* (The Invocation) – a heroic representation of a woman with her arms outspread – is draped in plastic and placed before a window. Backlit, she glows like a spectral relic. In another room, a sculpture of a naked girl has been half cleaned, so

that, curiously, one side of her – the dusty one – glows like a negative, while the clean half shines like a positive. She's echoed in a selection of negative and positive photographic portraits – of the Milanese mayor and geologist, Gaetano Negri in a florid bow tie; a middle-aged woman with tight curls; a naked young girl, titled 'Dreaming'. Filtered through the camera's technology, the sculptures look at once very old and very new; Sighicelli has recast them in a manner that recalls the surrealist questioning of what is more real – the dream or the waking, the dead or the living.

It is unsurprising to learn that Sighicelli originally trained as a sculptor. She carves images from light that are as robust in two dimensions as those found in three; she resurrects objects with her camera, complicating not only assumptions – about materials, time, function – but about what it means to look at something or someone, or to move through a space. She is, essentially, a time traveller: the dead, she makes clear, are still with us and they continue to have something to say; even the darkest corners of a storeroom can breathe, and the dustiest and most weary of languages can be re-booted. Hers is an art of possibility; a reiteration that however hopeless the scenario, life – in all its messy glory – will somehow end up charging in.