Published in *Elisa Sighicelli, 9 Years*, SKIRA 2020.

The transitional realm

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

In the introduction to *The Story of Art*, his seminal text from 1950, Ernst H. Gombrich (1909-2001) wrote: "There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists ... such a word may mean very different things in different times and places."
The artistic career of Elisa Sighicelli is undoubtedly an outstanding example of how the possibilities of defining contemporary expressive practice can exist far from the most often beaten tracks. Her path can be seen as isolated and idiosyncratic, though certainly not lacking in references to current artistic discourse, and it is quite close – in spite of the obvious differences of language – to the experience of a painter like Morandi. Nevertheless, what links back to Morandi is not only his placid rhythm, his way of being isolated from the fashion of the avant-gardes, his will to represent the world through his little studio in Bologna, while the environment outside – vital, full of transformations, progress, traumas, movements – exploded in all its noise. Morandi, in fact, did not simply paint bottles. First he covered their glass surface in blue, white or green, and then he painted their likeness. The bottle as object was thus already painted, it existed as an image in the world before becoming an image on canvas. In Morandi's works, then, a space is created that exists halfway between reality and painting, between the reality of the imaginary world and the real world.
Furthermore, in Elisa Sighicelli's work the negation of photography as a separate episode in the evolution of the visual arts, an isolated case or path taken from scratch by the practice of visual languages, emerges in a particularly stratified, erudite and ramified way. One of the characteristics of her research is the way it reminds us that photography belongs to the history of visual arts in continuity with painting.
In her works Sighicelli does something very close to the theory of the 'imaginal world' advanced by the great historian of Iranian culture Henry Corbin, according to which the *mundus imaginalis* is "a world as ontologically real as the world of the senses and the world of the intellect, a world that requires a faculty of perception belonging to it, a faculty that is a cognitive function, a *noetic* value, as fully real as the faculties of sensory perception or intellectual intuition. This faculty is the imaginative power, the one we must avoid confusing with the imagination that modern man identifies with 'fantasy' and that, according to him, produces only the 'imaginary.'"
It is a concept that leads back to Greek origins, to an Aristotelian vision of the image. In that vision there exists no separation between 'the thing' and 'its image'. That is a binary, modern European division: instead, what Aristotle had in mind was an intermediate space between the real world and that of representation. A space that is not abstract and does not reside in the mind, but possesses its own material density. It is in this 'transitional space' between the image and the thing that Elisa Sighicelli moves, constantly playing with perceptions – we never know if we are looking at fabric or the representation of fabric, the thing or the image.
The question we might ask when faced with Sighicelli's work, namely "is it still photography?", thus seems to be challenged or even erased by a wider overview of the technical and linguistic means she deploys, and by the multiple references to philosophical thought: in this 'transitional space' we are prompted to reflect on illusions of perception that link back to the Baroque, but also to quantum theory, where the

experiment is influenced by the very fact that the scientist has thought of the experiment.
Sighicelli – by juxtaposing photographic representation to the nail or to the canvas hanging from the nail – puts corporeality and the corporeal incarnation of the image at the centre of her work.