

# Giovanni Raffaelli

## *The Creation of Memory*

**O**ur brain, like the ocean, has its own undertow. In other words, a significant, but finite, series of images which we carry inside us for months, years, arrives, surfaces, carried by the continuous flow of waves, by their physical energy, brought back subsequently over time by the undertow.

This exhibition of works by Giovanni Raffaelli is testimony to what he does best, images which are his own but often those of all of us of the current generation, an artist who records them, rewrites them, depicts them in order to give them a holy and unholy value, ascribing significances which may be political or civil, pure enchantment, the socratically ironic indication in a provoked dialectic to which Raffaelli calls the viewer.

Presenter and collector at the same time, Raffaelli brings memory to life, makes it into art and spectacle, listing like a sophisticated encyclopaedist all the icons which have impressed him in his past, which may be salvatory images and terrifying images, divine images and frightening images. Which he portrays and discusses with exceptional expressive fantasy such that things which are considered confined to the dustbin of history, extinct languages and ancient, outdated beliefs, return in Raffaelli's undertow, in the treasure chest of wonders which he opens here and where we can rummage freely, to be reconsidered and we, complicit, bear witness to how much illusion and inadequacy, fake credulity lay in these. Even dreams or nightmares.

It is a method which without a shadow of doubt is reminiscent of Pop-Art. American artists were the first in the post-war period to make art by drawing attention to "mainstream" people and objects, and thus making them popular and public at a mass level, reconstructing them to draw them to the viewer's attention. A genius such as Marcel Duchamp had already taken "things" from everyday life raising them to a fetish, a totem, with iconoclastic gestures. But with Pop Art the images were truly taken from advertising, from comics, from printed paper to provide models for pictures and sculptures.

One morning in Viareggio I was lucky to hear the renowned poet Giuseppe Ungaretti, who had just returned from New York, give an account of the pop art which he had been able to witness and study. He underlined and emphasised the almost morbid attachment that each of us has to memory. And magnificently reference can be made here to the effects on the memory that created a writer such as Marcel Proust in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* or more recently the famous *Amarcord* by a director such as Federico Fellini.

Giovanni Raffaelli is following in these footsteps. But he does not re-edify the images, does not re-propose them as they were. Through colour and drawings and sketches of subjects, he mistreats them or repositions them, unites a saint with a sinner, he mocks them or glorifies them, he intervenes and claws them, he intervenes and beautifies them, he intervenes and plays. But what is created is not simple, superficial, ephemeral entertainment. It is, if anything, a moralistic process. Because Raffaelli always wants to say *beware of what you have always believed... Take care and do not fall back on these messages because they were and are dreadfully poisonous.*

In short, it is therefore necessary to examine briefly Giovanni Raffaelli's biography. He was born into a sea-faring family of practising Catholics and was himself a sailor for a number of years, enriched with thousands of stories, religious stylistic features, apocalyptic fantasies, and thus bleeding Christs and Madonnas, pious ex votos, environmental and carnal turmoil imprinted themselves on his mind. Having become a communist



and precocious painter, he added to the calls of religious faith the slogans of Marxist-Leninism, still religious or thus perceived. Not fully given over to all this, which weighed heavily on him during his adolescence and early youth, he roamed about between Milan, London and Rome in the golden years (the sixties), coming into contact with a renowned group of artists such as Scanavino and Carmassi, Ray and Dova (in Milan), Maccari, Tano Festa, Schifano (in Rome), while in Versilia he frequented Mario Francesconi and Mario Marcucci, Cerasre Garboli and Manlio Cancogni.

During these wanderings, Giovanni Raffaelli developed a desire for objects and images almost in the manner of a cultured antique dealer. He opened a shop and tested the market, without, however, getting out of his head what he had seen and experienced. Thus he created treasure from them and produced these works in the exhibition, which are the treasure that the "old sailor" brings with him from fantastic journeys, from Sarmarkand memorabilia, from the fabulous oriental nights, from the perfumed souks across the ocean. Wherever he landed.

His friendship, fellowship with Antonio Possenti, Lucca's marvellous illustrator of fairy tales and dream literature, was eventually the final stimulus that convinced Raffaelli to open up the significant, precious contents of his mind in this exhibition. And as in the inexhaustible undertow, everyone gathers now the golden nugget, now the scraps, now the dregs, now the black pearl. Heavens above! Here there is a skull, there a shrine, there the hideous reappearance of Hitler! Why did we believe? Why do we believe?

– by Adolfo Lippi

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Inauguration 7 September 6pm

Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Piazza San Martino, 7

Tuesdays to Sundays 3.30pm to 7.30pm

Free admission

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