

- Saturday October 16 2021 17:30 Meeting with Beatrice Celli, Passage des fougères

- Every day of the exhibition 15:00 Meeting around the exhibitions

The students of the Villa Arson will create guided tours of the exhibitions, sometimes with performances, evoking their personal interests in relation to the artistic issues of the program. Free admission. No reservation needed.

Exhibition opened every day (except on Tuesdays) from 2 to 6 pm. Closed on December 24, 25 and 26.

The Villa Arson is a public institution of the ministry of culture. It is supported by Région SUD Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Département des Alpes-Maritimes and Ville de Nice. The Villa Arson is a member of UCA - Université Côte d'Azur, and of the networks "Ecole(s) du Sud, BOTX(S) and DCA.



from these places really internalize this paranoia of feeling observed and judged. Among other things it can generate social jealousy. For better or for worse, I think this tradition expresses a strong feeling of community; in the past, being misunderstood by one's own group could mean endangering one's own life. Apart from the place and time, I wanted to speak of this discriminatory gaze which can generate fear and disorientation, which can sometimes cause blockage and complete destruction.

ÉM In 2017, you created the project *CalceViva* [Quicklime] to revive poorly maintained public spaces. What is this project about exactly?

BC I created this project in collaboration with a local association, Genius Loci Onlus d'Isola del Gran Sasso, which sees to the psychological well-being of the inhabitants. It is a challenge to create such a project in the public space, in these outlying villages and with people who are not familiar with contemporary art. The interventions are often collective and ephemeral. The project stems from the conviction that places are mirrors of the spirit and must be treated and respected as such.

The first year, I did it at Castelli. It was a fresco made with pieces of ceramics that had been broken in 2017 during the earthquake. Then with the refugees from the Association Salam in Isola del Gran Sasso, we created an intervention with phosphorescent paint in an underground passageway between a parking lot and the church. The idea was to convince the town to install a specific lighting system to restore life in this space. And finally for the last edition, I organized a workshop on the village square during which we created ceramic amulets which we then attached to the scaffolding of the buildings that were being renovated after the earthquake.

For each of these editions, I was always surprised by the reaction of the public. Generally I had very positive returns about my projects, in spite of a few inevitable misunderstandings. It was also extremely important to me as an artist to confront myself with other places of creation, and not necessarily only places dedicated to contemporary art. In these dedicated places it is easy to create because everyone masters the common codes. Outside, I'm often asked very frontal questions, like "what does this mean?" or "why did you do it?" which are not common questions in the art world but which really pushed me into reconsidering my point of view.

Artistic creation can act like an invisible fuse, one can't always measure its effects immediately, but it plants a seed which can potentially germinate in the behavior and thoughts of people. A seed which can grow anywhere.

ÉM Last summer as artist in residence in Lithuania you found inspiration for your exhibition at the Villa Arson. Can you tell us about your experience over there and what it was that impressed you and became a source of inspiration?

BC I knew very little about Lithuania before the residency. There is a myth according to which it is the last pagan country in Europe and indeed, cultural tradition is still very lively there, even though it is marked by nationalism and conservatism.

So everything I saw around me revealed something spiritual and invisible; it was part of my heritage. I gradually became aware that executing an action, manipulating a material or object, can represent a lot more than meets the eye and can offer a perspective on the world, build a "sense of reality". I like to think that my art is a reinterpretation of this tradition.

I tend to have a somewhat animistic view of my works. The material they are made of is not neutral, they are not just the result of manipulation. I believe part of our thoughts, emotions and feelings remain embodied in them. Which is why my choice of materials is so important, because often they are already charged with a certain energy.

The root on which rests the owl *Beffa Notturna* [Nocturnal Mocking] was shaped by the river in my village. The leaves of the garland were partly produced from canvases that I painted during my first years at the Academy in Urbino (in the center of Italy). In a previous exhibition, I used a sheet embroidered by my mother before her wedding, and showed a sculpture on my great grandfather's hoe.

This aspect is not immediately apparent to the viewers, but I believe nonetheless that the history of these objects has its own force of attraction influencing the way in which we perceive and feel a work.

And also I often have the feeling of being overwhelmed by the process of creating my works, as if I weren't the one who had made them, or at least not the only one.

ÉM I can remember your graduation installation at the Villa Arson.

BC *Due Occhi m'han guardato* [Two Eyes Looked at Me] which I made in 2018 was a work about the tradition of the evil eye. This is a very common belief in the Abruzzi: that an envious person, with a single malevolent look, can cause ill luck and harm to the person who is envied.

The idea came to me after reading a book by English anthropologist and artist Estella Canziani, who had traveled in my area at the end of the 19th century. She describes numerous amulets against the evil eye. The fact that I couldn't see exactly how these amulets were made was a real catalyst for my imagination.

A long time ago a woman in my village transmitted to me the ritual to keep the evil eye away; she was one of the rare people who still remembered it. In accordance with the tradition, I learned the formula by heart at midnight, on Christmas night. Because this belief is surrounded by discretion and secrecy, when I decided to use it for installation, I had to ask myself what could be shown and what should remain hidden.

So I decided to make a sort of hut out of recycled papier-mâché, with leaves and feathers that I found across from my studio. I liked the idea of a somewhat precarious shelter made with the materials that were on hand. Inside I performed the ritual, and only the traces remained visible for the public.

Around this hut I made five sculptures for protection from the evil eye out of humble materials which also bore typical symbols of rural imagery.

Even though this was an ancient belief that had nearly disappeared, I could relate perfectly well to what the evil eye was. The tight cohabitation between villagers means that people observe one another very closely. I think that people who come

The Passage des fougères [Fern Pathway] finds itself transfigured by Italian artist Beatrice Celli (Villa Arson class of 2019) into a place for dreaming and collectively imagining, inspired by the history of the garden; a landscape of symbols, created by the means of a rudimentary practice including salvaging, calling forth both classicism and folklore. Her metaphorical garden is conceived as an initiatory passage, strewn with a *memento mori* garland, a fountain decorated with a fantastical bestiary and a pavilion designed as a cosmic confessional. *The Garden of Allegories* is an invented *locus amoenus**, an invitation to cultivate the singular world hidden deep inside us.

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where peasant-shepherds live out their quiet lives indulging in the pleasures of song, poetry, and the disinterested joys of love.

Éric Mangion You were born in the Abruzzi in Italy, and you still live there part of the time. The area represents more than a familial and emotional attachment for you, it's also a source of inspiration through its folklore, its religion, its legends and craftsmanship.

Beatrice Celli Indeed my region is an important source of inspiration, particularly its magic and religious culture. There are very few manifestations of this culture today, even if certain conditions have remained intact thanks to the geographic isolation of this part of Italy. Nonetheless I was able to feel a sense of the sacred in what was transmitted to me by the women in my family, especially in the world of crafts, its sense of ritual, of caring and sharing, and also in the various stories and legends that I've heard all my life. And also I come from Castelli, a village with a thousand year old tradition of ceramics; so I was able to admire and to practice this technique from a very young age.

I was constantly seeing processions, sculptures of saints, amulets or objects for protection, and I heard stories about witches, devils and werewolves. When I was small, I watched my grandmother doing things that seemed mysterious to me. For instance when the priest came to bless the house, he scolded her for placing a horseshoe at the entrance; so she would put it in a drawer, and once the house was blessed, she would put the horseshoe back in the same place. I saw her making strange gestures when someone talked about a person who had died, repeating whispers in a low voice. She would light a candle when there was an important event, and told me to put salt in my pocket if I had to take an exam. Ironically, there were also in the family people who suffered from obsessive and compulsive disorders, and who also practiced rituals that seemed a bit absurd to me. Even though the motivations of obsessive gestures and those of rituals are completely different, I saw them in the same light.

Beatrice Celli benefited from the residency ACROSS #31 organized by [thankyouforcoming](#), which is part of the cross residency "DeMo" organized by Kaunas Artists' House (Lithuania), in the context of the program "Kaunas – European Culture Capital 2022".



16:10 – 30.12.21

Transition: Claire Bernstein

Curator Eric Mangion

BC While imagining this *locus amoenus*, I wasn't thinking of an ethereal representation devoid of contradiction. Quite the contrary, in this garden the monstrous coexists with the decorative, the grotesque with classicism, patience with brutality.

Isn't it perhaps in the free flight of fantasy, in expressing the numerous paradoxes and contradictions of our nature, the irrational and the nonsensical, that we can hope to restore some part of paradise?

Gardens are relatively protected universes but they are not outside of history; on the contrary sometimes there are even an opposing power, which resists deleterious forces. In an immortal Eden there is nothing to cultivate, because everything is already there, within the hand's reach. Although our terrestrial gardens often look like small openings onto Paradise at the heart of a fallen world, we have to create them, maintain them and care for them. In order to oppose destructive forces and the annihilation of the living, we have to seek soothing and restorative powers and let them develop within us. Cultivating, that's what it's all about. Cultivating a plural world whose form is shaped by human action.

So I imagined this *Garden of Allegories* as a place for contemplation, observation, patience, as a place where local mythologies are handed down and revitalized, as a place where one exalts the value of encounters, discovery and experimentation, where spirits and demons dance together between enchantment and illusion. As a place for the multiplicity of meanings, for inviting each person to participate with her or his own imagination in building, reinventing, cultivating an ideal horizon.

was the practice of Užkalbėtojai, which consists in healing illnesses, wounds, burns, with whispers. A few days later I talked about that with my host, Skaidra. She was the one who managed to find the contact details of this witch (she likes to be called that). She was delighted when she gave me her number, and she said to me: “she’s really the best”. Rita – that’s her name – lives on the outskirts of Vilnius. You have to walk down a long avenue from the neighborhood of the airport.

She welcomed us warmly in her garden, which is full of plants and flowers. I was with Viktorija, a friend of the person in charge of my residency, Agnė Bagdžiūnaitėthat, because Rita didn't speak English very well. I immediately understood that she was a real *Genius Loci* in Lithuania. She showed us the center where she transmits traditional customs. That’s also where she organizes workshops on folkloric costumes and where she dries the plants that she uses for herbal tea and healing.

She asked me to bring an unopened bottle of water. Water was the means through which she accomplished her ritual. Before starting, she said to me several times: “this is not a joke”. I had never thought it was. So she started to whisper and to blow on the bottle. At that same moment I felt a movement inside my body, a slight vibration. I was shocked by the precision with which she identified some of the small health issues I was having. When I left, she told me I would feel a little bit troubled by the session. In fact several days later, my head was a bit muffled, I had a nocturnal episode of paralysis, I don’t know if this was related. I drank the water in the bottle following her instructions: half of it during a one week period, the rest of it diluted in five bottles that I drank over a period of a month.

The installation *GrasciaCorna* came from this experience. The voice you can hear in the horns of plenty are repeating the magical formulas of Užkalbėtojai, but also of other similar practices that I am personally familiar with. They are used to cure certain illnesses and feelings of discomfort in general. In these magic formulas the words don't have to be intelligible; when the content becomes occult, verbal comprehension diminishes.

I manipulated the voice so that it became pure sound and vibration, an effect which is reinforced by the interaction with the shape of the sculpture. I recorded songs in Lithuania during a choir organized in a garden. I was supposed to participate but I arrived late. So I decided to record their voices from the neighboring garden. Perhaps you can hear other parasitic sounds, a croaking bird, a plane and also cars from a nearby parking lot.

ÉM You wrote that the *Garden of Allegories* was “an invented *locus amoenus*, an invitation to cultivate the singular world hidden deep inside us”. In traditional classical literature, a *locus amoenus* designates “an ideal place in harmony with nature and far from the tensions of the urban world, where peasant- shepherds live out their quiet lives indulging in the pleasures of song, poetry, and the disinterested joys of love”. Indeed we are familiar with this ideal and serene representation of Eden. But how is this idyllic image hidden deep inside us, we humans whose nature is often so violently paradoxical?

a “fountain decorated with a fantastical bestiary” or a “pavilion designed as a cosmic confessional”. The terms you use almost belong to mannerist language from another era. So how do you manage to make your works contemporary? What kind of transfer do you carry out?

BC I don't really worry about being contemporary, or at any rate it’s not a problem when I'm creating my works. Perhaps connection with my time is not something that I look for first and foremost, even if I try to know, to travel, to feel and to come as much in contact as possible with the spirit of the world around me. In the same way, I'm aware that any interpretation we have of our own epoch is always incomplete and relative to one's own point of view. I consider that I'm a human being living in my time. And finally, forcing oneself to “be contemporary” when creating is liable to provoke a kind of self censorship. So I wouldn't speak of transfer, that seems too deliberate in relation to my way of working. I'm very intuitive, each process is different, each work has its own story, which for me is absolutely necessary. So retrospectively if I had to say in what way my works are contemporary, I would say through sensitivity, syncretism, in other words through their integration within various beliefs, the search for a space for independence in relation to tradition and the past, and my remaining neither in opposition nor in an imitative relation.

Going from one material, one thought, one symbol to another, improvising and inventing my own technique is perhaps a relatively contemporary freedom. At the same time this comes to me pretty spontaneously.

When I use these terms, *memento mori*, confessional, garland, I'm aware that this can reveal a spirit of contradiction in relation to techno-scientific rationalism, which strives to be completely separate from representations of the past and ancestral beliefs. But when one looks closely at my works, one discovers that they are not at all reassuring. They reveal a lot of disquiet, and create a strange and bizarre atmosphere, almost the reverse of my original description.

Lastly, I often use recycled objects, what is available in my immediate surroundings, and this reveals a very topical environmental preoccupation.

Perhaps today being contemporary is to participate in the destruction of a single and normative vision of the world, in other words to escape from the notion of “center”, whether cultural, ideological or economic, to turn one’s attention towards local features in order to increase multiple perceptions, in space as well as in time. In my case the idea is to start with the magical rural imagery of my region, not as a way of withdrawing into oneself, but as a possibility to maintain a singular gaze on the world.

ÉM The sound piece *GrasciaCorna* [Horn of Plenty] which closes the exhibition comes from a conversation you had with a witch that you met in Lithuania, who apparently heals souls and bodies with sound. Of course we want to know more!

BC The anthropologist I met in Lithuania, Dalia Senvaityte, spoke to me about Lithuanian mythology and traditions. When I questioned her about witchcraft, one of the first things she mentioned

considering where I came from. I had never thought about how access to greenery could not be a given. Quite the opposite, I would say that in my region, forests can actually become a problem if they are not tended to. Trees often fall on electric lines, and the hydro-geologic instability caused by the gradual disappearance of farmland (land that is tended) sometimes results in landslides. So the equilibriums are very different.

When I was invited to exhibit in the Passage des fougères, we were being confronted with the second lockdown. I was isolated for at least a month and a half because I had Covid. With the pandemic, gardens also became a sad symbol of social privilege, some people having a place to breathe, and others being forced to remain inside their apartments without natural light. Aside from my personal need for greenery and air at the time, I thought a garden might be a deeply symbolic place.

I'm thinking of Boccaccio's Decameron, when a group of young Florentines in 1348 decided to leave the city of Florence which was devastated by an epidemic, to retire in a villa on the surrounding hills, where after two weeks they started talking, dancing, telling stories and partying. There was a radical contrast between the horrors of a city ravaged by plague and the idyllic setting awaiting the protagonists of the book. In the city, public order gave way to anarchy; love for one's neighbor turned into phobia of one's neighbor. So these young people tried to revive civil relations which had broken down in the city because of the plague, to re-create a new social order. They spent their time telling stories in the gardens, and the pleasure of transmission became one with the contemplation of nature. Boccaccio created a place where art did not dominate nature and was not dominated by it either. There are many analogies with the present situation: more and more people are trying to reinvest, symbolically and also physically, the outskirts, the country, the forest, to construct a different social order, to cultivate their alternative visions.

ÉM Part of the exhibition walls are painted in a sort of mint green. Is this a direct reference to gardens? Or should we see more than that in it?

BC I chose mint green to create a contrast with the materials and the colors of the works, which are more dense, made of ceramics, wood, black fabric. Compared to my previous projects, I would say that the *Garden of Allegories* was born with a need for lightness and freshness. Very popular during the Baroque era and also during the 1950s, mint green is very present in the Provençal imagination, but I also found it in Lithuania on traditional wooden houses. It certainly has something vintage about it. In the urban landscape not only is it a very mimetic color, because it is somewhere between the color of the sky and the color of vegetation, but I also like to consider it in a somewhat romantic fashion as representing a sort of nostalgia for the forest in the midst of the city. However it is so pale and soothing (very different from nature's green) that one quickly remembers that it's just a fiction.

ÉM We are all intrigued by the way you describe the works featured in the exhibition: a “*memento mori* in the shape of a garland”,

symbolic in itself: it's a passageway situated within the architecture of the Villa Arson, between the art school, the administration and the art center. So it's a physical and metaphorical passageway.

I chose to speak of allegories because they are rhetorical figures which leave room for creativity, which is more interesting to me than symbolism. Sartre used to say that with symbolism the semantic field went dry.

I wanted to give rise to several levels of interpretation and to create multiple links. I would say that for me allegories are the locus for a dispersive multiplicity of meaning, which is why they are more fertile and mysterious than a direct correspondence between signified and signifier.

However, the *Garden of Allegories* is essentially an invented mythology where I freely expressed my imagination. It's a pretext for giving birth to visionary images which, although they incorporate historically codified elements, aim at opening a new way of envisaging our relation to the environment and at reinventing beliefs and symbols from different eras and different worlds.

At first, I wanted to use the Italian word “selvatico” in the title, which means “pertaining to the forest” as opposed to “domesticated”, thus creating a contrast with the domesticity of the garden. Selvatico is often associated with the idea of something rustic, unrefined. Translated into French the word is even more negative, “sauvage”. The goal of the project as a whole is therefore essentially to enlarge the relation between “domesticity” and “wildness”.

More precisely, in my works, I accentuate the physical and direct relation to matter. I deliberately use a rustic aesthetic, somewhat “raw”, in order to reevaluate the notion of “spontaneity” and of “rusticity”, not in a pejorative sense but as the authentic expression – in the case of my history and my roots – of a singular vision of the world.

ÉM When one conceives an exhibition based on the garden at the Villa Arson, it is not an innocent move. In what way did the gardens of the Villa Arson inspire you? A few months ago, we talked about how brutalist architecture blends what is organic and what is inorganic.

BC The theme you suggested to me for the exhibition was “the spirit of the place”. So I thought about the past of the place and of the way in which this past determines a way of thinking and a way of perceiving for the people who live in it today. I remembered that instead of a school and an art center there used to be Italian gardens here, and I thought how today, in brutalist architecture, nature and artifice are integrated in a different way, but not without analogies. So the garden is not merely a small private and idyllic world, it also reflects a precise way of thinking and of feeling at a certain time. At the Villa Arson the vegetation is carefully tended, but the result is not asphyxiating; I also like it when there are weeds growing more spontaneously.

When I was a student here, I remember needing branches for an installation. The gardeners had recently pruned the trees and there was no way of finding any branches on the site. I had to walk at least 40 minutes before I found a bit of greenery where I could pick up a few. I had to climb high up into the hills of Nice to get them. This seemed really absurd

There is a neo-religion, Romuva, based precisely on Lithuanian mythologies and divinities, and which is waiting to be recognized as an official religion. In Kaunas notably there is a real gem of folklore which preserves Lithuanian beliefs and legends: the Žmuidzinavičius Museum, better known as the “Museum of the Devil”.

During lockdown, I had organized the exhibition *Pandemonium* in my village, which was closely related to the fear and representation of the devil in popular culture. I was so excited about this coincidence that my application for the residency in Lithuania was centered around the figure of the Devil.

Once I was there, I literally fell in love with the museum. I found myself confronted with a gallery of vices and of all sorts of human problems because the devil represents darkness, what our conscience does not accept and needs to expel. Therefore it is associated with tobacco, alcohol, accidents, diseases, insects, money but also with exceptional musical talent.

For example in Lithuania if you want to learn how to play an instrument you can invoke the devil at midnight on a specific day in a forest and the devil will materialize under the guise of a human being to teach you how to play magnificently.

When I presented my work in the garden of the Museum of the Devil, I reactivated with the audience an old Lithuanian belief which is used to “enchant” money. I asked them to bury a few cents in a hole, while repeating the sentence “Devil Devil come to the money, Devil Devil here's the money!”. The next day I went back to take the coins and they are now suspended on the horns of plenty (*GrasciaCorna*) in the last exhibition room.

In front of Lithuanian houses you can often find sorts of big wooden totems with symbols and personalized stories sculpted on the surface. I was struck by the sinuous lines and the spontaneity that one could obtain with this material which is usually associated with geometric forms, or even with a certain heaviness. In *Temperamental Confessional* (featured in the exhibition), I think I was inspired by these visions. The woodwork in Lithuania also reminded me of sculptures that I saw in the churches in Italy. Hence the idea of cross breeding a garden pavilion and a confessional.

In the Devil's museum there were also mostly wooden sculptures, and the Devil was a pretext for exploring the strange and the grotesque, by creating totally absurd grimaces. So the figures that I created were inspired by religious representations, but the way that I deformed them made them more monstrous and bestial. The bas-reliefs were made without a plan, I wanted to retain this feeling of something dynamic, impulsive and fresh.

I also wanted to overcome a few prejudices: wood is often considered as a material that is not very noble, good for decorative objects. I remember some of the teachers at my Academy in Italy qualifying it as being “unadapted to contemporary art”.

ÉM The exhibition is entitled *The Garden of Allegories*. The word *allegory* has several definitions. Which one is yours and what is its meaning in the exhibition?

BC The room where I'm exhibiting – called “Passage des fougères” [Fern Pathway] is very