

Quasi maturi (Almost ripe): sprouts, blossoms, tastings, transformations, journeys to the heart of the pulp and much more

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Something that Floats / Something that Sinks, reads the title of **Shimabuku's** work on display at Ceglie's Castle. In fact, inexplicably, it can happen that two elements of the same kind behave differently despite being similar, more or less the same size and at roughly the same stage of ripeness. Two tomatoes and two limes, practically identical, do not necessarily align in the same way: the difference is surprising, the cause mysterious and elusive.

The work recounts an encounter with a marginal discovery, one that is as insignificant in the grand scheme of knowledge as it is curious and, indeed, inexplicably amusing. The author, after all, loves the magic of these narratives that nature, the environment and the history of language offer when approached from a sideways perspective capable of delving into little-travelled paths.

It is in this *almost* – almost the same, almost ripe, almost rotten, almost human, almost real, almost ready, almost alive – that the 2026 edition of *Nucré* takes shape: a space of approximation, an approach to seek, in fruit and in the themes linked to its becoming, a collection of metaphors, nuances and possible narratives on the nature of our times.

Perhaps unconsciously, the method used to select the works and their creators also followed the approach of another piece on display in the exhibition. In *A glass of fruit*, **Alejandro Almanza Pereda** works with the constraints of gravity and the sculptural possibilities of water to create still lifes that play with perspective and instability, bringing to the fore our emotional relationship with objects and the cultural memory they evoke. This attachment to images and objects, together with the development of a perspective capable of being turned on its head and of accepting collapse and failure, have been fundamental elements not only in many of the choices made, but also in the search for a specific attitude, poised for floating, for shipwreck, but also for mirage.

That is why **Glenda León** and her *Espejismo II* – which, in English, means “mirage” – are instead tasked with fostering the emergence of new ethics. Through a perspective that looks from the ground upwards, the artist offers a glimpse into the delicate fragility of the butterfly, a pollinator that is essential for wild flora and for long-distance genetic exchange. As the images unfold, the presence, flight and behaviour of the insects begin to seem unusual; the sky then clears, and shortly afterwards the butterflies start to plummet towards us. The sound now becomes crucial to the work, as the noise of their impact begins to make itself heard; with the last butterfly, it shatters the glass surface through which we are observing the scene, presumably that of the camera filming it. The oxymoron between the lightness of the bodies and the impact of the crash can express the environmental damage caused by their invisible extermination but, as the artist says, if such a light body is capable of causing a break, we cannot help but acknowledge how relative things are and how change is a radical choice, rather than a matter of force.

Finally, as always, *Nucré* draws its lifeblood from the territory of Ceglie Messapica, from its landscape, its cultural distinctiveness and the relationship the town forges with the countryside. From the Norman Castle to the restaurant Cibus and on to Trullo Rubina in Contrada Menzella, this journey spans generations, languages, perspectives, economic contexts, environmental impacts and views on the passage of time.

Natural anatomies, bodily natures

Shimabuku's work, with its water-filled tanks and interrelated elements, prompts reflection on the nature of bodies and their behaviour. We are faced with two tomatoes and two limes, but the work soon transcends the boundaries of the botanical world, using analogies and differences to guide a broader line of reasoning that encompasses the human sphere. This is a line of inquiry to which the exhibition intends to dedicate a specific section, presenting investigations capable of revealing the complex relationship between body, individual and nature through forms of existence united by profound connections.

In her performance *One Fig*, **Ingela Ihrman** explores this connection by literally stepping into the shoes of a ripe fig, and by seeking to understand, through her interpretation of other natural species as well, the reasons, challenges and complexities faced by life forms other than humans. With an effective aesthetic of behaviour, scent and abandonment, the artist stages natural actions perceived by humans as secondary, revealing just how crucial they actually are for survival. Not without a certain irony and with a unique performative and visual approach, with this series of works the artist manages to step back from the position of absolute priority with which humankind places itself in the world, making room for an urgent, democratic and necessary interspecies reflection.

Cross-disciplinary forms of analysis are also among **Sissi's** interests. She has long pursued a line of research that intersects human and natural anatomies to create new approaches to anthropology. Rather than connecting species, her thinking literally weaves together specific bodily elements, revealing, through her sculptural-visual rendering and meticulous attention to detail, a deep connection between the human and natural worlds, both in form and in behavioural patterns.

Her very recent *Lingue recise* (Severed Tongues), crafted from coloured glazed ceramic, explore, through the manipulation of the material, certain aspects associated with the sense of taste, one of the first senses upon which, from birth, our understanding of the world relies. The tongue is, however, also one of the most powerful social tools entrusted to humankind, and with this body of work the artist captures some significant attitudes. Tense and open in the act of tasting, some resemble petals at the peak of a bloom; others, closed and contracted in silence, appear as buds still crumpled up, while still others, twisted in the articulation of words, reveal the complexity and difficulty of linguistic expression. Resembling branches fallen during pruning, these tongues intertwine to convey, through the study of the muscle, the movements of knowledge and its most unexpected character nuances.

In contrast, the reflection sparked by *Corpus citrus*—a floor installation by **Andreas Zampella** in which human garments are filled with citrus fruits—is of a completely different nature. No longer made of flesh, these figures are composed of organic matter that fills the space with scents that are either intoxicating or nauseating, highlighting the passage of time on bodies that progress from unripe to ripe, and ultimately to decay. The lemon, which for the artist symbolises the south, embodies the sensory nature of a substance that is as human as it is natural. The artist's interest, however, is not limited to this alone: the flavour of the title is in fact deliberately biblical, but Zampella's body, rather than evoking the sacred, seeks to represent, through the metaphor of the fruit and the absence of a real individual, as well as with a slight tragicomic tone, the perpetual rhythm of transitions that belongs to man in his living, and whose presence, stretched out as if awaiting the end, unites him with the condition in which the elements of a still life are represented. The narrative that intertwines the human and the natural, and in which the relationship between the body's absence and presence plays a key role in its development, is also represented in the exhibition by two precious multiples by **Alik Cavaliere**, an extraordinary exponent of twentieth-century sculpture. *Favola del Mago* and *Natura prigioniera*, both from 1978, are composed of gilded bronze panels from which part of the surface has been removed at the base so that the void creates the image of an apple. This space, which remains empty in *Favola*, is instead filled in *Natura*

prigioniera by the shape of a pear. Both works feature a leaf at the top, a symbol of the transience of time: the surface of the panels, like the fruit, is glossy, whilst the leaf, perfectly realistic, is veined and matt, as if it were dry. Finally, in *Favola*, the text of a story is engraved on the surfaces of the panels, held together by rings to make it plausible to use the elements of the sculpture as the pages of a book to leaf through, to read, in a single narrative of vulnerability, magic and paradox, the story of man and the story of nature.

Almost real, almost (un)real

Historically regarded as a minor genre, still life is explored from different angles across all the exhibition venues, demonstrating – even in the most contemporary examples – a deep-rooted and radical capacity for experimentation, which places it in a dimension that is anything but secondary.

Indeed, the exhibition also aims to highlight how, on a journey to the heart of the pulp, a focus on still life is not only inevitable but also essential for framing the complex relationship between reality and unreality, life and death, humanity and the environment that it has always portrayed.

Within this framework, some of the authors featured in *Quasi maturi* explore, through their works, the tension between authenticity, manipulation, fiction and paradox, drawing out social, environmental, philosophical, political and human tensions from the natural world.

Marc Quinn, for example, a well-known member of the Young British Artists and a tireless explorer of iconic imagery, presents his *Winter Garden II* at the restaurant Cibus, the temple of avant-garde cuisine in Ceglie Messapica. In this work, he displays a flamboyant composition of artificially created flowers, vegetables and fruit, immersed in three different types of snow and ice. The passage of time and that of beauty, frozen in time, underpin the themes of vanitas and experiential marketing, which are now far more important than authenticity. The display of the appeal of perfection that propels this still life towards eternity does, however, also convey a sense of widespread unease, stemming from the present's familiarity with the pressure to be flawless.

For **Piero Gilardi**, however, the work offers a political reflection on ecosystems and the impact of human activity. The artist created his first *Tappeti-natura* (Nature Carpets) in polyurethane in 1965, but between 1969 and 1981 he put his visual practice on hold to devote himself to the development of artistic movements, the curation of international exhibitions, political activism and the theoretical and practical analysis of the connection between art and life. The analysis of the relationship between the human and the natural, with which he had begun his investigation aimed at highlighting the imbalance between the space of industrialisation and that of nature, has accompanied his entire critical and creative thought, intertwining linguistic commitment and social action in projects of various types and scales. Unforgettable, however, within the broad scope of his research, are his polyurethane works, of which the exhibition features an example from 2004. Three-dimensional still lifes, originally conceived to be experienced and walked upon, the *Tappeti-natura* stage the tension between authentic and reproduced reality, sending a message of awareness and the need to take responsibility.

Almost dead, yet still alive: from *natura morta* to still life

The significance of that discrepancy, which we have chosen to explore by taking *almost* as our guiding principle, is already inherent in the term *natura morta* (still life). The Italian term emphasises the aspect of the subjects' impending end, destined to perish; the English term, by contrast, chooses to focus on a still image, the *still*, which, however, according to another etymological meaning, can signify still alive.

The variable between these conceptual nuances is well represented by **Achille Funi**, who demonstrates his ability to capture both moods. In one painting, he immerses a jug and a plate of fruit in a mysterious and evocative twilight, while in a second, he floods the room with light and colour, capturing, through impressions, the vibrant unfolding of a rhythm that remains productive.

Also at Trullo Rubina, the concept of time is interpreted in **Giorgio Morandi's** drawings as history and memory. In his landscapes, as well as in his still lifes, it is not a focus on the decay of matter that drives his artistic reasoning, but rather the observation and sharing of a simple, direct and authentic connection to the world of everyday objects. With the few strokes of this 1962 pencil-on-paper drawing, he does not simply capture a fleeting, everyday moment, but an atmosphere and a dimension that are profoundly human and universally recognisable.

This classical pictorial approach and its surprising expressive richness are echoed in **Almanza Pereda's** elegant composition. The reference to Caravaggio is clear, but the introduction of a reversal through the glass surface and the unique behaviour of the objects submerged in water amplify the delicate poetry of resistance and tragedy portrayed by the work. The sound, at times as crystalline as the liquid embracing the elements, is at other moments more like a ballad accompanying the gentle rocking of the fruit towards collapse. As with Quinn, for the Mexican artist too, *vanitas* is one of the dimensions through which to analyse our relationship with life and things.

If, therefore, the video, rather than taking a clear stance, maintains a constant tension between decay (*natura morta*) and preservation (still life), **Isabella Ponte's** work, whilst creating a device that functions in a completely different way, activates both dimensions just as distinctly. Her most recent series of paintings, which features half a peach against a landscape backdrop, in fact focuses not so much on the tension itself, but on the iconographic choice as a pretext for discussing the roots of images from the past in the present.

On the surface of the pulp, captured at the very start of its oxidation process, the artist has etched the silhouettes of several figures from Renaissance paintings into the paint. The landscape background is drawn from the same sources and is designed to blend the dimension of the past with that of the present, seeking to merge setting, heritage and painting from life. The process is divided into various stages and involves the application of different materials and bases, which, as they overlap, allow not only for the subtle progression of ripening but also for the engraving of the forms and their equally mimetic integration into the fabric of the painting. On the one hand, therefore, a reflection on the fruit and its decay; on the other, a scene constructed in keeping with the iconography of the still life; and, on a further level, the interplay of painting that returns to the present as an indelible visual memory.

Peaches are also the subject of **Man Ray's** lithograph, which translates into two dimensions an object-based work conceived in 1969 and produced in 1972 for the Galleria Il Fauno in Turin. The print echoes the very structure of the box in which the three fruits are depicted in the foreground against a green background, above which a blue sky with three clouds unfolds. The title of the work stems from the combination of three French words, *pêche*, *paysage* and *nuage*: peach, landscape and cloud, and, through wordplay and the fantastical setting, evokes that sense of magic also found in Cavaliere's sculptures on display at the Castle.

Going back, however, to the reversal that Pereda's video openly depicts through the glass panel, **Eleonora Mariani's** works evoke the same mechanism in a gradual, yet equally clear, manner.

The large canvas, created specifically for the Sala Consiliare of Ceglie's Castle, explores a fruit – the banana – which has been the focus of her interest for some time. With a deeply intimate gaze and a sensitive attention to colour, the artist renders her subject through fluid brushstrokes, which, in interaction with the luminous atmosphere of the painting, create a powerful yet at the same

time ethereal presence. It is through this use of composition and light that the artist makes possible the reversal mentioned earlier: the certainty of being faced with a banana soon gives way to a different sensation. Symbol of the exotic and having come from afar, the banana, picked unripe for transport, is also a metaphor for the journey of goods and the dynamics to which the ripening process is subjected today. Beyond this, however, its shape, as we can clearly see in the canvas on display at the trullo, evokes that of the vessels on which migrations take place. No longer merely for food, but also human, these are referenced in the titles Mariani gives to her works, translating into the fruit that epic of displacement which belongs to our time.

From almost to the beyond: pleasure and disgust

In the plant world, ripeness represents the exact balance between rotten and unripe, that precise threshold which for some must be firmer, for others juicier, and of which everyone ultimately has their own precise and specific idea.

Time is the factor underpinning the entire process: from an absolute value to an atmospheric parameter, it is responsible for a series of trends that translate into the states, properties and textures of the fruit, which in turn give rise to the contours and nuances of perfect flavour.

There have been – and still are – those who, however, find decay a more stimulating field in both organic and conceptual terms. **Daniel Spoerri**, for example, with his *Tableaux-Pièges* (trap tables), chose to restore to the (supposed) eternity of the artwork the dirt, disorder and decomposition of dinners and banquets. From these remnants, multiplied in the black-and-white photograph on display in Contrada Menzella, the artist believes it is possible to imagine aspects of people's lives and their customs, but also to provoke disgust, a feeling that society tends to hide and suppress, yet which, in its capacity to generate uncontrolled reactions, is in fact healthy.

Andreas Zampella shares an equally strong political sensibility. Although his canvas on display at the Trullo does not present a true aesthetic of revulsion, it creates a short-circuit between the allusion to growth and revolution contained in the title (*Primavera*), the decaying subject matter of a composition made up of cherries, cigarette butts and flies, and the allusion, through the burlap used in place of canvas, to the presence of the human, which is in fact completely absent. Integration, through the support, with a space that has already been lived in, is also the tool that allows him to interpret and manipulate something that has already had its own past, literally intervening on what is already in itself a still life, to unite the plane of the existing with that of representation, reality with pictorial illusion.

Roots, modes of expression and ways of presenting taste

While our journey through the world of fruit has, among other things, involved an encounter with its juiciness and, conversely, with decay and artificiality, we must certainly expand upon the reflection on the experience of taste that was first touched upon in **Sissi's** *Lingue recise*, which are extended and retracted not only in the movement of speech, but also in the tension of tasting.

In the realm of taste, **Gianfranco Baruchello** devoted a significant part of his research to sweetness, culminating in 1979 in a series of works, including a film (shot by Alberto Grifi) featuring interviews with philosophers, critics, friends, children, factory workers and pastry chefs, based on a book-object he himself had conceived and compiled, and which formed part of a series of works on the sphinx and death. The aim of the investigation was to elicit ideas and philosophical reflections, as well as analyses of one's own working days and imaginaries, starting from the sweet taste, identifying in it the primordial sign of all tastes, derived from the act of eating and nourishing oneself from the

very first experiences with breast milk, the taste of fruit and honey. The works exhibited at the Castello and the Trullo for *Quasi maturi*, dating from 1979, are part of this body of work: *Doux comme saveur* is a moulded aluminium object that simulates a cake in the act of being cut by a knife. The inscriptions and ink drawings on its surface reveal the artist's visual universe, characterised by flows of energy between individual elements which, as they interconnect, open up continuous narrative pathways. Of a completely different nature, at least visually, are the two small boxes containing sugar cubes, words, drawings, nests, bird skeletons, photocopied images, newspaper cuttings, needles and structures made of cardboard and PVA glue, on display at the Castle. These offer the documentary and archival counterpart to the artist's cross-disciplinary, combinatorial research through the collection and preservation of minute elements, bordering on the (in)significant, through which the everyday is allowed to speak for itself.

The year 1979 is also associated with the period of *Agricola Cornelia*, a long-running experiment at the intersection of art and agriculture (1973–1981) carried out around his home-studio: a space and a project in which he combined artistic, agricultural and livestock research. Baruchello describes it in many ways: as an intellectual experience to “an ‘involuntary’ critique of political economy, (to a) post-Duchampian reinterpretation of a potato harvest” (C. Subrizi, *Piccoli sistemi*, in A. Bonito Oliva, C. Subrizi, eds., Baruchello. *Certe idee*, Electa, Milan, 2011, p. 82).

This workshop for thought, experimentation and institutional art criticism, run by the artist in collaboration with *Agricola Cornelia*, was crucial not only to the development of his own vision, but also to all those critical and artistic generations engaged in analysing the intertwining of the work's meaning and necessity, the roots of the economic system, and the dynamics of the exhibition system. An example of this critical engagement on display is provided by **Giuseppe De Mattia**, who is committed to examining the link and contextualisation between the object-work and the market. At the Castello, on a pile of plastic crates, two ceramic signs display the names and prices of the fruit on sale, with references to its (spectacular) taste, its prices, and factors merely alluded to, such as the water crisis, which are intended to explain, without the need for further elaboration, the link between the quantity, cost and quality of the product. These signs, normally made of cardboard but made durable by being rendered in ceramic, reflect not only the phrasing of street-side marketing, but also the artist's interest in writing and calligraphy as a fundamental part of sales culture.

At Trullo Rubina, meanwhile, ceramic vegetables and real vegetables are placed on Enzo Mari's self-designed chair. Just like with the signs on crates, the display is a key element for the artist, who aims in these (and many other) works to link his exploration of the market for basic consumer goods with that of the art market, with the aim of turning art itself into an accessible and indispensable product. Inspired by the stalls on which farmers used to display the fruit for sale, Mari's chair also echoes a custom practised in many villages in southern Italy, such as Ceglie, where, along the road outside the houses, produce from one's own vegetable patch and garden is sold on domestic stools.

Displacement, movement and transformation of the pulp

The tradition of occasional markets has now fallen into disuse, but it remains deeply rooted in the memories of many people who view the garden, in its popular dimension, as a space for sustenance and economic activity. The garden in Ceglie has undoubtedly been like this in the past, but it is equally true that when thinking of green spaces, one cannot fail to mention the wonderful area behind the Castle. A lush complement to the Norman architecture, the park is undoubtedly a setting that delights the eyes of those visiting the halls and looking out from the main floor. Nature, however, is not primarily experienced in Ceglie through the town's urban spaces: as in many other parts of Puglia (and beyond), the community maintains a living connection with the countryside

through a daily rhythm of movement that ensures the persistence of the ancient agricultural culture even today, and fosters a joyful social and communal life.

A painting by **Giuseppe Urso**, a Ceglie-born artist who died prematurely at the age of 48, and a key figure in the artistic scene through his Milanese gallery in the 1960s and 1970s, depicts the summer festivals in the trulli that have always brought life to the hamlets and farmsteads outside Ceglie. Elegant and well-dressed figures are portrayed with mere outline strokes, just like the architecture in the background: nature, which is apparently given less space in the compositional dynamic, is nevertheless entrusted with the use of bright colours, which set the atmosphere and the “mood” of the scene depicted. A green line, perhaps the stem of a plant or a sprouting shoot that spreads across the entire surface, embraces every element of the narrative, uniting the human, social, territorial and domestic perspectives through environmental filters.

In a more intense and structured form, this linear development recurs in the series Urso has dedicated to the *sciaie*, the traditional bamboo racks on which the fruit undergoes its transformation. These structures, used for drying, bring about a metamorphosis of the material through the action of time, insects and the sun. Found in all the *lamie* and *trulli*, the *sciaie* have been depicted through Urso’s brushstrokes and colours, but also in the installation created for *Quasi maturi* by **Angelo Filomeno**. The work’s outdoor placement reflects the tool’s original use: the structure is, however, painted gold, the colour of preciousness and the divine, and upon it rest fig leaves painted black, with patterns resembling constellations on their surfaces. Begun in 2022 during a residency at the Fundación Casa Wabi in Puerto Escondido (Mexico), the series of leaves employs natural materials linked to the artist’s working environment. From sea hibiscus to vine and fig, Filomeno transforms the natural element into a map that evokes the alchemy between environment and cosmos, between the space of nature and human space, uniting on a single surface all the elements necessary for the fulfilment of a process of growth and maturation.

The magic, evoked by the connection between the objects and their absorption into black and gold, is the precious perspective opened up by the elegance of this installation, in which the sense of anticipation is tasked with conveying the culture of change and transformation.

Almost ripe

At the end of this story, as we attempt to summarise it and bring the introduction to a conclusion, it is undoubtedly clear that Baruchello’s entire body of work, with his ability to guide the public into ever-expanding realms of exploration, constitutes another fundamental precedent in shaping the ethos and methodology of this exhibition project. Drawing inspiration from his approach, *Quasi maturi* has sought to create, across its three venues, an almost nomadic trajectory, in which languages, artists, themes and temporal perspectives tend to echo one another, almost in a perpetual motion. The temptation to articulate all the nuances, all the connections and all the openings that the project has so far allowed us to glimpse is very strong, and perhaps also responds to the need to give an account of both the intense year of work carried out in dialogue with Rita Urso, Arechi Invernizzi and Cecilia Gaetarelli, and the extraordinary richness of the investigations by the artists on display.

Fruit, the first suggestion on which the work was based, has been used as a metaphor to address critical and environmental issues, the relationship between the exhibition system and the market, to re-examine the hierarchy of the relationship between plants, animals and humans, to draw closer to the poetry of humanity through nature, to sense the meaning of growth and that of death, and not to forget the magic and alchemy of transformation within the precious perspective of time. In an almost rhizomatic and at times uncontrolled development, *Quasi maturi* has addressed these perspectives and many others, leaving it to its audience and readers to explore them. The hope is that this seed, which, for the writer and those who worked on the exhibition, has taken root in an experience as critical as it is positive, may represent a sensory and po-

etic journey, but also a form of tasting that employs a mindset which does not shy away from commitment, and that, in the joy of the senses, does not forget the value of responsibility. Is this not, after all, what maturity is all about?