

# BOMB

## From Natural to Synthetic: Giulia Cenci Interviewed by Caroline Elbaor

*Installation and sculpture that investigate the Anthropocene.*



Installation view of Giulia Cenci, *field*, 2018, Lunstwarande, Tilburg, Netherlands. Photo by Gert Jan van Rooij. Courtesy of the artist and SpazioA, Pistoia, Italy.

In her sculptures and installations, Italian artist Giulia Cenci engages with conversations surrounding the Anthropocene in order to pose the question: What if humans are not the so-called “superior” beings ruling the earth and are instead under the same threat of destruction as the ecosystems they are currently annihilating? Cenci is a staunch proponent of the argument that the global obsession with fast-paced mass production is harming not only the

planet but ourselves, and she reimagines a world where all inhabitants, including the nonliving, exist on an equal playing field. As a result, her sculptures and installations are imbued with a post-apocalyptic aesthetic.

—Caroline Elbaor

### **Caroline Elbaor**

As I understand it, process plays a large part in your work, beginning with your sourcing of local, everyday objects that you then cast in resin or similar synthetic materials. More recently, you began working with animal body parts, inspired by the violent battle scenes found in traditional painting. Can you discuss your process as it currently stands?

### **Giulia Cenci**

My work changes often in that the process and the materials that construct the physical pieces are not always the same. There is a constant, though: the inclusion of a large percent of found objects—sometimes treated, sometimes left untouched.

Over time I've used different sources: from natural to synthetic, from readymade objects to materials that still needed shape. What I consider very important is that every object or recycled scrap is only going to be a part of the entire installation and that I'm going to carefully combine these with materials such as casts, reproductions, or simple handmade sculptures. The final result is a new entity, with its own characteristics and qualities.

The fact that the work starts from pre-shaped things means I make compromises to allow the pieces to match, which often gives the sculpture or installation an intricate, "ligamentous" aspect. The pieces can look forcibly connected, which is very intentional—a decision that has to do with the availability of materials in our time, that is, the amount of readymade things. I can't imagine working with a pure material, because it wouldn't fit our geological era.



Installation view of Giulia Cenci, *marine snow (scuro-scuro)*, 2019, Kunst Meran, Merano, Italy. Photo by Ivo Corrà. Courtesy of the artist and SpazioA, Pistoia, Italy.

## CE

Each exhibition and even singular work of yours is carefully thought out and conceived to function in dialogue not only with the surrounding architecture but also with other sculptures that may be in a given exhibition. Presumably, this method requires a healthy amount of premeditation.

## GC

This concern is an important aspect of my work, and in general is part of my ideas about the relationship between art and reality, and art and contemporaneity. I can't discern art and art-making apart from their physical, theoretical, and philosophical contexts. Since the very beginning of my desire to become an artist, I have spent time looking at reality as a place where art signs are present. After studying art theory along with art history, I realized that most of the processes (even physical) used by artists were ways to imitate and replicate something that was already happening in their surroundings.

Over time, spaces and the objects became part of my work, allowing me to focus on specific contexts that are mostly related to issues in my life as a person and citizen. My attempt is to immerse viewers in a new habitat that

surrounds them and let them feel part of it, engage with it, be overcome by it, even confused by it—similar to how it feels in reality, while walking in the street, or in a supermarket, or even in a forest.

The point is that when I get out of my brain space, when I wake up in the morning, I do not wake up inside a perfect white cube where one stunning, beautiful object is located with light focused on it. On the contrary: life is loud, chaotic, often disturbing; things are reacting to each other, relating to each other, and people do not walk or stand inside a perfect frame. This is why I do not see the point in creating an installation that is so unrealistic compared to the conditions we live in.

I understand that sometimes a neutral context is necessary, but I am interested in an interconnected habitat where multiple things, objects, and spectators are all together, which has much more to do with what we experience in the real, including its difficulties, its noises—basically all the interferences that humans are producing.

This is what makes me plan, each time, a general and large drawing for the entire installation that relates to the specific space and place I'm working in as well as to the connection between the elements (objects and sculptures) that make the work exist.



Installation view of Giulia Cenci, *diplomatic figure, exercise for a fall and limbo*, 2019–20. Campoli Presti, Paris. Courtesy of the artist and SpazioA, Pistoia, Italy.

## CE

I'd like to talk about the role of the Anthropocene within your practice, particularly in terms of your intention to raze the hierarchy between human beings and other elements or entities, including the nonliving. Am I correct that you aim to position humans as merely another component in the world, cohabiting with these other entities (be it machine, hardware, animal, plant, etc.)?

## GC

I read about the Anthropocene for the first time in 2011 when a friend of mine shared an article from the *Economist* that I will never forget; it was titled "A Man-Made World: Humankind Is Becoming a Geological Force." I felt that I was reading on paper the consequences of what I had seen around me since I was a kid and that the answer and the theorization of thoughts and awareness that I perceived before were some of the most urgent of contemporaneity.

Now we are accustomed to this definition, but the first time you realize what it means is shocking. It feels deeply impure to know that we are basically destroying all of what has been our home, our neighbors, our surroundings, and ourselves. I mean, we humans know how unfair, shortsighted, and cruel we can be; but what makes me crazy about the treatment of our surroundings—as well as some other issues of our present—is the inactivity toward a real solution, the impossibility of reaching toward a different plan of action. Even now, when the world is probably facing the deepest crisis since World War II with the outbreak of COVID-19, we are not planning for a different global future, but are instead choosing to look at how to get back to the elevated production and profit we had pre-coronavirus.

As I said before, this feels extremely impure. It is impossible to talk about a nature that is not contaminated by human action or its byproducts, and this has been fundamental for me in working on the disintegration of borders and on the loss of certain categories, classifications, or hierarchies. The fact is that until the Anthropocene we had been considering the human as an almost external factor to nature, something partly outside of it, or maybe even above it. But now, this untouched paradise that nature was is corrupt, contaminated by the artificial.

In the beginning of this newfound awareness, I found it necessary to place different materials and sources on the same plane, despite their classification as either “natural” and “artificial” sources. Later, while developing things in the studio, it became most important to understand that any action a human or an artist does to create also includes some form of destruction. It is indissoluble: the early human who drew on the wall of a cave consumed a little bit of its stone; the ceramist who takes matter from the quarry consumes a little bit of this mountain; the sculptor who destroyed a marble block, which itself was violently taken from the innards of the mountain. This is what it means to shape, to transform, and actually to live. And this applies to any action.

This is why I need to use every part and every leftover of my life, my surroundings, and my work as an active part of the final installation. Dust from my heating system, old clothes, metal and plastic parts of machines and cars, whether taken from recycling or from my family’s former farm where things have been lying motionless for years: these are some of the materials that I use to make the work, and this is why many of the pieces may look like a post-object, post-action. And this probably explains why many people see my work as having a “post-apocalyptic aesthetic.”



Installation view of Giulia Cenci, *territory*, 2019, Art Basel Statements. Photo by Andrea Rossetti. Courtesy of the artist and SpazioA, Pistoia, Italy.

**CE**

In his research, James Bridle, author of *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*, emphasizes that, "We are only just becoming aware of the more-than-human intelligences which have been with us all along, from animals, to plants, to ecosystems, capable of forms of communication and agency which are only now becoming apparent to us." Might such thought processes and subject matter pertain to the work you make?

**GC**

Absolutely, and it feels evident from the simple observation of our planet, of the relation between animals, or bacteria, and from the observation of the relation between micro and macro systems. How can we have the arrogance to believe that we are the only ones in the world so sophisticated? How can we place our species in such a privileged position without even wondering if other beings and entities are communicating with each other in the world and that maybe we are only unable to understand it?

My figures are often animals; they have anthropomorphic attitudes and poses, and I almost try to let them interact as humans and to let them be part of artificial landscapes. I guess this is often an attempt to reflect not only on species, but also times, iconographies, and ways of representation. In the past, it was normal to use animals to represent god or deities. This means that in a different evolution process, it could have been us humans, instead of them, being extinguished due to a thoughtless species acting uncontrolled on earth. It's also a way to mirror how we look, act, what we wear. How weird it must be for them to see us as animals interacting with many sophisticated objects, wearing so many safety devices, while outside, life is less and less, land is drier and drier, and the rest all around is more and more consumed.

*As one of three finalists for the 2020 MAXXI BVLGARI Prize, Giulia Cenci's work is on view at MAXXI: National Museum of 21st Century Arts, in Rome until March 7.*

*Caroline Elbaor is a writer and curator based in London.*

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