

Giulia Cenci

by Caterina Molteni

In *Dove comincia il buio* (*Where Darkness Begins*, 2011), one of Giulia Cenci's (Cortona, 1988; lives and works in Amsterdam) earliest works, darkness takes its consistency thanks to the halo of a partially walled-in lamp. The simple act of circumscribing a minimal fraction of space allows the manifestation of a wider, and before then invisible, second area. The artist captures that imperceptible moment in which light seems to disintegrate, but at the same time generates and gives the perception of something new, darkness in this case, which takes on an almost sculptural physicality. You can then capture transitory shapes like shadows and lights that, going through the space, constantly change throughout the day.

What fascinates Cenci is the capability of artistic practice to give a physical presence to what you cannot keep: moments of compresence of darkness and light, but also the idea of sudden loss, the process through which things deteriorate, the pace at which memories disappear. One of the quotes that reoccurs most in the interviews and texts introducing her work relates the birth of sculpture to the need to fill an absence:

Butades, a potter of Sicyon, was the first who invented, at Corinth, the art of modelling portraits in the earth which he used in his trade. It was through his daughter that he made the discovery; who, being deeply in love with a young man about to depart on a long journey, traced the profile of his face, as thrown upon the wall by the light of the lamp. Upon seeing this, her father filled in the outline, by compressing clay upon the surface, and so made a face in relief, which he then hardened by fire along with other articles of pottery.¹

According to Pliny the Elder, the beginning of sculptural representation corresponds to the action of a potter delineating the shape of a face: he traces the profile with clay and then puts it back into the world in the form of a newly present and recognizable object-figure. The transience of everything that lives on Earth meets the constant desire of preserving and making again visible what has already passed. And, through the centuries, sculpture has become one of the instruments chosen by human beings to resist time and its incessant action.

Cenci has been working with sculpture since 2014. If site-specific installation characterizes the artistic production of the years spent at the Fine Art Academy of Bologna, in 2013 the artist moved to the St. Joost Academy of Den Bosch-Breda, facing what she defines as "the empty space of my studio", and imagining to make sculptures starting from the chair, the table, the mirror, the sink and the tub in which every day she washes her hands, dirty with ashes of bones and marble, and on which she made her first experiments with resins.

This is how the studio became the training ground for a research based on the presence of one's own body in space, conducted by adopting sculpture specifically for its capability of leaving the demiurge's imprint on materials, an apparently impossible procedure involving that overabundance of utensils, containers and plastic films that remain unchanged, day after day, despite the use one makes of them.

¹ *The Natural History*, Pliny the Elder, tr. John Bostock, H.T. Riley (London: Taylor and Francis, Red Lion Court, Fleet Street 1855).

Cenci has re-handled these everyday objects - first those of the studio, then discarded parts of machinery found in Amsterdam's dumps - making them more precarious and fragile, accelerating their wear or partially remodeling their appearance.

The exhibition "La terra bassa" (*The low earth*) presented at Spazio A Gallery (Pistoia) in 2014, took the form of a landscape of objects whose horizon was no higher than a normal person's waistline; *Almost invisible #5* (2014), a chair, and *Almost invisible #4* (2014), a table, both in plastic, appeared as if they had both polished to the limit of their materiality, as if the intent were to accelerate their designated use and consequent wear. Elsewhere, the gallery featured a group of buckets composed of three elements, *Ritratto basso #3* (*Low portrait #3*, 2014), *Ritratto basso #4* (*Low portrait #4*, 2014), and *Autoritratto basso* (*Low self-portrait*, 2014). Created through a series of resin and marble powder castings, these sculptures are hybrids of real and modeled objects. Cenci covered the plastic bucket partially with a layer of clay during the casting process that let the resin acquire the consistency of a modified object with excess matter going through it, the same matter that sediments at the bottom of the bucket in the artist's studio every day. As the titles of these works suggest, the buckets are like portraits of people and self-portraits of the artist; evoking the capability of objects to resist human beings, contain them, and withhold the parts of them that would otherwise go lost. Everyday residue that is usually rinsed out is recomposed here thanks to the action of clay, resin, and powders.

Still in 2014, Cenci presented the exhibition "Mai" (Never) at Tile Project Space in Milan, where her production increasingly focused on the sculptural expression of surfaces using the same objects in her previous show. Here, however, their surface is incomplete: structures previously capable of standing alone are now laid against a wall or visibly lack something of their previous use, like the stool (*Almost Invisible #7*, 2014) and the chair (*Almost Invisible #8*, 2014) reduced to a plastic skeleton. The thick, heavy castings of *Ritratto basso* are abandoned in favor of transparent and fragmented surfaces, where clay is used only to contain the resin casting, which in *Ritratto perso* (*Lost portrait*, 2014), moreover, takes place directly onto the container that serves as a negative. In this series of works, the artist reconstructs the nature of the object by making it correspond to the substance - such as a liquid, in the case of containers like basins and tanks - that it usually holds. This is done not merely to illustrate the object's function, but also to freeze - through the slow resin layer overlapping process - the moment of the material's change of state occurring inside it.

Cenci builds something extremely organic, changeable, and temporary in substitution of those plastic containers reproduced ad infinitum in the industrial resin moulding process. In this sense, sculpture is used to affirm the presence of the artist in front of the artificial environment of her daily life, changing it and inserting it in the human body's rhythm.

Her investigation of surfaces has more recently extended to research in shape as the residual moment of the energies at play in sculptural production. In *Aprile5055* (2017), she reassembled auto and machinery parts and wires to reconstruct the tensions in a human body. Like muscle tendons, arms and legs stretching out and under strain, these parts were joined together in an elongation and distortion of their initial form. These sculptures, consisting of minute stringy elements with their own internal complexity, were partially covered by a thin skin.

The same kind of inertial vitality characterizes other works that emerged from the artist's De Ateliers residency in Amsterdam: *Bianco sudato* (*Sweaty white*, 2017) is a complex installation of parts of machines and objects whose moulds, covered in a rubber that alters their usual shape, appear as if their insides had been scraped out. Creating a hybridization of an object's existing shape with volumes evoking organic masses, Cenci inserts her works in a process through which they can be observed as semi-living micro-worlds. The feeling of vitality is enhanced by the presence of pieces of fruit, also covered in silicon, that highlight by rotting and imploding how

surfaces, colors and the consistencies of matter undergo change even in nature, albeit filtered by the presence of a plastic element here.

Despite being shown in a state of decadence, both groups of works betray the exasperation of the sculptural act of the mould, which through its repeated action, inserts them in a particular flow of energy. Unlike nature's straightforward vitality, this is an entropic force that traverses these objects with the chaotic movement typical of hybrid complexes of matter that in their search for balance recognize their own internal rhythm only later.

This never-ending metamorphoses demonstrates the potential in terms of form of surfaces and thin skins covering the proliferation of relations between microscopic parts of manmade mechanisms, in the same way as those inside a body, which is apparently stable but conceals a wild motion of molecules.