

Giulia Cenci

Text by Daria de Beauvais
Portrait by Andrea Rossetti

“Calm block fallen down here from an unseen disaster.”¹

Starting from the “real,” Giulia Cenci brings her sculptures and installations to the state of “surreal,” that is, beyond reality. The artist makes us see the invisible, she manufactures it, puts it in front of our eyes as unpleasant as it may be. With an aesthetic of the fragment, she addresses the evolutionary challenges our civilization is encountering and reveals the deep mutations the world is facing.

HISTORY AND COLLAPSOLOGY

From micro to macro, from pre-human to the post-human era, Giulia Cenci’s practice seems at once timeless and to speak about the collapse of the current era—a contemporary Pythia reflecting on the downfall of industrial civilization and what could follow it. Geological time, overlapping with human time, creates the feeling of one discovering an archeological treasure coming from the future. This temporal ambiguity goes along with one of the artist’s mottos: “never to be pure.” Indeed, every element she uses is transformed in a process of recycling and hybridization, in order to challenge both the shapes and the meanings of the resulting artworks.

Her sculptures are linked by rods, splints or metal tutors creating horizontal and vertical tensions in space, as if they could still develop, as remnants of a catastrophe in transformation, in convalescence. They are about entropy, about escaping any fixed interpretation. One can wonder whether her extraordinary proposals—between decay and growth—are an attempt to either beat or resist time. But Giulia Cenci collapses time and space at once, even calling on outer space. This is well illustrated by *territory* (2019). In this complex environment, the artist summons the ruins of the past in order to let us glimpse at our potential future, on Earth or beyond.

THE ARTWORK AS BODY SNATCHER

Evoking rocky concretions, or traces from alien creatures, these works exist in autonomy. They could be body snatchers. Bits and pieces found by the artist are incorporated into elaborate installations, dystopic and sedimented landscapes, a mix of industrial remnants and organic materials. Their exterior aspect, their membrane, is troubling. As in Abel Ferrara’s *Body Snatchers*, it is difficult to state what is real: us or them?

Her artworks look like existing forms or materials, but improved, like Donna Haraway’s cyborg, “a disassembled and reassembled post-modern col-

lective and personal self.”² The artist in a demiurgic gesture gives life to her sculptures. She replaces industrial molding processes with her DIY own technique, enhancing these forgotten objects in an almost alchemical process. Hybrid gestures forming hybrid sculptures.

RELIQUARY OF THE EVERYDAY

In her practice, Giulia Cenci uses immemorial gestures as well as advanced technologies, but her most important tool is her hands. The simplicity of forms, the absence of ornamentation give strength to her sculptures, and can enable for instance branches to become electric cables. Between crafts and industry, they evoke a perverted cabinet of curiosities. They are threatening and vulnerable at once, dealing with burial and resurrection. The envelopment of everyday objects transforms them into talismans; what’s below the casting and coating is known only by its creator. The covering of these raw materials contains them as much as it hides them, modifying them into relics of our failing world. For her coating, the artist works with silicone, dust taken from the walls of exhibition spaces, bone black pigment, ashes, marble dust, clay...

All of her projects are context-based: at once the dialogue between the works and the architecture, but also the dialogue between the sculptures themselves. Cenci works from everyday objects, from her surroundings but also from the street, for instance discarded parts of machinery found in dumps. By reworking them, she makes them look even more precarious, accelerating their already present wear. Cast several times, covered with resin or other synthetic material, they become sculptural and timeless concretions. Quite conscious of belonging to the Anthropocene era, Cenci tries to overcome human control over the world and consider human beings as just another component of this world. Machine, wire, animal, vegetal, human—we are all co-inhabitants in her world.

CHIMERICAL CONTAMINATION

On the edge of domesticity and savagery, working with body and animal parts is a recent development in Giulia Cenci’s works. In her previous creations they were nonetheless present in their absence itself. For instance, her series *Aprile* (2016), made of metal bar, rubber pipe, car, and branch fragments, epoxy resin, marble dust and fresh clay, was inspired by handrails. The missing hands were like ghosts; for whom an absence is a presence, a disappearance is an incarnation. For her project *marine snow* (2019), Giulia Cenci decided to form a landscape “made out of hybridization of extinguished species like dinosaurs and still existing animal shapes.” This way she created chimeras both in a historical

sense (as the represented species didn’t exist in the same period) but also in a zoological sense (mixing several species in the same sculptures).

Another project, quite densely populated, is for the first time produced on site. A few elements come from her Amsterdam studio, such as casts of human legs or animal parts (from original casts of wolf paws, the artist creates other animals’ shapes, such as dogs or horses) made in urethane foam evoking implosions. Once covered with resin, they seem bruised or decaying in their grayness. But most are found material from an auto breakage, a metal recycling company or remnants from previous exhibitions. The installation is entitled *mud* (2019), a term which evokes for the artist melting and a physical involvement. The installation, spread from floor to mid-height, is traversable by visitors, thus bears an immersive aspect. Metallic bars cross the room, creating a labyrinthine effect with ebb and flow. Movement is important in the artist’s sculptures: she is inspired by battle scenes in classic painting, which she sees as “chaotic landscapes of body and animal parts,” an entanglement of men and horses’ legs.

Modification, fragmentation, aggregation, hybridization... are all means for the artist to work on the materials. She intrudes repeatedly into the world of beings and things. Through her manual intervention, she alters the seriality of manufactured objects resulting from mass production or of common species. She stops their functionality and *raison d’être* for the benefit of a vision that alternates between post-apocalypse and pure onirism. Her work is an elusive chimera that could be called the present. Today is the son of yesterday and tomorrow, and has been adopted by Giulia Cenci.

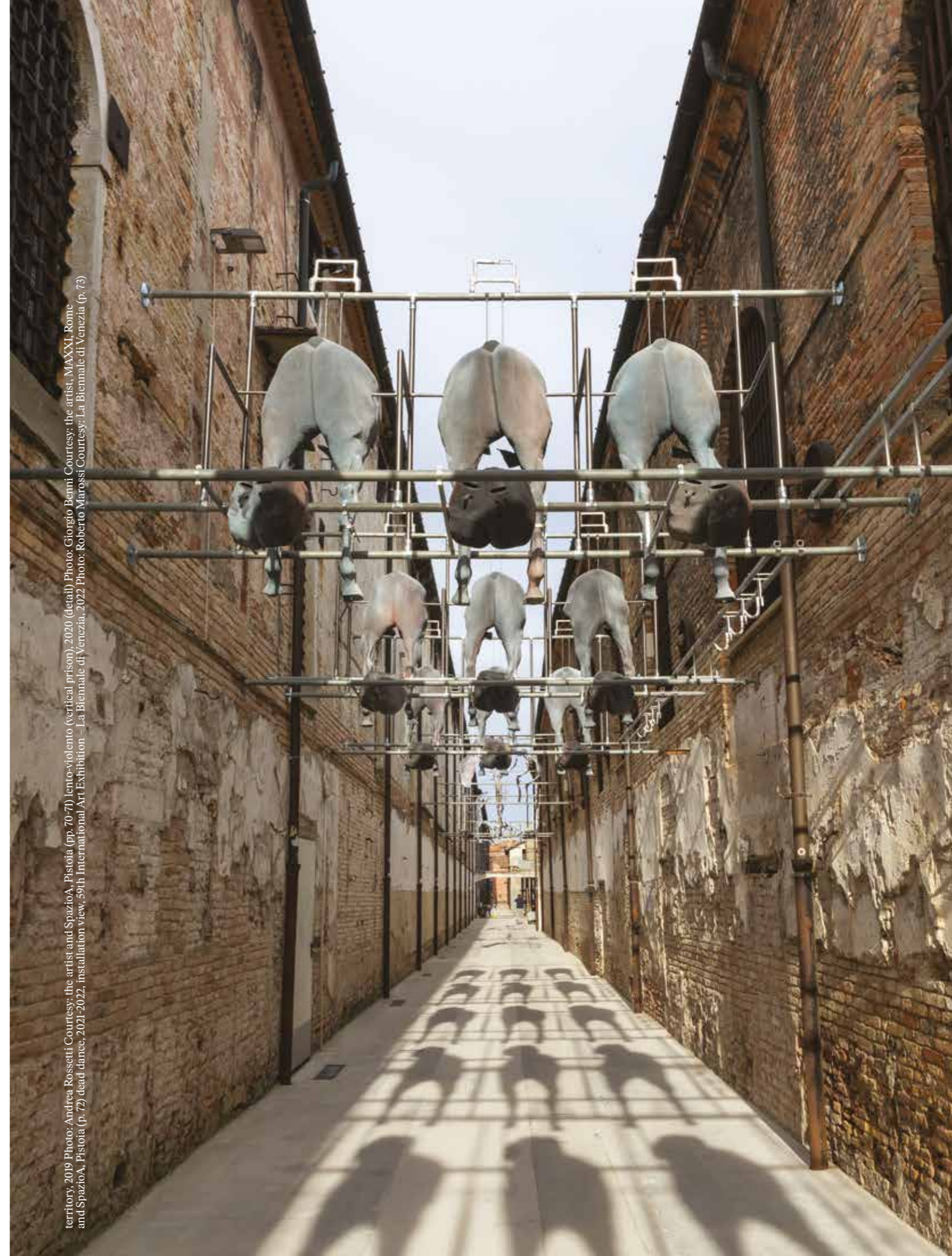
1. Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Tomb of Edgar Poe*, 1914. From Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Poems in Verse*, translated by Peter Manson (Miami: Miami University Press, 2013).

2. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

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territory, 2019 Photo: Andrea Rossetti Courtesy: the artist and SpazioA, Pistoia (pp. 70-71) lento-violento (vertical prison), 2020 (detail) Photo: Giorgio Benini Courtesy: the artist, MAXXI, Rome and SpazioA, Pistoia (p. 72) dead dance, 2021-2022, installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, 2022 Photo: Roberto Marossi Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia (p. 73)