

# RAFFAELLA CORTESE



Francesco Arena presented in the small space of Aedicula Raffaella Cortese in Albisola Superiore a new copper sculpture that lives only when it is accompanied by a person holding it up. If no one takes charge of its unbalanced center of gravity, it lies on the ground without showing the writing that hides under the long side. Separated from all, he is united with all is a quote from The Brothers Karamazov; it is a sentence spoken by Zosima to the two. Zosima is a starec, a sage who assumes the role of a spiritual guide, a father of faith always ready to show the way and give advice.

And it is precisely this figure – which has been popular since the Eastern Christian monasticism of the fourth century – that inspired Arena to think of the new work, which takes precisely the title Starec. It is a copper triangle with an obtuse angle, which can stand stably when stretched out on its long side, but needs a counterweight to keep it from falling when lifted up and resting on its short side. The message on the bottom is therefore only usable if someone makes a commitment to it, correcting this distortion by taking on its impermanence.

We asked the artist some questions.

*In the new sculpture Lo Starec you have combined the mystical with the profane, indeed you really wanted to give attention to a possibility of participating in the sacred while keeping one foot firmly anchored to the earth. I say this because starecs know a spiritual dimension precisely because of lifestyles they choose to lead, by embracing the world they are in and not denying it. Can you tell me what fascinates you so much about these figures and how they approach – if they do – your perception of the sacred and the metaphysical?*

In The Brothers Karamazov, the figure of Starec Zosima is a scale that weighs without judging the various protagonists, it seeks a balance in the chaos of feelings and actions of the brothers and their degenerate parent. The Starec is wise but not dogmatic, he is holy but when he dies his corpse stinks like any man's, he rises but is anchored to the earth, he is a figure made up of extremes, like probably each one of us, containers of opposing impulses and thoughts, far from everything to be close to everyone; it is the combination of these aspects that makes the Starec so interesting, there is light but also much darkness.

*We talked together about where you live, the Murge area, one of the most beautiful and energetically powerful natural places in Italy. You were telling me about the Mercadante forest, your garden, wild cyclamens and listening to the land and the sky that bathes it. "Separated from all, he is united with all," an inscription we read when the sculpture presented at Aedicula is lifted off the ground and held up by the counterweight of a person, brings me back to this living dimension of yours,*

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*away from large urban centers. That phrase somehow reflects a certain bond that we have when we listen to and experience nature, which we share the world with: we are separated from others, from that whole that governs the ordinary system of everyone's lives, but at the same time we are united with the other whole, the one that created us. What is your relationship with nature and how does it affect your work and the materials you use?*

It is a great fortune to be able to choose where to live, most people cannot choose; the possibility of choosing involves recognizing oneself in a place that is not necessarily where we were born and raised. Living decentralized, even if by now this decentralization is more and more limited, can give the possibility to relate to more than one reality, for example the social reality of the place where one lives and the social reality related to the work environment, which are completely different in my case and often absolutely contrasting. For me this diversity is important in order not to lose that well-grounded foot that I mentioned earlier. I often find nature disturbing and thankfully overwhelming, however, I like its cyclical nature, its indifference to man, its resistance to our presence. These things put me back into proper context, and materials often have this same characteristic, whether they are natural materials like stones or man-made materials like bronze or objects, things with their persistence become natural elements.

*I'm reminded of a marvelous piece from Tasso's Gerusalemme Liberata, contained in Canto VII: " Non si destò fin che garrir gli augelli / non sentì lieti e salutar gli albori, / e mormorar il fiume e gli arboscelli, / e con l'onda scherzar l'aura e co i fiori. / Apre i languidi lumi e guarda quelli / alberghi solitari de' pastori, / e par le voce udir tra l'acqua e i rami / ch'a i sospiri ed al pianto la richiam". Many centuries ago, but same theme. Which authors do you feel are close in this?*

I can't mention names, there are many. The artist, the poet always talks about the same things, the time and the social structures in which we move or the names and definitions change, but the things that are really worth wondering about remain the same. I admire those who can describe in a few words thoughts that I try to pour into the things we call sculptures or performances that sometimes require so many more words to be told. In The Passenger, Cormac McCarthy writes: "In the end it is impossible to know. Impossible to grasp the world. You can only describe it. Whether it is a bull on a cave wall or a differential equation, nothing changes."

*However, it does not mean that you are solitarily excluded from the world; on the contrary, there is often attention in your works to the communal datum, to past and present political urgencies and to the family. Lo Starec also needs a person to reveal itself totally. Is there a legacy of relational aesthetics or am I wrong? What about this sharing with others of yours?*

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Making a work contains a willingness to relate to others, you don't make a work just for yourself, you make it to show it to others, to know what others think of it. I don't believe those who say otherwise, the gaze of others somehow defines us, not makes us but defines us.

In *Dissipatio* H.G., Guido Morselli describes an empty world where there is only one man, the narrator, everyone else has dissipated, but the one who has really disappeared (he probably committed suicide) is the narrator, the only one present. When you disappear to others, you remain present to yourself but alone, a frightening scenario.

Francesco Arena in conversation with Marco Arrigoni, october 2023