

Elisabetta Di Maggio, *Untitled (Foglie)*, 2009, variable dimensions

Elisabetta Di Maggio

Selecting the Essence

Francesca Pasini

The fragility of the world is a recurrent theme in both Italian and international contemporary art: Elisabetta Di Maggio has made it a key element of her work. For years she has carved tissue paper, plaster, soap, porcelain, filmstrips and most recently ivy leaves: *Untitled (Foglie)*, 2009. She starts off with stencils that may come from ancient lace patterns, scientific drawings, underground maps or ones of entire cities. At the beginning, with her scored tissue paper, she created entire walls, while later the tissue paper became used as a means by which to transfer patterns onto other materials. This was the technique used for the maps of Paris, Tokyo and Mexico City carved into soap.

Recently, she carved the leaves of ivy branches which she first *embalmed* to maintain their sap. She intervenes in the spaces between the veining of the leaves, which thus take on an ambiguous form of reality. They are alive, yet separate from the earth; light passes through them, and the shadow cast dilates the holes against the wall. The scalpel cuts into them gently, without force, following the fibres, genetically modifying them. The fragility of these surfaces thus becomes a metaphor of the environmental crisis, while at the same time evoking scientific research, gazing through the microscope, identifying fantastic molecules, selected in order to define their own essence.

They are images that hybridise the figure, introducing a pattern via the tip of the blade which upsets the tradition of nature drawings. They could be reminiscent of ancient herbaria, yet there is an underlying sense of alarm to do with the representative content of nature. Just like the herbaria, Di Maggio also provokes a figurative abstraction process, but her obsessive engraving while she modifies the physiological structure of these *perennial* leaves foreshadows a new organic form rather than a study of nature. Vegetation, in the form of leaves – one of its earliest manifestations – thus becomes the very surface of art.

The very first images were drawn onto the rock of cave walls; Di Maggio on the other hand chooses leaves that grow on wood, the source of paper.

There is something in this process that takes us back to the very origins of art and the beginning of that clamorous exclusion of women from Culture. Penelope had a web to weave and unravel to express her own will, while Ulysses had a bow, not only to strike his opponents with, but also to cross space metaphorically. Di Maggio does not weave her web; she cuts into it, writing all the passages of her existence, and of those who have chosen to look into the depths of that bound up in what is close to us, to our everyday lives. She discovers vibrant worlds among the nerve structures of the living, the pattern of branches of budding leaves just like those patterns of city streets, carved into her rectangles of soap.

Penelope's web is also the archetype of the subdivision of labour: weaving, which on one hand identifies a cultural and social level, on the other hand reminds us of the diktat which attributed the construction of the world to men and the care of the household to women. This is no longer the case; women-only exhibitions have been commonplace since the '70s, i.e. since the beginning of women's breaking away from such subordination.

Di Maggio touches that backdrop of exclusion and turns it around. How could we forget that even Giacometti, with his worn down, *carved out* figures, always showed women with their feet still, blocked to the ground, and men with a stride with set them free to walk around the world?

Yet Di Maggio does not respond to these images eye for eye. She locks herself up at home, spending hours carving, yet this obsessive repetition opens up a dynamic vision of relationships and desires: however overwhelming they may be, there's always a point they are born from and which cuts through consuetude, engraving the skin and the heart. The repetition that Di Maggio has made into a language is the very quality of our material and mental existence. We eat, sleep, love and think, and as long as these actions are repeated, it means that we continue to exist. This is how Di Maggio interprets the fragility of existence and makes it as precious and transparent as the very air breathed by men, women, plants and animals.