

CATERINA SILVA

things that will never become objects

April 30 – July 5, 2025

Essay by Paola Bonani – Art historian and Curator at Azienda Speciale Palaexpo, Rome.

What happens to the thing when it is said? Does it live? Does it die? Is it possible to imagine an open form that overcomes the inadequacy of language in defining reality? Is it possible to imagine a language that the system cannot co-opt? Or is silence a better option?

Caterina has a long journey behind her. A journey that has been constantly fueled by the desire to examine the possibilities and limits of language in the definition and representation of reality. Within the physical confines of the work of art, be they those of a canvas, a performative action, a virtual space, what has always interested her has been to verify whether it is possible to pronounce a word without it determining the fate of its object, whether it is possible to describe without judging, narrate without conditioning, depict without enclosing reality within a fixed, univocal, given image. Verifying, thus, whether language, an indispensable means for orienting ourselves in the world, can be used without becoming an instrument of domination and power over *others*.

The paintings collected in this new exhibition at Galleria Eugenia Delfini are conceived starting, from time to time, from elements of reality that Caterina reworks and “tampers with”, as she herself says, in order to activate a process of resignification. *things that will never become objects*, the title chosen for the exhibition, speaks of this process of tampering, in which a liminal space is defined, in which “things”, precisely, do not become “objects”, the real data is not defined by its function, the object does not adhere to the interpretation of a subject. The *essence* is given through a subtraction and an *absence*.

Oh-lym-pia, one of the two large canvases in the first room, takes its cue from the masterpiece of the same name by Édouard Manet. In the original painting, the space is divided into a lower part where the bed and Olympia’s body with her exposed nudity shine brightly, and an upper part dominated by the semi-darkness of the room. There, the darkness would also swallow the face of the black maid if not for the white of her dress, which reunites her with the luminous world below. Catherine literally shatters this image, as in a kaleidoscope. On the left, towards the top edge of the canvas, can we perhaps recognize the petals of the faded pink flower that Manet pinned above Olympia’s left ear? Is there perhaps a memory of the sheet, the pillows on the bed, the maid’s dress in the white areas at the bottom of the canvas? Do the dark brushstrokes at the top right curve like the green curtain behind Olympia? Are the gray and brown fragments from the darkness of the screen and the wall at the back of the room? Nothing is really recognizable,

¹ Caterina Silva, *statement 2011-onwards*



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nothing remains of that image whose invention in 1863 caused a scandal, to become, shortly after, one of the first masterpieces of contemporary art, with a paradigm shift typical of the history of Western culture. *Oh-lym-pia* breaks the word and transforms Manet's image and his story into a rhythm, an almost musical cadence of signs, no longer conceived through contrasts and oppositions (contrasts of light and shadow, of bodies and objects, of position and roles), but as presences that brush against each other, lie down next to each other, intersect and fade into each other.

A similar overturning also occurs in the other large canvas in the exhibition, *Divide et impera (green)*, an example of a cycle of paintings that have as their initial referent the graphic visualization of an algorithm (*Divide and conquer*). This algorithm, inspired by the political and military strategy, exercised since the times of the Roman Empire, of control of conquered territories through the division and fragmentation of the opposition's power, breaks down a problem into smaller and easier to solve subproblems, then recombining these solutions to obtain the result of the initial problem. Starting from this rigid structure, Caterina has associated a sign or a shape to each of the subproblems. Imperfectly geometric yellow and green shapes, long dark green lines, tangles of pink signs and green and white tangles float on the edge of an empty space, repeated similarly but never identically. The linear scheme of the algorithm is transformed into a code without a possible univocal interpretation, the result of a negotiation between the abstract reality of computer language and the concrete presence of the body of painting and the artist, of a dialogue between rational control and unpredictability, of a struggle between the norm and the ineffable. What is taken away from us is the reassuring vision of a logical structure, what is offered to us is an irregular, fluid organism, potentially infinitely varied and non-repeatable.

Even the final work of *Le cose non mi hanno aspettato III, IV*, a series composed of large paintings sectioned into parallel strips, then rolled up and fixed with a staple gun on cardboard tubes, is created through a process of tampering. Here, the initial reality data are the paintings created by the artist herself and the tampering is not of an iconic image or a code, but of the physical object of the work. Our gaze finds itself recomposing fragments of signs and forms through the leaps, interruptions and slippages existing between the three-dimensional bodies of the canvases. The intent is to show the cannibalization of the images we experience daily, and at the same time, it is once again guided, as in the works cited above, by the desire to create an "open" form, no longer based on stability and linguistic and meaning univocity, nor on the opposition "self/other", a form not averse to exception, indeterminacy and transformation, perhaps closer to an oriental sensibility for which it is not: "what stands out that is beautiful, but rather what is held back and withdrawn. Not what is stable, but what is suspended. Beautiful are the things that in themselves bear traces of nothingness, of their own end, the things that do not resemble themselves. [...] beautiful is not the full presence, but rather a here innervated by absence, a lesser here, lighter because of the void".²

² Byung-Chul Han, *Del vuoto. Sulla cultura e filosofia dell'Estremo Oriente*, Nottetempo, Milano 2024, p. 51.