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Diego Cibelli *A life ahead*

Opening: 21.05.2026, 18:00-21:00
Exhibition: 22.05. – 11.07.2026

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“Live in the layers, not on the litter”
« Vis dans les strates, non dans les débris »
Stanley Kunitz, “The Layers” from *The Collected Poems of Stanley Kunitz*. Copyright © 1978 by Stanley Kunitz.

The origin of *Una vita davanti* lies in an archaic scene from which the first work seems to emerge: the nightmare of the artist’s mother, dreaming that she has not prepared enough food for her children. This fear of scarcity, of not having given enough, also permeates Diego Cibelli’s relation to creation, which he envisions as a welcoming experience.

This family memory is echoed in the background by a wallpaper designed as a collage of various engravings from the collection of Count Firmian, housed in the Capodimonte Museum. The scene depicts a shared moment: the figures of peasants prepare a meal, while behind them, a large crowd seems already caught up in the spirit of a collective celebration.

In the display case, rises a sugar hill upon which is placed a porcelain sculpture. To this first reference is added another: Mimmo Paladino’s *Montagna di Sale*. By shifting from salt to sugar, the artist profoundly alters its symbolic weight. He replaces the dry, almost sacrificial, mineral substance with a domestic, emotional, and nourishing one, linked as much to childhood as it is to care, to desire and absence.

Placed atop this sugar mound, the porcelain is not set apart by a pedestal. On the contrary, it rejoins the world of the table, of sharing, and of everyday life that this mountain evokes. This choice reminds us that, in the 18th century, porcelain objects could be placed directly alongside guests, at the heart of the meal or the tea ceremony. They were not merely displayed, but accompanied gestures of hospitality in the intimacy of daily life.

Further into the exhibition, a deep, enveloping music draws the visitor to another scene. Inside the Cabinet of Marie-Amélie of Saxony, also in the Capodimonte Museum, the eye follows a child’s discovery. Among the porcelain, he finds a gilded potato, which he grasps almost like forbidden fruit before putting it in his mouth. Titled *The Potato Eaters*, the work directly references Van Gogh’s work. Here, the golden tuber evokes a humbler economy: that of the land, of food, and of necessity. Its gilding does not detract from this modesty; on the contrary, it underscores its almost sacred value.

This economy of emotions is inseparable from Neapolitan history, as it is rooted in a heritage where ornament and wear continue to coexist. The hierarchies between high art and domestic forms are caught up in the same breath; the precious falls in love with the ordinary. It is within this living, layered memory that Diego Cibelli’s work is deeply inscribed. If the exhibition arises from an anxiety of lack, it responds with a proliferation of forms and motifs that stems from a veritable aesthetic of profusion. This abundance is part of a profoundly Neapolitan tradition, where it often appears as a symbolic response to poverty, as in the taverns of Neapolitan nativity scenes where the promise of accessible food becomes a collective spectacle. Porcelain, from this perspective, is a decisive choice: it carries within it an entire history of taste, as well as the decorative arts, of which Capodimonte is one of the major centres. In our collective imagination, it belongs to the domestic sphere, to what is utilitarian. For the artist, it also becomes the site of a deeper question: at what point does an object cease to be merely decorative and become a sculpture? And on what basis have we learned to separate what belongs to the lexicon of „the table“ from what is deserving of a museum exhibition?

This questioning also takes shape in the gallery's main space. Suspended porcelain sculptures, inspired by *chinoiserie*, open up a floating universe populated by exotic animals – such as those long fantasized by the West –, suspended flowers, faces, and motifs borrowed from medieval manuscripts. The aim here is not simply to accumulate references, but to reveal a world where forms from different times, uses, and imaginations compose a shared poetic order.

This reflection continues in the filmed conversation between Sylvain Bellenger and Eduardo Cicelyn. In the background, the artist can be seen cooking for his guests. This gesture subtly extends one of the exhibition's central themes: to receive is always to prepare more. Decoration then becomes not a matter of excess, but rather a form of attentiveness to others. In the video, Bellenger and Cicelyn discuss how, in Naples, porcelain cannot be reduced to its aristocratic heritage alone. They also highlight the inherent risk of this particularly fragile material, a risk that Diego Cibelli's work constantly brings into play, echoing the very tensions of his native city. Finally, the exchange reveals a more subtle affinity between porcelain, *chinoiserie*, and a certain way of inhabiting the material, united here by a shared desire to make art a celebration of life.

It is in this gap that a subtle affinity with Arte Povera can also be perceived. Not as a direct lineage, but as the interplay between two artistic systems often presented as opposing forces: on the one hand, porcelain, ornamentation, and decorative heritage; on the other, iron, the raw materials, and a certain gravity characteristic of Italian sculpture. For Diego Cibelli, however, it is not a question of choosing between these two poles, but of maintaining their friction. The window displays extend this reflection in another way. By arranging the porcelain pieces in iron scales that immediately evoke Jannis Kounellis, the artist shifts their status. In Kounellis's work, the scale refers to measurement, exchange, and commerce, but also refers to a way of symbolically weighing history and memory. Here, the artist brings porcelain into another light: no longer just that of ornament, but that of circulation, transmission and value.

Through this exhibition, Diego Cibelli gives form to a conviction I share: forms never exist in isolation; they respond to and influence one another over time. Perhaps this is what it means today to truly look at a work of art: to relinquish the attempt to immediately categorize it and instead accept entering a world where boundaries become porous. *Una vita davanti* should not be understood as a melancholic phrase or a biographical promise. More importantly, it signifies a way of thinking about time. Not as a clear succession of past, present, and future, but as a stratified, shifting continuity, where old forms are constantly being reinterpreted. This is undoubtedly what the artist seeks to convey. His works do not categorize the world into what is art and what is not, between what belongs to the home and what belongs to the museum. On the contrary, they open up a field where categories lose their authority, and where creation can become what it may have always been: a way of making space, of welcoming others into a world, and of giving form to that which is both fragile and generous, to what connects us.

Elise Roche