

The Impluvium of the Damned, a Breathing Vent Noni Benegas

An impluvium is a pool at the centre of an ancient Roman house, for collecting rainwater. An open-air courtyard, encouraging dialogue between the interior of the inward-looking house and the forces outside, which is to say, the forces of Nature: light, wind, storms.

But if this opening, situated at the very core of the house, is protected on all four sides by sheets of glass, as in this gallery, it is difficult to avoid thinking of the inner chamber of a classical temple; the Roman "cella" flanked by columns, or the total darkness of the Egyptian sancta sanctorum, in which were kept the cult images and offerings to the particular deities, in a word, the treasure.

Susan Nash's installation rests on these two ideas: that of the courtyard or vent to the open air, and that of the central chamber of a temple, accessible only to the initiated.

She explains that she wanted to transform the rational space of the gallery and architects' studio into an art space. In other words, a space in which the artist presents, for the enjoyment of the observer, irrational elements that overflow the utilitarian structure of the place.

Thus, an impluvium intended to allow the circulation of air and light through the entrance area and the area at the back, as well as to extend both visually, has been barred up with yellow and black tape of the kind used in public places to indicate danger, even if not absolute prohibition, as would be the case if the colour were red.

We often see, on the fences surrounding building sites, yellow and black triangles forbidding entry to all but those involved in the work in progress.

Nevertheless, we usually peer through the chinks in the fence, to see what is going on inside. And this is what Susan Nash suggests we do: spy on what is happening in the inner chamber, the Impluvium of the Damned.

And why of the Damned? After the book of that name by Charles Fort, published in New York in 1919, and which is a compilation of real but unusual phenomena that have occurred in the course of time, but which science has preferred to ignore. Phenomena that challenge the frontier between reality and fiction: rains of frogs in the desert, downpours of blood, reptiles and insects in European cities, unpolished jade falling on Jamaica, showers of silk in Pernambuco... Yes, but also grain falling on Persia, thus feeding people and cattle, a manna not restricted to a people "chosen" by divine will, as recounted in the Bible.

Fort argues that science operates in a way similar to the latter, establishing truths on the basis of chosen phenomena, excluding others which have equal right to exist, "damning", "condemning" them to exclusion in the shadows. To take an everyday example, do we not condemn certain things when we choose some and repress others, in order to ensure acceptance within the group, to avoid endangering our survival?

Nevertheless, we know what makes our hearts beat faster, and we seek to relive the stimulating thrill of horror experienced by the child on opening the creaking loft door a chink, peering with one eye at the dismembered dummy covered in dust, and at the sleeping bats hanging from the beam, then fleeing downstairs in terror.

And what of the creatures of night, what of the pipes? Those sudden discharges, or the patient secretion of gastric juices within a mass stirred by the murmur of its pipes; a mass that breathes, exhales smoke and breath, pumps like a larger body enveloping us...

Sensations that stimulate the imagination and create parallel worlds, just as sleep frees us from daylight prohibitions, opening the sluice gates to worlds in which desire and reality merge uninterruptedly.

Borderlines are faint, everything in the universe is continuous, and "red", explains Fort, "is not positively different from yellow, but a different degree of that vibration of which yellow is a degree, so that red and yellow are continuous..."

In this way, Susan Nash transforms the impluvium of the Bop gallery into a mental breathing space that visually extends those parallel worlds into the reality of this world.

Covered in ambiguous, intermittent, and therefore dangerous yellow, it places before us the representation of things which, in spite of having been unearthed from the loft of desire, appear brand-new; jewels from the treasure, fully charged, alive in their energy and capacity for dreaming. Things that have won out, triumphal now, disordered within a new order.

The order of art.