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Press

BEA BONAFINI

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EMERGENT MAGAZINE

2020

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Exhibitions, Interviews, Articles, Store, About



In the studio with Bea Bonafini. Words by James Ambrose

I understand you relocated to Paris from Rome earlier this year, what prompted this move? How have you settled into Parisian life in the middle of a pandemic?

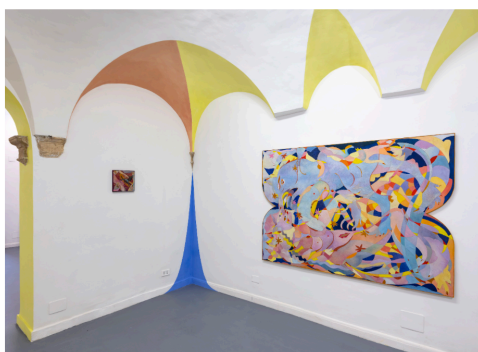
I have a long love story with Paris going back to when I applied for the Beaux-Arts at 18 and was told to do a foundation course. I had my first solo show last year with Galerie Chloe Salgado, and other opportunities and connections that made me want to give Paris a go. It's a weird time to be here, but I was offered to take over a friend's studio at the new studio complex Poush Manifesto. It's got the energy of a residency, and there's a good community of artists and makers. Life feels a bit less isolating thanks to this.

You now also have a studio, with possibly, the best view any studio in the city can have?

That's right, and the best light. I'm on the 16th floor of an ex-office block from which I can monitor the temperamental mood-swings of the Parisian sky, and get rewarded with sunsets behind La Défense that set the studio on fire. It elevates me from the chaos of the city.

What does a normal day in your studio look like?

I cycle 9 km to get to the northwest end of Paris, so my morning ritual is a mixture of cooling down and re-energising with a coffee and a catch-up chat with my studio mates Julien, Manon and Antoine. I work on multiple pieces throughout the day, and listen to my favourite podcasts like *The Great Women Artists* or *How to Fail* while working. My lunch and tea breaks are usually in the company of my best friend Cecilia who works in the same building.



Installation view, *Twin Waves. Operativa, Rome, 2020*

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I know growing up you moved numerous times, going from country to country. How did this affect you, was it something you embraced?

I think it turned me into a sort of chameleon or octopus. I had to adapt to new social and cultural contexts all the time. I was the outsider trying to fit in and was hopeless at it. But the main difficulty was creating such deep friendships and leaving soon after, it was heartbreaking. The idea of home is a fluctuating concept for me that I'm still redefining as I grow, I think it affected the versatility I have towards making, and my fascination with fragmentation, hybridity, interpersonal connections and their inherent tensions.

Did art play an important role in your life in these formative years? You must have been exposed to a lot of different experiences?

It was a lifeline! Art gave me moments of total independence and free reign to imagine and create my own worlds. Sitting by myself to paint or draw was a moment of magic where everything was possible. It felt totally natural and necessary, and it absolved me from the difficulties at school or at home. Then in my final year at the Slade in 2013-14 I was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma, so I was working towards my final degree show while undergoing chemo treatment. I began cutting and sewing to make a series of sewn textile paintings with saturated bold colours, where decapitated heads floated in fields of cacti. That was a crucial turning point where art making served me again as a lifeline.

I heard you state something, that also resonates strongly with me, whenever I have encountered your work that; "it feels like a form of expanded painting" ?

Painting was my first love. But very early on I realised I was wearing a suit that was too tight for me. I quite literally chopped up that suit and refashioned it to my own needs, seeking some kind of expansion. Painting became something that covered bodies in performances, that was stitched or knitted, translucent, stretched or loose. Today I use a painterly perspective as a starting point, but I prefer straddling multiple categories rather than fitting into the one.

You employ a plethora of different mediums in your practice, what influences your choices in what to use, especially when putting a show together?

I have phases where I'll fall in love with manipulating materials in new ways. I become fixated on a process if it feels strange and powerful, and if it gives me the same thrill and challenge as learning a new language. The choice of medium depends on how it aligns itself with my current energy levels, the kind of space the work is for, and whether I feel it has the potential to flesh out into something that will surprise me and push my boundaries.



Installation view, *Talk to the Hand*, Bosse & Baum, London, 2019

I know you have recently started painting directly onto cork, tell me about your journey with that material and how you came to use it?

I used the beginning of my Abbey scholarship at The British School at Rome to experiment with new mediums. I began working on a series of sewn PVC collages until I picked up some cork from a hardware shop and began testing its properties as a painted and engraved surface. It's a sustainable and versatile material that's used in different fields like the construction or wine industries. I'm drawn to soft, textured materials, and cork is the softest wood that has almost magical properties. I headed over to Sardinia over the summer, famous for its cork production, and spent time speaking to producers, walking in ancient cork forests and gathering material.

Perhaps your most well-known works are the textile pieces you produce that sometimes act as "carpets" when presented as installations. What first led you to make work in this way? And what are the processes involved in creating these pieces?

After graduating from the RCA I no longer had access to the machines and technicians in the textile department which I'd used so much while they were accessible and free. I began looking for ways to continue making tapestries without needing to depend on facilities or technicians, and without the skills of weavers. I realised that London has domestic carpet shops everywhere you look, and that I could apply to carpet similar inlay techniques I'd seen used on the marble inlay floorings in Italy. I began making carpet-tapestries of a hybrid nature, that could expand across horizontal spaces or drape across vertical walls.

You were commissioned to create an installation at the Zabłudowicz Collection almost immediately after you finished your MA at the RCA in 2017. How was the experience of showing your work in that space? And how has that show affected your career since?

For *Dovetail's Nest*, I received a production budget for the first time and the show gave me lots of exposure. Knowing it was such a visible platform gave me the motivation to make something ambitious that I'd never tried before. It's definitely been a strong reference point for a lot of new connections.

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Installation view, *Dovetail's Nest*, Zabłudowicz Collection, London, 2017

When we first spoke, you told me about some recent in-depth conversations around gender identity you had with another artist and how it is becoming an increasingly prevalent topic within the art world. Does this subject reflect in your practice at all?

My solo show in Paris last year was titled *Chimère* or *Chimera*, for which I focused on hybrid forms, and moving on from that, my current show *Twin Waves* in Rome definitely explores gender and form fluidity and latent or explosive sexuality. I identify with queerness though I don't feel the need to define my own sexuality – it fluctuates and it should be free to do so. My work often tackles subjects whose identity is unfixed, evolving, or breaking down into millions of fragments. There's definitely a personal projection onto the work of all that I feel, have encountered or wish to be, so you'll find figures that are interconnected and charged with erotic power, free from being any one thing.

There are many references and gestures to "classical" themes running through your wide-ranging practice, does research and art history form an important pillar of your work?

I do a lot of site or museum visits, as well as reading and writing. I think ancient artefacts that were made specifically in connection to death or spiritual practices trigger me the most. They carry an immediacy and power that feels close to my sensitivity. I think that through them I'm trying to understand the rawness of human emotion, and where we've come from. And it's inspiring to see such open-mindedness towards shapeshifting.

What do you love about being an artist?

Creating something out of nothing. Making art could be the closest thing to magic or alchemy for me.

What about your upcoming plans? What shows are in the pipeline?

2021 is filled with a second solo show at Lychee One in London, a return to the BSR to my residency that will end with a final June Mostra, a summer residency at Palazzo Monti, and a second solo show at Renata Fabbri in Milan.



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BRITISH SCHOOL AT ROME

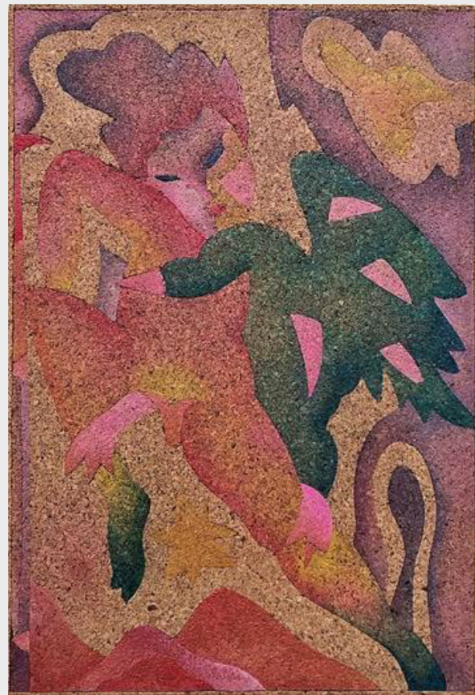
31/03/2020

Life at the BSR

The blog of the British School at Rome

Meet the artists...Bea Bonafini

An interview with Bea Bonafini, our 2019-20 Abbey Scholar in Painting, in which she speaks about the works she has produced during her residency at the BSR.



— *I conversed with you in dream, 2020*, gouache on inlaid cork, 40 x 30 cm. Image: courtesy of the artist



— The artist in her studio at the BSR. Photo credit: Viviana Calvagno

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BRITISH SCHOOL AT ROME

31/03/2020

This is your second show at the BSR as an Abbey Scholar. What has changed in your practice since the show in December?

I've shifted my attention to looking more into the origins of the *grotesque* in painting. The Domus Aurea wall paintings for example, or the decorative painting framing frescoes in the Vatican or in the Orvieto cathedral, and so on. The term *grotesque* was applied to fresco painting in the ancient Roman ruins that were being discovered in the 15th and 16th centuries. They inspired artists at the time to consider surreal, bizarre or fantastical elements in painting as tools to move towards a freer, dream-like figurative depiction, that included the monstrous or the ugly. I've been thinking of the grotesque body as the site of fluid transitions: from human to animal, or from animate to ornamental. Nothing is what it seems. Anything is granted the ability to transform into something else, or to behave abnormally. I've been thinking about how we experience painting without borders, across space; how our way of consuming images is slowed down through the fragmentation of the picture plane. Different from my work in the previous Mostra, I've now used an inlay and engraving technique with cork, which is then painted with gouache to create quite condensed, intimate scenes.



— Grotesque in Luca Signorelli's frescoes. Photograph by the artist

Can you talk about your relationship with colours?

Colour and texture need to work together, I don't consider them to be separate things. There is no colour without texture, and there is no texture without a surface. So working backwards, I give a lot of thought to the colour-texture of the materials I'm working with. Cork has a patterned and absorbent surface that I hide or expose. I prefer thinking of painting as a staining process. Right now I make puddles of diluted paint that get absorbed into the cork, which gradually becomes more and more saturated with pigment, so that the brush marks are never visible. In the same way that my figures transition, so do colours. I treat them like a body that is blushing, creating its own glowing puddles of colour, emerging softly from a material, from within.



— Reliefs from the facade of Orvieto's Cathedral by Lorenzo Maitani. Photograph by the artist.

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WALLPAPER

20/05/2019

Wallpaper*

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A pop-up Peckham exhibition and café blends food and art

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Missing Soul glazed ceramics by Bea Bonafini with Quench Cup by Studio Arhoj, 2019. Courtesy, Open Space and the artist

INFORMATION

For more information, visit the [AMP Gallery website](#), and the [Open Space website](#)

ADDRESS

1 Acorn Parade
London
SE15 2TZ

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WALLPAPER

20/05/2019

A fully-functioning temporary café has opened on an urban corner of Peckham. But look closer, and it's also a gallery space and shop, hosting a multisensory exhibition and social experiment that encapsulates community spirit whilst playfully blending food and art.

Spearheaded by contemporary arts platform Open Space, *Tender Touches* is part of the 'Edible Goods' series that investigates food as an artform. The project is the curatorial brainchild of art collector and founding director of Open Space Huma Kabacki and Portuguese artist Inês Neto dos Santos, who drew together a group of international creatives that had a connection with food, or a knack for breaking boundaries. 'We talked a lot about touch and the body, and then we arrived at this amazing list of 11 artists,' says Neto dos Santos.

The London-based artist was keen to distort the border between artwork and audience too, and what better way to do so than introduce food, and manufacture an environment of hospitality. Forever a tool for social engagement, she uses food here as a 'connector', styling the café as a curious laboratory with an array of quirky designs, many of which were specially commissioned for the show. The aim? To see 'how differently we relate to each other when food is involved in an art context,' she says.

Table settings in the bistro are a playful party of gherkin (and slightly phallic) shaped resin and ceramic cutlery by sculptor Lindsey Mendick in collaboration with David Mellor. These are scattered on vibrant table designs by Coco Crampton. Guests can mop up their meal using napkins by Athens-born Sofia Stevi, while admiring the whimsical wallpaper, designed by Italian illustrator Marco Palmieri.

Neto dos Santos adopts these blurred lines in her career too. While working as an artist with food, creating performance and installation-based pieces, she also moonlights as a chef. 'As you will all witness, food is a powerful tool for togetherness,' she claimed at a supperclub launch of *Tender Touches*. 'Bringing food into a gallery space can change the dynamics of the space'. Naturally this ignited conversation among diners. Focusing on fermentation for most of her practice, Neto dos Santos enjoys the artful nature behind its process, the chemical reaction between oxygen and enzymes.

The menu is an additional artwork by Neto dos Santos too, an array of experimental dishes that act as tributes to each artist. A plate of turmeric labneh and cornbread is inspired by pigments and paints used by by Mexico-based Magda Skupinska, while goats milk panna cotta, lemon verbena with strawberries and honey alludes to the calmness of Clementine Keith-Roach's work and processes – she designed the centrepieces, terracotta, jesmonite and beeswax candles.

When cooking up their concepts, both Kabacki and Neto dos Santos, who met at an exhibition themselves, took cues from Gertrude Stein's book *Tender Buttons*, a book known for mystifying familiar and unfamiliar. This, plus other culinary manuals picked up by the pair find themselves on a bookshelf in the pop-up as well.

Open until June, *Tender Touches* is as much a social investigation as it is café and exhibition. Both curators are intrigued to see how the Peckham locale will respond – will they just come for the food? Will they buy an artwork? Will they want to dig deeper? 'It's a symbiotic exchange,' Neto dos Santos muses. ✱

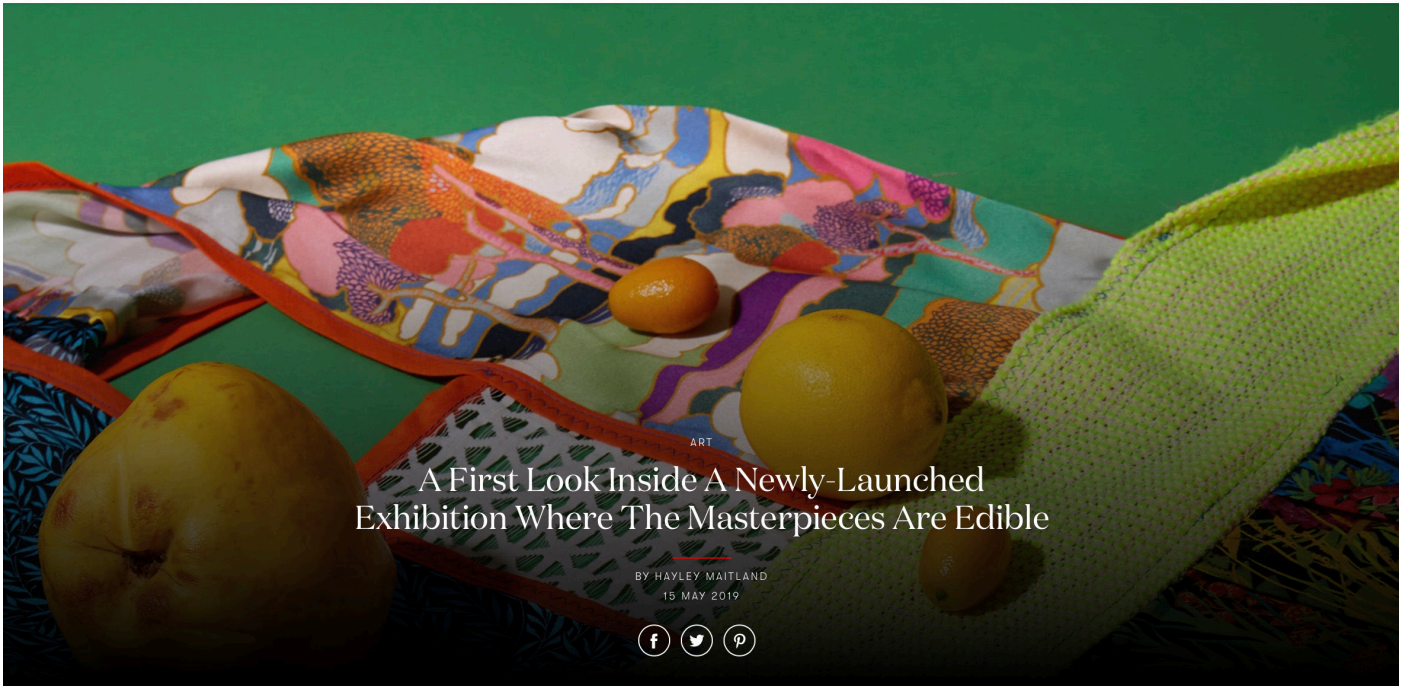
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VOGUE UK

15/05/2019

VOGUE

FASHION BEAUTY ARTS & LIFESTYLE RUNWAY NEWS VIDEO VOGUE SHOP



A First Look Inside A Newly-Launched Exhibition Where The Masterpieces Are Edible

BY HAYLEY MAITLAND
15 MAY 2019



"The Origin of Fruit" (2019) by Goia Mujalli and Cecilia Charlton GOIA MUJALLI AND CECILIA CHARLTON

When does a meal become a work of art and vice versa? That's the central question posed by forthcoming exhibition *Tender Touches* at Peckham's AMP Gallery this month. Curated by founding director of Open Space Huma Kabacki and artist Inês Neto dos Santos, the project blurs the lines between art gallery and dining room, masterpiece and... lunch. Every single piece in the multi-sensory "restaurant" has been commissioned from dedicated artists: ceramic plates by Bea Bonafini; paintings of exotic fruits by Magda Skupinska; hand-embroidered aprons by Cecilia Charlton and Goia Mujalli, and more. Best of all? The artfully plated menu developed by Neto dos Santos to reflect her love of seasonal produce, with dishes ranging from blueberry, labneh and thyme on sourdough to dark chocolate mousse with apricot and olive oil. Launched to coincide with the V&A's *Bigger Than The Plate*, the installation is the first in a series known as *Edible Goods* which will consider food as a "medium for contemporary art practice" in a moment when our diets are under ever greater scrutiny, particularly in terms of their impact on the planet. Kabacki and Neto dos Santos were inspired by Gertrude Stein's "verbal" Cubist work *Tender Buttons* (1914), which includes a section of poems dedicated to gastronomy, as well as the artist-run restaurant FOOD launched by Gordon Matta-Clark and Carol Gooden in Manhattan's Soho, where guests would be served avant-garde dishes such as a plate of bones. A number of further supper clubs and dramatic performances will be held in the AMP Gallery space over the coming month. Head to [Open Space](#) for more details, and get a first glimpse of the installation below before it opens on May 17.



BEA BONAFINI

2/5

Various glazed ceramics by Bea Bonafini, with food by Inês Neto dos Santos



TANIA DOLVERS

4/5

"St. Barbara" (2019) by Bea Bonafini

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VON GOETZ ART

09-10/2018

von
Goetz

EXHIBITIONS

CONTACT

Giotto's Room

Bea Bonafini and Aisha Christison

Post_Institute, London | Sept 26 - Oct 17, 2018



Cob.

VON GOETZ ART

09-10/2018

PRESS RELEASE

von Goetz is pleased to announce its upcoming exhibition Giotto's Room, taking place at the newly refurbished Post_Institute in Brixton from the 26th September 2018 – 17th October 2018. The redesigned gallery space will show paintings and drawings by AISHA CHRISTISON and a unique commission for von Goetz by BEA BONAFINI.

Drawing upon the vaulted spaces of frescoes, perspectives and the imagery of the early Renaissance, Giotto's Room takes its starting point as the ceilings, walls and floors of Italian palazzo's, basilicas and chapels, remaking the spatial terms of the gallery as its immersive corollary.

Bea Bonafini's carpet works can be said to invert the architecture of classical fresco painting, laying the image down underfoot and admitting the viewer as a narrative companion; to step into the composition of the work is to navigate the formal details of the piece—lines and colours, forms and fabrics—in addition to positioning oneself as a subject of and within the frame. This intimate encounter channels the spiritually charged environments of religious sites, whilst employing the image not as a hegemonic, totalitarian presence, but situates it as a common ground. The hierarchical structures of religious doctrine are flattened and given new life as a shared history and a unifying cultural architecture.

In Aisha Christison's works, the dreamlike spaces of the canvas are collaged and fragmented. At times the figures and symbols give way to psychological landscapes and still lives, in others the thematics and motifs of the Baroque are woven into theatrical tableau, and utilised with a contemporary coolness—images are repeated, stylised, and refined to a gestural incident. The room, however, need not be limited to a reading on purely art historical terms that equate artistic-architectural structures and the perspectival image to that of church and state. How might the exhibition be read as Giotto's studio? His bedroom, perhaps? His tomb? Aisha Christison's paintings take on a double-meaning: the relationship to the "space as construct" situates the images as central to its reading, they become singled-out, personal, and profound.

To enter a designated space, therefore, is to enter a private, social (and cultural) situation that is administered under alternative formalities. The soft bounciness of carpet, fibres between toes, the smell of a rug's unblemished pile, the framed image, the repeated figure, and the landscape—all recall the sensual and memorial. It is through the material that the works become transcendent, creating archetypal encounters through content and construction.

Accordingly, Giotto's Room inflects the intricate and immersive perspectives of classical fresco painting, it constructs a proximate and sensuous space that is grounded—instead of heavenly. Through Bea Bonafini's floor-based work and Aisha Christison's works on paper and canvas, the space is connected across surfaces; the architecture of the gallery space becoming constitutional to the work, as both support and framing device. The elaborate spaces and common ground of Giotto's Room, therefore, centralises the subjective experience, creating a discrete, intimate rendering of the image.

BEA BONAFINI studied at the Slade School of Fine Art (2014) and the Royal College of Art (2016). Selected exhibitions include: Shed Shreds (solo) Lychee One, London (2018), Dovetail's Nest (solo), Zabłudowicz Collection, London (2017), Chambre Dix, La Hotel Louisiane by Sans Titre 2016, Paris (2018), Et Refaire Le Monde, Galerie Bessieres, Paris (2018), Searching for Myself Through Remote Skins, Renata Fabbri, Milan (2018), If You Can't Stand the Heat, Roaming Projects, London (2018), Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavour (On The Bedpost Over Night)?, J Hammond Projects, London (2017). Upcoming shows include Memories Arrested in Space by ARTUNER, Italian Cultural Institute (2018) and a solo show at Renata Fabbri, Milan (2018).

AISHA CHRISTISON studied at the Chelsea College of Art and Design (2012). Selected exhibitions include: If You Can't Stand The Heat, Roaming Projects, London (2018), Terrasse 2017, Silicon Malley, Lausanne, Switzerland (2017), Night, White Crypt, London (2017), The Classical, Transition Gallery, London (2016), Americano Maison (solo), Barbican Arts Group Trust, London (2016).

Included in the limited edition signed catalogue for Giotto's Room are two commissioned essays, Giotto: A Contemporary Artist by Piero Tomassoni and Field of Vision by Oliver Morris Jones

Curated by Lucy von Goetz

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ARTUNER

2017

ARTUNER

INTERVIEW

AN INTERVIEW WITH BEA BONAFINI

WORDS BY:
ALISEI APOLLONIO



Memories Arrested in Space draws the viewer up the stairs of the Italian Cultural Institute (on 39 Belgrave Square, London) and into its first floor salon, bathed in golden autumnal light. *Slick Submissions* – a carpet-tapestry by Bea Bonafini is there, greeting the visitor and invitingly asking to be ‘activated’ by the audience, by removing their shoes and stepping on it. Playfully subverting one of the most deep-rooted rules of gallery-going (art is made for looking, not touching) Bonafini’s artwork succeeds in tickling the public’s attention and, finally, putting them at ease.

After the opening of the show, I caught up with Bea Bonafini to explore some of the most fascinating aspects of her practice. Remember you can still visit *Memories Arrested in Space* featuring Bea Bonafini, Serena Vestrucci, Rebecca Salter, and Paul Kneale.



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ARTUNER

2017

Alisei Apollonio: In your works, the balance between figuration and abstraction is very fragile: at any point, the composition might tip over one side or the other, revealing figures or unraveling abstract shapes. What first inspired you to work with this 'vocabulary'?

Bea Bonafini: I am often drawn to archeological sites and ancient art of great fragility, that have suffered the impact of time. I recognise how they can still be active and present by lingering between form and formlessness. We can attempt to reconstruct and make sense of these fragments of the past, in order to understand the complexities of who we are today, but our best bets are our assumptions, the stories we tell ourselves and what we want to believe. I realised that what excited me most was the washing away of clarity and information to create a new truth or myth, something that bears the scars or changes of time. I think this way of working keeps my own works active, bringing them closer to the sort of way I see life – where there is more complexity and poetry in the unsaid, in the inexplicable, in what is lost and in the resurrection and rethinking of thought or image.

Previous work you exhibited at the Zabłudowicz Collection *Invites* was inspired by the marble floor of the Siena Duomo, while *Slick Submissions*, currently featured in *Memories Arrested in Space* at the Italian Cultural Institute, is inspired by Etruscan tomb paintings. What makes you choose a visual source or narrative over another?

I often take into account site-specificity for a new work – the former was originally a former side chapel of a Methodist church. The show rethought the mechanics of a chapel, which referenced horizontal narratives of conflict found in the Siena Duomo. The latter was based on the tucked-away underground room of Renata Fabbri gallery in Milan, with intimate proportions and low ceilings, much like the Etruscan tombs I visited in Tarquinia. I often reference image material that I have seen in the flesh, and keep photographs I have taken of details lying around my studio. Through drawing I can process the images both visually and mentally; the ones I keep returning to start appearing in new work. I often end up choosing to work with images which have some sort of idiosyncratic intensity, building up to a climax or post-climax, whether it be movement, conflict, euphoria, connection, metamorphosis, chaos or the visceral.

Textile art has often been associated with feminism (think of the iconic Judy Chicago tapestries in the 1970s-80s). Indeed, it's a medium that immediately brings to mind strong 'identity politics' connotations. Being a woman artist, did you consciously choose textiles for this link with Second Wave feminism, or were you guided by other considerations when you first started producing these works?

In my early 20s I consciously made performances and costumes that were in dialogue with Second-wave feminist art practices in order to situate myself in the context of a lineage that felt personal and still urgent. It lay the foundations of my awareness as a female artist. The drive towards textiles came from a love and hate relationship to painting – having to keep up a dialogue with the history of painting felt like a burden, I needed to loosen these ties and step into a domain with fresher connotations. By replacing paint with textiles it felt as though I was carving out my own space. It opened up a fascinating dialogue between painting and everything that textiles represents – clothing, fashion, craft, home-based practices like the Gee's Bend quiltmakers or the traditional handsewn domestic wall-hangings I discovered in Nepal. I could escape the rigidity of the square stretcher, and enter a more fluid realm. Textiles desire to be touched, worn, sat on; they can be draped, hung, laid flat; and most importantly, there is no separation between colour and material – colour is material.



In the past you mentioned that one of the elements that fascinated you about the Etruscan tombs was that, upon burial, they were meant to be sealed forever and never seen again by the living. By contrast, your works really encourage the public to engage – by taking off their shoes, literally stepping inside the work and spending time in close touch with it. How did you negotiate this fundamental difference in aesthetic, but also conceptual terms?

If the tombs had not been found in modern times, we wouldn't be having this conversation; we wouldn't have that shock-impact of suddenly experiencing a chamber painted thousands of years ago for the dead, with so much vitality that it could have been painted yesterday were it not for its crumbling aesthetic. Today they are accessible and are still very intimate, you are still looking at something that is usually kept hidden. My work is seldomly on permanent public display, so when it is reopened for a show, it almost recalls that novelty of experiencing something that is usually inaccessible. Even for myself, there's a rediscovery when the work is reopened. When you do have access to it, I want it to retain that same sense of enveloping vitality.

The dichotomy between public space vs domestic space is something the viewer becomes acutely aware of when interacting with your work (with reactions such as hesitating to take off one's shoes and/or wondering if one is *really* allowed to step on the artwork). What prompted you to explore and play with these boundaries?

I think of my work as being active. I think of it as having its own rules. I see how people approach the work with caution – initially assessing what the work is demanding from them and how they should behave around it, before relaxing into its softness and subject matter. When entering someone's home for the first time, our movements are more delicate and our body moves with a different consciousness, before understanding the new rules and system of logic, and relaxing into it. Not unlike stepping into a new home, I want my work to construct a space in which you are more aware of your surroundings, which has a sort of specific spirituality, which is composed of layers, details and a safe comfort. The most urgent prompt was to explore ways in which my artworks can themselves desire intimacy, as opposed to merely depicting it.

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ELEPHANT

07/08/2017

ELEPHANT

ART LIFE & CULTURE DESIGN PHOTOGRAPHY SUBSCRIBE SHOP



Out Now! Issue 45

7 Aug 2017

5 QUESTIONS

5 Questions with Bea Bonafini

“Even if we don’t believe in a supernatural God, there is no reason why secular society should not have spaces of beauty purely dedicated to thought and reflection, and I don’t mean galleries or museums.”
Bea Bonafini is a sculptor, textile and multimedia artist whose work celebrates the spaces that bring people together. Words by Rosalind Duguid

In her most recent exhibition at the Zabłudowicz Collection’s Invites space, Bonafini took over the building’s side chapel with muted tones and undulating shapes. A dysfunctionally tall wooden chair stood elegantly over an intricate (and oh-so-soft!) handmade carpet, whilst the large pencil drawing *Proposition for a Non-Religious Chapel II* hung, altar-like, on the end wall. With her command of colour and texture, Bonafini manages to introduce a serenity into a space that allows viewers to contemplate, questioning their relationships to others and the spaces they inhabit.

In your recent installation *Dovetail’s Nest*, you carpeted the whole of the Zabłudowicz Collection’s side chapel with a piece inspired by the marble floor of the Siena Duomo. Can you tell me a little more about this work and the process of making it?

The beauty of the Siena’s floors lies in seeing skillfully cut marble shapes come together to compose narrative scenes of great complexity. Where the details have worn away, the image left behind dances between figuration and abstraction. I wanted to maintain this aspect of a horizontal picture that is overwhelming, that you can walk over and around, offering many more physical perspectives.

The process was physically challenging but exhilarating. After a series of technical drawings, the carpets were cut in undulating patterns and reassembled. Working on the reverse side, figures of fallen soldiers, horses, animal and human limbs, batons and shields were cut out from one end of the carpet and swapped with an identical cutout on the other side. Each figure therefore appears twice, always in a different configuration, mimicking the mirror-aspect of a battle. The swapping of figures allows shapes to emerge, while creating a dynamic whereby one side is effectively fighting itself.

Cob.

ELEPHANT
07/08/2017

Your sculptural work often references furniture but is sometimes functional and sometimes not. Do you feel it's important for your work to be activated by viewers?

It is important for my work to have an intimate physical connection with viewers, but sometimes it's enough for it to exist in their minds. The great thing about furniture is that it inhabits our most intimate space: the home. I can use carpet to evoke a mentality of comfort and domesticity, or use the structure of a coffee table to bring to mind social connections. But I want the way these objects are encountered to shift fluidly from one show to the next, depending on what suits the context.

"I will always admire the determination of religions to create spaces of immense beauty to elevate the soul and inspire awe."

Dovetail's Nest was not the first time you have made reference to places of worship in your work. In your show at FieldWorks gallery you exhibited a pencil work named Proposition for a Non-Religious Chapel I. What interests you about these spaces?

I will always admire the determination of religions to create spaces of immense beauty to elevate the soul and inspire awe. They understand that beauty is a material version of goodness, and can remind us of virtues like love and kindness. All of my thoughts and problems with the secular world were perfectly worded in Alain de Botton's Religion for Atheists. Even if we don't believe in a supernatural God, there is no reason why secular society should not have spaces of beauty purely dedicated to thought and reflection, and I don't mean galleries or museums. In my drawings on non-religious chapels, I created imaginary spaces where light, shadows, patterns, totemic sculptures and height are the main focus. Although there are hints of human limbs here and there, these are decentering spaces, where the ego takes a back seat.



Installation view Bea Bonafini, *Dovetail's Nest*, 2017. Photo: Tim Bowditch

Your work displays a beautiful command of colour. Can you trace your choices of palette back to any particular influences?

My palette is something I create instinctively, but which is the subconscious result of my environment. I return home to Italy often in the year, where the quality of light is simply unique. When working there on a residency I think my work absorbed some of the softness of the Tuscan autumnal light, as well as the wall frescoes in the residence we lived in. Each room was frescoed differently; the villa was spooky and magical. Similarly, I want my palette to be the seductive entry point to a more psychological and complex subject matter at the core of the work.

Performance and video are also a part of your practice. How do you feel this ties in with your sculptural work?

Performances are a way for me to collaborate and to get out of my own head. I enjoy seeing people excited about a shared project; it counterbalances the solitude of working alone in the studio, surrounded by all my doubts and insecurities. I've spent years making collaborative performances using my body, which explored the relationship between two people, and the tensions of individuality and collectivity that lies at the heart of my work that is puzzle-like. It also impacts the choices I make that reference domestic furniture—the relationship dynamics in the home or the way people come together in public spaces to exchange life stories.

In my ongoing banquet series, sculpture, performance and social gathering collide in one ephemeral day. They're moments of magic for me, and their memory ends up feeding new works for months, or even years.

MARCELLE JOSEPH INTERVIEWS ARTIST BEA BONAFINI

By Marcelle Joseph • 15 June 2017
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Italian London-based artist Bea Bonafini creates sumptuous immersive environments that hover on the border between functionality and *objet d'art*, craftsmanship and artistry. Inspired by confrontation in human relationships, Bonafini's painterly objects, installations and textiles share a soft, luscious Art Deco palette and incorporate sensuous, tactile materials that invite viewers to get closer to the artworks as well as each other. Her work can currently be seen in London as part of the *Zabludowicz Collection Invites* series of solo exhibitions featuring UK-based artists without commercial gallery representation (on until 9th July 2017).

On the occasion of Bonafini's current solo show, Marcelle Joseph probes the artist on the domestic and the decorative.

For your Zabludowicz Invites solo show, you have transformed the gallery space into a 'quasi-domestic and non-religious chapel', covering the floor with a large, patterned knit carpet and the walls with a drawing on tiles resembling an altarpiece and filling the space with an upholstered chair and a family heirloom. Tell me how the show came together for you and the inspirations behind it.

My initial point of departure was the characteristics of the Invites space. Formerly the side chapel of a Methodist church, its scale is long and narrow, with stained glass windows. I wanted to create site-specific work that wrapped around the architecture and stretched upwards in height, while assimilating the former ideology of the space. The works on show are a natural progression of my on-going research around the chapel as an installation space, where architecture and art collaborate to create a holistic experience for contemplation. The drawing shows a cave-like interior where terrazzo floors, pools of light and diagonal shadows of trees and totemic sculptures provide a space for reflection. The carpet piece takes a medieval Italian battle as a starting point; I found one in inlaid marble on the floors of the Siena cathedral, which are walked on and worn over time. I was interested in its double function as a walkable surface and carrier of a narrative image, which politically asserts a conflict. The horizontality of the image means that it can't be seen in its entirety, and is absorbed through the feet. Considering the dichotomy of the chapel as nurturing while imbued with images of conflict, I wanted to create a link to the domestic environment, where nurture and conflict can coexist. British culture sees carpet as a vital domestic element. The technique I used is similar to inlaid marble, as the process involves cutting and interlocking many individual pieces to create a new image, which also happens in the drawing. A chair carved out of wood acts as a presence in the room; it is the essential domestic furniture piece, while alluding to the magic and comicality of thrones, seldomly used and reserved for figures of power during rituals.

You really played with scale in this exhibition – a wall-to-wall carpet filling every square inch of the exhibition space, a tiny silk pillow in the corner and a dainty but outsized upholstered chair fit for an eight-foot giant. It feels super immersive, as if the viewer is stuck in the set of a Disney animated movie like *Beauty and the Beast*. How did you look at scale for this show? Is there a conceptual layer to the work that is important to you or is it more of a formalist choice?

Spaces of worship play a lot with scale. Often, these buildings are awe-inspiringly tall; their enormous ceilings are covered in frescoes that force us to look up to the skies; vast floor pieces engulf us; and their colossal sculptures of deities humble us. I am fascinated by spaces that are capable of swallowing us into their system of logic, signs, symbols and sensitivity. You're right, there is definitely a fairy tale aspect to the work. Fairy tales are alter-realities where the oddest things are undisputed because they belong to a coherent system of codes. Like myths, I think they are often the subtlest and most accurate tools we have to illuminate certain truths and help us make sense of the world. Finding a balance between the conceptual and the formal is always really important for me. In the same way that a fairy tale creates an internal logic but remains inextricably linked to our world, I intend for my work to be its own environment that weaves history and research into its own coherent language. I look a lot at holistic spaces like Giotto's Scrovegni chapel in Padua, Fortunato Depero's house museum in Rovereto, or Niki de Saint Phalle's Tarot Garden house-sculpture in Tuscany. These are examples where concept and formalism proliferate obsessively in a single space, and how powerful this combination can be.

You have been making opulent knitted works that I view like 'paintings' since your days at the RCA, and they have been shown in a myriad of different ways – on the floor for this show, on the wall, covering a table, folded on a shelf. How did this way of making come about? And is the mode of display a critical part of your work?

I have a strong relationship to painting, which I hope transpires in my fabric works. They feel like extensions of painting that have lost the attachment to the wall and the rigidity of the stretcher. I enjoy the plurality of references and the flexibility of formal possibilities that comes by replacing paint with fabric. I spend a great deal of time thinking about the display and presentation of the work, which can completely change their reading. The flexibility of textile lends itself to so many different choices of display. Draping it over a shelf or laying it over the surface of a table alludes to a domestic environment; hanging it from vertical structures makes it more bodily; wrapping it around seating demands a direct contact with the body. The decision of how to place the works in dialogue with each other is equally important. When a coffee table is paired with a sofa, it is asking to be used, and when it is left isolated, it becomes more sculptural and aesthetic. I often decide the mode of display of individual pieces when responding to a specific space, so their reading might easily change from one show to the next. I prefer this way of working, as it's as flexible as the medium itself.

For your recent solo show at FieldWorks Gallery in London entitled *A World of One's Own* (20 April – 4 May 2017), you created a mimetic living space complete with a bed, chair and two tables set with crockery, all with anthropomorphic features that brought the objects to life. Even the picture on the wall had legs and the door had arms and hands with seven fingers. In the press release text, Woody Mellor wrote, "She is the architect, this is her interior, full of curious objects and images that want nothing more than to be shared." How paramount is it for viewers to activate your artworks? And which is more important – the physical activation through touching or intimate observation or the psychological activation? Viewers creating memories and associations of their own...

I like to think of my artworks as objects that crave intimacy, while having a life of their own, beyond the viewer. I often use sensuous materials or functional objects that can persuade us to spend time to grow familiar with them. The carpet piece in my Zabłudowicz show has an abundance of subtle imagery that can only emerge after some time. The softness of its surface welcomes you to sit on it and get comfortable; through that process, the chaos of scattered animal and human limbs, and discarded batons and armour can begin to appear. As there is no separation between the architecture and the carpet, walking over it and activating it is a prerequisite for entering the room. It demands something of you as soon as you encounter it, and a gesture as simple as removing your shoes invites you to adopt a new mindset. Sitting with or on a work is one way to increase intimate observation. Using elements of domesticity is a way for me to activate the sort of behaviours and memories associated to a safe environment like a home. This and the use of seductive materials are mechanisms to disarm in order to render digestible the complexities of the works' imagery and concepts.

For your degree show from the Royal College of Art last year, you bravely chose to exhibit your work in the art school's café area, filling it with bespoke tables, chairs and shelving units containing other textile, ceramic and wood objects as well as house plants poking out of a decoratively shaped hole in the wall. Viewers were confronted with a quandary – 'Can I sit on this artwork? Can I place my coffee down on this table?'. Is this slippage important to the work as it hovers between being a functional object and an exquisite work of art?

All kinds of slippages are important in my work. I like the fluidity between mediums as much as I enjoy confusing function with pure aesthetics. With each piece or installation, I'm interested in shifting the dynamics of the way they are encountered. Installing work in a cafe space meant that I adopted a space with a prescribed function of consumption and social gathering. There was a collision of behaviour patterns around the artworks, and people could spend time with the work, not only observing and thinking, but also meeting other people, eating and drinking. The social aspect was a way to counteract the sterility of the white cube space, which doesn't often encourage the social or comfortable consumption of art. For the same reason that my fabric pieces were hung loose, I'm interested in increasing the physical and psychological proximity between artworks and us.

One last question... Colour. Your palette is absolutely gorgeous. Where does it come from? Is it embedded with meaning? Is it steeped in history – art, design or otherwise – or is it a matter of your own aesthetic choices?

I think my palette goes through phases, which are often influenced by an environment that has had a strong impact on me. Three years ago, I used punchy reds inspired by the rituals and festivals I experienced in India, and a year ago, I rode the pink wave of the RCA studios and the domestic setting of my Villa Lena residency in Italy. The palette of my most recent work is an extension of the blues, greens and silvers from the surrounding landscape of my tree-top studio. There is little division between the exterior and interior, so the variety of plants and changing sky affects the current work at Zabłudowicz. By working on several pieces at once, I can also let the works influence each other, so that they can start making more demands of me, or taking some decisions themselves.

Cob.

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Holy order: Bea Bonafini creates an artist's chapel in London

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WALLPAPER

12/06/2017

‘There should be more art shows in chapels’ quips the caption on one of Italian artist Bea Bonafini’s recent Instagram posts of the Fitzrovia Chapel in London. With her solo show ‘Dovetail’s Nest’ at the Zabłudowicz Collection, she’s done just that – transforming the museum’s Methodist chapel into a non-religious ‘quasi-domestic’ space to explore her own complex relationship with religious iconography.

‘You realise that it’s brainwashing,’ Bonafini explains of the intensely violent scenes found in churches. ‘In “Dovetail’s Nest”, I wanted to create links both to sacred and domestic spaces.’ Bonafini questions the “brainwashing” elements of the church with an installation made up of objects – a huge handmade carpet and an altarpiece – in the girlish pastel colours of pink, blue and purple.

The rug is inspired in equal measure by ‘carpet in British homes’ and ‘the inlaid marble battle scenes on the Siena Cathedral floor’. It takes up the entire floor space and is met at its furthest end with Bonafini’s own version of a 25ft painted altarpiece, covered in prints and bright colours.

Her predilection for everyday objects feminised through pastel colours and patterns partly nod to French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle, a source of inspiration for Bonafini. This artistic kitsch is becoming her trademark, recent works including the pink plaster, wood dye and salt dough canvas *Poked Peach & Georgian Mouths* (2016), have seen Bonafini savouring the subversive.

‘I like to think of myself as a promiscuous artist,’ she tells us, ‘I like being surprised by my work and this project has surprised me.’ When she received the commission from the Zabłudowicz Collection, as part of its Invites series, Bonafini instantly thought back to the small chapels often found on the side of buildings in Italy where she grew up and were both austere and compelling.

She adds: ‘This chapel intends to create a world of its own, a world that asks something of you the moment you walk in.’ Which in this case, is to make yourself at home.



Bea Bonafini's work transforms an art gallery into a secular chapel



A new exhibition from a very exciting young artist has the ambitious aim of transforming a gallery into a "quasi-domestic space" that explores the idea of a "non-religious chapel".

WRITTEN BY: EMILY GOSLING

8 JUNE 2017

Gernam-born, London-based artist [Bea Bonafini](#) only graduated from her MA at the Royal College of Art last year, and her solo show at the [Zabludowicz Collection](#), *Dovetail's Nest*, aims to examine "the tension between the functional and dysfunctional, order and chaos, interior and exterior".

It does this through covering her entire space in a carpet created through hand-cut sections of green, pink and blue material that references the 15th century Siena Cathedral's marble 'intarsio' floor, which once showed Biblical battle scenes before time and feet eroded the image and transformed it into a more abstract composition.

In the place of an alter, Bonafini presents a more secular centrepiece in the shape of a large drawing occupying the end wall of the gallery. This was created using a tiled effect from paper shapes, and shows an interior space populated by stacked columns based on the artist's own sculptures.