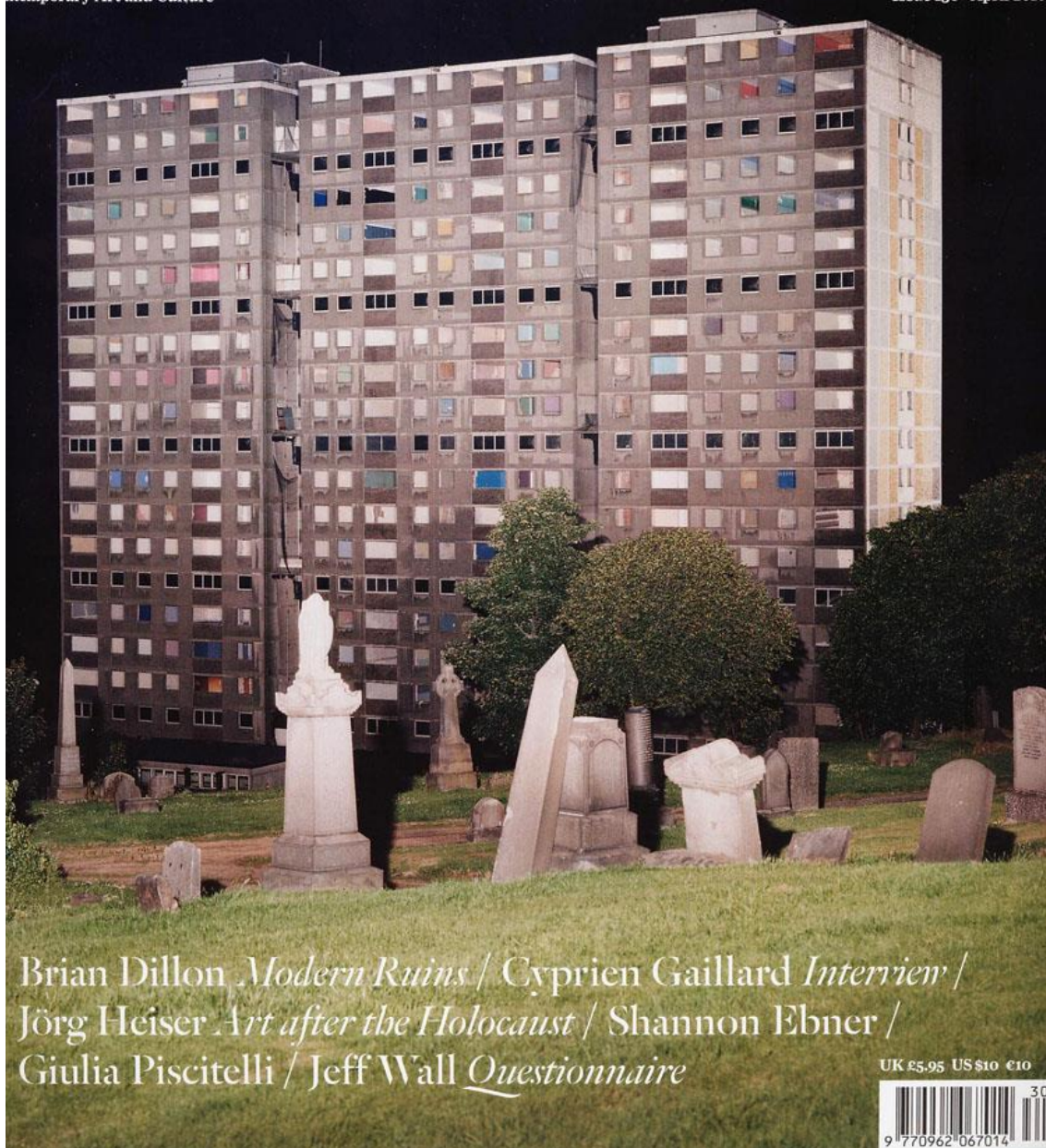


frieze

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Italsider/Collant
1994
Colour photograph
100x70 cm

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Between Me and You

Recuperation and representation
in the work of **Giulia Piscitelli**

by *Pádraig Timoney*

We all live facing something. Giulia Piscitelli lives and works in a building on a narrow street across from the site of Naples' now-defunct Italsider steelworks. The dismantling of the factory's perimeter walls and internal superstructures, around 15 years ago, left her with a view out over a vast wasteland. The scene seemed strange to the artist, who was used to seeing nothing beyond a towering black wall ten metres away. As for the sounds, it was not so much the infernal cadences of the factory during the day that she missed, as its snuffling, fitful, nocturnal presence. How quickly can the black wall fade, given the afterimage of memory, which conjures up a present overlaid with the sooty transparency of the past? In 2003, Piscitelli made a diminutive, gold-leafed box enclosing a series of metal 'reeds' and a small fan blowing through them; a piece that suggestively re-created the wheeze of industry after the machines were silenced. The work's alchemical title, *Musicaloro*, can translate as either 'Musical Gold' or 'Music to Them' – music to the artist's ears, perhaps, or music 'right back at you'?

The Italsider site's changing appearance has formed a frequent backdrop to the artist's photo-based works. *Italsider/Collant* (1994) was Piscitelli's attempt to negotiate some space between the two machines dominating her physical and intellectual environment: the industries of steel and of art publishing. The artist depicts herself between the overbearing bulk of the factory behind her and a copy of the Italian art magazine *Collant* that she holds up in front of her. *Yashica* (2008) portrayed the artist's old SLR camera, photographed in front of the backdrop of demolished buildings, as both a replacement factory and a threshold to another world.

As Piscitelli explains: 'With this camera, my point of view goes through a channel and a space previously unknown to me. This camera helped me to see more of what there was inside than what was outside.'

Recuperation is something Piscitelli has been exploring for many years. When the artist broke her nose in the Amalfi Coast town of Furore, it prompted a number of works examining the healing process and how trauma necessitates a re-evaluation of perception. In *Furore* (Fury, 1996), the artist took four passport photographs of her bruised face, modifying one by collaging a pair of sunglasses over her eyes. In the companion video *Furore* (Fury, 1996), Piscitelli recorded her own face healing, monitoring the progress only by watching the footage,

which she felt presented a truer version of events than looking in the mirror. By taking control of the representation – by making her image detour through her own hands – Piscitelli felt she was healing herself.

Naples is full of bodegas – tailors and menders, polishers and carpenters – that offer a host of techniques for restoring things. It's to these artisans that Piscitelli turns when one of her works demands a restorative or modifying intervention – not to have them do it, but to learn how to do it herself. Such was the case with *Materasso Argento* (Silver Mattress, 2003), to which Piscitelli appended the following text:

'Once upon a time there was a woollen mattress; it was warm and quiet. Every evening,



Materasso Argento
(Silver Mattress)
2003
Silverleaf on wool
mattress
15×190×80 cm



Above:
Lucertola su strada
(Lizard on the Street)
2008
Bleach on cloth
320x160 cm

Below:
Furore
(Fury)
1996
Passport photographs
12x9 cm



the mattress would wait for the body of a young girl, to give her shelter. The girl used to lie down on the mattress, rock on it and, in this continuous movement, she used to tell it all about her fears, joys and wishes. The mattress saw and listened to so many things: a birth / an act of love / the cold of a fever / a never-born baby / a girlfriend with a heart / the desire of dying / a peaceful rest / and so much light. One day the mattress was removed and placed in a grotto, but it continued to live and nourish itself with all the memories it had. After some time, the young girl – now a young lady – went to see it. She looked at the mattress and saw herself reflected in it as if it were a rectangle of water. The mattress was so happy that all the light that it had kept within itself came out, like silver leaf. This is the way it remained forever.'

The mattress tells of the shift in existence it has undergone: it was removed and the girl 'went to see it'. In the fabulous realm of a moment's exchange between viewer and object, 'she looked at it'. This is an object dependent on an imported fantasy, as theatrically patinated as its use is mundane. *Materasso Argento* explores how we make the world by making ourselves in tune with what the world we make makes us into: 'This is the way it remained forever.'

Piscitelli's practice locates its object as the frame of its history, as its own threshold between two worlds.

There are several counterparts to the mattress in Piscitelli's practice. *Portabagaglia* (Luggage Rack, 2003), for instance, is a baggage rack that has undergone an apotheosis, lifted from its customary flat, burdened angle. *Trapezium* (2000) is made from a mirror stand, configured as the base and legs of an empty bed, the illusionary effect redoubled by the bed's receding lines being themselves reproduced from lacquered wood. *Ramaggio* (Mending, 2000) is a bedsheet, patched and repaired so many times that its beautifully textured, assemblaged appearance could no more be called a bedsheet, or used as such.

In a series of tapestries from 2008, Piscitelli employed selective bleaching on second-hand cloth and brocades in an attempt to control the uncontrollable – using an unpredictable process and selecting the best results – to produce banners for a chance procession: heraldic tic or astrological symbol. Imagine the head of a swordfish severed from its body. These works are a combination of remnants, from which the colour of one object has been stripped to produce a de-territorialized image of something else – a lighthouse, a giant squid, a crushed lizard, a moped. Piscitelli's 2005 series of spindly ink drawings of battered rowing boats, 'Senza Titolo (Barca)' (Untitled [Boat]), depicts some vessels 'alive' in the water, some 'dead', dried and shrunk, with their timbers popped open as though ribbed and boned, haunted

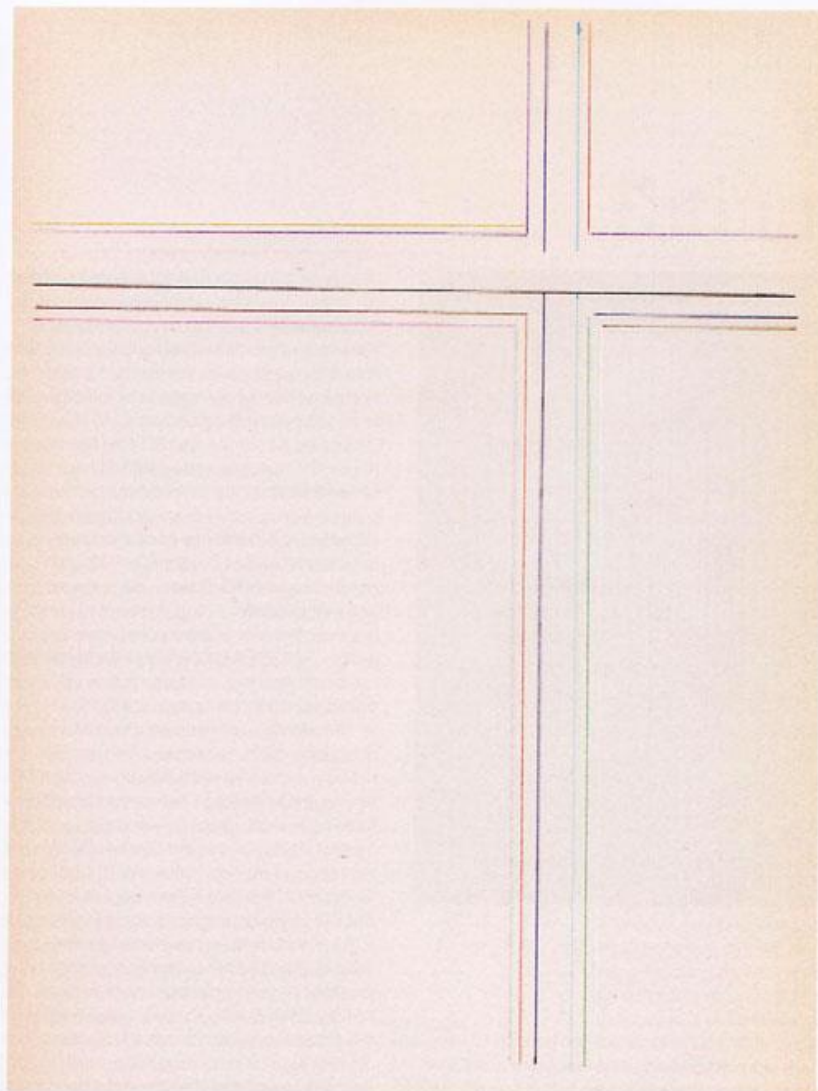
by their earlier incarnations. In each sketch, some detail is picked out in silverleaf; Piscitelli has adopted the techniques of a silversmith to bring light, like a reflection, into these works; the effect is an optical illusion of a glistening, wet surface or of the squeaky-tight fit of swollen wood.

Bandiera Pac (Pac Flag, 2003) is an Iraq War protest flag, its fibres worn away from being snapped back in the wind; having lost the final letter of 'PACE' (Peace), the banner now reads 'PAC', which could be taken as an acronym for Proletariat Armed for Communism. The duration of the neglected appeal for peace mutates the meaning into something exasperated, more combative. With its worn curve of inevitability, the flag speaks a different language of truth-to-material.

Piscitelli's fascination with used objects is likely rooted in her father's favourite hobby, to which the artist pays homage in the video *Todos* (Done, 2008). A former taxi driver, Piscitelli's father knows all of the city's prime locations for illegal dumping. These sites service his passion for repairing broken mechanisms – clocks, lamps, meters. He does not resell them, or even use them himself; he is just at peace with things when they can function as originally intended. Whether they ever re-enter the world in a fully functioning state doesn't matter to him; his work is a non-acceptance of entropic decay, or of its lazy contemporary cousin – the tendency to bin things for want of a fuse. Piscitelli's front room has shelves full of these rescued objects, and some of her own restored items nestle in among them.

Piscitelli's focus is on impairment as the condition of – and reason for – rejection or a loss of functionality. Used to articulating threshold space literally – as in the drawing series 'Berlin Windows' (2008), depictions of the blank simplicity of window frames, or in the *Italsider* photographs – Piscitelli's practice locates its object as the frame of its history, as its own threshold between two worlds (before and after its presentation as an art work) of real import by implication, and fantastical shortcuts to that implication. While her father's objects may be at peace with their status, Piscitelli's still have some work to do: the artist aims to restore them not only to themselves, but also to the point at which their new viability can be tested. Piscitelli sounds out the hollows in each scenario, and demands a space in which an attuned sensitivity may concuss apperceptions together. Such is the case in the photographic work *Sunshine* (2009), in which the palpitating, stringy orb of a balding head is reconceived as splendidly solar. That's a huge transformation. Piscitelli finds a niche through her work from where she can deploy a lever to shift massive energies.

These art works won't allow wallowing – they never have. Instead, they acknowledge that the integral assessment of viability and impairment is both a power play and a judgement on the status of another thing, image or person, and its position in relation to ideality. Take the handwritten labels from jars for a local cure/treatment for HIV – *Polline de api, fieno greco, cardo mariano, tarassaco* (Bee Pollen, Fenugreek, Milk Thistle and Tarassaco, 1994). Confronted by their intention and hopefulness, Piscitelli has



Left:
Berlin Window (f)
From the series
'Berlin Windows'
2008
Ink on paper
28x21 cm

Above:
Sunshine
2009
Lambda print on
aluminium
110x90 cm

paused, acknowledged the itch of affinitive significances and dealt with it – then moved straight on. *Ape* (Bee, 1987–2000) is a small, bee-like construction – a fibrous body, gauze and wire wings – to which Piscitelli adds a short line: 'Such a small object, so fragile, for which it was worth the time I spent to make it.' That's putting it straight to you. Practical and prayerful investment are conceded by almost all of Piscitelli's works; but they are presented with non-judgmental matter-of-factness, provoking us to measure our reaction to them against our own registers of surety, uncertainty and hope. The video *Rodolfo Centodue* (Rodolfo 102, 2002), which depicts a 102-year-old man eating a plate of spaghetti, dares you to examine how you assess viability: the solidity and hinterland of this life amidst its appallingly decrepit visual. The protagonist, Rodolfo, is somehow less damaged, irrespective of his diminished capabilities, than Federico Fellini's frozen 50-year-old iconic film about the high life of Rome, *La Dolce Vita* (1960), from where the soundtrack to Piscitelli's work comes.

In 2008, for the 5th Berlin Biennial, Piscitelli videoed in close-up a duck on Berlin's Unter den Linden boulevard, standing in the rain on its one good leg, with the other bent at an angle (*Unter der Linden*,

2008). The soundtrack to the work consists of a loud conversation, taking place in the street at the same time, between a drunk and a taunting passer-by. The drunk, Piscitelli noted, was more aware of himself in his impairment than the person trying to make fun of him. Since the exchange took place in German, the artist was unaware at the time of what was being said, but it seemed so forceful as a soundtrack that she had it translated and subtitled onto the footage of the duck. Suddenly, as if it has been listening to the exchange, and waiting only for the discussion to end, the duck spreads its wings and flies out of the frame. Despite its handicap, it is capable of disappearing from our sight and escaping our attention.

Back at the Italsider steelworks, Piscitelli is responsible for the preservation of a daubed piece of graffiti on the low perimeter wall that remains: 'Less Smoke, Less Noise'. When she saw some mural painters were about to cover it up, she shouted down to them to leave it alone, claiming that it was 'historical'. It sits quite comfortably now within the context of its prophetic revelation, its request fulfilled.

Pádraig Timoney is an artist and writer who lives in Naples, Italy.

Tigre in Italsider
(Tiger at Italsider)
2002
Lambda print on
aluminium
90x90 cm

