

*I love you, a work by Pantani-Surace*, Laura Culpan, Pantani-Surace, Gli Ori, Prato, 2006.

When art historians ponder the beginnings of art, or perhaps more precisely, image making, the prehistoric wall drawings executed some 15,000 years ago provide a probable starting point. It is believed that in primitive times the images carved, painted or scratched on to the walls of caves and rocks were imbued with powerful, quasi-magical qualities. Their existence was not for decorative purposes, as, for their creators, these images served the practical purpose of aiding survival. The primitive hunter believed that reproducing the image of the bison, for example, would in some way aid the manifestation of the actual beast that could then be hunted.

From the ancient pyramids onwards, images and text are seen to have adorned walls, and the role of art played as an important part as that of the architecture. The architectural structure of the pyramids was built to preserve the body of their sacred deceased king and the upwardly pointing structure designed as such to aid the ascension of their king to the gods, from whence he was understood to have come. However, it was the reliefs and paintings on the wall that would pave the way and accompany the soul into the after world that would keep their king immortal.

Fast forward to the fourteenth century and in the Italian churches we see Giotto break through in a revolutionary manner with a new style of wall painting, or frescoes, that changed the course of religious art and subsequently the history of art as we know it. By eschewing the rule that sacred images must be as simplistic as possible, Giotto and then Mantegna, Raphael, Leonardo, Michelangelo and colleagues, realised that the wall and ceiling space offered up the chance to embellish, illustrate and delight whilst telling the narrative of the Holy Word.

So the wall has featured as an important and integral ground from which to view images throughout the history of art. Even in more modern times we see the likes of Gustav Klimt and Diego Rivera rekindle the connection with the grandeur and importance of the wall drawing and unite with the architecture to display images that are decorative, powerful and, especially in Rivera's case, also politically charged.

It was with American Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt in the 1960s that the wall drawing was conceived and used in an entirely different dimension, pushing the boundaries of contemporary art and paving the way for site-specific installations.

LeWitt sought to make drawing as two dimensional as possible and liberate it from any kind of supporting structure or medium, ensuring optimal flattening. The very nature of wall drawings more often than not would make them permanent works, merging and complementing the architecture of a space. However, with works such as Sol LeWitt's, it is the concept or the idea of the work that *is* the work, therefore the complex formula of the design becomes the original and the output of that design a mere temporary expression. LeWitt's artistic hand is usually once removed from the work and the careful execution undertaken by his assistants. LeWitt thus sees himself as analogous to the musician who writes music but does not play it, or the architect who designs the house, but does not build it.

Across the Atlantic in France, minimalist artist Daniel Buren was seeking to redefine the conditions of avant-garde art with his series of abstractions. In the latter half of the 1960s Buren's monumental wall paintings are reduced to their simplest visual and mathematical form and the wall becomes an integral part of the equation.

Alternatively, in Dan Flavin's works, his signature neon lights do not merely adorn the walls, rather the architecture is an intrinsic part of the installation. His works are concerned with the relationship and balance between structure, light, reflection, colour and space.

In this context, the work 'Ti Amo', as well as others in this series by Pantani-Surace, can thus be seen to be furthering the legacy of wall drawings.

*Ti Amo* (I Love You) are the words that appear on the concrete wall surface: a silent, subtle and ephemeral message. The words are spelt out by rainwater strategically seeping through the pores of the wall. Slowly the greyness deepens and the dark stains begin to form letters and the letters, words. The mystery is sometimes unveiled to the viewer when the back of the wall is made visible and the complex system of tubing and plumbing reveals the mechanism behind the installation.

When the spectator is permitted to see behind the wall the effect is disconcerting. The contrast between seeing the back and the front of the installation highlights the contradiction between the cold technology and the emotive outcome. It's as though exposing the calculated structure behind the wall calls into question the sincerity of the words. Strong, emotional and personal words are reduced to an intricate technical structure far removed from human sentiment.

Yet when the structure is concealed and the wall becomes part of the architecture of the space, the effect is very different. The wall is no longer such a dominant feature and when, defying logic, the enigmatic words appear, the mysterious and anonymous message takes on a ghostly presence. It's as though the words "I Love You" have been written defiantly, like graffiti on the wall, but the graffiti has dissolved into sodden words: a permanent mark becoming a temporary, fading feeling. Graffiti statements are usually anonymous outcries or desperate declarations meant for one but for all to see. Whose words are these? And for whom are they intended? Will he or she ever read them, or will they evaporate too soon?

The role of the wall in Pantani-Surace's series can be contextualised within the history that precedes it, with nods to the past Italian tradition of frescoes, to the conceptual and minimalist artists of the 60s and 70s and also to the Arte Povera artists' use of materials such as concrete and the inclusion of text. As with most of Pantani-Surace's portfolio, there may be many acknowledgements contained within their work, yet each of their pieces manages to defy categorisation or generalisation to present fresh works of art that provide a unique experience.

Pantani-Surace's work over the past decade has challenged galleries and spectators to shift from passive to active roles (*The Elio House*), disoriented with scale (*Voglio sentire il rumore*), surprised in their use of materials (*Non spiegatemi perche' la pioggia si trasforma in grandine*), delighted in their evocation of the past (*se la memoria mi dice il vero*). Now, with their series of wall drawings they have brought the illogical and improbable into the gallery space with the creation of these unlikely ephemeral installations.

The wall drawings, including *Ti Amo* and *Un po e' vero* (the watery words change according to the environment and context in which it is shown), are contradictory in the way that they manage to remain within the realm of the temporary installation: the water evaporates and the wall can be removed and re-installed. The image is no longer a permanent trace locked in the material and preserved for centuries like the prehistoric cave drawings or fourteenth century frescoes. No longer is the wall a functional part of the architectural space like the conceptual artists of the 60s. What appears to be solid and integral is in fact the opposite. Elements from daily urban life (quite literally in the form of rain and graffiti) are brought into the gallery space to be re-examined

In this work Pantani-Surace have created a silent and soluble piece that crosses boundaries between installation, sculpture, painting and poetry.

