

## Florilegium | Rebecca Louise Law

Written by Elisabetta Rastelli

In my mind there was only you, Ophelia. A critic can have few certainties at the moment in which they are called upon to express the sensations that spring forth from beauty, but your face appears vividly in my mind. You, the incarnation of beauty, pure and innocent, so fragile and, at the same time, strong in the act of abandoning life even while you were enjoying its most beautiful aspects. You were the one who helped me to throw myself into an artistic experience in which the work of art transforms itself into a miraculous space, torn between two worlds. What we did together was to walk towards the transcendent beauty of art, which stands alone in knowing how to open up the world of the real, the only thing that draws man out of himself by the kidnapping of his enraptured gaze.

*When night colours the guard towers in a tired golden sunset,  
little Ophelia, dressed in white, meets the night, sweet and barefooted,  
holding in her hands garlands of flowers and in her hair,  
the reflections of dreams, in her thoughts,  
a thousand colours of life and death, of wakefulness and of weariness.*<sup>1</sup>

What I have always envied in artists is their capacity to see that which our eyes cannot by manipulating matter in such a way as to transform reality as we know it into another world. In her use of natural elements, the artist, Rebecca Louise Law, brings the work of art back to displaying the pure aesthetics of matter. In her hands, flowers, torn from life, find a new form of expression, abandoning their earthly dimensions to enter into the timeless world of art: that of the everlasting.

Raised in a village near Cambridge within a large natural park, Law, since childhood, gained experience of nature by following the work of her father, an expert gardener, who taught her how to tend to plants and about their history. Drawing from a fantasy composed of endless landscapes, scents and a deep understanding of the most ancient of gardening techniques, the artist found the tools that allowed her to break the confines of the canvas, in order to share with the viewer the spectacle that comes from the essential beauty of nature. In light of this, it is interesting to revisit with the artist some of the formative moments of her artistic maturation:

*I felt frustrated with how basic I made nature look, when my recollections were all sublime. I could not escape the feeling I had as a child and began to retrace my steps back to when I first noticed nature. The endless fields and dried flowers in the attic resonated and the smell of these places couldn't escape me. How could I reinterpret this onto canvas? I researched my ancestry, with gardeners and artists for over six generations, I was surrounded by art with flowers and the natural world. It seemed that for hundreds of years my family had always tried to capture nature. I started*

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<sup>1</sup> Francesco Guccini, "Ophelia", *Due anni dopo*, Columbia, EMI, 1970

*making artworks outside of the canvas and creating objects that had family symbolism. Interestingly, these pieces were always combined with flowers.<sup>2</sup>*

Rebecca Louise Law began working directly with flora in 2003, leaving mark-making techniques behind as a tool she would use purely during the inspiration phase. In fact, her self-confessed tribute to the entire Still Life genre appears evident, a theme that is expressed visually by many of her sculptural works. Recognised as a standalone theme only since the turn of the seventeenth century, Still Life is a genre that has been tackled by many of the Greats within the History of Art. Law has sublimely reinterpreted this historical genre in a contemporary manner. Particularly dear to the artist is the Dutch tradition of Still Life from which she had the chance to admire various masterpieces kept by the National Gallery, among them the works of Jan Davidsz. de Heem and Ambrosius Bosschaert, to whom she has dedicated several of her works.

Her decision to align herself with this artistic current allows us to dive deeper into one of the key themes of her artistic poetry. As underscored by the art historian Victor I. Stoichita, the term "still life" is an oxymoron: «How can nature, the defining quality of which is life, be dead?»<sup>3</sup> From the contradictory dichotomy associated with the term, Rebecca Louise Law extracts the symbolic value of *vanitas*: its link with the magic of representation for which the super temporal character of the artistic image, brings her to an invasion of the physical space, a positioning "on the other side" of the mortal world. Franciscus Junius defines Still Life as a *parergon* (*para* = counter; *ergon* = work) a term for which Jacques Derrida gives us one of the most interesting definitions:

*A parergon goes against, alongside, in addition to the ergon, the finished piece, the fact, the work, but is not apart, insofar as it enters into contact and cooperates [...] it is like an accessory that one must welcome at the edge, to take on board. What I like to emphasise is how this interstitial characteristic of still life enables it to transform itself into a barrier positioned at the border of two worlds.<sup>4</sup>*

With the remark "Still Life in Death," Rebecca Louise Law underscores the very capacity of the flower to become the metaphor of a journey, not so much as an element belonging to the world of the living that passes to that of the dead, but insofar as it is a metaphorical object capable of embodying the power of art and the artist to restore a new form of life. As asserted by the philosopher Federico Ferrari:

*Art dissolves the thing's substance and illusion of permanence (the notion that only things exist), entrusting it to the nothingness that the thing contains. In the vision, in the infinitesimal transition*

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Louise Law, *Life in Death*, Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, Richmond, 2017, pp. 1-2

<sup>3</sup> Victor I. Stoichita, *L'invenzione del quadro*, Il Saggiatore, Milan, 2013, p.29

<sup>4</sup> *ivi*. p.35

*from thing to nothing, lies beauty. Beauty is the aching moment of a transition. The work of art bears witness to it.*<sup>5</sup>

If *Still Life* is declared protagonist of predominantly sculptural artworks, Law's tribute to Abstract Expressionism appears equally evident by virtue of her selection of colours for the installation. Born out of the ashes of the great Avant Gardists of the twentieth century (to which it owes among other things its very nomenclature), Abstract Expressionism is an entirely American artistic movement, which emerged after the Second World War through the efforts of great painters including Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, and later in Germany with the work of Gerhard Richter. These names are not chosen by chance from among the many exponents of the movement, rather, they are united by their emphasis on the use of colour for its emotive and self-expressive qualities, that manifests itself in Law's energetic use of colour. Reflecting the techniques of the aforementioned artists, Law shares and extols a strongly performative approach: the creation of her works of art across the board require long periods of time for their realization, when even the body is called upon to actively perform.

Defined by Law herself as "larger-than-life," these installations (almost always site-specific), bring the artist into intimate and meticulous contact with every single element of the artwork. In the same way as the Moiras of Ancient Greece would weave the threads of life for men, Law, through the action of twining to each copper wire hundreds of flowers which she herself cultivates, dries and transforms into works of art, becomes a demiurgic artist, responsible, therefore, for the life of these delicate creatures.

Having already exhibited in important institutions and galleries of international renown, such as the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio (2018), Skovgaard Museum in Denmark (2017), the Shirley Sherwood Gallery, Kew (2017) the Melbourne Museum in Australia (2016) or the Victoria & Albert Museum (2015); her installations comprise a long study into the environment, both internal and external, of the exhibition spaces. For Rebecca Louise Law, confronting a "space" means understanding the surrounding environment, the botanical history of the area; working almost always with the local community, to gain a greater awareness through the time she dedicates to interacting with and observing nature.

These are the qualities that have made the artist a key figure for the contemporary art direction that the city of Parma intends to pursue in light of its designation as the Italian Cultural Capital 2020. With the title "Parma 2020. Culture defeats Time," this exhibition shares the artist's way of thinking about art and culture as "a place for the inclusion of time"<sup>6</sup> and the city "as a living organism that breathes and develops according to different

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<sup>5</sup> Federico Ferrari, "Matter and ecstasy" text inside the catalogue, *Sophie Ko. Sporgersi nella notte*, Gli Ori, Pistoia, 2018, p. 53

<sup>6</sup> Application dossier of Parma as Italian Capital of Culture 2020, p.6

timelines.”<sup>7</sup> Following these threads, Rebecca Louise Law, through her exhibition *Florilegium*, has taken on four iconic places within the city of Parma, including the Church of Saint Tiburzio, The Congregational Archives (better known as the Ancient Pharmacy), the Ducal Palace and the Botanical Gardens. For each location the artist conceived a corpus of artworks and systems to guide the visitors step by step towards understanding her artistic production and the studies she has made about the territory. The most obvious embodiment of this intention is the piece installed in the Church of Saint Tiburzio. Considered a work in progress, and therefore undergoing a process of continual metamorphosis, the installation is destined to change not only by virtue of being made up from natural elements but also as a result of various interventions by the hand of the artist and of the city’s residents, with the inclusion of many Violets of Parma, the flower symbol of the city.

Here we find another device that is characteristic of Rebecca Louise Law’s work: the selection and study of a particular flower that is representative of the place in which she is called to intervene. To the artist, the Parma Violet represents a symbol through which to relive some of city’s most significant historical moments and to avail herself of these identifying elements within the territory. Alongside the choices of display spaces, her research into the personality of Maria Luisa d’Asburgo, the second wife of Napoleon Buonaparte and Duchess of Parma, Piacenza and Guastalla from 1814 until 1847 is also apparent. Referred to as Maria Luigia by Parma’s citizens, the Duchess was one of the historical figures most loved by locals, who today remember her for her enlightened culture and the important urban transformation which she brought about both in the city and the province.

It is to Maria Luigia and her love for this flower that we owe the existence of the perfume known as “Violetta di Parma”. She herself had encouraged and supported the work of the Friars of the Convent of the Annunciation, who, after some time, succeeded in extracting from the violet and its leaves an essence almost identical to that of the flower itself.

Subsequently from 1870, thanks to Ludovico Borsari who was able to get hold of the jealously guarded formula, even the public was able to use that particular fragrance, still famous in the world today.

As the Duchess’s favourite flower, the violet became a kind of effigy for the city of Parma; it was used to sign correspondence, as the colour of the uniforms worn by housemaids, as the subject of choice for painted plates and fine china and was embroidered on clothes, even on the wedding dress the Duchess wore when she married Napoleon. We are not talking merely of the whim of a noblewoman, rather of a great passion for a culture, a botanical one, that Maria Luigia - in the same way as other important sovereigns and regents in the span of the 19th century - embraced and valued, and to which she gave

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<sup>7</sup> *ivi*. p. 5

much of her attention, even to all the symbolic language that is hidden behind every floral species.

*Beauty is made from an eternal part, immutable, the amount of which is exceedingly difficult to determine, and a relative part, occasional, which is, if one prefers, from time to time or contemporaneously, the age, fashion, morality and passion.*<sup>8</sup>

During the Victorian age (1837-1901) not only in painting but also within culture itself, hidden symbols and language - such as the use of the handkerchief, the umbrella, gloves or of flowers - represented a very real form of communication. Even though etiquette dictated a rigid set of rules for floral tributes (in theory reserved only for those who had already forged socially important ties), a small tribute could say more than a thousand words.

This variegated cultural heritage was certainly valued by the Pre-Raphaelite artistic movement, of which an exceptional example is the famous painting by John Everett Millais, inspired by the figure of *Ophelia* (1851-1852). Immortalized according to the description by William Shakespeare in *Hamlet* (1602), the maiden lies in the water, surrounded by an impressive flora, her hands stretched towards the sky, one holding a bunch of flowers, while around her neck she wears a garland of violets symbolizing her premature death.

With this image we come to the end of the text intended as an homage to the artist Rebecca Louise Law, recounting her artistic experience through the metaphorical idea of cyclicity. From the initial invocation, to the development of an invitation that might help the reader in his relationship with this complex creative universe. The exhibition *Florilegium*, beyond being the artist's first exhibition in Italy, is a journey... a long path, a fictitious climax of cross-pollination and the study of the territory, a visual story that aims at achieving an ideal beauty.

*Nature is a temple in which living pillars  
Sometimes give voice to confused words;  
Man passes there through forests of symbols  
Which look at him with understanding eyes.*

*Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance  
In a deep and tenebrous unity,  
Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day,  
Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.*

*There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children,  
Sweet as oboes, green as meadows*

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<sup>8</sup> W. Benjamin, *I "Passages" di Parigi*, vol. IX delle *Opere complete*, Einaudi, Turin, 2000, p.14

*And others are corrupt, and rich, triumphant,*

*With power to expand into infinity,  
Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin,  
That sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "IV Corrispondenze", *I fiori del male*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 2003, p.43