

CARNALE

VERITA MONSELLES

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CENTRO PECCI PRATO

CARNALE

Verita Monselles. CARNALE is the first exhibition in a contemporary art center focusing on Verita Monselles (1929–2004). Monselles was an artist who explored issues of identity, the body, and desire from female and feminist perspectives. Born in Buenos Aires and raised in Italy, Monselles started taking photographs at the end of the 1960s to tell her story and «that of many other women of my generation who received a Catholic education and experienced endless frustration and dejection» (Monselles, 1981). Her artistic journey intersected with those of the most important Italian women artists and critics of her time, including Lea Vergine, Ketty La Rocca, Tomaso Binga, and Lara-Vinca Masini. Her work crossed paths with theater companies such as Magazzini Criminali and Krypton, as well as fashion photography, as seen in her work with the Emilio Cavallini stockings company.

Monselles creates images that challenge stereotypes and social models, reclaiming “a woman who questions her role.” She ironically intervenes in symbols of the patriarchal and religious traditions and is interested in *mise en scène* and fiction. The protagonist of her work is the female body, often portrayed in its predominantly erotic and sensual dimension as the subject and author of its own desire.

Verita Monselles. CARNALE proposes a non-chronological itinerary through Monselles’s oeuvre, creating an interplay within the varying nature of her work: art, theatricality, advertising and fashion. The display crosses the public sphere and enters the private space with an advertisement billboard insisting on the artist’s explicit language, as well as photo studio lights that project shadows interacting with Monselles’s idea of still life and *mise en scène*. The exhibition underscores the artist’s contemporary relevance and her ability to contrast radical political stances with the increasingly pervasive language of advertisements in our collective imagination.

The exhibition presents several groups of three photographs, selected and arranged by the curators. Within each of these groups, the three images refer to different aspects and periods of Monselles’s body of work. The first triptych includes *Amore*,

1.

Amore (1974), in which a model holds a doll and looks directly at the camera. The feminist magazine *Effe* published the image on its cover in 1975 for its effectiveness in denouncing the roles imposed on women by society. The second photograph features a woman wearing fishnet stockings, a recurring motif in Monselles’s work. This picture evokes the language of fashion and advertising. The third image features a female face that has been transformed into a crescent moon. Metamorphosis and cosmic visions define the

brightly colored image with a kitsch aesthetic typical of the 1980s. The female figure functions as a means of self-affirmation, critique, desire, and dreaming.

2.

This first group of works introduces the theme of masks and masking. The section brings together well-known images, such as *Cuore di corallo* (Coral Heart) and *Le bambole* (The Dolls) from 1975, as well as previously unseen photographs, including a portrait of the artist Ulrike Rosenbach wearing a fur boa. Also featured is a self-portrait in a mirror where the artist's face is obscured by various furnishings, with the word "merda" (shit) visible in the background.

These works belong to Monselles's early creative phase, when she returned to Florence in the early 1970s after spending time in Naples. During this period, Monselles questioned her connection to the bourgeois world and intensified her use of photography as a means of communication. The images depict women in the roles society has assigned to them, surrounded by dolls and mannequins. Despite this, the figures are living, present. They look directly and confidently at the viewers. Through this gaze, they challenge the patriarchal society's imposed models of motherhood, family, religion, and sexuality.

3.

Monselles launched a professional photography career in fashion advertising in the second half of the 1970s. An emblematic series was created between 1984 and 1987 for Emilio Cavallini, a historic Tuscan manufacturer of hosiery. In these images, stockings become an extension of the skin, a symbol of seduction and a threshold between naked and clothed bodies. The models are no longer submissive dolls, but rather, they are the authors of their own desire. Conversely, men often appear on the ground, crushed by these sensual and provocative female presences.

4.

The installation of a large billboard displaying a loop of three photographs by Monselles emphasizes her striking and captivating visual language, which often yields results reminiscent of advertising, with a pop and kitsch aesthetic.

One of Monselles's most iconic works is *Paolina Borghese come Venere Contestatrice* (Paolina Borghese as Venus the Protester, 1977), which draws on Antonio Canova's famous *Paolina Borghese as Venus the Victorious*, housed at the Borghese Gallery in Rome. Monselles photographs the sculpture from the front and back, and manipulates the black-and-white image through analog processing. She also introduces the "vagina sign",

made by touching the thumbs and index fingers of both hands, which is used in feminist gatherings as a symbol of struggle and self-determination. Thus, the work transforms a neoclassical icon into an image of political protest.

Created in the early 1970s, the following image depicts two friends in a bedroom. One of the friends is Marion D'Amburgo, an actress with the Florentine theater company Magazzini Criminali. This lighthearted, carefree portrait captures a moment of female camaraderie and play in a safe space where viewers can see themselves. Finally, *Blu delirante nel volo dell'oblio / Farfalle* (Delirious blue in the flight of oblivion / Butterflies, 1982) celebrates the artist's works from the 1980s. Monselles experiments with bright colors and the theme of the female body's metamorphosis into plant and animal elements.

5.

One of Monselles' most famous works is *Ecce Homo* (1976). The piece consists of four series, each containing four photographs and an image of a penis in a heart of thorns, resembling an ex-voto. In the sequences, the bare buttocks and legs of artist Tomaso Binga and actress Marion D'Amburgo form a cross of flesh. The black-and-white images and play of light and shadow highlight the bodies' lines, shapes, and folds. The religious symbol loses its solemnity and becomes a critical image of male power.

Irony and provocation permeate the entire piece, transforming the body into a space of tension, denunciation, and defiance.

6.

This series of photographs, taken in different years, depicts the artist's friends. It shows exposed female bodies, redefining the nude genre. Monselles frequently returned to this theme throughout her career. Close-ups, changes in lighting, and chiaroscuro highlight the forms, volumes, and folds of the body. Some of her favorite themes reappear, including staging, transfiguration, and the interplay between pose and metamorphosis. Other works recall the style of erotic photography from that period but with an inverted perspective: rather than responding to a male gaze, the nude becomes a space of freedom and self-affirmation.

7.

Throughout her career, Monselles has repeatedly engaged with the still-life genre, subverting its conventions with irony and irreverence. Works such as *La gabbia d'oro* (The Golden Cage, 1974) and *Stars* (1975) feature everyday objects whose meanings are transformed. Golden cages, skulls, and stuffed animals evoke modes of constriction and control. In the triptych *Untitled*, mirrors and shimmering fabrics echo the glittering, glamorous aesthetic of the period's fashion. The

group also includes a photograph of a shop selling reliquaries, likely taken by the artist in Naples. The image shows a concentration of objects with strong symbolic value, and foreshadows elements that will appear in later works.

8.

In the early 1980s, Monselles created some of her most iconic photographic triptychs. These works share a common language of saturated colors, exposed and naked female bodies, fabrics and textiles, and minimal set elements. Above all, they depict an interaction with organic, plant, and animal elements. The female face, defined by makeup, takes center stage, visibly disclosing attitudes and moods. These works also reveal a newfound confidence expressed by women, who have grown stronger through their experiences and are capable of forming different relationships with men and society.

9.

The *Scherzosamente* series (Jokingly, 1976) features a nude model juxtaposed with a small cactus resembling a penis. Through irony, the image introduces themes related to the desire to escape the rigid sexual rules imposed by patriarchal society. The woman in the picture seems to distance herself from these conventions, displaying a free and self-aware attitude. Far removed from the political representa-

tions prevalent at the time, the work was created during the years when the artist was approaching the world of fashion and advertising and adopting a more captivating and direct visual language.

10.

The video *Rosematic* (1984), recently discovered by the artist's heirs, features models and figures close to the artist in scenes of transformation involving bodies, animals, plants, and cosmic images. The models become butterflies, play with flowers and everyday objects, and interact with the camera. This video is an animation of images from Monselles's contemporary photographic series, many of which are on display in the exhibition. The work was inspired by her ironic, at times playful, dialogue with the Florentine theater company Magazzini Criminali. Marion D'Amburgo appears as an actress, Sandro Lombardi composed the soundtrack, and Federico Tiezzi directed the film.

BIOGRAFIA

Verita Monselles was born in Buenos Aires in 1929. A few years later, her family relocated to Florence, where her father, Renato Monselles, had already settled. She spent much of her childhood in boarding school until the outbreak of the Second World War, when she chose for a time to live in hiding in the mountains alongside the Italian partisans. In the aftermath of the war, she moved to Livorno to live with her paternal aunt. There she met the radiologist Ernesto Porta, whom she married in the early 1950s. The couple later settled in Naples, where their four children were born. It was in Naples that Monselles deepened her engagement with literature, music, painting and, above all, photography. A formative encounter with the critic Lea Vergine—who would remain a close friend throughout her life—introduced her to the city's artistic milieu. Through Vergine she met Mimmo Jodice, with whom she studied photography.

In the early 1970s, following her separation from her husband, Monselles returned to Florence, where she became involved with the city's experimental avant-garde scene. During these years she developed close relationships with Ketty La Rocca—whose work explored verbal language and the expressive and political potential of the body as a critical tool of communication—and with Marion D'Amburgo, actress in the theatre company Magazzini Criminali. She became increasingly engaged with Florence's theatre scene, photographing pro-

ductions by Magazzini Criminali and later by Teatro Krypton. During this period she developed a photographic language distinguished by theatrical, ironic and irreverent staged compositions through which she challenged the roles imposed on women within patriarchal society.

In 1974 she participated in *Coazione a mostrare*, the landmark exhibition curated by Romana Loda and among the first in Italy devoted exclusively to women artists. It was there that she met Tomaso Binga, with whom she would establish a significant artistic and personal partnership. Between 1976 and 1977, the two artists presented a series of joint exhibitions featuring, respectively, *Ecce Homo* and *Litanie Lauretane*, works united by a shared reflection on the body, identity and the reclamation of female representation.

From the late 1970s onward, Monselles worked with Roberto Bastianoni at the Florentine studio *Fotogrammatre*, producing fashion advertising campaigns. Particularly significant was her collaboration, between 1984 and 1987, with the Tuscan hosiery company Emilio Cavallini. In these images, stockings become an extension of the skin itself—symbols of seduction, autonomy and liberation. Part of this body of work was presented at the *Sicof* photography fair in Milan in 1987, accompanied by a critical text by Pier Vittorio Tondelli.

Alongside her commercial work, throughout the 1980s Monselles pursued an intensely personal investigation into female portraiture. Saturated colours, fabrics, vegetal motifs and

animal elements converge in powerful images in which the made-up face becomes a site of emotional and identity-based expression. In 1982 she participated in the exhibition *Six photographes italiennes* at the Centre Pompidou, among numerous other group exhibitions, and in 1987 she held a solo exhibition at the Maschio Angioino.

During the 1990s she gradually moved away from commercial photography in order to devote herself entirely to artistic research. She began experimenting with digital processes while revisiting some of her earliest black-and-white photographs, digitising and reworking them into new compositions.

Monselles died in Florence in 2004. Two years later, the Archivio Fotografico Toscano dedicated to her the exhibition *Codice inverso. La dissacrazione dell'archetipo maschile nella fotografia di Verita Monselles*, curated by Lara-Vinca Masini. Today, the artist's archive is held by the institution.

Verita Monselles.
CARNALE

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The works on view are from the Archivio
Fotografico Toscano - Verita Monselles
Collection



More information on the
Monselles Archive
is available via the Cultura
Toscana QR CODE