

The Age/L'età: Emma Talbot at Collezione Maramotti

by EMANUELA ZANON • 17 JANUARY 2023 • REVIEWS

The British artist Emma Talbot (1969, Stourbridge, United Kingdom) was one of the great female protagonists of *The Milk of Dreams* exhibition curated by Cecilia Alemani as part of the 59th edition of the Venice Biennale of Visual Arts, which ended last November with an extraordinary public success. Her unmistakable expressive figure, which finds its most typical formalization in a continuous pictorial writing interspersed with textual appearances poised between digital pop-up and comic graphics, is mainly associated with floating supports of fine fabrics, similar to curtains, which return on an environmental scale the all-encompassing vocation of her thought. This choice, influenced by the theory of the French feminist Hélène Cixous on the *écriture féminine*, stems from the intention to conceive a female artistic language understood as a liberating action instinctively translated from the formal to the political level.



Emma Talbot, *The Age/L'età*, exhibition view, Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, photo Dario Lasagni, courtesy Collezione Maramotti

In her prolific imagery, Emma Talbot brings together simplified figurations, mythological motifs, quotations taken from the history of art, abstract patterns and calligraphic texts which, arising from her personal experience, touch on themes ranging from technology to nature, to urban planning and eco-politics, up to the pandemic and aging. The post-anthropocentric and posthuman theories that constitute the conceptual basis of her research are declined by her in a positive yearning for change in which nostalgia for a mythical lost harmony becomes the driving force behind a sort of “ethical magic” capable of inverting the tragic course of the events for a humanity that today seems doomed to self-destruction. Contrary to what one might think at first glance when observing her enchanted silk paintings, the artist does not propose a utopian escape from imminent catastrophe in a dreamlike universe, but an existentially disenchanted attempt to reverse course through an active mobilization of humanity guided precisely by the categories which are normally considered weaker, such as women and marginalized and oppressed people.



Emma Talbot, *The Erythmanian Boar*, 2022, acquerello e gouache su Khadi paper, dettaglio di *The Trials*, Photo Carlo Vannini, courtesy the artist

The exhibition *The Age/L'Età* which, after making its debut at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, has landed to Collezione Maramotti, also investigates these issues. The monograph is the result of a six-month residency in which Emma Talbot, winner of the eighth edition of the Max Mara Art Prize for Women (a biennial award assigned to female artists active in the United Kingdom who have not yet been awarded an institutional anthological exhibition), was invited to Italy to devote herself to the study of textile craftsmanship, permaculture, classical mythology and to experience places of naturalistic and historical interest inherent in her artistic research. The stages of the residency, organized by the Maramotti Collection, were Reggio Emilia, where the artist learned to knit in collaboration with a digital knitwear company, Sicily, where she had the

opportunity to stay on Etna in a permaculture site and to visit archaeological sites such as the Temple of Hercules in Agrigento, and Rome, where she focused on the iconography of the Roman hero famed for his twelve labors.



Emma Talbot, *The Age/L'Età*, exhibition view, Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, photo Dario Lasagni, courtesy Collezione Maramotti

The protagonist of the new cycle of works resulting from these experiences is an elderly woman who, in terms of appearance and posture, follows the more mature character of Gustav Klimt's *The Three Ages of Woman* (1905), a painting kept in the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rome that Talbot was able to see first-hand during her trip to Italy. While the character imagined by the Austrian painter hides her face in an almost shameful attitude and seems to bend under the weight of the trials that have consumed and deformed her body, what we see in the exhibition is a vigorous anti-heroine in whose wrinkles circulates the precious lymph of a wisdom stratified over time. The woman has managed to survive in the dystopian landscape in which she lives alone, a didactic prefiguration of the long-term consequences of our culture of destruction, aggression and greed. In the large suspended paintings from the *Ruins* series, evidently inspired by the Roman ruins visited during the residence, and *Volcanic Landscape*, a visionary emanation of the excursions on Etna, the visitor is induced to stop as in a secular ritual in front of the textual "stations" that mark the visual consequentiality by listing the principles of permaculture, in declared opposition to the dictatorship of information enslaved to late capitalism.



Emma Talbot, *The Mares of Diomedes*, 2022, acquerello e gouache su Khadi paper, dettaglio di *The Trials*, photo Carlo Vannini, courtesy the artist

In this project Emma Talbot conceived a monumental reverse epic narration that invites us to rethink the concept of power no longer in relation to aggression and strength, of which Hercules is the mythological expression, but to care and sharing, values suggested as more archaic, of which the old woman seems to be the last custodian. The aspiration to build a sustainable future by re-learning to interact with nature and relying again on holistic methods of belonging to the world is the humus on which the artist's inexhaustible drawing fervor is nourished, which is able to transform even the potential centrifugal drifts of her discourse into a solid iconographic mythology.



Emma Talbot, *The Age/L'Età*, exhibition view, Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, photo Dario Lasagni, courtesy Collezione Maramotti

The successful syncretism between contemporary concerns, stylistic transversality and a passionate introjection of the logic of classical vase painting, perhaps the most interesting aspect of this new production, appears even more evident in the video-animation in chapters that concludes the exhibition. The work, the first test with this medium that Emma Talbot approached as a self-taught during the lockdown, shows the protagonist engaged in a series of attempts similar to Hercules' twelve labors, which become the pretext for a hypnotic duet between words and drawing. The close interdependence between these two elements in the rapid succession of images manages to cancel the constitutive difference between words and signs in a highly effective perceptive continuum which, when compared to the paintings, makes explicit the artist's creative process showing it in its making without limitations of space and time and manifests the direction of her stylistic research by instilling the curiosity to discover its next developments.

Info:

Emma Talbot. *The Age/L'Età*

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Collezione Maramotti

Via Fratelli Cervi 66, Reggio Emilia

www.collezionemaramotti.org