



Leoncillo, *Affinità Patetiche (Pathetic Affinities)*, Terracotta, enamel, and engobe. Courtesy Salvatore Ala.

Leoncillo

Leoncillo Leonardi was born in Spoleto on November 18, 1915 and died on September 2, 1968 in Rome. Important retrospectives of his work were presented in 1979 at the Gallery of Modern Art in Rome and in 1983 at the Gallery of Modern Art in Verona. In 1985, his sculptural group, *Affinità Patetiche*, was shown at the Pompidou Center in the exhibition *Qu'est-ce que la sculpture moderne?* His first one-man show in New York is thus of considerable importance, for it presents an ensemble of mostly non-figurative terra-cotta pieces by an artist who in 1949 was already considered by the Italian critic Roberto Longhi as "the only opening in new Italian sculpture."

Modeling is a sculptural art that has long been underestimated. It has almost been regarded as an art of the past, since tactility and sculpture in the round are not highly valued from the modernist perspective. Even when modeling is indeed taken into account,

it is generally associated with a version in bronze or plaster. Creation directly in terra-cotta, consequently, receives little attention. Following de Kooning's remark that flesh was "the reason oil paint was invented," I would say that flesh also aroused the desire for modeling. Leoncillo's oeuvre is a desire for sculpted flesh.

Leoncillo elevates statutory to non-figurative art by means of highly subjective modeling that is close to his Catholic tradition. In his sculptures *Saint Sebastian I* and *II* (1962; terra-cotta, enamel, and engobe) and *Pietà* (1960; enameled terra-cotta), he transforms a Christian iconography of suffering with modeling whose almost abstract evocation carries all the drama attributed to the titles. The seventy-one-inch-high *Wounded Time II* (1963) recalls a Christ-like torso with its wounds, and thereby the sense of Christian suffering that is evoked throughout the exhibition. Thus in Leoncillo the association of

verticality with a tree does not refer to nature, but to the Tree of Life represented by Christ. The eroticism of his modeling is more religious than naturalist. Like a secret being revealed, this truth progressively emerges through the multiplicity of the works, and happily it effaces those aspects of the work that depend on the virtuosity and talent of the ceramicist-artisan. This Roman Catholic religiosity definitively distinguishes this sculptor from all those in the same period who were also devoted to the transformation of ceramics.

In these works, moreover, the artist does not simply shape the terra-cotta in a relationship of dominance and interiority, but as a veritable body-to-body struggle. He does not simply dominate a reduced mass, but also wishes to fully elevate it. Hence these clays are not objects, but living bodies.

In *Wounded Time II* the artist improvises by marking the clay with a wooden plank. He also often slices his vertical works into segments for firing and, in their subsequent reconstruction, preserves the marks of their assemblage. He does not work the clay from full, solid blocks, but from sheets a few inches thick that allow him, through irregularly placed openwork, to suggest the void they enclose and allow the viewer's gaze to penetrate to the interior of the sculpted body. By placing numerous large-scale works in relation to each other—notably *Saint Sebastian I* and *II* and the two *Pathetic Affinities*, all from a single year, 1962—this presentation succeeds in revealing this aspect of the work. These pieces are placed far enough from the walls to agreeably satisfy the essential desire of sculpture, the desire for circumvolution of the vertical. Thus in a frontal view the works seem full, yet the viewer progressively discovers a modeling of the void, as if the clay were an embossed sheet rising against a material that is the void itself.

And when the artist splits the material with "slashes," it is certainly a matter of a wound that recalls those he represented in the figurative period of the *Saint Sebastians*. If we compare Fontana's well-known "tagli" or "cuts" to the "slashes" of Leoncillo, the difference fundamentally lies in this universe of the incarnate wound. Leoncillo's is a great art of the wound of the flesh. (*Salvatore Ala, February 10–March 10*)

Alain Kirili

(Translated by Philip Barnard)