

Luigi Ontani

(Vergato, Bologna, 1943)

Anticipating themes related to identity and gender that would have broad international dissemination in subsequent years, since the early 1960s, Luigi Ontani has used his own body as the material through which he investigates multiple similarities and experiments with continuous disguises. In a complete union of art and life he describes himself as an “androgynous, ephebe, hermaphrodite, hybrid, Sagittarius.” Also anticipating the diffusion of the postmodern taste for citation, the catalogue from which Ontani initially draws is both the rich repertory of art history and its reiterations of Virgin Marys, martyrs and heroes, and the world of literature, including his habitual reading of Italo Calvino.

Photography is the means that bears witness to the artist's continuous performative mutations and his chameleon-like ability to lend his hieratic profile to a wide range of different characters. Moving indiscriminately between the stages of history, religion or mythology, the artist animates them with *tableaux vivants* that mix high and low culture and move from a Western model to explore Eastern suggestions. In every print by Ontani, the adroit modulation of colours, which recalls the manual applications used at the dawn of photography, and the choice of conspicuous, often gilded frames reveal the artist's attention to the work's material aspect and his need to crystallise in tangible form his characteristic and incessant metamorphic impulse.

Since the late 1970s, Ontani's crowded universe has become further enriched with human and animal hybrids that take shape in watercolours and complex polychrome sculptures, in a skilful rediscovery of traditional techniques shared with artists of the contemporaneous Transavanguardia movement. In a process of incessant germination, his invention also extends to the works' titles, which Ontani often constructs by inventing poetic neologisms that contain anagrams, palindromes and polyglot citations.

In the two color photographs *RaffaEello* and *LeoNardo*, both 1970, Ontani portrays himself respectively as Raphael Sanzio and Leonardo da Vinci. He impersonates both figures wearing simple black garments, and their identity is recognisable through very few details, such as Raphael's way of wearing a hat, or Leonardo's flowing beard. In these works, where he focuses on two giants of the Italian Renaissance who are most identified in the collective imagination with the figure of the artist as an unquestionable genius, Ontani's citationist impulse fully manifests his intentional narcissistic matrix. As in almost all his works, even in the multiplicity of his disguises, in both these cases the artist is well recognisable and his pose leaves visible the small mole on his face.

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The independent, eye-catching and ostentatiously different research undertaken by Luigi Ontani has been enhanced over the years with an extraordinary variety of sculptural

materials and techniques, in the desire to break down even the three-dimensional space with his own image. In the 1980s, the artist intensified most of all his use of ceramics and wood for the production of masks and his *ErmEstEtiche*: the former derived from the cast of his own face, and the latter inspired by hermae: the ancient pillars topped with a dual-faced and bivalent human head.

These evocations find their synthesis in *Alnus Aurea della Setta dei 7 S.o.S.Petti*, the intervention carried out in 2013 for the GAM in Turin. His habit of playing with the words in his titles may be seen also in this work, the magenta intertwining of which – painted on the wall – imaginatively replicates the alder tree (*ontano* in Italian, *alnus* in botanical Latin), in clear assonance with the surname of the artist himself, portrayed not by chance in the golden mask on top of the boughs. The shapes of the extravagant polychrome couplings that appear on the branches, of unmistakably Oriental origin, seem to look more directly to the iconography of the Artemis of Ephesus and her many breasts, once more displaying Ontani's penchant for the stratification of eras, cultures and distant yet universal motifs.

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