

Carol Rama

(Turin, 1918)

Nonna Carolina (Grandma Carolina), 1936, is perhaps the most important watercolor in the first series of works in which the artist focuses on the apprehensions of her personal history, marked by the suicide of her father and the mental illness of her mother. In these works the protagonists are tools and objects connected to illness, infirmity and the forms of imprisonment that medicine creates in an ambiguous space between treatment and torture. They are tales of a palpable sadism that spreads through environments that flaunt mechanisms of constriction.

The portrait of Carolina is surrounded by orthopedic forms and artificial limbs, somewhat like exvotos, a distant memory of a metaphysics tinged with sensuality. The woman is a bloodless body, with diaphanous skin, almost like that of the pillow on which she rests her head. Her torso merges into the sheets and, against this disheveled pallor, the black, darting bodies of numerous leeches stand out on her neck. The medicine/torture is at work, but those sinuous black signs strangely resemble a disturbing necklace. It is pain that is offered, yet beautified and illuminated by the iconography of martyrdom.

Ritratto di Massimo Mila (Portrait of Massimo Mila), 1984, is no less anguished. The critic appears against the background of the raw canvas, an expression of uneasy languor on his worn face. Teeth appear on the canvas, just as pieces of glass, fingernails, and syringes had in the 1960s. In 1985 Carol Rama, in a conversation with Corrado Levi, said: "The story of the teeth is a fact of love for Mila. I have known Mila since '45, [...] he was very young then and resembled Spencer Tracy. Some time ago he had had an accident and I told him: I will make you something. Tell me: a portrait? I'm not much for portraits, he said, I have some teeth that I'll bring you. I thought he was joking, but then one evening he came over with some cakes and gave me a little envelope. And inside were seven of Massimo Mila's teeth! I half-fainted, it made me sick. All this led me to take a tragic approach to Mila's portrait, with the red eyes, a hunted air, [...] in the portrait I put a beast on his head, which grasps him a bit at the temples, and I put the seven teeth on the beast's back." (EV)