

Roberto Cuoghi

(Modena, 1973)

Roberto Cuoghi has made metamorphosis the weapon of his survival, as well as his artistic tool. At the age of twenty-five he transformed his own body until he came to resemble his father. He assumed the appearance and manners of a person more than sixty years old, living this way for almost seven years, in a gesture that blurs the boundaries between his private world and his artistic practice. Taking back possession of his own life, from an adult viewpoint, Cuoghi continues to adhere closely to the idea of metamorphosis, changing the initial physical process into successive operations that are exquisitely mental. In his art, transformation is the principle that ties the investigation of themes of time and memory to the continuous confusion between appearance and reality. Always unpredictable, his production is characterized by experimentation and by constant technical and stylistic invention.

Šuillakku, 2008, emerges from a long journey into ancient Mesopotamia, which the artist made without ever leaving his studio in Milan. Dwelling on the most dramatic moment possible, the fall of the Assyrian Empire, when the splendid city of Nineveh was at the point of being destroyed at the hand of its enemies, Cuoghi identified with the reactions of those who survived by fleeing. The resulting work is a sound installation in the form of a lamentation, a chant-prayer imagined as a choral ritual connected to the gravity of the moment. Mixing archeological data with elements of pure invention, *Šuillakku* is elaborated on the basis of the so-called “ui-ua-ui,” a sort of stylized weeping, respecting the microtonal structure that is believed to have formed the basis for Assyrian music, according to which the melody is given by the repetition of a few alternating notes. As if sensing impending death, the work respects the phases of isolation, irritation, negotiation, and depression. Pronounced “sheeooeelahkoo,” the title of the work is in the Akkadian language—an idiom commonly used by the Assyrian population during the late period of their existence—and it refers to a prayer position where one hand is raised, which was practiced at the time to invoke the attention of the gods. Cuoghi personally constructed most of the musical instruments needed to compose the work. Similarly, the voices of the priests and the women, as well as the noises of the crowd and the animal sounds that make up the piece, are all modifications of the artist’s impressed own voice.

In his journey to identify with the ancient Assyrians and their beliefs, Cuoghi frequently meets up with Pazuzu, a demon in animal and vaguely human forms, whose dreaded image is thought to be able to function as an amulet, fighting evil with evil. In *Pazuzu*, 2010, the hybrid forms of the demon—obtained through an advanced process for prototyping a small statuette in the collection of the Louvre in Paris—are duplicated, giving rise to a two-faced creature whose apotropaic function seems to enter into contradiction with itself. (MB)

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