

GABRIELE TOGNOLONI

Works in black

Over the course of his artistic career, Gabriele Tognoloni experimented with many techniques and visual languages before specializing in ceramics in the early 2000s. The decision to adopt the art of earth and fire reflects his desire to give tangible form to a poetic vision of the world that could reveal the skills acquired over years of apprenticeship with masters such as Edgardo Abbozzo and Eliseo Mattiacci, and his explorations in the company of exceptional guides such as Jannis Kounellis and Eduard Winklofer. This led to the definition of a mode of expression hallmarked by works that, becoming part of the millennial history of ceramics, with its techniques, materials and concepts, advance its interpretative and semantic boundaries, demonstrating familiarity with sculpture, graphic design and engraving, as well as the artistic use of metals and wood.

CESARE COPPARI

Sunta, detail





Aspettavo che tornassi (I was waiting for your return), 2019, technique: bucchero, Wavy shape: base 23 cm, l 37 cm, h 17.5 cm, Low vase: base 6.5 cm, c 43.5 cm, h 35 cm, Tall vase: base 5.7 cm, c 26 cm, h 41 cm Photo by: Gianluca Benedetti

In deciding to utilize materials and techniques with centuries of venerable tradition in order to say something new and meaningful in the realm of art, Gabriele Tognoloni's course of action was both inevitable and courageous. Courageous because his conscious confrontation with auctoritas, in no way innocent, and often light-hearted and ironic, took place in a historical and cultural context rich with precedents, such as works created in clay that embody a centuries-old heritage of motifs. However, while on one hand they certainly bear witness to an expertise that can be used to give free rein to ceramic art, on the other hand they can also have a negative influence, swamping and inhibiting the artistic process.

This can happen when you train in a land of ancient ceramic tradition such as Umbria. Tognoloni was born in Gubbio, and later chose to live and work there, in one of the Cities of Silence celebrated by Gabriele D'Annunzio in the early 20th century. The poet linked Mastro Giorgio Andreoli's "incorruptible clay" to the "glory" of its name worldwide. In fact, though not ruby red, Gabriele Tognoloni's clay shines like gold and silver, bringing new light – just as the pottery makers did in the same town in the mid-19th century – to the alchemical kilns of the great Lombard ceramist who moved to Gubbio in the late 16th century. But Tognoloni shows that not only does he know how to bring light to clay "in a pictorial way": as a sculptor, he is also capable of "darkening" it through modelling, combining his fascination for light with a passion for shadow. He decided to work specifically on that particular type of black ceramic named bucchero, considering it the most suitable for conveying his artistic vision. The technique was used to make vases and amphorae in the Etruscan area from the mid-7th to the early 5th centuries B.C., and it was rediscovered in the late 1930s by Polidoro Benveduti, also from Gubbio, as well as by the Rossi brothers, in whose workshop he learnt the secrets of this art.

Such was the challenge posed to Tognoloni by the land of his origins. He consciously accepted it, being aware that the only way to keep a tradition alive is to renew it. As if to say the relationship

implemented by his experimentation on traditional ceramic techniques is also effective in giving expressive form to concepts and themes that are capable of defining a unique brand of artistic poetry.

Gabriele Tognoloni's works show us that objects also possess body, and to the same degree as subjects. Objects and subjects actually share a flesh and a shell that contains them, a skin that gives them their identity as complete, independent organisms. Except for the fact that his objects often appear not only deformed, but also disintegrated and dismembered, starting precisely from the significant connection between their body and the world, namely, the

Sunta, detail





skin. This is particularly evident in the bucchero vases made in a material notoriously less suitable for vessels than majolica: they present an alternation on their surfaces, between polished and fractured, smooth and rough, continuous and discontinuous, as if in the attempt to express a desire to break rather than to shape. And so as to connect the body of such silent objects with the outside world, as if they were waiting for something, for an archaeologist who could retrieve them from the dimensions of time and the earth many of them seem to come from. But where this exploration of the limits of body becomes even more obvious is in Gabriele Tognoloni's highly personal interpretation of the human form. His Figure (Figures) often appear as if they had been freshly excavated from the ground by an archaeologist, recovering furrowed half-busts with details that are visible notwithstanding earthy residues, along with similarly encrusted profiles of complete figures whose identity can only be guessed from their elemental lines. Such a reduction to the essentials reaches its highest level in the equally anthropomorphic series *Ombre della Sera* (Evening Shadows), the small and large bucchero sculptures that recall Etruscan figurines and votive bronzes. Even when they acquire colour through the clay material, these works seem to be the result of a further process of subtraction in a quest for minimalism. It is as if, after excavations in search of the human figure in its entirety, there had been an effort to progressively reduce its shape to the limit beyond which it would no longer be possible to understand the reference to human forms. Seeking a limit means seeking measure, and Gabriele Tognoloni finds it in the human form. In this approach, the human body is classically understood as the measure of all things, and therefore also of the body itself, one of the many objects in the world. It offers a view of the world, and at the same time it is part of it. The body created by this process may depart from the classical canons of perfection, balance and harmony, finding its own tenets by means of an expressive process capable of attaining depictions

Sunta_2, base 5 cm,
ø 12 cm, h 14 cm

Sunta_1, base 7.5 cm,
ø 12 cm, h 24 cm,
2021, technique: bucchero

Photo by: Gianluca Benedetti

that are so elemental that there seems to be nothing left of the human figure, though in actual fact, there is nothing missing.

Such themes are ever-present and Gabriele Tognoloni expresses them in an original language, by using techniques that are almost always derived from ceramic traditions, in a continuous quest that he considers a form of "personal archaeology". In this way, he creates a link to the "imaginative archaeology" previously identified by Omar Calabrese as one of the typical forms of our Neo-Baroque age, which in art, like other fields, has a wealth of expression which departs from real archaeology and gives rise to a sort of virtual archaeology. In Tognoloni's work, this form of imaginary archaeology can be seen in the use of a ceramic technique that is to a degree a somewhat visionary reconstruction of the past, namely Etruscan bucchero. But it can be found above all in the expressive forms of his black works, embodying both archaeological relics by resembling "discovered objects", and the process of searching for the subject, which becomes the result of an excavation that has subtracted them from the mud, the soil, the earth. After all, the expression "to invent", deriving from the Latin etymology of the term "invenire", means "to find". And no finding is possible without rummaging, delving, foraging, putting your hands into something, removing the coating of clay to discover the treasure that it has always protected inside.

CESARE COPPARI

Art critic and exhibition curator, Cesare Coppari (b. Gubbio, 1967) graduated in semiotics at the University of Bologna, and has developed a career in the semiology of the arts and contemporary art conservation, publishing articles and essays in Italy and abroad. cesare.coppari67@gmail.com

Ombre della sera (Evening shadows), 2021, technique: bucchero, l 45 cm, w 16.5 cm, d 8 cm
Photo by: Gianluca Benedetti





Figure (Figures), 2022, technique: glazed terracotta, h 65 cm, base 8 cm, c 51 cm
 Photo by: Gianluca Benedetti

TECHNIQUE

A black ceramic, fine and very light. This is bucchero, used by the Etruscan civilization from the mid-7th to the early 5th centuries B.C. A pottery technique that was forgotten until the 1930s, when it was rediscovered by the heirs of the Ancient Umbrians, whose territory bordered on Etruria. Gabriele Tognoloni is also from Umbria, and not only has he adopted this expression of artisanal brilliance for his artistic creations, he has also helped popularize it with seminars throughout Italy. In these events, he explains the three stages involved in making bucchero. Firstly, the shaped object is dried and then finished with sandpaper, followed by burnishing, polishing its surface by rubbing with a stick, preferably boxwood. In the second phase, the object may be enhanced by decorations, engraving its surface with a steel stylus, tracing outlines of figures filled with gold or platinum applied with a brush. In the third stage, essential for giving bucchero its characteristic appearance, the object is fired by immersing it in charcoal, in kilns that reach temperatures of over 900°C. The oxygen-starved combustion creates a saturation of carbon oxides, giving the object its definitive and indelible pitch-black colour with gunmetal reflections. This creates a contrast with the noble metals, which return to their natural colour after evaporation of the pigment mixture.

Gabriele Tognoloni (b. Gubbio, 1973) studied at the “Bernardino di Betto” Artistic Lyceum in Perugia, the city where he also took a degree in Sculpture at the “Pietro Vanucci” Academy of Fine Arts. Although he found many influences in various parts of the world that were important for developing his artistic style, he chose to live and work in Gubbio, one of Italy’s most important ceramics cities. It was here that he had the chance to train at Antonio Rossi’s historic ceramics company, exploring the bucchero technique with the help of Rossi’s widow, Assunta Monacelli. Since 2009 he has directed Unico, also in Gubbio, an atelier and gallery where his artistic experience is embodied in ceramics that reveal not only their link with local artistic artisanal traditions, and with the genius loci, but also with the direct and indirect input received from some of the most important personalities in Italian and international visual research, reinterpreting such suggestions according to his own highly personal, immediately recognizable language. Many art critics have written about his work, including Italo Tomassoni, Aldo Iori and Antonio Carlo Ponti. Recent exhibitions include solo shows held at the Galleria “lalineartecontemporanea” in Rome (2016) and at the Centro per l’Arte Contemporanea “La Rocca” in Umbertide (2020), the group show “origine/presente” at Atelier Schwab in Wertheim, Germany (2018), an artistic residency at Atelier A in Apricale (2018), “Arte fiera” in Genoa with the gallery Scultura Ceramica (2020), “Progetto Italia” in collaboration with the artist Alberto Gianfreda at Casa Testori in Milan (2021) and the “Grand tour Limonaia” at Palazzo Corsini in Florence (2021).

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