

I Have Longed to Move Away, or The Slow Becoming of Things...

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The first encounter between Lawrence Carroll and the Museo Vincenzo Vela took place by chance in 2012, while the artist was in Ticino for a solo exhibition.¹ He immediately showed a keen interest in all that he discovered there: the works by the naturalist sculptor after whom the museum is named; the material, a porous, patinated plaster, which dominates the collection; the slow process of creation from the original models to the definitive work in stone or bronze, and the preservation of every single testimony of that very creative process (drawing, sketch, photograph, model). Carroll was also intrigued by the life of Vela (1820–91) and by his voluntary or compulsory wanderings from place to place, accompanied by his “baggage” of monumental casts, which first filled his various studios and finally came to rest in his house museum. These discoveries and the fascination they exerted confirmed a leitmotif in Lawrence Carroll’s poetics: his close involvement with the works of artists who have preceded him² and, like Carroll himself, have marked a stage in the vast flow of “art history”. In fact, the artist was so taken with the oeuvre of Vela—who revolutionized sculpture with his naturalistic and political approach from the outset—and the well-lit “domestic” spaces of the house museum, that he started working on this monographic exhibition with the evocative and programmatic title *I Have Longed to Move Away*, a quote from Dylan Thomas. The show we are now presenting to the public was developed over a period of four years, and facilitated by the artist’s several “residencies” at the museum’s guest quarters in Ligornetto, a secluded village on the border and a place of transit, so suited to Carroll’s predilections. Here, he has found yet another, albeit temporary, home³ where, rather than producing art, he has painstakingly reconstructed his career from the beginning to the present, in a situation that mirrors the exhibition space itself, namely the house-studio-museum of Vincenzo Vela.

This overt harmony between place and aims underpins this retrospective exhibition, the first that a Swiss museum has devoted to this important artist. For decades, Carroll has chosen Italy—so culturally and geographically close to Switzerland—as his home, a place in which to conduct a dialogue, just as vivid in his most recent works, with the artists of the past that he particularly admires: Giotto, Giorgio Morandi and the fresco painters of Pompeii. The exhibition devotes considerable space to the themes central to his work and to the echoes that reverberate in his fertile production spanning over thirty-five years. If it is true, as the artist says, that “every show gives the opportunity to show another side of one’s work”,⁴ this project’s long gestation period has enabled the artist to carefully select around seventy works of which many are new or have never been publicly displayed before. Furthermore, the show



ill. 1
 Vincenzo Vela (1820–91)
Monument to Antonio Allegri «Il Correggio»
 (detail), 1879–80
 Museo Vincenzo Vela



ill. 2
 Vincenzo Vela (1820–91)
Morning Prayer (detail), 1846
 Museo Vincenzo Vela

combines early paintings and drawings, loans from collections near and far, recent works and others that the artist was able to “reassess” and “encounter” anew after years of being parted from them: tesserae intended to validate a narrative of references and echoes, stemming from attitudes that he has referred to repeatedly in our verbal and written exchanges. By this I mean a delicacy in approach, a sensitivity towards the making of drawings and paintings, a vulnerability recognized and sought after in the material used, and an intimacy between the artist, his corpus and his many “dwellings of creation”. What we see in the rooms of the Museo Vincenzo Vela is the result of the artist’s delving deeply in the storehouse of his memory, of his computer, of thousands of photographs and of his inner feelings: a kind of radiograph or stratigraph, or better still a “cross section” of his personal trajectory. The exclusive access to so many years of activity—“being an artist is selfish, but what a difficulty . . . !”—was fundamental to the creation of this project. It was inspired and made possible by the special structure of the museum—a space originally made for living, working and displaying art—and by the wonderful light, which accentuates the slightest resonance and consonance, the subtle interplay between the works, its contemplation that induces silence and stimulates what Carroll rightly calls “the responsibility of the viewer”.

All this has resulted in an exhibition that is itself an artwork, composed with care, in which each “room” holds surprises, yet at the same time endorses a choice made previously or a position assumed later. A show that not only hosts works in every room, but also hosts the artist himself, similarly to when he was a little boy and allowed to sleep in every room of his parental house. And since, to quote Carroll again, the studio “is where you try to understand things”—where the significance of the work responds to that of the questions—our museum has been transformed at regular intervals into the artist’s studio, or, in a metaphorical sense, a place of “minimal pace” and of negated permanence. For the next five months the museum will be Carroll’s home, where the sober spatiality of his work will be enhanced by the nineteenth-century atmosphere of the villa, and where the circular itinerary will be a metaphor of Carroll’s practice of rethinking and poetically reworking his pieces, even after they are finished.

The attentive viewer will also be fascinated and stimulated by the subtle dialogue between Lawrence Carroll’s sculptural-painting- and Vincenzo Vela’s painterly-casts. A dialogue that is neither obvious nor slavish, triggered by their many affinities, such as the permeability of the materials, which are only apparently fragile (the massive canvases that are cut up and sewn back together by Carroll—the monumental plaster casts by Vela), or the similar quality of the surfaces (the texture of the canvases covered with dust and wax by the American—the porous surface of the Ticino artist’s sculptures). It comes as no surprise that the oeuvre of the sculptor, whose work was judged as explicitly pictorial from the beginning (ill. 1), aroused the interest of an artist who, by contrast, defines essentially three-dimensional works as paintings, revealing a conceptual preference for painterliness over volume. Furthermore, the softness and lightness of the modeling of the casts displayed in the permanent collection (ill. 2) evoke the same delicacy and sensitivity that characterize Carroll’s endless reflections on his own work. Even the surface of the plasters, which is shiny without being uniform or “white”—just like Carroll’s own “whites”—and modulated by light patinas, evokes the waxed and lustered surfaces used by the latter to create a skin that breathes, since, as he says, “canvas is like a skin”.

Around twenty years ago, in an interview published in the catalogue of the show at Studio La Città in Verona, Carroll already stressed the importance of having “work that might seem very ordered in a way but also had a history of its own making, a history of what it carried with it, and I want that to be very present.”⁵ Carroll’s paintings, as we are able to appreciate them in the various rooms at Villa Vela, are manifestly inseparable from their previous transformation, brought about by many transitions, changes and reworking. In the time gaps between these transformations I believe we find the artist himself since, using his own words, “I want that to be the humanity of the work”.⁶ The artist’s wanderlust (“I have longed to move away”, chosen as the title and thus as the emblem of the exhibition) is inevitable (“I want that [to be the humanity of the work]”, quoted before) as much as his pleasure in nurturing exchanges of ideas with those around him, is the prerequisite for the constant transformation of his art. A transformation that is enacted in the solitude of his studio, where the world and life settle like coffee grounds in a paper filter, leaving indelible and unpredictable traces. We, the viewers, are excluded from his retreat but summoned by his work, since we have the task, or more likely the duty, to understand a simple truth the artist holds dear: “you don’t see what you see”.

Many people have contributed to the staging of this exhibition, and this must be duly acknowledged. My thanks go to the institutional and private lenders for their generosity and the faith they have shown in both the project and this federal institution; to the authors of the essays, namely David Carrier, Barbara Catoir, Lara Conte and Petra Giloy-Hirtz. Warm thankings to the team active at the Museo Vincenzo Vela who have helped in different capacities with preparing and co-editing the catalogue, the communication, the development of a cultural program and the staging of the show. A special thank-you to Lucy Jones Carroll for her essential contribution, and my deepest gratitude to Lawrence Carroll for having chosen this museum-place-metaphor as a temporary docking place in which to offer us the possibility of reflecting over his life’s and his art’s journey.

Notes

¹ *Another Life*, Buchmann Galerie, Agra. My thanks to Gaia Regazzoni Jäggli for having introduced the artist to the Museo Vincenzo Vela.

² This theme is addressed in the conversation between the artist and Barbara Catoir in this catalogue.

³ Terry R. Myers, “Lawrence Carroll’s Art and our Lives”, in Milan, exh. cat., 1997, n. p.

⁴ The statements by Lawrence Carroll quoted in this essay are taken, unless otherwise indicated, from conversations between the writer and the artist himself.

⁵ Citation from an interview with the artist by Maria Elena Ramos, who at the time was the director and president of the Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, which was published in Verona, exh. cat, 1996, n. p.

⁶ *Ibid.*