

I have chosen *Ágalma* as the title for this piece. It means “statue” in Greek but also “likeness” in general and so a “mental image”. The philosopher Plotinus said “Never stop sculpting your own statue” (our translation) [ágalma], in the sense of the invisible statue. On rediscovering these words in Roberto Calasso’s book *The Celestial Hunter*, the work of Nina Carini (Palermo, 1984) immediately sprang to mind, along with its capacity to generate onlookers’ own images, stirring amazement mixed with emotion. This occurred at the height of the pandemic in 2020 when she invited me to read a poem at *For 24h CALL ME POET! Let’s meet on the horizon* - a 24-hour performance at Casa Testori and Casa degli Artisti, and accessible on a virtual platform.

Every guest chooses a poem to read and shares their emotional thinking. Poetry is an artform that transports you to another place and speaks of infinity. Hence the reference to the horizon in the title. This infinite line is missing in our homes but human nature relates to infinity because finitude is not enough and actually is scarier than ever.¹

These are the thoughts that prompted the Carini work now in the Enzo Nembrini collection. *The house of a poet rests on the horizon* (2021), is neon wording in the artist’s handwriting, hanging on a reinforced-concrete wall and visible in all its blue light. That same light reappeared the following year in the sound and light installation entitled *L’heure Bleue* (2022). In that case, the work spoke of that magical moment when nocturnal animals fall asleep and the daytime ones awake, and the metamorphosis processes commence.

I retrieved an old halogen faro from the 1980s and rigged it to produce blue light and sound. The sound montage was devised as an act in three parts comprising animal recordings made in a forest far from human civilisation. These were edited to create fantastical verses and it ended with an excerpt from a work by Hindemith, who was the first to put Rilke’s *Das Marienleben* to music in 1948.²

An opening on infinity, an *eye drinking in light*; light in the sense of energy as in the photographic work *Nocturnes* which opens towards the sky, it too and again according to Plotinus an ágalma: “a great and beautiful image of a god — whether a living one or one made by the art of Hephaestus.”³ In a play of balances, between horizontal formulation and vertical tension, Nina Carini’s work is driven to explore new tools and means of expression. Coming now to the works in her first solo exhibition in Milan, which I have the pleasure of curating with art historian Angela Madesani, one painting more than all others

reveals their genesis. This is *Papilla Estelar* (celestial nourishment) by Remedios Varo (Anglès, 1908 - Mexico City, 1963), a work dating from 1958, an oil on masonite seen by the artist in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice last summer. We observe a woman in a sort of cosmic tower. To her right is a sickle moon enclosed in a cage although it is not her prisoner, rather a patient. Indeed, aided by a fantastical and mystical device, the woman is grinding stardust, a form of nourishment to restore the moon's health. So she is a protector and guardian of the life of the universe.

It is a surrealist work and the woman appears to be the point of contact with the alchemic world. The two words in the title forge an unusual connection and on reflection I began wondering "what can human beings do for infinity?" I find that the line between reality and the dreamworld must become finer in times of uncertainty such as those we are experiencing today. I have always thought the connection to be one-way but after this work I began to see it as a dialogue.⁴

The artist develops this dialogue with her works and she now wants to share it with those observing them in the "Aperçues" exhibition. She first came across this French word in Georges Didi-Huberman's book of the same title, which the author describes as a fleeting image that appears and then vanishes leaving a trail of questions and emotions in its wake. The works are connected by an invisible thread because "è una necessità di modifica, di arricchimento continuo, l'opera è vita e in tal senso ha una sua organicità."⁵ Today the work goes so far as to explore new tools and means of expression. *Venere Bugiarda 3023* is a work reformulated by the artist after drawing on *Venere Bugiarda* (2022), an installation in which she used stone for the first time at the invitation of the collector Enzo Nembrini. Long a devotee of research into and the study of materials, he began collecting artworks a few years ago and his home has become a space where site-specific projects are created with the participation of artists. Stone is a classic symbol of eternity and much loved by the collector. It adapts perfectly to the concept of sculpture which here becomes central, enabling a reflection on topics such as gravity, weight, time and infinite-time.

*Can a stone exist forever?
Can it survive my finitude?*

The artist does wonder. *Venere Bugiarda* is formed of a central gilded sphere evoking the Sun and resting on water. It is surrounded by nine alabaster orbs on which are engraved letters forming the adverb "PER SEMPRE" and arranged to imitate the orbit traced around the Sun by Venus. It is a "promise" made by Venus to always rotate around its

luminous star but a “lie” because it cannot be kept. “In billions of years, or perhaps much sooner, the Sun will be a red giant that absorbs its inner planets.”⁶ Venus continues rotating in its vortex undaunted, oblivious to its imminent end, in keeping with a tendency peculiar to the human race. The installation seems to project itself into the infinity of the cosmos, into an eternity unknown to us, while remaining strongly rooted in today’s problems. Allowing herself to be influenced by the relationship between the two stars, Nina Carini wrote her first poem: *Per sempre e Toujours*,⁷ comparing the infinite time of a star with the finite time of humans. “Dentro l’azzurro del vetro / tutti i giorni vengo a fare l’inchino al cielo / c’è chi mi aspetta / Se la luce è un desiderio / può incontrare la sua fine?” [our translation: “Into the blue glass / I come every day to bow to the sky / I am awaited / If light is a wish / can it meet its end?”] These words suggest what will be, over and above what we can see in the here and now. And so we come to *Venere Bugiarda 3023*. After wondering what human beings can do for infinity, when the artist took *Venere Bugiarda* inside the religious space of the Basilica of San Celso she thought that the Sun had already become larger than it had previously been and so Carini decided to evoke it with a large installation made of glass vases and organic objects, flowers, which remind me of Giorgio Morandi’s forms. Here, this simple presence represents the highest function of matter, allowing onlookers to be amazed and marvel before the truth of the object.

Choosing such a delicate and fragile organic object as a flower was key to being able to speak of the vulnerability of time and much more. The life of the flower is different from that of us human beings. Every existence in our world has a different timeframe and we often don’t accept those timeframes.⁸

A flower lasts a week but if dried it might last *Per sempre*. We breathe in a sense of timelessness just by imagining this work, which brings us closer to the mystery of life.

I am often in a state of tension with that infinity, which I appreciate in all its immensity; and with the possibility of not remaining within a boundary that may somehow circumscribe my work. This is why I try to enter into a dialogue with the tension so as to understand the images that come to me, realise where they originate and how I behave when addressing them. It is a little like wondering where emotions come from. I see myself with a raised arm, stretching up to touch the sky.⁹

Mani come rami che toccano cielo (2023) features really long arms in bronze polished to a mirror finish, each one nearly four metres in length. The sculptural installation rests on the altar between the windows where two rows of bricks pointing towards the Basilica dome

differ from the others. This is where the artist felt a need to create apertures that break through the space and open onto a different world. This work was produced during a residency at the Fonderia Artistica Battaglia and with the aid of expert artisans. “Un sogno | Avevi le braccia lunghissime | e mi toccavi | l’unità di misura perdeva quota | Eri ovunque | sopra, sotto, al bordo.”¹⁰ Hands eager to come closer to infinity, almost to grasp the stars or hands reminiscent of those outstretched towards the sky in search of help in Theodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa of 1817*.

(...) I took a photograph of my outstretched body with my arms reaching to the ceiling and then post-produced the image, greatly narrowing it. Later, I decided that part of the work had to be created from moulds of my body: my arms and hands. I wanted tree branches to form the remainder of the height that was missing because they are the only thing in nature that touch the sky.¹¹

So, while the tree branches help Nina Carini touch the sky, rows of drops removed from old lamps and chandeliers fall from the ceiling, helping us onlookers explore the endless possibilities of light and space. *Occhi in lacrime* (2023) is the title of a work that reminds us of the lavish earrings worn by the Empress Theodora in a mosaic conserved in the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna. But, for the artist, they can accompany us to the dividing line between the visible and the invisible, between finitude and infinity. Here, the artist surprises us by countering the static nature of the other forms in the exhibition with a dynamism that seems almost a homage to the work of Alexander Calder. A suspended column with a small mechanism moves slowly, prompting amazement and conceding us a dialogue with the sky and stars that suddenly fall to the ground in *Lingue di cielo* (2023). These small crinoid fossils — a name that means “lily” in Ancient Greek — are usually attached to the seabed. Here they appear as fragile stars in a constellation, speaking of life long ago and enabling us to perceive the analogy with a plant. Their counterpart is not a star but a flower, the lily, made of the light-bearing white we found in the flowers of *Venere Bugiarda* 3023 and which we discover in the pure stone of *Senza voce* (2023): the alabaster of Volterra. The “mute” sculpture where colour becomes transparency is inside the confessional. Nina Carini counters the time of pointless accumulation and overlapping we live in by creating sculptures that exalt the power of the void and silence — not a flight but a need to transport us to another place. *Le cose in pericolo* (A, B, C, D, E, ...) (2023) greets us in the Viale delle Ortensie, the outdoor space of the Basilica of San Celso which was originally a burial place in the 10th century. It is a list of words drawn from the book *Glossopetrae* by the contemporary poetess Simona Menicocci.

Words that belong to realities currently in danger because on the verge of extinction and read out by children of first-year primary school to produce a cacophony. Nina Carini creates her works by experiencing and observing nature and human beings, trying to celebrate what our eyes cannot see with the gaze but can imagine with the aid of our soul, allowing us to breathe the allure of infinity in timeless surroundings. These works symbolise an other order that is simply a breaking up of a visible order, allowing us to experience the sensation felt by a Celestial Hunter when holding all the stars of the firmament in the palm of his hand.

If the constellation is an arbitrary place to which stories are attached, not unlike the way meanings are attached to sounds, it will not be easy to explain why whenever people, not only in Greece but in Persia, Mesopotamia, in India, in China, in Australia, and even in Surinam, looked into the same segment of sky over thousands of years, they saw the exploits of a Celestial Hunter that they never grew tired of contemplating.¹²

Ágalma
Open dialogues
Rischa Paterlini

¹ N. Carini, notes to the author, December 2020.

² Conversation in the artist's studio, January 2023.

³ R. Calasso, *The Celestial Hunter*, New York 2020, p. 340.

⁴ Conversation with the artist, 27 December 2022.

⁵ "it is a need for change, for continuous enrichment, the work is life and, in this sense, has its own organicity" (our translation), from *Partiture illeggibili*, edited by A. Madiesani, exhibition catalogue (Bologna, December 2019 - February 2020), Milan 2019, p. 15.

⁶ N. Carini, notes to the author, spring 2022.

⁷ N. Carini, *Per sempre e Toujours*, unpublished poem, read during the poetry performance on 25 September 2022, Casa Nembrini, Trescore Balneario, Bergamo.

⁸ Conversation with the artist, 27 December 2022.

⁹ Conversation with the artist, 7 February 2023.

¹⁰ "A dream / You had the longest arms / and you touched me / the unit of measure lost all sense / You were all over / above, below, beside" (our translation), N. Carini, *Per sempre e Toujours* op. cit.

¹¹ Conversation with the artist in Fonderia Battaglia, 15 February 2023.

¹² R. Calasso, *The Celestial Hunter* op. cit., p. 29.