

On Ethic

Interview with Giovanni Corvaja by Maria Rubtsova

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M.R.: *“Only those who attempt the absurd... will achieve the impossible”*. I find these words by M. C. Escher to be rather strongly connected with your work and your artistic approach. Could you please comment on them?

G.C.: Let me answer this quote with another quote, a poem that comes from an English translation of an old Italian Alchemy book. I find these words very interesting. They synthesize the whole spirit of the Craft to me:

*However hard or high a goal might be,
However far the consummation seems
To which your spirit ardently aspires,
If artistry and intellect are joined
With gentle, sacred, pious patience – then
A worthy soul achieves his every wish,
And reaps the fruits of his desired intent,
Grown rich in virtues, joyful and content.*

*To realize some excellent design
Or bring some noble enterprise to term,
Let no man stint intelligence and art
But rack himself with effort and expense;
For you must suffer if you hope to gain
That goal whose value few can comprehend.
To win the fame and fortune that our world
Alone seems to esteem: fly up by work.*

Giovanni Battista Nazari, Three Dreams on the Transmutation of Metals; Brescia 1599

Nobody can achieve extraordinary goals by following safe, known paths. Every special achievement requires some kind of risk, a leap into the vacuum.

M.R.: Do you agree that *“we adore chaos, because we love to produce order”*?

G.C.: I agree that a situation of chaos inspires a desire for order, in the most cases. All positive human actions are fundamentally aimed at creating order. Chaos is a necessary condition for creation. Most cultures believe that everything in the universe originated from chaos. All matter evolved from chaos. One may consider chaos a state of maximum entropy or absolute vacuum or, like the Ancient Greeks believed, imagine it as a wide, open mouth. I believe that only from a situation of maximum disorder any kind of order is possible. Only from total chaos any form can be created, without restriction.

M.R.: Is that how you work? From *“chaos”* to an *“order”*?

To a certain extent – yes. Except that the formula for my work is: *order – chaos – order*.

For me *order*, or *beauty*, is a source of inspiration. That is where my creative stimulation comes from.

Then I dip myself into *chaos*, or *emptiness*, *vacuum*, *isolation*, for the creative process. That is when an idea, in order to find its perfect material form, needs to be free from any external influence.

And finally, I require *order*, or *harmony*, again, for the best possible expression of the idea.

M.R.: What is beauty for you?

G.C.: Generally, I think beauty is an attractive, natural force that acts powerfully upon all humans. The aspiration for beauty is an innate, healthy instinct.

I, personally, divide beauty into two types though: a *Taste* and the *Universal Beauty*.

The first one is a transitory notion, a visual perception dictated by social and individual preferences of a particular time, social environment or cultural background.

The second one is a force which acts on the aesthetic receptors of the deepest unconscious; what C.G. Jung describes as the *collective unconscious*. That is common to all the human beings, regardless of their race, culture, social status or historical period.

Universal Beauty is the same for all beings. Its commands are blind to race, creed or colour. They are not sensitive to cultural differences, not tailored to fit any circumstances or conditions. The satisfaction of a human desire does not exhaust the eternal nature of the Universal Beauty. Every encounter with it gives one a renewed pleasure. One does not get tired of it. It cannot be taken for granted.

I am, in my “delirious desire of immortality”, interested mainly in the second one. I am convinced that true beauty is not contemporary. The Real beauty is eternal.

M.R.: Beauty and Art... Do you think Art should aim at Universal Beauty?

G.C.: I believe that Universal Beauty induces the beholder to fall into a state of contemplation. Arthur Schopenhauer describes the aesthetic experience of beauty as follows: “[we] devote the whole power of our mind to perception, sink ourselves completely therein and let all our consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the object actually present”. In my opinion, the purpose of Art is to produce objects that induce this state.

The main and the hardest task of Art is to perceive Universal Beauty in the surroundings, abstract it from the certain temporal and causal qualities and express it in an object as free as possible from those qualities.

In other words, Art consists in transforming an ordinary experience into an aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience acts through all the human senses, including the intellectual and emotional ones. Usually one experiences things only through space, time and causality, but in an aesthetic experience one transcends the particular object and its spatial, temporal and causal relationship: one perceives the universal essence of the object.

Of course pure beauty is an abstract and absolute concept that can never be reached, but I think that one, and especially an artist, should always aim higher than what is realistic.

M.R.: Do you always aim at Universal Beauty in your work?

Yes, I do.

Any object that is universally beautiful serves its purpose throughout time. An object in Gold, due to the incorruptibility of the material, if carefully preserved from mechanical damages, is eternal. I would like to think that a few of my pieces will be experienced, understood, enjoyed and appreciated in a the distant future, as much as now.

M.R.: The most primitive, but essential, question: WHY? Why do you do what you do?

G.C.: Attraction. Desire. Love. Obsession. The line in between these stages of involvement is very fine and fragile. It is easy, driven, for example, by curiosity, to get carried further and further along the inviting path. As a consequence, what appears as a *wish* becomes a *necessity*.

What drives me along my way is a *desire for improvement*, spiritual, emotional and intellectual: both in my work and in myself. My method of working is one of the possible solutions in order to achieve this improvement. That happens through action. Working to me is a way to go towards what I aspire to the most: *virtue*. Essentially, it means acting in such a way that my personality is realized, without necessarily doing what I think others might be expecting from me.

Therefore, I am constantly discovering what I am constitutionally predisposed to, even if that does not always correspond to my abilities. So, I keep “re-dimensioning” myself in order to achieve my aim.

There is another important reason for me to work. Everyone leaves behind a trace of their existence – consciously or not. That is an inevitable fact. Some of these traces are positive and virtuous; something one creates or builds. Others are negative; something one damages or destroys. Those who search for immortality, build something that is meant to last forever after their death.

The idea of “borrowing” some gold, something already highly ordered and perfect in its structure but still amorphous in its shape, from nature and “trans-forming” it into something as beautiful as I can, is a way for me to compensate for any negative trace that I may leave behind.

To answer in a primitive way to what, in its simplicity, is far from being a primitive question: I do what I do because, considering my necessities, I cannot think of anything better to do.

M.R.: But why *jewellery* in particular and why *made of gold*?

Gold is my obsession, it is a symbol of evolution and perfection, it expresses the best virtue of nature and the creation. It is therefore a necessity for me to work with it, to acquire the maximum possible knowledge of it.

Making jewellery is maybe... just an excuse, the best solution I have found to allow me to be constantly in contact with gold, this magic element, this miracle of nature.

M.R.: Do you ever feel that people are envious of your skill, braveness, success? Geniality? What is your reaction, protection, action?

G.C.: Jealous? Maybe, sometimes. But luckily, I am generally not aware of this.

Envy or jealousy are just one step away from a healthy admiration. By admiring an excellent achievement by someone else, one experiences a desire to be as good as that “virtuoso”. I believe this desire should give a positive impulse for improvement.

However, one should not forget that what is visible is just a result of a long path of training and hard labour. And that is indeed the most admirable aspect of a virtue.

I feel sorry for those who might be jealous of my achievements.

First of all, jealousy is a feeling that poisons and corrodes the soul.

Second, jealous people see happiness in possessing something and not in acquiring it. And those are the most vulgar people indeed.

Happiness for a real artist is not *the satisfaction of a desire or reaching a goal*. Happiness for an artist is found in the ability to *get pleasure from every single stage* of the Craft. Every moment spent in the construction of a piece, or in the development of a project, can be a moment of happiness, if one learns to appreciate the process, and not just the result.

To the jealous ones I can promise: I do not seek fame and success. I seek to be worthy of them.

M.R.: You are among the brightest representatives of contemporary jewellery artists. Your pieces are opening a new epoch in the history of art. You doubtlessly have many admirers and followers.

However, there is only one step from this passionate affection to plagiarizing. How do you feel being the centre of attention and a victim of “creative robbery” sometimes?

G.C.: I feel good when I happen to be the centre of “positive attention”.

As far as the plagiarism is concerned, I strongly condemn people who steal ideas from others. Fortunately, maybe due to the intensive nature of my work, this has not happened to me too often. It is a pointless job to reproduce my pieces. Most of them require many hours of precise labour. One might as well dedicate that time and energy to making something original.

In my case, plagiarism has been more of a moral offence than of a material loss. The precious value of having made some of my pieces lies in having gone through the process, having experienced an intellectual and emotional growth. The design and the techniques used are only a minimal, visual, part of it. Still, even those do belong to the one who has invented them.

M.R.: How do you explain the notion of plagiarizing then?

The root of plagiarizing is hiding in the lack of working ethic and the humiliating reference to the Craft as mere labour without any intellectual involvement.

Basically, the one who steals intellectual rights either has little respect for the Craft or is conscious of being dishonest.

M.R.: What qualities does one need to be a creator? To transform nothing into something? Something beautiful, spiritual and unique.

G.C.: I would like to carefully distinguish between the terms “creation” and “transformation”. The only creator that I can think of is God. All the rest is transformation to me.

Every single act of the existence is transformation, either active or passive. Going more specifically into the Craft, I define the “creative act” as a *double transformation* that involves *three stages*.

In “the Emerald Tablet” the first Alchemist wrote: “one has to transform what is visible into invisible and what is invisible into visible”.

In practice one gets inspiration from something real, existing now or in the past, an object or an idea. Then one abstracts it from its context and it becomes something immaterial (invisible). That entity, in its own turn, needs to find a form of expression to become real (visible) again. As long as its material and semantic content are concerned, I feel that nothing new gets created. One just abstracts something from a context and re-forms it into a new one.

I think that the main qualities necessary for a good craftsman are three:

1. *The spirit of observation.* That is essential in order to see all the beauty around. Just one glance throw a magnifier is sometimes sufficient to realize how much order and beauty there is in that interesting world in front of our eyes, hidden only by its dimension.

2. *The capacity of analyzing.* That allows one to understand the aesthetic of things: what is special and important about them, what is their essence.

3. *The expressive skill.* That lets one represent what one has in mind without any distortion of unwanted technical difficulties, without compromises.

These three components combined with motivation and dedication result in a piece of art. If the transformation is successful, nothing essential gets lost.

The cauldron where this alchemical transformation takes place is the mind, heart and hands of an individual human being. Therefore, I believe that the resulting form is necessarily unique.

M.R.: Ten years ago, in an interview in your first book, you were asked about the importance of technique for you. How would you answer the same question now? So, where does your fascination with technique come from?

G.C.: There is often a diffidence towards technique, especially in the artistic field. Some believe that the technical knowledge might reduce the creativity of a maker by forcing his work to adapt to the technique. I believe the opposite: with a “technical creativity” the craftsman adapts the technique to his work. Technique, skill, work ethic, patience, dedication and good taste are the essential virtues for a craftsman.

I intend technical knowledge not just as a skill, but as an advanced understanding of what the consequences of an action may be. Every action produced on a piece of gold, for example, causes a reaction: a *trans-formation*. Only by understanding the reasons of that reaction one can then predict what result a particular action might bring. Thus, a free choice can be made beforehand and the artist stays in control of the labour, avoiding the “accidental art” that I strongly deprecate. By mastering the technique one can express the invisible entity in mind into a brilliant material work without compromising its power, beauty and meaning. With the perfect technique one acquires the real freedom of expression, *one uses it* and *is not used by it*.

Does technique abolish the limit or does it constantly re-propose it? Technique is connected to the impotence of a human and not to his power. In fact, the further a technique goes, the further the limit gets moved. The limit does not get cancelled. If all the limits were eliminated (if a man became God – in the absurd hypothesis!), technique would no longer be necessary as there would be no need of emancipation.

This aspect of the technique – its *power of moving the limits further* – is what fascinates me the most. Let’s imagine a limit as the line of the horizon. When one moves towards it, the line of the horizon moves further forward, revealing some landscapes previously hidden. That is the magic of technique. Not only it is a tool for transformation but also a way to discover new things, to get a unique knowledge.

So, my fascination by technique comes from a desire of wisdom. Technique is a tool that enables me to fulfil this desire.

M.R.: I have noticed that we hardly spoke about jewellery. Do you mind?

G.C.: Not at all. Let *the jewellery* speak about jewellery...

Todi, November 2008