

Observatorium

by Angela Madesani

I have known and worked with Elisabeth Scherffig for twenty-five years; together, we have curated some solo exhibitions, many group shows, and a monograph.¹ Ours can now be considered a shared journey, rich in dialogues, comparisons, and shared passions.

The works featured in the four² exhibitions, which this small book accompanies, span over forty years of creative output. However, this is not a chronological journey but rather a dialogue between works, through which one can trace threads that testify to the coherence of her research.

Observatorium, the exhibition's title, operates on two levels: on one hand, it relates to the artist's approach to the surrounding world, and on the other, it invites the viewer to delve into her research, which demands attention and *studium* in the classical sense of the term.

Her ability to observe details that might seem insignificant, to notice transformations and transitions, corresponds to her aptitude for listening, in contrast to the speculative consumerism of our time. This attitude likely stems from her musical training, which deeply influences and occasionally characterizes her work. Some titles of her series of works come directly from the musical realm, such as *Passepiéd*³ or *Écossaise*⁴, a 2020 series on display here, where three types of iron are combined in sequence. These works embody rhythm and delicate yet complex harmony. Deleuzian difference and repetition: it is the obsession with detail. Music is sound, but also total silence. It is mental and physical at the same time.

Scherffig's first exhibitions date back to the early 1970s. Drawing has always been central, initially executed with orderly ink lines alternating light and shadow. Even during this period, human figures are rare. Her subjects are mostly domestic interiors, focusing on furniture, objects, and details. Some museum installation views are reminiscent of the 18th-century paintings of Italian Giovanni Paolo Pannini or German Johann Zoffany.

¹ All relevant information can be found in the biobibliographical apparatus accompanying this volume.

² This refers to the solo exhibition at Labs Gallery in Bologna and her participation in Arte Fiera in Bologna, Art Paris, and Drawing Now Paris.

³ These are large-scale papers created using frottage to capture impressions of the city. The *passepiéd* is a dance step.

⁴ This also refers to a dance step.

As a child, she liked drawing houses without facades. It was like removing the skin, going beyond appearances. This brings to mind certain works by Gordon Matta-Clark. While there is no formal similarity, the same curiosity of approach is evident.

In her early works, the relationship between light and shadow is already clear, situated within contexts that always suggest the possibility of movement, such as the works featuring staircases.⁵

Even here, the idea of “*in fieri*” (in the making) has always marked her work. She is interested in halting, capturing the processual moment. By the late 1970s, she felt the need to step out, to cross thresholds, to go beyond interiors into a dimension that does not narrate in the canonical sense. Her references are signs of metabolization, as seen in the 1982 drawing *Untitled*, inspired by the construction site of the Palazzetto dello Sport in Rome, designed by Pier Luigi Nervi in the late 1950s. It resembles a watchtower: a beautiful architectural object, beyond its specific function, historical recognition, or definitive interpretation.

Over the years, the construction site became a central theme in Scherffig’s research. It represents a place where architecture is not finalized, where precarity reigns, a liminal zone that could become a growing structure or remain a ruin. Emerging from a sort of visual *mare magnum* are iron rods, pipes, and load-bearing structures. Her approach resembles a core sampling to delve into depth. In this sense, one can discern an ethical commitment beyond facile socio-political citations.

During an exhibition in the deconsecrated church of San Carpoforo in Milan, the artist wrote: «The columns bear traces, ruins, stones, and fragments of nature and architecture. These elements exist in a precarious balance between human activity and natural states, capturing in the shapes of stones the premonition of the architecture they might become, or conversely, certain ruins returning to nature.»⁶

Not much has changed in the large drawings of 2024 presented in this exhibition, in which the subject is deliberately obscured: architecture, nature, perhaps a nod to an Expo building. Defining or labeling what we see is unimportant. In these works, human architectural design is not so distant from the workings of nature, which relentlessly advances, day by day. Her research is marked by intentional ambiguity, which should be understood positively. Ambiguity embodies the presence of doubt, an openness of thought, a curiosity toward the surrounding world. The viewer is entitled to be emancipated - paraphrasing Jacques Rancière - to find meaning and offer their own interpretation.

About twenty years ago, she titled a work - a small well made of porcelain and iron - *La brocca rotta (The Broken Jug)*, referencing the text by the German Romantic author

⁵ A drawing of a rationalist staircase from 1977 (*Untitled*) is part of the exhibition presented at Arte Fiera.

⁶ E. Scherffig, *Work Project for the Church of San Carpoforo*, in *The Rooms of Time*, curated by V. Fagone, Centro Internazionale Brera, Milan, 1988, p. 48.

Heinrich von Kleist, which contains a clear nod to certain philosophical principles of Immanuel Kant and humanity's inability to grasp the deepest truths of phenomena.

The artist discovers rather than hunts, during her *walserian* walks through cities, quarries, nature, by the sea, or in the mountains. Everything enters her eyes and mind, becoming sign and drawing.

Her works feature dense textures, a kind of *horror vacui*, where the marks are precise yet tangled. In some ways, they are unreadable, requiring effort to focus and comprehend. Is architecture a hive, or is the hive architecture, a structure created by humans or a natural marvel? Real or imagined? Once again: it doesn't matter. Recognizability is expendable, unnecessary; there is no pursuit of realism.

Photography is her primary investigative tool, allowing her to capture moments that stimulate her interest. It serves as evidence, trace, and index. In some recent works, this medium becomes the object of her research. These pieces depict composite imaginary landscapes where small porcelain fragments—evoking architectural structures—are placed in front of photographs. Porcelain introduces fragility, precariousness, and the brilliance of an almost marble-like whiteness.

Vis à Vis consists of pairs of works, each representing dense mountain vegetation reflected in a natural pool. «We are on a ridge, on a threshold between reality—still tied to the image—and its representation in a fluid, constantly changing element. In these heterotopias, the represented reality confronts its reflection, rendered entirely unrecognizable compared to its original reality. These works embody life's movement, its fluidity, which continuously changes, acquiring iconic value, where phenomenal reality becomes abstraction.»⁷

The concepts of movement and transformation also feature in the *Vitrea* series, characterized by an almost obsessive attention to detail. The artist's interest focuses on various types of glass, particularly areas struck by moving light. The references in her research are never mere citations for their own sake but connect to art history, bridging the northern micrographic tradition of Albrecht Dürer, Martin Schongauer, and German masters, and the Italian intellectual-mathematical Renaissance of Luca Pacioli and Piero della Francesca. Her interest in that era is also evident in her study of Jacopo de' Barbari's bird's-eye-view map of Venice, which inspired a series of graphite works on three layers of Swedish paper in the 2010s. A 2013 map of Bologna is on display, featuring overlays and palimpsests that evoke memory through sight. Regarding this city, the artist «has conducted unique research, uncovering a devotional mapping imprint. In medieval times, the city's various religious architectures were placed in specific points, referencing Jerusalem's map.»⁸

⁷ A. Madesani, in *Limen*, Palazzo Borletti, Origgio, 2021, p. 8.

⁸ A. Madesani, *Urban Diachronies*, in *In the Cities: Works 2012-2015*, curated by A. Madesani and F. Tedeschi, Colpo di Fulmine, Verona, 2017, p. 7.

In the early 1980s, she created two large ink maps of Hamburg and Vienna. Even in these works, she included architectures outside the urban fabric: rationalist buildings by Giuseppe Terragni, constructivist ones by El Lissitzky, and others. These are moralized landscapes, reminiscent of the 17th-century works of Nicolas Poussin, the 18th-century works of Hubert Robert, or the visionary Giovanni Battista Piranesi.

The map, the ultimate object of precision, is here distorted, transformed, enriched.

This mnemonic dimension recurs in the drawings of the Custonaci quarries near Trapani, captured during pauses in excavation work, where stones are stacked to support lighting poles. Scherffig titled them *Denkmal*, a term coined by Martin Luther, meaning “memorial,” a neologism merging Mnemosyne, the mythical personification of memory, and the Latin *monumentum*. These works testify to the passage of time, both geological and otherwise. The quarry is a landscape *in fieri*, in constant transformation, challenging the concept of eternity, which is indissolubly linked to our culture.

Collective and personal memory intertwine, as in the two porcelain casts of Elisabeth’s head, made using silk organza. One preserves the transparency of the fabric, with traces of the casting material visible on its surface. Through this transparency, the surroundings enter her thoughts, which become visible: tangled networks of complex connections, precious tools for understanding the world. The other is covered in gold leaf, with a clear reference to light.

The heads are placed side by side, in profile, observing each other and their surroundings. Years ago, they were exhibited at the Church of San Celso in the “*Claritudo*” exhibition, where they were placed frontally on the altar. The reference was to universal spirituality: that of nature, humanity, intelligence, and the infinite possibilities of knowledge, which, over fifty years of research and work, have been for her a continuous confrontation and dialogue.