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**by Paola Ugolini**

“Words were originally magic and to this day words have retained much of their ancient magical power. By words one person can make another blissfully happy or drive him to despair, by words the teacher conveys his knowledge to his pupils, by words the orator carries his audience with him and determines their judgement and decisions. Word provoke affects and are in general the means of mutual influence among men...”

(Sigmund Freud, “Introduzione alla Psicanalisi”. *Tutte le lezioni*, 2010, Edizioni Newton Compton, p.2)

The austrian artist Greta Schödl (1929, Hollabrunn) is one of the most important, if little known, artists of visual poetry in Italy. A student at the Akademie für Angewandte Kunst (1948 – 1953) in the cosmopolitan city of Vienna, she met and interacted with young artists, meeting in the evenings in the basement of the Secession building to discuss artists such as Fuchs, Hundertwasser and Staudacher.

It is important to tell her personal, and romantic, story: in the late 1950s, already with a burgeoning art career in Austria, she meets the charming italian designer and businessman Dino Gavina at the Frankfurt Fair. Gavina was a friend of Lucio Fontana and many other artists at the time (including Matta, for whom he produced pieces of furniture that became true design status symbol).

Despite her success and a promising career in Vienna, Greta left to follow Gavina to Bologna; a city where woman artists were a rarity. As a working mother and artist in the city, Greta produced, over a period of fifty years, a vast and striking body of work. Weaving together organic and geometric forms with words becomes a defining element of her artistic practice: words are repeated obsessively, illuminated with gold or embroidered with wire, and emerge from painted backgrounds, or from pages enriched with long silk threads that emerge freely from the edge of the pages. The threads become not only decoration, but also give a three-dimensional materiality to the flat sheet of paper.

“The use of thread is transformed into a “mark”, an element from archaic tradition through which mankind took possession of the world, characterizing it with personal spontaneous connotations, ever since cave times.” (Lara Vinca Masini, *Greta Schödl*, Galleria d’Arte L’Incontro, Imola, 12-31 gennaio 1980).

Hers is an obsessive, precise working method that speaks of the passion of a willful woman who never abandoned her artistic career despite not achieving commercial success or recognition.

By chance I arrived in Bologna to Gavina’s house, looking for the chinese artist Li Yuan-cia, who had lived as a guest of the family from 1961 to 1965. Whilst there, I discovered and began to appreciate the refinement of the visual poetry of Greta’s work, an artist who still works in her studio in the historical center of Bologna. This edition of Artissima Art Fair is the first presentation of her work and illustrates a lifetime spent following her unique artistic dream and vision.

Greta worked with a diverse range of unusual materials: linen pillow covers, the italian flag, maps, pergamene, the loose pages of antique botanical texts, old letters, and paper mounted on canvas.

The domestic experience is strongly felt, and the materials are often rife with memories of her home and of her private experiences. Old linen pillow covers, on which the word “pillow cover” (in German) is repeated obsessively and becomes a simple decorative motif void of its original meaning, an ironing cover and her grandmother’s old nightgown, are repeated with the words “ironing cover” and “nightgown” creating a sequence of rhythmic signs that transform the object and its meaning into an abstract work, disconnected from the literal. Greta’s mother tongue is German, and she uses it as her language of choice in her work.

“The mother tongue is the mediator of our first relationship with the world, a sensorial language, complex, made up of sounds and gestures, contacts and linguistic invention, that leave us with an impression and a creative pool that we can draw on for the rest of our life.” (cfr. Donatella Franchi in “La scrittura che tesse: incontro con Greta Schödl”, *Greta Schödl, Pagine Pagine 1957-1999*, Campanotto Editore, March 2000 e “All’inizio di tutto la lingua materna” edited by Eva Maria Thune, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1998, Torino).

Greta’s use of colour is varied and intense, blue and pink and yellow, with gold used as the common thread, suspended between reality and visionary. In some of the works, she takes detailed imprints of the human body, the skin of the palm or the heel, and covers large canvases with the lines of the skin, imbuing them with an orange colour. Using Gothic font, pointed and intrinsically rhythmic, she repeats letters, without spaces between, applying gold leaf to create a vertical reading of the composition, enriching it with symbolic meanings. The visual poems of Greta Schödl are delicate ideograms that, like a mantra, create messages that speak to the extraordinary complexity of the “poetry of life”.

“If one follows the sense of Greta’s writing, one finds, in the absence of sentiment, or better, in its critical development, an empathy with the living that is never dehumanization but equilibrium between the precise distance and the excess of distance, as if one had blind instruments to look more critically at reality without being overwhelmed.”

(Angela Marchionni, “La Distanza e l’Io”, *Greta Schödl, Pagine Pagine 1957-1999*, Op. Cit.).

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