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## An insight into South-Italian culture through the art of Angelo Formica

Posted on Wednesday, September 24th, 2014 at 2:54 pm

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“So what this is all about?” is one of the frequent questions that people ask artist Angelo Formica.

It’s no surprise. Even if in contemporary art provocation is the norm, to see a religious figure of a saint amidst a deck of cards can still be a bewildering experience. “So, how do you explain that Mother Mary on an ice cream stick? And what about those baking cups filled with faces of saints. Is that some sort of comment on the Christian church?” someone could argue suspiciously.



Well, that’s exactly what Angelo Formica is not interested in doing.

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Formica works with collage, creating unexpected associations of meanings. Although his art can look ironic at first, his work is deeply poetic. The complex – sometimes impenetrable – theories of conceptual art are very far from his aesthetic. Formica's collages can be appreciated by any viewer approaching them without preconceptions. While having many layers of interpretations, these works are also enjoyable on an immediate level – you just need dive in the mellifluous colours and the unconventional compositions. This is visual art of the synaesthetic kind; it almost feels like you can taste and smell it.



Formica's art practice can certainly be identified as peculiarly Italian by an external observer. Nevertheless there is no exoticism in his vision, but a true interest in the grassroots of South Italian traditions and mindset. Far from Milan's stern Duomo and Rome's monumental churches indeed, Southern Italy carries a unique legacy of culture, which drastically differentiates itself from the rest of Italy. Here the sacred pervades all dimensions of life. You can find a sacred element in food, games and traditional rituals, as a sort of widespread spirituality. This sense of sacred is shared by believers as well as non-believers in Italian society, permeating different strata. This kind of diffused rituality goes beyond the confines of official religion, sometimes in flagrant contrast with it.

To look at what sacred means in South Italy, we have to consider the opposition between the so-called "religion of the elite" and "religion of the people". This notion dates back to the 18th century, when there was a clear distinction between the intellectual elite and the masses. For the first group religion meant enlightened principles and theological theories, while the latter group was grafting an implicit polytheism in their religious approach. The intellectual elite were looking for a single deity in the order of the universe. By contrast the people tended to personalise and deify the unknown forces that govern human history. It ultimately corresponded to the way both groups were trying to grasp the divine; the people by bringing it closer to everyday life, the intellectuals by taming the divine in the realm of theory and abstraction.



The “religion of the people” is precisely the focus of Angelo Formica’s work.

Born in Milazzo, Sicily, Angelo was raised on ice creams, religious figures, card games and baroque churches. While many contemporary Italian artists have troubles to confront their humongous art tradition, Angelo is able to deal with it in gracefully. His work doesn’t aspire to be monumental, but it rather plays between high brow and low brow, always in the segment of tradition. The use of collage as medium is pivotal. It allows the artist to associate things that seem distant, but that truly come from the same cultural matrix. Through his work the artist reveals analogies between paintings and pastries, divine grace and games. The collages just make obvious what is already rooted in people’s everyday life.

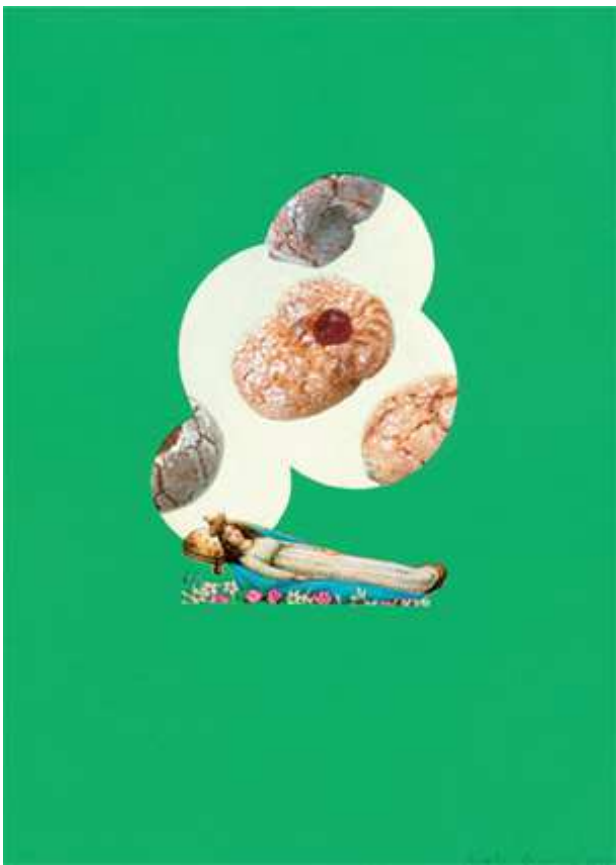


In Southern Italy sharing is key. You share news, memories, food, complaints, prays, fun, games.

The use of recurrent elements in Formica’s work, such as religious figures, card games and Sicilian pastries, is deeply connected to the idea of sharing. What the artist is interested in are domestic and community rituals. Take an average Sunday morning; you go to the patron saint feast or a procession with your family, and then you eat lunch together. After lunch is coffee and pastry time. That’s usually when a deck of cards pops up, and people relax by playing scopa or briscola, the two most popular Italian card games. Clearly no one wrote the rules for this ritual, yet it keeps on repeating itself, becoming a way to spend time together and part of a shared memory. As the writer Lucia Grassiccia pointed out talking of Angelo Formica, in South Italy: “Pastime is law and playing is a serious business.”

Another important feature in Formica’s work are his many references to painting. Although the artist’s main inspiration are renaissance and baroque Italian art, he works with the popular version of these paintings on prayer cards. In every Italian church in fact, you can find small painting reproductions in pocket printed figures, with a prayer on the back. You can take these holy cards with you by leaving a small offering for the church. People stick them in front of their car, to have their car protected, or they keep them in the wallets together with the photo of sons and spouse.

We all know that Christian religion doesn’t spare itself from grim stories. The scenes depicted on holy cards are often pretty harsh indeed. A Mother Mary with a set of daggers thrust in her chest, saints holding their own eyes on a silver tray, martyrs undergoing any kind of torture. Curiously, these scenes on prayer cards have a very delicate palette. The colours of the original paintings are often toned down and the type of drawing resembles illustrations in children books. Through those nicely-presented images, despite the subject, the people manage to make cruelty innocuous. Those pastel and rosy hues are not that far, after all, from the delicious colours of ice cream or icing on cakes, as the artist points out through his collages.



Beyond the charming symbols and the look from South Italian culture, what really makes Formica's work powerful is the universal patterns in it. Rituals can differentiate from country to country, but they ultimately are people's way to stay together and share their lives.

Religious ideas of the sacred and traditional rituals have influenced art for millennia. Now it's up to contemporary artists to bring it all out in the world of today.

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