**Cut. Play. Repeat. The Collages by Laura Zeni**

Text by Raffaella Resch

As part of the Fuori Salone 2016, Laura Zeni will present a new series of works at the elegant design store and workshop of creativity Jannelli&Volpi, which has been hosting decor-related cultural events since 2006.

Laura Zeni is already an established wallpaper designer at Jannelli&Volpi, but for this event she has taken a different imaginative and stylistic turn, an original and innovative venture to add to the arc of her prolific output.

If a common thread can be detected in Zeni’s constant experimentation, it is drawing; in other words, the technique of defining outlines and surfaces through the skill and inventiveness of the artist’s hand, and its ability to execute the concepts and images that gradually take shape in her mind. This interpretation of drawing-as-project, of a more or less complete line that encloses an idea, also includes Zeni’s three-dimensional constructions, such as the *Radar* works, or the Plexiglas objects, for the most part defined by the abstract, linear shape of their outline.

But this is not all. As well as a drawing process for outlines and one for volumes, Zeni now uses a drawing process for patches of colour, thus creating form (according to the Treccani Encyclopaedia) ‘*through the values or intensities of light used for the individual parts, creating the effect of painting’*.

We can include within this third category of drawing patches of colour, Laura Zeni’s new series *Geometrie Ri-Viste*, a collection collage works comprising ten, one-metre square canvases and twenty small boxes. Unlike the gestural freedom of brush or pencil work, for Zeni collage is a more demanding task of selecting, cutting, juxtaposing and finally affixing the pieces. The materials she has used come from the archives of architecture and design magazines published in editions marking the Salons of previous years, in particular *Abitare*, *AD Architectural Digest*, *Casa Bella*, *Casa Facile*, *Domus*, *D Casa di Repubblica*, *Elle Décor*, *Grazia Casa*, *Interni*; *Living,* *Marie Claire Maison, Urban* and *Vogue Casa*. Each periodical is a source of inspiration, from which, after a careful examination of the material, she has selected the fragments – the specific ingredients – for creating each composition. Once the field of operation has been established and the tools selected, the process becomes free and random.

Laura Zeni’s creativity lies above all in imagination and design: a combination of fantasy, invention and the project itself; in other words, the finished design of an object.

A salient feature of her work is to start with an inert material and from it to create surprising combinations, a suggestive number of variants on a theme that reveal new ways of seeing.

This time, the source that Zeni has drawn on is an archive of paper memorabilia, an accumulation of magazines and clippings, already read, appreciated and kept for some initially important reason, then stacked in a storeroom and more often than not forgotten. In earlier work Zeni has already shown a responsiveness towards retrieving and reusing waste materials, the accumulations of consumerist overproduction, and incorporating them into an ethical vision of production and consumption. Also in these new works, the sustainability of art in relation to the surrounding world is apparent and thus defines a specific mission for art in society.

Zeni’s initial gesture is to retrieve traces of the past, to breathe new life into materials, to take them from the state of symbolic inertia in which they have been stored and invest them with a new form and new meaning. The form is the fragment, pasted beside others in the search for a recurring motif or pattern, or to suggest regular or broken geometric figures. The meaning can be traced in the random sequence of retrieval and juxtaposition, in which viewers can recognise what is most familiar to them, and from among the shreds of magazine text identify contents that are linked in some way to the form as a whole.

For instance, the black silhouette that looks like ruined house in *Omaggio a Living* contains a randomly retrieved fragment on the construction of a new building, starting from the demolition of the old one. In *Omaggio a Abitare* the fragments are arranged to form a horizontal flow in which one glimpses buildings lapped by waves. In *Omaggio a Marie Claire Maison,* the canvas is dominated by a floral composition that has no above or below, yet contains a true harmonious order. In the small-format collage *Omaggio a D Casa*, the word ‘cubista’ [cubist] appears as a sort of guide which the scissors have left almost intact to represent by chance the entire abstract composition. In other examples (for instance, *Omaggio a Grazia Casa*) the human figure or face reappears, a feature of Zeni’s previous work. The cut-out shape is highly refined to encompass fragments of other figures or images, forming a body with flowing hair and fishnet stockings (*Omaggio a Urban)*; or, inthe case of *Omaggio a Marie Claire Maison*, two profiles are interlocked, one inside the other: one pearl, the other ebony. Elsewhere (*Omaggio a Interni*) attached to a surface made from accordion-pleated paper pieces fanned open, is a linear geometric structure in rainbow colours, a prismatic accumulation that creates an angular effect in contrast with the soft and supple sensation of the lace beneath. *Omaggio a Elle Decor* is a pure explosion of fragments that seem to follow a trajectory of dispersion originating from a strong inner energy, an intricate collage where the cut geometric pieces overlap with a lightness of unity that is one with the force of movement they suggest.

In the case of *Omaggio a D Casa*,the fragments appear to have been photographed in the exact moment of an explosion and can be seen floating in orderly fashion in a galaxy of regular geometric forms where relative time moves at a slower, almost stationary pace.

Again in *Omaggio a D Casa*, the figure with raised fists seems to be both imagining and producing this expanding universe, formulated in his mind as though in an innocent comic strip.

In addition to triangles and lines, even circles come to life in Laura Zeni’s compositions for *Omaggio a Casa Facile*, where bubbles like microorganisms in suspension are borne on a warm mood, carrying colour and words, the generating principles of art. Movement and flow are again contrasted with order in *Omaggio a Casabella*, in which a dominating grid at the centre of the canvas sits atop a torrent of fragments carried by a rushing stream of thoughts and letters. In *Omaggio a AD Architectural Digest*, the construction becomes more ambitious: not only does it use its power like an opposing geometric fortress, it also contains a new organic and colourful compositional germ. The opposition between vibrant polychrome and tetragonal black and white is also found in *Omaggio a Elle Decor*, where a figure has emerged from a spacecraft from another dimension and is striding towards the coloured glade of a new world.

Laura Zeni’s inventiveness seems infinite. Whether the pyramids of Giza (*Omaggio a Interni*)multifaceted insect eyes (*Omaggio a Elle Decor*), optical effects (*Omaggio a Elle Decor*), or informal abstract convolutions *(Omaggio a Vogue Casa),* everything is undeniably dominated by the light of imagination and creativity (*Omaggio a Abitare*), which discovers everywhere forms and colours for creating new images.

In these new works devoted to collage, Zeni explores possibilities for textures through graphic inventions and memory retrieval in a fascinating process of geometric storytelling.

Her works are likewise an archive of words, with each canvas strictly limited to fragments from the same magazine, and in this way each incorporates, as it were, the complete vocabulary for that magazine’s specific area of interest. A sort of minimalist library, in which the randomly jumbled words reassume their specific meaning more than ever before, thrown in pieces onto the canvas but victorious over oblivion. In this way the ‘drawing’ they compose in their fragmented forms, assumes a known shape at a glance, like looking at Rorschach inkblots.

The words in this vocabulary also belong to the technical handbook for architecture, interior design and decor, and are a testimony to the ingenuity and excellence of the programme of events that is part of the Salone del Mobile and Fuori Salone in Milan every year.

But whoever prefers to stand back from the canvases, making no attempt to interpret the fragments like a crazy game of snakes and ladders, will glimpse a whole image, abstract and clear: a firework or a regular decorative surface, a figure or a kaleidoscopic succession of geometries. Childlike wonder will capture the observer as meaning emanates from every strip of paper, from every corner of the canvas, telling us that in these individual universes of forms and words, in these various games, each governed by different rules, there is no meaning other than the one our demiurge suggests with wise temporariness – a meaning we must reconstruct.

In the ultimate analysis, one can discern an amused sense of the provisional in Zeni’s works, structured each time with new, pre-established rules. For her, there is no closed world that can be definitively represented but rather a series of combinations based on objects or materials reinterpreted in different ways and attributed with different meanings. The arbitrariness and lack of meaning in the various combinations leads us almost paradoxically to a new, poetic universe, perfectly organic and functioning in all its parts. In the case of this solo show, the game’s lack of meaning, the vague irony of a continual invention from paper remnants, opens up new visual possibilities for us that actively involve our imagination; they take hold of our capacity for elaboration and memory, as if a game were put into our hands and we devoted ourselves to exploring its possibilities.

In this way Laura Zeni seems to return to one of the most intriguing motives for artistic research of the last century: the relationship between art and play. From Munari, Baj and Tinguely to Boetti and Melotti.

How can one fail to recognise, especially in the assemblages of objets trouvés – a feature of Zeni’s past work and again present in this series – the critical attitude towards the modern throwaway society so typical of Baj.

Looking at Zeni’s series of *Homages* also brings to mind Alighiero Boetti’s word squares, described by Tommaso Pincio in *Scrissi d’arte* [Writings on Art] (L’Orma editore, Rome, 2015): “He began to play a game that works like this: draw a square and then other squares inside the first to construct a grid of four squares by four, or five by five, or bigger. At this point you’re looking at sixteen white squares, or twenty-five, or more. Now try to put a letter inside each square to construct a proper sentence. Alighiero chose a phrase he’d heard. He drew the grid and had a go. If the sentence made a perfect square, his face lit up in a smile. It meant nothing, but for him it was as if things had turned out right. ‘Happy coincidences’, he called them”.

And all of Zeni’s work, whether fine art, design, or publishing, seems to respond to a single creative principle, which like Munari’s work is related to play. Just as a child will shake and handle a toy to the point of breaking it, just to discover what makes it work, so Zeni with same spirit of extraction takes apart the art object, invoking new approaches.

The game is not linked to reality but stands in opposition to it as a separate space, albeit contiguous, a possible alternative, a way out. The rules that an artist from time to time applies to his or her work and to the way we look at it are important. As Alighiero Boetti said: ‘It's just a matter of **knowing the rules of the game: anyone who doesn’t know them will never see the order that reigns in things.** Just as anyone staring at a starry sky who doesn’t know the patterns of the stars will only see confusion, whereas an astronomer will have a very clear vision of things. (Alighiero Boetti, *Dall’oggi al domani* [From Today to Tomorrow] Edizioni l’Obliquo, Brescia, 1988.

In his turn, Fausto Melotti, when discussing the art of the early decades of the twentieth century, hoped that: ‘Still we would like to find in our work the echo of the ancient counterpoint, the modulation. In the enjoyment of the parts, not neatly juxtaposed and obvious “plans” (modelling), but plans that by playing with each other lead to other imaginary plans. **A game that, when it works, is poetry**” (G. Scheiwiller, *Sculture astratte di Fausto Melotti 1934 - 1935*, All’Insegna del Pesce d’Oro, Edizioni Scheiwiller, Milan 1967).

Raffaella Resch, 29 March 2016