**Text by Alessandra Tiddia**

*L’Ombre dans l’eau.*

Tracce e sedimenti del passato

nell’opera di Omar Galliani/

*The Shadow in the water.*

Traces and sediments of the past

in Galliani's work

“*In rivers the water that you touch is the last of what has passed and the first of that which comes.*

*So with present time*”.

Leonardo da Vinci

The theme of water, very present in Galliani's work and the main theme of today's exhibition, is also the object dear to a lot of painting movements from the past, especially to the Symbolists who in their time took inspiration from the classic and the figurative art culture of the Renaissance[[1]](#footnote-1): lake-like surfaces of the Symbolist painting are the supreme locations of shadows and reflections, and standing water of canals and ponds is able to capture and return images. As in a sort of infinite game of mirrors, where each reflection is enriched by the previous one, the theme of water comes from the past to the large drawings here on display, that disclose a series of visual inputs and memories, more or less unconsciously determined by hints to the art of the past, especially the Symbolist, and that perhaps became part of the artist's life experiences.

It is a new point of view from where to observe the works by Omar Galliani, as if symbolism were not a category of history, but a way of life.

In this revealing process we are helped by the synesthetic quality of his art, that, because of its “wateriness”, the reflective power of water, is able to lead us to the borders of figurative art; these territories can also be experienced through senses other than sight, such as hearing and smell.

Actually some works by Galliani could evoke the smell of a water garden, where it is possible to recognize the scent of the shade, of the wet turf of the banks and the heavy berries from the branches of trees and the older leaves fallen on the ground, but also the rejuvenating freshness of rose bushes at dawn or the mists along the lines of poplars that decorated the canals of his birthplace: scents that are memories, mixed with Asian essences, among which there is mostly incense, that again evokes the atmosphere of the East, but at the same time visualizes vapours and their rhythmic pattern of ascent and descent.

These essences, already praised by Baudelaire in *The Flowers of evil*[[2]](#footnote-2) for their evocative properties, were also very dear to the Symbolist culture of Mallarmè and Debussy.

The reference to the name of Debussy is not random because it evokes another synesthesia, this time a musical one, that leads to one of the most “aquatic” composers of the last century, who often talked about the scent of sound, of the fact that the listener should perceive music with all the senses to better lose himself in what it could evoke and because music could leave a wake, a feeling, like a whiff of perfume. Francesco Spampinato[[3]](#footnote-3) describes the 'wateriness' of the music of Debussy like this: “Firm and still is the water that goes through the first notes of *La* *Cathédrale engloutie/The sunken Cathedral*, prelude for piano: these sounds move slowly in a “*brume doucement sonore/sweetly sonorous haze*” and give body to music, making the keyboard resound with its whole extension. The muffled sounds of the beginning overlap and barely let through the distant chimes of the underwater bells of the cathedral of Ys. In *Reflets dans l’eau/Reflections in the water* light is taken apart in a dust cloud of golden reflections, shaded from now and then by an unnerving charm of depths. […] The sea, the fountain in the park and the standing water of the dungeons of the castle express the complex symbolism of life and death in the work *Pelléas et Melisande/Pelléas and Melisande*”[[4]](#footnote-4).

His musical piece *Les parfums de la nuit/The fragrances of the night,* appealing to both smell and visual imagination, reminds us of the "doctrine of correspondences" by Baudelaire, who was a direct vanguard to symbolism, a movement lingering in Paris at the end of the 1800s, and to whom a young Debussy was closely linked during his education.

The experience of the Symbolist poets and more in general of the Symbolist movement contributed to unchain sound in music, like sign in painting, from the realist orthodoxy and concurred to open the perceptions of the artists towards a wider resonance in the world, looked for in nature, wind, sea, in woods, in the vibrations of light and subsequently darkness through analogies, the well-known 'correspondences' among the visible things and the intelligible lacking of a secret interior reality.

For this reason Debussy's music proceeds with allusions; a hint and its vagueness give the listener's imagination and emotions the possibility and subsequently the freedom of defining themselves, to keep resounding. This is possible also thanks to one of the innovations he introduced in the musical culture of his time, the arabesque, a subtle combination of floral and geometric elements, an almost magic talisman for Debussy.

This form, deriving from the figurative art and typical of the Liberty period, had been defined by Baudelaire as ‹the most spiritual of all the designs› and ‹the most ideal›, because it is not subordinate to a story or a representation, it is not descriptive, and its abstraction and tension towards spirituality resides in the fact that as an ornament and decoration has a value of “immediacy”.

It is the same with Galliani's painting, where he turns his refined reference to oriental and arabesque-like themes into an alluring seduction that takes us to the threshold that divides the exterior from the inner world.

Being more daring, we could put the magic of the arabesque closer to the floating and swirly strength of the hair drawn by Galliani, when the artist gets lost and makes us lost in the turbulences of the hair buns by Leonardo, establishing a connection among the arabesque, the floral and plant themes, the Art Nouveau and the wavy lines of female hair.

This is another analogy that Galliani shares with Debussy starting from a comparison introduced by the French philosopher with Russian origins, Vladimir Jankélévitch[[5]](#footnote-5), in regard to “some of the melodies by Debussy with a botanical phenomenon, the geotropism, that is the influence exercised by gravity on the orientation of leaves and roots; it is divided into positive and negative geotropism, the first one to indicate the attraction towards the centre of gravity, the latter to indicate the tendency of stems to grow, distancing themselves from the centre of the Earth. The arabesques by Debussy follow this phenomenon: rising, creating a feeling of eradication given by the overlapping of perfect chords, each one of them with a different tone, that don't give consistency to a rational musical discourse, but they just live in space; descending, the arabesque by Debussy symbolizes a feeling of fright and escape, of falling, or seductive abandon”[[6]](#footnote-6).

The feeling of falling very often recurs in the figurative representations by Galliani, it becomes one of the elements typical of his style. This feeling becomes alive in the video of one of the most hypnotic and "aquatic" among the contemporary bands, The Chemical Brothers with *Wonders of the deep*: they bring on the screen that continuous flowing and falling, a flow of particles, flowers and objects that are all suggestive of figures they evoke or portray, hinting at the cosmos, the same cosmos where the figures of Galliani's paintings are immersed, so that looking at the set-up of the room with all his works one could think he is in an aquarium.

The figurative background of this crepuscular idea of cosmic and life flow can be found in Redon within the French Symbolism and also in Klimt, who submerges his creatures with long red hair in amniotic liquids (*Serpenti d’acqua/Water snakes*) or creates a rising flow of stars where the gaunt bodies of the *Medicina/Medicine* and the *Giurisprudenza/Jurisprudence* fluctuate on the ceiling paintings made for the University of Vienna, and that will influence a young Casorati, who a few years afterwards started the incisions for his *Via Lattea/Milky Way*.

Like Klimt, Casorati too (in the night separation, in a painting that was made more and more of shadows - as in *Notturni a San Floriano/Nocturnals in San Floriano* from the early 1910s and in his imaginary incisions) was looking for the encounter between the inner world and reality, that line that divides light and darkness, where past and present merge, a field of research that seemed to interest Galliani as well.

Actually the present also consists of the past and this is especially clear in one of the artist's works, especially for the semantic value that he gives the shadows, powerful evocative means of memory, like water.

It is in the absence of light, or, better said, in that dimension which is neither light nor darkness, but is formed by both, that is shadow, where memories resurface, in the wake before falling asleep. That state evoked by almost all the female figures with closed eyelids, shut in an inner world, it is perhaps the same recalled by Fernand Khnopff (the enigmatic Belgian artist who painted women like silent sphinxes with closed eyes, as in *The Silver Tiara* - 1911, New York, Museum of Modern Art) a century before; he above all eternalized the standing enchanted water of his own Bruges through the same idea of mystery.

In Galliani's creations the light is not a natural light but more like a glow, a reflection of the inner light that through the black sign of graphite, repeated like a mantra on the poplar board, shines and performs magic; it fuses the exterior landscape with the inner one.

Before him many other great artists loved the use of black as a place of interaction with the most hidden dimension, from Piranesi to Goya, Redon, Seurat, Kubin and Sironi.

Galliani becomes part of this world bringing in some novelties, from the linguistic point of view (e.g. the sizes of his drawings, completely new, and the introduction of formats like the diptych and the triptych) and also from the way of creating, which both characterize his graphic work in a very personal and original way.

For his way of expression what takes on a crucial role is the process of the 'impression', that we will explain in short, and the fact that the base of his drawing is not paper but a wooden board, the soft poplar that he prepares and carves before he starts covering the surface with slant strokes of the pencil that slowly reveal, next to the drawn figure, markings, dots, constellations, glares invisible before the black of the graphite.

This technique may evoke the *frottage* used by Max Ernst from 1925 as it unites drawing and carving (the base is carved like on a board for a xylography), but it differs from the technique of the most dream-like masters of Surrealism, as it doesn't have the embossed detail typical of the surrealist process. Actually the *frottage* places above an embossed object a sheet of paper and traces its borders, rubbing it with a pencil, bringing out those that in 1944 Henri Michaux used to call *Apparitions (Apparizioni*)[[7]](#footnote-7).

Galliani instead lets the graphite and the marks impressed on his hand to reveal the signs carved on the board, like a print inside out.

As 'Master of black', Galliani breaks down the relationship between background and figure through the technique of the *sfumato*, that made his works being often compared to Leonardo's drawings. This is not the only point they have in common, also the interest in anatomy, the research of that particular anatomical detail that in Galliani can be magnified beyond measure or noted on small sheets of paper like in the codices by Leonardo.

The interest in certain forms and Leonardo's ways is especially asserted by the artist himself when he draws the details of the hair bun of Leonardo's *Leda*; he is even more linked to the genius from the Renaissance by the principles of physics and chemistry of water and its processes of transformation and motion, such as evaporation, dilution, dissolution, fading, expansion and corrosion, all well described by Leonardo in his *Del moto e misura dell’acqua/On fluid motions*[[8]](#footnote-8).

At the same time Galliani investigates every osmotic and metamorphic process of water and its reactions with the art bases, from wood to paper, from the brush to the copper board, since his early works in 1977 when, through the evaporation processes, water affected the sheets of paper that the artist submerged in a pond and on the remake of *Ofelia*, or also in 1979 when, in a place rich in symbolic characteristics, like between the Archeological Museum and the Aretusa Spring in Sicily, he again submerged his sheets of paper of mythological subjects and allowed the current and the other agents of the river to affect his work in a performing act called *La dea levò la fronte/The Goddess raised her head* (1979-80).

He is very interested in the process of the evaporation of water and the formation of salts on his papers after a certain amount of time being submerged, as in the great floating image of the sublime city of water, Venice, in 2010, but also in the dissolution of his sign on the sheets of papers left in the autumn rain like in the principle of corrosion produced by water and acids on copper sheets treated in a way so that the oxidation of the matter is triggered and shapes will come out similar to Victor Hugo's stains, and, before that, to the speckles and veins of the walls, that were suggested by Leonardo as source of inspiration.

Leonardo used to advise the artists of his time to look at the stains on the walls, the veins on the marble, clouds and dust to look for landscapes and animals, unusual and unbelievable things, as he used to do himself, indulging in the evocative power of the “confused things”, because “confused things rouse the mind to new inventions”.

The act of impressing copper and find on it forms and faces, takes us back to the topic of the 'impression', a sign reproduced under pressure, and that Galliani transfers from the familiar copper engraving to the drawing on paper, in a sort of backwards path.

A whole series of his works is dedicated to the specular and symmetrical print left by the graphite of one of his drawings pressed against a white sheet of paper, like a paper diptych where the drawing re-draws itself, it becomes a symmetrical reflection of the first one, its drawn shadow. This procedure lead to very peculiar effects, but above all it highlights one of the main themes linked to the artist's working process: through these drawings the illusory opposition of two actions, to imprint and to reflect, is summed up in a single result that unites shadow, repetition, double.

Even water can become an impression, like a wide fluctuating wake left by the brush soaked in water and colour on which Galliani places some figures or like drops scattered on the sheets of paper, witnesses of the dynamic process of falling: this way water can be itself impression, memory.

Recent studies proved that molecules of water record different forms, if exposed to sounds and melodies that are more or less harmonic, strengthening the theory of sound, but also to words and thoughts, as forms of energy that can modify matter or at least its form.

For more than 15 years the Japanese scientist **Masaru Emoto** (1943-2012) documented - through miniscule photographs - the fact that the crystals of water have a form that can be harmonic and symmetrical or completely messed up according to the information they receive. Hence his theory of the memory of water: energy, or better its vibration, in the shape of a sound (music, a voice or prayers) or like written words or thoughts, can inform water that records such vibration (defined Hado in the Japanese culture) and changes its form.

A crucial discovery if we think that the human body is made up of more than two thirds of water.

The attention to words and their definitions in the past and present times brings us towards one last thought that brings us back to the title and, in a certain way, takes us back to the starting point, that is the meaning of the word “Ombre/Shadows” in its reference to the reflection of an image, that has its roots in the troubadour literature of the 1200s: in *Le* *Roman de la rose/The Romance of the Rose*, for example “l’ombre/the shadow” is often mentioned with the meaning of reflection of an image[[9]](#footnote-9).

This is the main theme of a composition which is crucial to the Medieval literary culture and subsequently the Renaissance[[10]](#footnote-10), that starts and ends with two episodes, at the same time opposite and symmetrical, regarding the love for a “ymage/image”: Narcissus and his own reflected image on one side, and Pygmalion and his own image artistically chiseled into a sculpture on the other, both icons of falling in love, of the wish for love.

In the entire troubadour literature and not only there, to focus the attention on an image is the very act of falling in love, such that the subject becomes blissfully estranged from reality. This rapture leads to certain death, if not restrained. Narcissus knows it very well, as his story tells: “*Here is told how Narcissus fell in love with his own shadow. He was a very fine and very handsome knight. It happened one day that he was resting above a beautiful fountain and in the water he saw his own beautiful shadow. He began to contemplate it, and rejoiced above the fountain for his own resembling shadow. He believed that the shadow was really alive, living in water, and never realized that it was his own shadow. He began to love and fell in love so much that he wanted to catch it. He disturbed the water; the shadow disappeared; so that he began to cry. When the water cleared. he saw that the shadow was crying. Then he let himself fall into the fountain, and drowned. It was Spring time; ladies were coming to enjoy themselves by the fountain, and they saw the beautiful Narcissus who had drowned. Crying a lot they dragged him out and, so stiff, laid him down on the fountain banks, from where the news arrived before the god of love. From where the god of love turned him into the most noble almond tree, very green and very lush, and Narcissus was and is the first tree to bear fruit and renew love*”.

For a Medieval reader, the mistake Narcissus made was to have believed that an image was a real creature: actually it is the obsession about the image, the building of the simulacrum of something that wasn't there, in common between Narcissus and Pygmalion, that will bring about the annihilation, the dissolution of their lives.

As previously stated by Aristotle and later by Averroës, it is the image of what is seen that stays in one's imagination, and, there it stays completely devoid of matter, like «something similar to a drawing», even without the perception of it[[11]](#footnote-11).

The image of the beloved object remains impressed in the eyes, and from there, moves to memory, where its figure is present even though the object of love is not there. Memory and imagination will carry out a proper creative act, to recreate that image in the mind, to allow the artist, poet, painter or sculptor to draw it again or mirror it into a portrait. That is to draw it again.

“Aqua est oculus/*The eye is water*”, says Averroës[[12]](#footnote-12); it is not a case if all the narcissistic representations are by a well, a spring, etc., from Caravaggio to Segantini, who puts the red mane, so prominent that hides the face of the woman, of his work *Vanità/Vanity* (1895) on the bank of a small Alpine pool of water, that here he characterized it as the Spring of Evil, but that in other paintings will become the Spring of Life. Also the woman in the painting is looking for the shadow in the water as well.

1. As per Michel Imberty's words: “Water is the supreme Symbolist theme […]. The Symbolist movement, that tries to free the word from its meanings in order to rediscover the original enchanting music of it, actually renews one of the deepest aspects of the poetic language, the ‘liquidity’ of the word. This liquidity is the great universal symbol of primeval harmony that the symbolist poet searches for in the language”. M. Imberty, *Il senso del tempo e della morte nell’immaginario debussiano/The sense of time and death in Devussy's imaginary*, in «Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana/New Italian Music Magazine», XXI, 1987, p. 400. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Baudelaire writes in *The Flowers of Evil*:

   “*Nature is a temple where sometimes living pillars  
   let out indistinct words:  
   Man, lost within woods of symbols, feels like  
   he is observed by their familiar glances.*

   *Like long echoes mingle from afar  
   in a dark and deep harmony,  
   Vast like the night and like the light,   
   scents, colours and sounds resonate together.*

   *There are scents as fresh as the flesh of a child,  
   sweet like oboes, green like pastures;  
   and others, corrupt, rich and prevailing*

   *spread like the infinite things,  
   like the amber, musk, benzoin and incense,  
   singing the ecstasy of the soul and senses*”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. F. Spampinato, [*Debussy e la seduzione dell’acqua. Suggestioni e metafore della liquidità nella musica*](http://www.francescospampinato.net/docsito/mus-real66.pdf)*/Debussy and the seduction of water. Fascinations and metaphors of the liquidity of music*[,](http://www.francescospampinato.net/docsito/mus-real66.pdf)  in “Musica/Realtà”/“Music/Reality”, 2001: 22-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. F. Spampinato, *La poetica dell’acqua in Debussy/The poetics of water*, in “Diastema”, XIV, 2001: 35-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Debussy et le mystère/Debussy and the Mystery* (1949), curared by Enrica Lisciani Petrini, translation by Carlo Migliaccio, *Debussy e il mistero*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1992. On Debussy and what touched on here, see: M. F. Cuccu, *La "musica sognata" di Claude Debussy/The "dreamed music" of Claude Debussy*,in "XÁOS. Giornale di confine", Year 2, No. 3 November-February 2003/2004, http://www.giornalediconfine.net/anno\_2/n\_3/5.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. M. F. Cuccu, *La "musica sognata" di Claude Debussy/The "dreamed music" of Claude Debussy*,in "XÁOS. Giornale di confine", Year 2, No. 3 November-February 2003/2004, http://www.giornalediconfine.net/anno\_2/n\_3/5.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. *Apparitions: Frottages and Rubbings from 1860 to Now,* catalogue of the exhibition curated by A. Pesenti, Hammer Museum Los Angeles 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Del moto e misura dell’acqua di Leonardo Da Vinci/On fluid motions by Leoanrdo da Vinci*, curated by F. Cardinali, Bologna 1828. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. M. Davanzo, *Il tema dell’«immagine riflessa» nel Lai de l’Ombre di Jean Renart/The theme of the «mirror image» in 'The Lay of the Shadow' by Jean Renart*, Master's degree thesis, University of Venice, academic year 2011/2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Le Roman de la Rose/The Romance of the Rose* is probably the most beloved novel of the European Middle Ages, as it is proved by the more than three thousand manuscripts that have been transmitted it to us. The first part - the part we are interested in - has been written by Guillame de Lorris during the first half of the 13th century, between 1225 and 1230; the second part had been written by Jean de Meun between 1269 and 1278. In the prologue Guillame-as narrator «tries to conquer the sympathies of a lady, dedicating to her the tale of an adventure, at first only dreamt of and then actually occurred, where is the main character».

    A young man enters in a garden to pick a rose; Pleasure, the owner of the garden, invites Guillame-as lover to join the company, where there is also the God of Love. Separating from the merry lot, he arrives at the Fountain of Narcissus - - at the centre of the garden - which is also the Fountain of Love, «a fountain of death for those who can't steer their own desire in the right direction, beyond the treacherous surface of water».

    In fact the young man starts looking at his reflection and falls in love with himself. Only when he rests his eyes on two crystals at the bottom of the pool - the eyes of the soul - «the young lover turns into a lover who is able to positively steer his desire»; so Love can make him his servant and tells the lover his ten commandments. Bewildered, but soon reassured by the beautiful Acueil – the personification of the lovability of a maiden - he tries to pick the rose but he is rebutted by Rejection.

    G. de Lorris, J. de Meung, *Le Roman de la Rose/The Romance of the Rose*, parallel translation in Italian by G. D. Matassa, L’epos, Palermo 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Aristotle, *De memoria/On memory* (450a) : «The passion produced by the sensation in the soul and in the part of the body that has the sensation is defined as drawing [..] In fact the movement that is produced makes a sort of impression of the thing perceived, as do those who make a seal with a ring», *Parva Naturalia/Short Treaties on Nature*, curated by J. Tricot, Paris, J. Vrin, 1951: 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. «This explains why only when the sun, which sees all, /casts its rays in the fountain / and the light goes to the bottom / then more than a hundred colours appear / in the crystal [..] and the double crystal that reflects now one, now the other half of the garden, and never together at the same time, is the one of the sensitive and imaginative virtue, which is easily understandable if one keeps in mind that, as Averroës shows using the image of a two facets mirror where one can never look at the same time, it is possible to contemplate the ghost of the object through imagination (to cogitate) or the form of it through sight, but never at the same time». [↑](#footnote-ref-12)