

Experience Trans

A Conversation with Gianni Caravaggio

by Robert Preece

GIANNI CARAVAGGIO, COURTESY GALLERIA KAUFMANN REPETTO, MILAN, ITALY

posed:

q/a



*Non poserò
mai più i miei anni
così sul tempo
(I shall no longer
lay my years in
this way on time),
2014.*

Carrara marble
and red lentils,
80 cm. diameter.

Gianni Caravaggio works with diverse materials, creating mysterious forms that aim to open the imagination. Born in Rocca San Giovanni (Chieti), Italy, in 1968, he soon moved with his family to Germany. He studied philosophy before moving back to Italy to attend the Academy of Fine Arts in Milan, where he is currently a professor of sculpture. A student under Luciano Fabro, Caravaggio shares with him a decision to renew the sculptural idiom by combining traditional materials such as marble with other, more unconventional ones, including talc, paper, and lentils.

Robert Preece: [How do you create such mystery in your work?](#)

Gianni Caravaggio: To contemplate mystery is to contemplate the abyss within us. In the human



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imagination, mystery has always been distinguished by being veiled, like the veils of Maya in Hindu imagery or the idea of veiled appearances for Plato. It shows itself as a landscape—the tip of a mountain stabs into a cloud—or as a face concealed by a veil. Nature loves to hide itself away—to veil itself—and by hiding, it manifests as an image. It is a paradox, but in this concealment, I feel that nature is asking us not for comprehension but for openness. In *Il mistero nascosto da una nuvola* (*Mystery hidden by a cloud*, 2013–18), I partially dust a block of Belgian black marble with confectioner’s sugar as if it were a brownie, evoking a landscape-like image of a cloud covering the peak of a mountain. This seems to be an almost Duchamp-like, ready-made practice, but with a natural object instead. Such imagination is aimed at initiating the image rather than recognizing it. In *Immagine seme* (*Seed image*, 2010), a veil of plaster dust sandpapered off the wall falls on a slab of black marble to reveal the vision of a starry sky or a nocturnal snowfall. The power “to initiate” and open up the observer’s imagination is the principle of my works.

RP: You studied under Luciano Fabro. What aspects of his work and processes influenced you?

GC: I had read Fabro’s *Attaccapanni*, which convinced me to leave my German hometown, where I grew up with my parents as an Italian immigrant, and go to Milan. The main reason I studied with Fabro was his dialogical and philosophical approach to art. I respect the creative process in which he passed from one work to the next, his thinking starting over *ex novo* and creating a body of different work that testifies to the same vision. I feel very near to this approach. If you look at Fabro’s work, you’ll find an emphasis on formal figuration. In my work, this is minimized in favor of an emphasis on the form of the gesture. I like to think that one of my recent works, *Il sole avvolge un paesaggio innevato* (*The sun wrapping a snowy landscape*, 2016), has a familiarity with Fabro’s late works, such as *Inverno* (2007), evoking a landscape vision with sculpture.

RP: I understand that your artistic influences also include Joseph Beuys, Walter de Maria, and Carl Andre.

GC: My work has metabolized the complexity behind



FROM OPPOSITE:
Installation view of
Iniziare Un Tempo II,
2018–19.
Museo Del Novecento,
Florence, Italy.

Il mistero nascosto
da una nuvola
(The mystery
hidden by a cloud),
2013–18.
Black Belgian marble
and powdered sugar,
52 x 68 x 112 cm.

the elementary simplicity of certain artists from the 1960s and early '70s such as Walter de Maria and Robert Morris. de Maria's *A computer which will solve every problem in the world* (1984) is a grandiose work that out of the simple act of counting creates space and immaterial imagination. Regarding Robert Morris, I would like to mention *Cloud* (1962), a white slab suspended in mid-air. Beuys's *Schneefall* (1965) is anything but tautological even though it seems to be, due to its elementariness. The square pieces of overlaid felt seem not to have anything to do with snow, yet they cover and warm the spruce branches as snowfall does in the forest. Not only does it transpose the experience, but it also evokes the Germanic poetic imagination founded on the vision of snow.

RP: In *La luna appoggia sul paesaggio mentre il sole tramonta* (*Moon lays on the landscape while the sun is setting*, 2018), the subjects seem clear as poetic, surreal abstractions. Are you evoking an emotional response such as melancholy, or is this "order?" Or are you playing between the two?

GC: The sense of abstraction intrigues me. A photographic representation aims at immediate recognition; for example, in a photo of a snow-covered landscape, you recognize it, and this instantaneous recognition limits fruition with respect to the memory of the snowy landscape itself. I feel that a sense of abstraction is capable of breaking through this limitation and stimulates, in the sense of Kandinsky, the "inner sound" of perception—in our memory, in our sentiments. When I combine a bronze tube, a white marble cylinder, and a red thread, the objects remain what they are, and yet they indicate something else. The enigma reflected in the title

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Il sole avvolge un paesaggio innevato (*The sun wrapping a snowy landscape*), 2016.
Plaster, yellow cotton thread, and Kassel earth pigment, 210 x 12.5 cm. diameter.

La luna appoggia sul paesaggio mentre il sole tramonta (*Moon lays on the landscape while the sun is setting*), 2018.
Bronze, white marble, Carrara marble, and synthetic wire, bronze element: 200 x 15 cm., wire: approximately 600 cm., marble cylinder: 30 x 2 cm.



gives a metaphorical quality and allows the memory of landscape to resonate. The bronze tube, which has whitish marks on the parts you see, derives from a direct casting of a piece of rolled cardboard; the brown of the bronze recalls a landscape. On this, I place the white marble cylinder, which when seen frontally is a white circle, while a red thread runs through the tube to suggest the last glimmer of light on the horizon. The gestures are fresh and simple. The viewer becomes complicit in creating the landscape.

RP: In *Il sole avvolge un paesaggio innevato*, there's a somewhat similar form, with a shift in materials. Could you tell me about this work?

GC: It is not so much the photograph of a snow-covered landscape that determines its image, but the memory associated with the snow that covers the landscape. Snow has shaped the poetic imagination

of Germanic and Japanese cultures. In *Il sole avvolge un paesaggio innevato*, a yellow thread winds around a long, slim plaster column as if it wanted to capture, shape, and embrace it. I would like observers to take in the visible and, with the help of the title, embark on an exploration of their imagination.

RP: *Couple with ancient feelings* (2016) seems a different kind of work for you in terms of the material, the form, and maybe the subject. How did you make it?

GC: This work simply tries to provide an image of the sense of a couple and the sense of feeling oneself bound to another person. What is a couple? I felt that the essence of the couple ought to be constituted of originating sentiments. In a way, you hear an echo of the example of Aristophanes in the discourse on love in Plato's *Symposium*, when he imagines couples in the form of spheres that already enjoy an original happiness. The problem of dualism is revealed even with the closest unity. The semi-cylindrical parts of *Couple with*

“ I think that the **sensation of magic** is created by simple gestures, sparking a degree of surprise because it makes us think, 'Is that all?' ”

*Couple with
ancient feelings,*
2016.
Terra cotta,
31.5 x 70 x 77 cm.





Fasi lunari che deviano lo spazio (Moon phases deviating space), 2016.
Zinc and black cotton thread,
18 x 157 x 257 cm.

ancient feelings lie back to back, turned after a presumed original division. The wire cut made in the fresh clay testifies to this division, but if you look carefully, the cuts do not coincide with one another and suggest only the circular figure hinting at a sign of the infinite. This couple of ancient sentiments could only be made of clay, the oldest material of sculptural expression.

RP: Could you explain the imagery of *Fasi lunari che deviano lo spazio (Moon phases deviating space, 2016)*, in relation to the different forms? Why did you choose zinc?

GC: The division of a zinc cylinder into four different forms composes various *Fasi lunari che deviano lo spazio*. Each installation may vary the position of the elements, which alter space differently. The space is materialized by a black thread. The divided faces of the

cylinder present various semi-circular forms like the phases of the moon. If I choose to recompose the elements to form the complete cylinder, in a certain sense I am indicating the full moon; and in this case, I wind the black thread around it. Zinc was used in prehistoric times for castings, before being abandoned in favor of bronze. This fate means it is not identified as a classic sculptural material, and with its deep bluish-silver light, it is removed from the world as if it were an astral body.

RP: Could you explain *Sostanza Incerta (Uncertain Substance, 2015)*? It reminds me of a partly opened present and the anticipation of seeing what is inside.

GC: Let's say that the underlying idea of this work is, in fact, a gift package. I was interested in the expectation with respect to the revelation of substance. Will it be surprising? Disappointing? In my work, the

substance returns literally to reveal itself and is no longer concealed from the senses. Because photographic vision is the only experience that we have of the starry sky of the universe, it forms a similarity with the geological appearance of a block of black Marquina marble with its fine white veining. A paper shell contains a mass of 350 kilograms. Physically a dichotomy is created, while visually a continuous if unexpected depth is created between the photograph of the starry sky and the mass of black marble. The gift package that begins to rip reveals an oscillation between substance and appearance and also checks the conceptual short circuit opened by Duchamp and Manzoni regarding the concealed content.

RP: Why contrast white Carrara marble and red lentils in *Non posero mai più i miei anni così sul tempo* (I shall no longer lay my years in this way on time, 2014), and *Cosmicomica* (2006)?

GC: I borrowed the title from Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomiche*, a collection of stories that begins with a cosmological scientific hypothesis before heading off into pure play of the imagination. In the case of *Cosmicomica*, form and dimensions are conceived so that the irregular polyhedron of statuary marble can be stood on each of its sides without a single fixed point of support. With each way of standing, only some of the lentils may lie in the concavities without falling, thus creating a constellation. The act of changing the support and redefining the constellations is like turning and playing with the universe. The lentils are seeds, points of life, and while scaled down, they are no different to the suns of the universe.

RP: The treatment of abstract clouds in *L'orizzonte si posa su una nuvola mentre il sole l'attraversa* (The horizon lays on a cloud while the sun is crossing, 2016) contrasts with that in *Il mistero nascosto da una nuvola*. How did you make these works?

GC: I think that the sensation of magic is created by simple gestures, sparking a degree of surprise because it makes us think, "Is that all?" In *Il mistero nascosto da una nuvola*, I wanted the observer to experience only the sensation of pure nature. For this reason, I sculpted the stone to remove all evidence of its being



FROM TOP:
***Non posero mai più i miei anni così sul tempo* (I shall no longer lay my years in this way on time) (detail), 2014.**

Carrara marble and red lentils, 80 cm. diameter.



Sostanza Incerta (Uncertain Substance), 2015.

Black Marquina marble and photographic print on paper, 45 x 52.5 x 61 cm.

***L'orizzonte si posa su una nuvola mentre il sole la attraversa* (The horizon lays on a cloud while the sun is crossing), 2016.**

Fishing line and light blue and yellow cotton thread, 170 x 130 x 55 cm.



Sostanza Incerta (Uncertain Substance) (detail), 2015.

Black Marquina marble and photographic print on paper, 45 x 52.5 x 61 cm.





worked. The icing sugar transforms into a pure gesture of lightness like a cloud. I realized that to make this delicate gesture clear and effective, I had to work with an impressive scale and dimension, hence the volume weighing nearly a ton.

What I find intriguing is that these two works oppose each other—*L'orizzonte si posa su una nuvola mentre il sole l'attraversa* almost lacks the sensation of mass with respect to the volume, yet the volume itself seems to be expanding. It seems as though placing a thread of blue wool on this volume without mass lends it a minimal, gravitational state sufficient to make it react as a counter to the blue thread. In recompense, the blue thread traces the surface, weighing and falling in its every interstice. This tracing lends a figuration in which the tangle-volume becomes cloud and the blue thread the horizon defining a landscape. The sun instead traverses the cloud on a yellow trajectory. You might say that all this is pure contemplation, but it is precisely this that fascinates me.

RP: *Giovane Universo (Young Universe, 2014)* is the size of your hand, yet the title magically scales the work to the universe. What is the thinking here? Does this piece by chance encapsulate the entirety of your work?

GC: *Young Universe* is delicately constrained from expanding by the confines of the hand of the “young artist,” which gives it volume and form—a condition that could change at any moment. The outline of my hand in silver-plated bronze wire presents a minimal obstacle that prevents the glass spheres from expanding freely in the surrounding space of the floor. The number of spheres may vary in relation to the quantity I manage to pile each time within the hand.

Certainly, the metaphor of the creation of the universe is understood, but while cosmology has a theoretical description of what happened in the moments of condensation prior to the Big Bang, my work gives it a significant form—the hand of the artist as sculptor. I quite agree with your observation that it is a neat metaphor for my work overall. In its gesture, it tries to shape matter as much as possible and ends up creating space. ■■■

LEFT, FROM TOP:
Iniziare un tempo (To begin a time), 2012.

Aluminum and red casting clay, 135 x 40 x 40 cm.

Installation view of *Nonostante Questo Buio*, 2018.

Spaziosiena, Siena, Italy.

RIGHT:

Giovane Universo (Young Universe), 2014.

Silvered bronze wire and glass spheres, 20 x 20 x 10 cm.

