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## CONVERSATIONS

# Cleo Fariselli "Dy Yiayi" at Operativa Arte Contemporanea, Rome

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Cleo Fariselli in conversation with Allison Grimaldi Donahue

Cleo Fariselli's exhibition, *Dy Yiayi*, at Operativa Arte Contemporanea in Rome is an ethereal world apart. The space of the gallery is transformed into a quiet chamber, full of half-hidden sounds and shapes: *raku* casts that seemed glazed with moon-water, *scagliola carpigiana* figures that radiate a mysterious softness, all under rose light and gentle folds, surrounded by a distant haunting soundtrack. I spoke with Cleo after spending time alone in the space, taking in the works as a whole, or rather, letting them take me in.

Allison Grimaldi-Donahue: When you first enter the space it becomes immediately clear it is a full immersion sensorial experience; I am wondering if this is something you've always been concerned with or if it is something that has evolved over time in your work. I'm also thinking about the sound element and how powerful this is as it resonates among the sculptural work.

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Cleo Fariselli: I think that my works have always, in some way, aspired to generate a certain context around them that would influence the perception of them. But the first time that I consciously concentrated on this aspect was when I began working on the performance *U*. From then onward, the desire to create immersive environments developed and always became more pronounced, also in my solo shows. I love making shows because I am able to work on the transformation of space-time that envelops the works, attempting to transmit and amplify the experience. This also allows me to include other elements of my personality that I think are important, like theatricality, music and writing. When you cross the threshold of an exhibition, I like there to be a palpable feeling of entering a dimension in which logics different from those found in everyday life are at work. I studied and practiced theater over the course of my education. It taught me that it takes very few elements to access something extraordinary, but the balance is extremely delicate, little bits of magic.

AGD: There is something a very visceral about the pieces. You mentioned while I was visiting the show that you want them to seem almost untouched by human hands, even though the sculptures are often very clearly made from impressions of the human body. This contrast creates something otherworldly for me. Is this otherworldliness or mystical quality a desired effect in your work?

CF: Yes, I would say so. This is one of the reasons for which my research has, over the years, has become ever more object focused; a choice that may appear controversial in times of such consumerism and overabundance of objects, and for these very reasons I didn't begin this undertaking with a light heart. However, I realize that only in our relationship with the inanimate and the object "made" or "transformed" by human hands is it possible to generate that particular mystery, that resonance in the soul, that for me remains the cornerstone of art. It is something incommunicable by other means. I like that you mentioned otherworldliness, because it is a level I seek to invoke, but not in terms of an aspiration towards something beyond the earth but more an attempt to bring out the mysterious side of this world: it is a transformative view of things. As a child I dreamed of being a witch, I think I've gotten pretty close!

AGD: Like skin on hot milk the pieces float upon the surface of the gallery floor. It feels like we're walking in mud and that there is a chance we may sink down, ever deeper. There is a danger present in the show that we may go to far, whether that's down the stairs or have

an encounter with the serpent sculpture, Edda, as we walk into the second room of the gallery. What is this danger you are evoking? Or in other words, the soft possibility of violence?

CF: I situated the show in a state of ideal half-sleep, or the half-shade of consciousness, in relation to a domestic atmosphere. I am interested in stimulating ambivalent feelings: welcome and refuge on the one hand and contact with the unknown, even danger, on the other. Deepening my own relationship with my unconscious over recent years, one of the most striking sensations I've discovered is that a truly 'safe' place doesn't exist, because the experience of being alive in itself always remains, in some way, irreducibly incomprehensible to the conscience. To spend time in this liminal zone, is for me, extremely fertile and intriguing. The moments of the slowing of reason and of contact with other states of consciousness, being fundamentally unproductive, are mostly relegated to private spaces within the home in contemporary society. This is why domesticity becomes a place of refuge, on one side, and a point of contact with psychological depths, on the other. Two sides, of welcome and of danger, of wonder and of terror, which I find in feminine nature, and which I believe are the basis this nature's bewitching quality.

AGD: Along those same lines I have the feeling the show is somewhere in the borderlands between myth and dream. I kept thinking about how myths make dreams but also how dreams make myths, I wonder which you imagine comes first, if one does come first and if this plays a role in your world-making?

CF: Yes, this decidedly plays a role, but in an organic influx in which there is no before or after; dream and myth, in my imagination, nurture each other. Reverie may be what brings them together, the "dream with open eyes," which I think is the basis of artistic thought. That particular mental state, capable of tapping into the depths of dreams and mythology and mentally weaving it together with the surrounding reality and lucid thought.

AGD: Looking at your past work I see a lot of similar shapes, similar materials. They are quite different in their iterations or versions, but there is an element of repetition. I've been thinking a lot about repetition recently and how it can produce newness each time it is carried out. How do you think this is true or untrue in relation to your work?

CF: I'm happy that you notice the elements of recurrence and reiteration because in an education or development characterized by a certain formal eclecticism like mine, they are like veins under the skin: not immediately evident, but very much felt. Seriality, in a strict sense bores me, but there are some strands that I feel I have to continue to follow and dig, because gems can only be found deep in the ground. My attempt is to deepen the research that I am passionate about by always inserting new and challenging elements.

AGD: We spoke briefly about the materials and you mentioned how *scagliola* and *raku* were both 16<sup>th</sup> century techniques. This combined with the folds in the curtain of your piece *Cleo* led me straight to thinking about Gilles Deleuze's essay "The Fold" which is about the fold as the fundamental Baroque apparatus: the infinity of it, its power, its texture. Early in the piece he writes: "Ceaselessly dividing, the parts of matter form little swirls

within a swirl, and in them there are much smaller ones, and still more in the concave intervals of the swirls which touch one another. Matter thus offers a texture that is infinitely porous, that is spongy or cavernous without empty parts, since there is always a cavern in the cavern: each body contains a pond of matter in which there are different currents and waves." I'm curious if you think of your sculptures and their materials as having not only different layers but doing different work with those different layers and how over they reveal themselves to both you and the viewer.

CF: The boundary between revealing and not-revealing of the works is subtle, and even in the phase of "completeness" of the work, I always try to make sure that there is a component that includes or alludes to a hidden, elusive or inaccessible dimension. The discourse we had before, regarding the welcoming and the unknown, or even danger, translates into the works in the coexistence of expressed and veiled aspects, and in their being the result of a both conceptual and practical stratification. Then there are some traits that allude to this discourse more explicitly: take the pottery, which invites a viewer in, to look, but which also modify the trajectory of the viewer's gaze, or the sleeping heads of "Cleo," physically present yet absent, or "Edda," whose great body extends beneath the floor and in the imagination. The search for this "incompleteness" of the works that opens itself to be completed by the imagination, is a powerful instrument of engagement, both for me and for the spectator. I was impressed by a quote, unfortunately I do not remember who said it, stated by Axel Vervoordt at the end of the exhibition *Intuition* at Palazzo Fortuny, in which I had the honor of participating; he spoke of the "non-finite" in relation to the "in-finite" as a dimension able to keep the work of art alive because it is able to access to an ulterior dimension. Among the folds of the curtain, in the hidden or "unresolved" features of the works, I look for this possibility, of the object/work to become an activator of imaginary, of reverie, of thought, of emotion.

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