

Sergio Pucci

in conversation with Daniela Lancioni

Like many photographers, there are two sides to your profession – documenting for others and experimenting as an artist in your own right.

Sometimes these two activities overlap.

At the Palazzo delle Esposizioni we are presenting your work as a documenter but, before we introduce it, I would like to read something you said about artistic expressivity which will help us interpret your photographs on show here.

“Right from the start I realised that, as a technique, photography gave images an independence from reality, almost as if they had nothing to do with what they were representing. For this reason, rather than record reality, I used photography as the best form of subtraction”.

As I looked through some of the papers stored over the years, I noticed an old newspaper cutting: “Suicide victim saved in the nick of time yesterday afternoon at Ponte Sublicio. A fifty-nine-year-old man, Pucci Ferrer, did not hesitate a moment before running down the steps and diving into the water to save the drowning woman, who would otherwise have been swept away by the current”.

That was my father, an anarchist, an artist, the best stonecutter in Rome. He had a workshop in Testaccio and used to make the most spectacular inlaid tables... not to mention his alabaster basins, in layers like an onion. He graduated from the Istituto d’Arte, which in those days was called the Museo Artistico Industriale di Roma.

I wanted to work in films. In 1948, like my father, I enrolled to study painting at the Istituto d’arte but switched to photography as soon as the department opened. I wanted to become a film operator but in those days it was hard to get regular pay with film work. I had seen my brother Mario, who worked in the industry as an electrician.

I had to earn my crust somehow, so in 1954 – just two months after graduating – I began teaching at the Istituto d'Arte and continued there until I retired.

When did you start as an art photographer?

I started with colleagues from the Istituto d'Arte.

Ercole Drei and Leoncillo. Pericle Fazzini had been my plastics teacher and had a studio on Via Margutta, and Alberto Ziveri had also been my teacher but didn't allow anyone into his studio. There was also Giuseppe Uncini, who taught mosaic and who was a dear friend.

Another colleague used to photograph for Ettore Colla but he wasn't happy, so one morning he came to me and said, "I need someone who can photograph my sculptures without them being out of focus. Could you do that, Pucci?".

At the time I was working for Luigi Montanarini, the director of the Accademia di Belle Arti, as well as for my great friend Nicola Carrino, who taught at the Corso Superiore per le Industrie Artistiche.

Nicola Carrino has called you Colla's "bard", the one who could truly convey his candour and bring out the solid transparency of his sculptures.

My working relationship and personal friendship with Colla are so deep that they still continue today, fifty years after his death.

I should say that all the shots of him in his work outfit – with his leather apron, big leather gloves, holding the welder and wearing his visor – were all staged. Colla never made his pieces himself, he would supervise others as they worked from his drawings, and in the meantime he would scour scrap iron yards for whatever pieces he needed.

Some of the photos you have chosen were taken in Alberto Gerardi's studio. The one where you can see the forge hood and work tools was taken in the classroom at the art institute where Lorenzo Guerrini taught wrought iron lessons. Others were taken in Viale Parioli 12, where Colla lived and had his studio.

And the ones with the pistols?

He had two antique pistols and would pose with them. It was all an act, he was very ironical and had a great sense of humour.

Which other artists have you worked with?

Fausto Melotti, Giulio Turcato, Bice Lazzari, Edgardo Mannucci, Guido Strazza.

I met Francesco Lo Savio at Fazzini's, he was taking photographs for him. He was quite good, in fact, but I can't say I ever talked to him at length. Tano Festa, on the other hand, was a student of mine, when I first met him he was still in shorts. He had a good personality, and Schifano too – a good heart.

I also used to work with Luca Maria Patella, it was he who convinced me to first show my works as an artist.

I've also worked with Eliseo Mattiacci, Carlo Lorenzetti, Piero Sadun.

I photographed Sergio Lombardo's 'beams' in my home, as well as some Maurizio Mochetti's works. Lombardo and I introduced Mochetti to Gian Tomaso Liverani.

I have a truckload of photographs of Carlo Maria Mariani. The one you are showing was taken here at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni. Mariani had sent me to check on how the show was being mounted and I had to have all the lights illuminating the works changed.

I knew all the Transavanguardia artists.

How did you first start working for galleries?

I wasn't particularly interested in working for the galleries, I was interested in the artists. I always chose who I wanted to photograph, it wasn't a job – for me it was a way to get to know people and make new friends.

Gian Tomaso Liverani was introduced to me by Ettore Colla and Topazia Alliata, who at the time was running the Galleria Trastevere.

Lo Savio's metal sheets on show at La Salita weren't easy to photograph. Liverani said to me, "Pucci, don't you use photography umbrellas?". I answered, "I have them but they don't work for these pieces". I placed a light in front of the work and managed to photograph it that way. At the Galleria Odyssia I photographed Leoncillo. I gave all the photographs I did at the Marlborough to the management and didn't keep any for myself. Sometimes I would go to Angelica Savinio's. At L'Attico, for Fabio Sargentini, I photographed the work of Pino Pascali, Sergio Ragalzi and Piero Pizzi Cannella.

Luisa Laureati, Giuliana De Crescenzo, Maria Colao, Mario Diacono – how did you meet them?

My name was passed around a lot, I did just about all of Rome's artists and galleries. I never photographed the opening nights, though, I always refused to do that.

How is your archive organised?

I don't really have an archive, I've never bothered to file all the material. I often gave the negatives along with the prints, it was more of a bother for me to make more prints than it would have been to do the job over again. Uncini, for example, always had my negatives.

What camera did you use, and what type of film?

With the film, or camera roll, I used a Rolleiflex. I also printed 9x12 plates with an Arca Swiss. I always photographed in black and white.

Did you print your own?

Yes, always. I had my darkroom at my Testaccio studio, in Via Evangelista Torricelli 1. I left it just two months ago, I had been there since 1954.

In which format did you print?

Always in 18x24.

What paper did you generally use??

Ferrania mat K 201, but also K 208 glossy. I was always careful to make very clear prints, I never touched the negatives up in any way, except in a few special cases.

He shows me some negatives where the surface around a sculpture by Colla has been coloured red and explains the pre-digital era technique for blurring outlines – you had to apply a red coating, new coccine, with a paintbrush over the area, which would not develop and stay white.

I touched up these photos of Colla and inserted clouds. What today you would do on a computer, in those days you had to do by hand.

He shows me a book containing an image of a sculpture by Colla, against a sky with a few – rather baroque - clouds. Next to the image, an annotation explains the procedure that was used: “photograph taken against a white background, overprinted with another negative with the clouds. The base has been reconstructed with paper cut-outs in different shades”. Although superimposed negatives are still widely in use, it is very unusual to see – on the photographic print used for the reproduction – the rectangular base of the sculpture obtained with a collage of cardboards in different shades of grey, juxtaposed to mimic the effect of shadows and perspective.

Have you ever had an assistant?

No, not even to carry my equipment.

I never made much money with photography. I've earned exchanging photos with works of art.

Did you prefer photographing the artists while they were working or in studied poses?

The portraits would often come at the end of the job. When I had a few leftover shots in my camera I would photograph the artists.

(DL)

The photographs of Ettore Colla on display were printed by Sergio Pucci in his workshop. The others are analogical prints made for this exhibition by Fotogramma24 in Rome.