

# In Villa

Alberto Salvadori

“...very / Whitely, discreetly...”

Sylvia Plath, *Mushrooms*

“Ah, down there in the shining expanse  
that arches toward the hills,  
how the hum of evening thins away  
and the trees converse with the weary  
chatter of the sandbanks...”

Eugenio Montale, *Bellosguardo*

*Times*

As we were preparing the exhibition with Giovanni, I re-read what I would define as a literary gem: *Up at the Villa* by W. Somerset Maugham, given to me years ago by an English friend who, while staying in Florence, loved to go for walks at night, even as far as the first hills outside town, magical places that have helped to create the good fortune of our city.

The nocturnal scents and sounds of those walks gave me an idea and an image of Florence I had never had before; in his nocturnal walk in the garden, Giovanni Ozzola gave me emotions and sensations I hadn't felt in a long time. *The villa stood on the top of a hill. From the terrace in front of it you had a magnificent view of Florence; behind was an old garden... with lovely trees... grassy lanes and an artificial grotto...*

This is the beginning of *Up at the Villa*, which tells of a Florence different from that of today, (and I say this without regret; time passes for all of us, even for an eternal sleeping beauty like *Florentia*); the writer immerses us in a country town, where everyone walked and lights were apparitions.

Going down from the villa towards the city center, the protagonists of Maugham's short novel move towards a city recognizable through small but enduring signs, like the trees along the road.

Trees are an essential presence in the park of Villa Bardini, marking the times and places of the garden.

When Giovanni and I took our walks, the Judas tree was in full bloom, and all the other plants and trees offered their seasonal shade and buds. Thus began a journey through nature, suggestions and symbols.

For the writer, the instrument of creation, of unveiling, is the pen, and the page becomes analogous to the Albertian window within which, according to a tradition, everything is contained and manifests itself; for Ozzola the instruments are the camera and the video camera.

Artists thus take us to a place where most of us never allow ourselves to go, to see where we are often unable to look, to become involved through exploration that establishes their work and their art as future hopes for our sensibilities.

The staging of encounters during a nighttime walk, with an exhibition arrangement conceived specifically for Villa Bardini, is the dimension within which everything is manifested and contained.

Walking at night is always a different way of seeing things – the city we're visiting, the neighborhood we live in, a garden.

We think that there is no light at night, or in any case we associate the night with darkness, with obscurity, with silence, and at any rate most of us spend the night sleeping, taking our lives, at least for the moment, elsewhere.

But walking at night, we realize that the light at night is strong, capable of revealing what the day hides from us; and the sounds and noises are different as well.

The project with Giovanni Ozzola came about in reference to the night, to nocturnal walks in the Bardini garden and the desire to bring the night into the BardiniContemporanea space.

Light reigns in the artist's work as an element of growth, of apparition, of temporality.

The theme of light, of nocturnal encounters, of revealing a place through apparently secret passages, is his main merit in this exhibition, and a persistent feature of his entire oeuvre.

Evident or hidden meanings, metamorphic elements are contained in the images; the unfolding of situations appears to us in a suspension of time, another element of the figurative nature of Ozzola's photography.

A key word for understanding this artist's work is iconology, which leads us to grasp the content of elements through an analysis of form and images: his photographs or videos are the result of a construction, which always results from the intentions manifested through the images.

Another key word correlated with iconology is the Italian adjective *icastico*, from the Greek εικαστικός, which means evocative of clear, incisive, memorable visual images.

Both of these words express the exactness that Ozzola's works carry within them, along with the lightness and the poetics of a vision aimed at a precise rendering of nuances, of thought and of imagination.

It is all brought about a priori, the fruit of the artist's magnificent instinctive reaction to what is around him, to what stirs his sensibility; afterwards, it all finds its theoretical and critical dimension.

The vision of a moon at night, suspended in a dark sky; the appearance of a Judas tree, flourishing in its apparent suffering, budding flowers directly from its bark and giving us luxuriant green boughs; and finally the morning re-awakening, with the passing of the night, from darkness to the light of a random point of the garden, which is also enlivened by plants and by the signs of everyday constancy: these are the encounters and presences within the dark space of the villa.

The presence of a luminous script in a little artificial grotto - a fantastical and mysterious place that has characterized patrician Florentine gardens since the Renaissance - appears as a presence of refreshing restfulness, arousing our sensibilities and the frame of mind or mood that impacts us while walking and entering into contact with a magical place like the Bardini garden.

*Stimmung*, as the script reads, intended as a mood, as Florian Matzner has explained so well in his essay for the catalogue, is the perceptible condition into which Ozzola plunges us with his images.

The boundary between the real and the imaginary, between day and night, thus establishes a dialogue into which we try to enter delicately, seeking our place.