



Reprinted from Franz Schulze, “La Mostra di Chicago (1970),” in *Virginio Ferrari: Gocce d’Amore Pop* (Parma, Italy: Istituto di Storia dell’Arte dell’Università di Parma, 1971), 36. Published in conjunction with the exhibition “Virginio Ferrari: Gocce d’Amore Pop” shown at the Salone dei Contrafforti in Pilotta, Parma, Italy.

Franz Schulze—Art Historian and Critic.

Judging from a cursory glance at Virginio Ferrari’s most recent exhibit in Chicago — in November of 1970 — one would have concluded that it was altogether removed in mood and matter from the work he was doing in 1966, when he first arrived in this city. In his earlier sculpture he had been preoccupied with a variant of abstract surrealism that was marked by expressionistically agitated volumes and usually executed in bronze. The fantasy was biomorphic in form, and it hung tantalizingly on the edge of recognizability, without even inching over it. It contained components reminiscent of insects’ legs of bagpipes and footballs (or sewed-up wounds?), of phalluses, sperm droplets and other erotic images, yet these associations never quite congealed into secure identification. Thus the elements remained magical, and they tended to proliferate exuberantly, even compulsively, from a broad base of ideas.

By the end of 1970, however, he had radically simplified his style. The November show featured a number of sleek serial sculptures, mostly in Plexiglas. Their surfaces were milky and cool, their emotional temper aloof. Now the ideas were severely edited, and repetition rather than variation was the rule.

This transition occurred in four years’ time, and it appeared to entail a complete shift of expressive motives. Had he not grown progressively more interested in smoothness, hardness, and cleanliness of form and in the use of synthetic materials (Naugahyde and epoxy as well as Plexiglas)? And had this not been accompanied by a reduction in the factors of overt surprise and magic? The answer to both questions was evidently yes.

Yet the more one studied these later works, the less satisfying the assessment became. Something remained alien to all the purity: a faint but persistent recollection of old fancies. That which had once been surreal substance was now almost nothing but a formal shadow, but it did not quite stop giving off the associative overtones. Phallic and vaginal forms were still there, reduced almost to mere extensions and recessions, or volumes and voids, but with some vestigial erotic implications left. They disturbed the austerity, or more properly, they relieved and animated it, and lent the works a warmth and a gentle caprice they would otherwise not have had.

Then there were the drawings, those frankly surrealist efforts which one was likely to look at only after he had spent time with the sculpture. They left no doubt about Ferrari’s persistent concern with fantasy. They too had been largely stripped of the dense textures and discursive stories of the mid-1960s, but their juxtapositions of eerie organic forms with occasional mechanical things were still clearly intended as mysteries, as subversions of rationality. It became gradually apparent that his objective over four years had been distillation of a single and consistent point of view, not the exchange of one style for another. There is always the possibility that he will someday banish all

suggestion of the marvelous from his work, and become a complete formalist. But as of now associative imagery, almost inevitably of bio-erotic import, remains the germ that informs all of his Chicago work.

Indeed there has been a quality of life force in all his sculpture, even in the earliest days of his career. He came of age late in the 1950s, a decade during which international art dominated abstraction, but of a distinctly romantic sort. Forms were personalized and frequently roused into passionate movement by the flailings of the brush or the sculptor's tool. After a brief involvement with straight figuration during his student days in Verona, Ferrari turned his attentions toward abstraction, but the results almost always contained the reminder of a source in the physical world. The *Tragic Flight* bronzes are among the most obvious example of this: a series of sculptures executed following the 1962 air crash which took the lives of several members of the Atlantic Art Association, people who had visited Ferrari's studio just a short time before.

The directions of the established artists who interested Ferrari most during his formative period tended to confirm his own inclination toward affective subjects rendered in expressionist forms: Luciano Minguzzi (with whom he studied), Kenneth Armitage, Lynn Chadwick, Germaine Richier. Somewhat later he saw the work of Etienne Martin, and he remembers being impressed by its "organic brutality". By 1964 he was a polished professional himself, working in a more or less abstract impressionist idiom. In addition to frequent appearances in major Italian galleries and cross-sectional shows, he had been included in the Munich International, and had had his first one-man exhibition in the United States.

Two years later he had accepted a post as sculptor-in-residence at the University of Chicago. By then he had already begun his first important stylistic shift from expressionism to surrealism. The initial products of this new orientation were aggressive bronzes in which richly modeled erotic elements vied with insectoid forms. The products of this phase metamorphosed further; one is tempted to suspect that the increasingly laconic hardness and the larger scale of the work he was doing as the 1960's drew to a close were responses not only to his new American environment but to the anti-romantic mood which gathered everywhere during the '60's. *La goccia della vita* — The Drop of Life — which could be variously interpreted as blood or as sperm, emerged as the leitmotiv of his sculpture of those years, and it sometimes gained in both poignance and shock by being superimposed against surfaces much too cold and inhospitable for it.

Was this collision of the organic and the inorganic, of warmth and cold, another sign of Ferrari's reaction to the brassy newness of America? It would be conjectural to claim as much, but there is no doubt that the direction his work rapidly moved in at the turn of the '70's was toward the terse minimalism that has been at the heart of American art for the past half-decade.

Ferrari is still a young and developing sculptor, already accomplished enough to justify a full retrospective account of himself as early as his 34th year, but sufficiently mercurial in his interests and alive to his time to suggest that his career is likely to take more than a couple of turns before he is done with it. As we have said, for all its many expressive aspects, his sculpture is thus far held together by the unflinching presence of the organic germ — the drop of life — and that theme, together with its manifold variations, augurs well for a richly creative future.