

FEDERICA SCHIAVO GALLERY

SIMONA BARBERA  
THESE STONES WILL NOT  
DANCE OR CLAP HANDS  
AT THE SOLSTICE

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## INTO THE DARKEST LOOP

In recent years Simona Barbera has taken her own autonomous route, in respect to contemporary visual arts and experimental music in Italy. Musician, singer, composer, performer, visual artist and author of photos, videos and soundtracks for other artists, Simona Barbera has constantly woven the densest artistic discourse which, at first glance, appears both scattered and heterogenous.

Her work, made up of many little variations of medium and formalisations, well describes the heuristic process which characterises her meaningful and eccentric artistic research. Formally and symbolically Simona Barbera has equally conveyed in disparate mediums the same imaginary visuals, acoustics and emotions that regularly reform and manifest themselves in each of her projects: video fragments, photographs, installations, collage, sound and image files as well as sketches and drawings (displayed for the first time in this exhibition) and even clothes and assorted apparel all designed by the artist.

The darkness, the expressive qualities that this psychological and visual dimension transport the viewer to, can be translated in her works and in the images that make up the mapping of her art, inviting us to slightly close our eyes in order to better penetrate into an intimate spatial and temporal dimension, which unconsciously mixes portions of reality with darker moments of dreams and the imagination. For the first time in a private space, the artist has condensed all the fundamental elements of her poetics into the realisation of an autonomous environment, intense like a music track: a sonorous and visual loop that the viewer is invited to pass through and listen to as such.



*These Stones Will Not Dance or Clap Hands At The Solstice* is the title chosen by the artist to introduce the spectator to her world, rich with recollections and multiple suggestions filtered down not only through cinema and literary and visual cultures, but also from magic, mythology and other esoteric elements. In fact, the title refers to a track by Derek Jarman which describes the magical and psycho-geographical qualities found in his garden, both vegetal and mineral, that the English director cultivated in Dungeness on the Kent coast in the last years of his life. Such a reference directly recalls the medieval and renaissance images of Hortus Conclusus (enclosed garden), a theme which Simona Barbera has already addressed in the project Orchard (2006). In this case, the artist interlaced various media to describe a space in time limited to one performance, transforming

it into a garden of images and sounds contained within a precise artistic ritual, delimited by her voice that, just like the antique depictions of Hortus Conclusus which expressed the feminine predisposition to a closed but fertile space and to whose diverse internal natural elements such as flowers, shrubs, rocks and water came recombined as an artifice of nature, from which emerges a precise iconographical intention tied to cults and symbolic tales.

In the same way, Simona Barbera cultivates the space with the juxtaposition of natural and artificial elements, remixing them, sampling them, using synthesisers, creating both live and recorded parallel soundscapes, to which she adds her extremely evocative and evanescent voice.

Her music incarnates elements from different worlds which range from noise, dark ambient, electro, microsound, laptop music and at times melodic and rhythmic shadings from black metal or techno. However, it is her voice, understood as an instrument to be a transversal presence within the mixture of all these genres, that works not so much with the spirit of quotation, but more as precise notes placed side by side to compose an independent and personal sonorous discourse.

Simona plucks this vision from the voice like an instrument and enriches it by interlacing the technical dialogue with that of the expressive and intimate. Her imagery is strongly influenced by the visual culture of the extreme Norwegian music scene (where the artist has lived and carried out research for many years), with such 'cursed' protagonists as Burzum and younger Scandinavian groups like Arabrot with whom the artist has collaborated. However, she herself never assumes that relentless tone, characteristically menacing and nihilistic, but rather translates it into a penetrating song, ethereal, reflective, equally tormented and warm, which on one hand recalls the American pop singer Nico, in particular on her detached and hypnotic final live album *Fata Morgana* (recorded in West Berlin in 1988) and on the other has influences from female Middle Eastern singing.

The complex articulation of all these elements melts into a powerful and primary act that, through the voice defines the space and the actions of her performance with the intense and frequent dj sets, where the ritual aspect and strong relationship with the public brings out an atypical rebellious feminine characteristic, reminding us of Babalon or The Scarlett Woman in the pagan visions of Thelema, representing the liberated woman as an expression of sexual impulse and vitality.

The process of sound transfiguration happens in parallel within the images used by the artist in the preparation of the performance and of the exhibition: the path begins with the blurred but still recognisable image of a wild cat, a reworking of a photo taken by the artist, which conceptually signals the starting point and also coincides with the end point of the loop. The figure of the cat, seen as the animal adjectively described through the centuries in terms of magic and ethereality, therefore represents the border, or the limit to which the purely figurative images are lost, leaving an undefined space.

Along the walls of the gallery the murals, made up of dark hues and spots resulting from the pouring of black paint, create gashes towards an imagined landscape, shadows which are deposited and which are observed as vacuums into which the imagination can escape towards other scenarios, at the same time the music allowing the continued spatial and psychological solicitation towards an imprecise destination where the primary elements and the aggregate states of matter are recombined altogether at the same time, present and overlapping.

The same liquid quality, metamorphosed from these fixed projections on the wall is rediscovered in the representation of the landscapes obtained through the digital processing of real photographs: in this series of work, the images seem to be continuously missing, vanishing. They are at the same time landscapes and their ghosts. Clouds, snow-clad expanses, crags and glaciers describe surreal but strongly telluric segments, which in turn give back a powerfully expressive ambivalence.

The natural primitive wilderness, appears at times to evaporate creating spots and abstract forms which at times appear to shape themselves into monstrous figures and grotesques, echoes of fantasy characters found in the Nordic fables whom artists like the Norwegian Theodor Kittlesen and the Austrian Alfred Kubin illustrated, although with clear differences (more inspired by nature and romantic prints, the former more symbolist, the latter more expressionist). That dark world of the unconscious and liberator of primitive energy, that from chaos is sublimated in natural entities which are strongly physical: the relationship with the vegetal and animal kingdoms, the suspension of time, the concrete representation of death pervade from subliminal emotions, synthesised in the portrait of a luxurious and deadly nature, destined to swallow up those who dare to challenge it.

The lack of a real and proper definition of the subjects on the other hand, projects these visual hints towards an experience similar to the Rorschach test, the famous spots used in psychometric analysis designed in the early 1900's but which Leonardo da Vinci and Boticelli had already sensed in the interpretation of the so-called 'ambiguous designs'. The contents of the spots are usually subdivided into the categories 'human', 'natural', 'animal' and 'abstract' so just as the dreamlike and unconscious hints from the world of fairytales which contain in every single detail a transformation of signs, from positive to negative and vice versa.

These Stones Will Not Dance or Clap Hands At The Solstice is a circular story, to be approached with a spirit of pure visual fascination through which Simona Barbera remodels time and space according to the rules of her eccentric imagination and hypnotises the visitor by leading them into the dark universe of dreams and timelessness, both magical and strongly feminine.

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Simona Barbera, Black Cat, 2009, print on cotton paper, 30 x 30 cm