

## ROME

## Luigi Ontani

ACCADEMIA NAZIONALE DI SAN LUCA

A self-curated retrospective often risks being bombastic or over the top, but not in the case of Luigi Ontani, who represented his emblematic path from the 1970s to the present with eighty-five works—photographs, watercolors, sculptures in ceramic and bronze, and one mosaic—in which he is the main subject, turning the show into a sort of ironic and phantasmagoric über-self-portrait.

Since the beginning of his career, Ontani's reflections on art history have been both observant and irreverent. Using disguises and disrobing, Ontani reinterprets not only iconic figures from Italian art, but also poets, heroes, saints, and sinners from many cultures, sometimes crossing the subtle boundary between irony and sarcasm. He transforms and multiplies himself in an endless play of mirrors, shuttling between fantasy and reality in a vertigo of time and meaning. Particularly in his sculptures, he effects bizarre and enchanting metamorphoses, with unpredictable leaps of logic (reflected in often untranslatable punning titles), combining mythological or allegorical figures, and anthropomorphic or symbolic animals. Everything intrigues him: myth, epic, religiosity, vice. And everything is inscribed on his body, which is often naked, as if his skin were a form of radar that picks up synchronicities and vibrations, lights and shadows, from the depths of time. Just as he ranges through the centuries, he also moves easily from India to Bali, from Rome to New York, taking in the salient aspects—both artistic and spiritual—of each culture, in an incessant interchange. Where he encounters inner affinities, he physically interprets, without prejudice, Shiva or Christ, liberated from any sense of belonging to a given territory, free to take on the emotional facets and human contradictions he perceives at any locale. His Narcissus mirrors himself in a pool that reflects multiplicity rather than a single individual. This Narcissus looks beyond the surface, going deeper, embracing the shadow. A voracious observer, he has traveled and lived, letting himself be touched by the world's stories. He no longer contemplates only his reflection, but rather assimilates and regenerates the cultures he encounters. While he employs multiple appearances, masks and ornamentations, he then reabsorbs everything onto his skin, onto his face, onto his body, like a living simulacrum, bearing witness to his own complexity and that of the world.

Ontani inserted polychromatic ceramic sculptures from the series "Canopi," 1997–; "BellimBustTi," 1996–; and "ErmEstÉtiche," 1995–, in the niches of the spectacular spiral staircase designed by Francesco Borromini for the Palazzo Carpegna, now home to the Accademia Nazionale di San Luca. Together the works formed a parade of artists (Jackson Pollock [*BellimBustTo Pollock*, 1996]), composers (Gioachino



Luigi Ontani, *David d'après Michelangelo*, 1970, seven color photographs, overall 6' 1" x 25' 3".

Rossini [*EremEstEtiche – RossinAria*, 2011], literary figures (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti [*ErmEstEstiche – MariNettiDannuziazione*, 2010]; Dante Alighieri [*ErmEstEtiche – PavouDanTe*, 1995–96]), and historical personalities such as Pythagoras (*ErmEstEtiche Pit Allegorica*, 2007) and Nero (*ErmEstEtiche NeronEros*, 1995), appearing full-length or as busts, on gilded, twisted columns, almost all with Ontani's face. Embedding himself into the individual history of each, he becomes the mirror and alter ego of the others, and he reveals their peculiar traits, excavating their distinctive features, obsessions, and idiosyncrasies. On the other side of the staircase, in a series of lenticular photos titled "*Anamorpse*," 2000, the artist assumed postures that multiplied, depending on the viewer's position. These images were veritable self-portraits in motion, full of cross-cultural references, but also patently emotional.

Faithful to himself and to all his faces, Ontani fearlessly embodies the sacred and the profane, in the most extreme sense of those terms. Revisiting the Last Supper and the Passion of Christ in High Baroque style, even assuming Jesus's suffering face and crown of thorns, in *Ecce Homo d'après Guido Reni*, 1970, he seizes on gestures and symbols that are key to the Catholic tradition. Then, in the following room, he presented *David*, 1970, a suite of seven photographs inspired by Michelangelo, where his own naked, life-size body asserts itself as a vehicle of both culture and nature.

—*Ida Panicelli*

*Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.*