

**Critical text by Francesca Pasini**

*Volevo le calze nuove ('I Wanted New Stockings')*

Maddalena Sisto was born with a pencil in her hand: her primary school exercise books tell us as much. She often received high marks. There is a touch that brings to mind her fascination with collage, with the cutting, with the immediate and synthetic sign to which she accustomed us when she turned into MAD, when she used her stylized figures to recount the reality, the fashion, the emotions and the euphoria of the roaring years of Made in Italy.

It is fascinating to look through the drawings of her childhood and adolescence in search of her intuitions before she decided to go into journalism, underlining the tics and stereotypes of femininity with withering sarcasm. There was a caustic side that put you on the alert, that demolished the glamour and hinted at women's rebellion against the rules. What nostalgia!

Today the women's bodies have become a sideshow on TV, a sop to male desire that brazenly continues to propose the model of woman as sex object. There is no need to mention those in power who have had an influence on this archaic and oppressive relationship between the sexes. We all know who they are.

It's better to hurry back to MAD's figures. And further back still to her drawings of the seventies, when she depicted days spent by young girls at the seaside, amidst the anxieties and uncertainties of adolescence, the discovery of their own bodies and the desire to shape them in their own ways, without following the models of a stereotypical seductiveness. The bodies that Maddalena Sisto drew speak of women's relations with the world, the discovery that came with starting out from themselves, from their own desires.

These were the years in which feminism had shaken the foundations of patriarchy, and in which it was said that the 'body is mine and I do what I want with it', that the 'personal is political'. Maddalena's drawings and watercolours remind us of that time and contain within them the proposal of a different relationship between the sexes. They are a multiple self-portrait, in which the many different passages that make up the female identity emerge. Women in flesh and blood, with their bodies in full view, skinny, naked, with a few kilos too many, decidedly fat, in short with no fear of looking at themselves. Here and there male phalluses appear, sometimes mocked, at others simply described in order to bear witness to the breaking of a taboo. I don't know if Maddalena would have agreed, but in these drawings I see a portrait not just of herself, but of all women. Tenderness and irony, scornful depictions of frames of mind and a sort of liberating paean to the freedom to be themselves, with the awareness that desires are many and sometimes contradictory. Perhaps it is no accident that in the series of large drawings on pale brown paper there are always groups of figures. I'm reminded of Cindy Sherman's photographs from the late seventies, in which she represented herself according to the many stereotypes of feminine subjectivity. Maddalena may have been aware of them, or perhaps she simply lived at a time when that was where research was heading. Although they are less bitter, they also remind me of Carol Rama's watercolours of the late thirties and early forties. Far ahead of her time and in scandalous fashion, she explored with her *Appassionatas* the theme of sexual desire from the viewpoint of a woman, sometimes presenting the male phallus on a

disproportionate scale, enveloping her female figures with its overwhelming presence. Today we immediately see the contrast between a sexuality that had to be repressed (the woman's) and one that had to go along with the will to power, but in that period which preceded the Second World War this too was a war, and it left dead and wounded on the battlefield.

Maddalena belonged to another age and was able to permit herself the grace of self-parody even when referring to a phallus. There is less drama in her women, because self-knowledge and the search for the words and symbols to communicate it had become a collective movement, the only revolution that has cut across the boundaries of culture and class and radically modified behaviour in the spheres of society, the affections and the family. But what is attractive in these works of hers is the sense of fragility and of understanding of the small and great trials that accompany growth. We find it again in the words that she had written on the back of a wrapper of the weekly puzzle magazine *La Settimana Enigmistica*, in which amidst the other torments of a teenager she declared 'I wanted beautiful stockings, new stockings, me alone in Alessandria, but I won't have them'. Little upsets, foolish sorrows that can be sensed in these figures and that in a more curt and abstract way found their way into MAD's thousand and one women.

Her playfulness, her mockery, her readiness to overthrow the rules are apparent in the sculpture that imitates one of Calder's mobiles, and above all in the drawings of female angels and the extraordinary,

elegant and highly effective series of *Mother Christmases* carved out of balsawood: with some of them we are going to celebrate Christmas 2010 in the gallery with Maddalena-MAD.