

Vedovamazzei

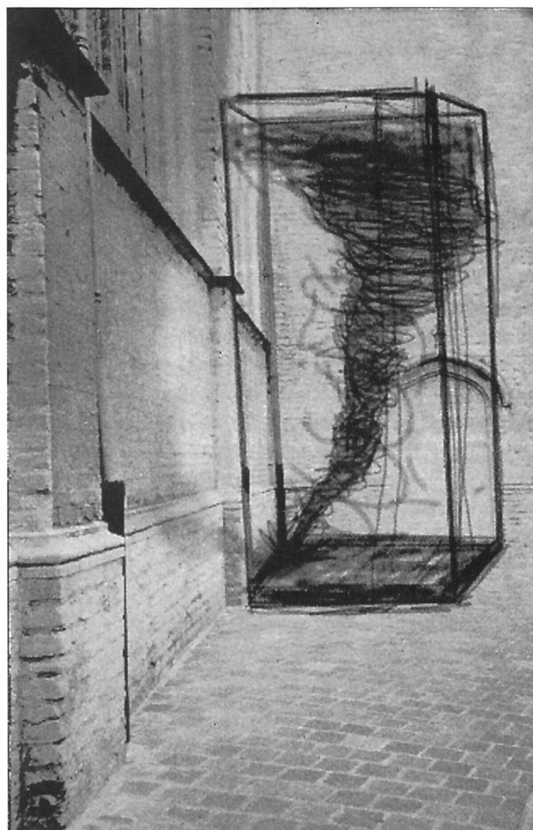
Gilda Williams

Vedovamazzei
Tornado 2000

'VEDOVA MAZZEI' LITERALLY MEANS 'THE WIDOW MAZZEI', and is the pseudonym since 1991 for the Italian artistic duo of Stella Scala & Simeone Crispino. One version of their founding myth claims that the cryptic name 'vedova Mazzei' was spotted on a tombstone. The name etched in stone suggested a woman whose identity had been completely subsumed into that of her spouse, having lost her first name to her marital state (widow) and her maiden name to her husband (Mazzei). Yet the 'widow Mazzei' was only 'born' when Signor Mazzei died; his death signalled her birth.

There are many accidents of birth in Vedovamazzei's work, which crosses every possible medium. At its most disturbing, such accidents are encouraged: *Babies in Waiting*, 1996, is a (staged) photograph of a nurse caught spitting into a sterile, sperm-collecting container at an artificial insemination clinic.

Vedovamazzei
Go Wherever You Want,
Bring Me Whatever You
Wish 2000-04



More elaborately, a 1992 series of ten large-scale paintings, *X-rays*, depict highly believable, smoky black-and-white X-rayed heads of famous deformed skulls: Pinocchio (with long, bony nose); Bart Simpson (whose skull is topped with his signature jagged ridge); a saint (with floating halo), and so forth. Some are living jokes: the skull of the carabinieri is extended comically to fit beneath his helmet. It's a joke, but painstakingly rendered in large format, 200 x 200 cm, exquisitely painted in oil, occupying an uncharted space between fact and fiction, life and death. In an unorthodox late portrait by Andy Warhol of Philip Niarchos, the artist traced over an X-ray-type CAT scan of the sitter's head, forcing a reminder of mortality into his usual vanity portrait. Vedovamazzei's X-rayed 'sitters', instead, are beings who originally had no mortality, 'undead' characters from fairytales, cartoons and carabinieri jokes. Masquerading as doctors, the artists endow their patients with bodily solidity and physical deformity; they are given disease and mortality by virtue of the artists' superheroic, X-ray vision.

The ability to see and see-through is another theme in Vedovamazzei's varied work. *Fog*, 1992, and *Mirage*, 1996, were both instances in which the gallery was filled with a haze of dry ice, contradicting the 'viewing experience' expected of the art gallery. On another occasion, the pair built a glass wall (*Time without Example*, 1999), complete with door and light switch, down the centre of the gallery, recreating a real wall which had

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been there before. The glass wall, a modernist invention, was used in to make inside and outside permeable in the manner of Mies van der Rohe: the exterior walls were floor-to-ceiling panes of glass, while interior dividers (as at the 1929 Barcelona Pavilion) were impermeable, even solid marble, barriers. Vedovamazzei's glass wall enacts the opposite effect: the outside remains sealed off, and the interior glass wall, while continuing to function as such (preventing passage from one side of the gallery to the other) has the effect of putting anything on the other side on display, as if behind a shop window. Rather than obstructing our view to create privacy and enclosure, this wall actually enhances the experience of looking through it.

Exhibited on the other side of the wall on that occasion was a series of Vedovamazzei drawings, returning us to a traditional gallery experience. Essential to Vedovamazzei's practice is drawing. Both artists are consummate and prolific draftspeople for whom drawing seems to be a veritable compulsion: at their first London gallery showing at Percy Miller in May/June 2005, the artists presented *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*, an ordinary set of bookshelves whose edges, however, have been profusely decorated and drawn. Jammed with written notes, stitched together and scribbled with graffiti, they are instantly recognisable as extreme examples of the textbooks we defaced as teenagers. Some drawings are fragile and delicate – landscapes, figures, faces – drawn with the sort of detail and elaboration produced only in a state of prolonged classroom ennui. The artists seem eternally blessed in such a state.

Some of Vedovamazzei's larger works originate as drawings and bear the kind of formal freedom – heedless of cost, scale, the force of gravity, etc – that is easily realised in a drawing but potentially impossible in three dimensions. *Tornado*, 2000, is a sculpture project, never fully realised, of a functioning tornado spinning violently within the confines of a glass box. Other works that began life as a drawing were actually realised, and retain the sense of the improbable. *Go Wherever You Want, Bring Me Whatever You Wish*, 2000-04, is a full-size articulated lorry whose container holds a complete lake – 3ft deep, with rowing boat, lilies and pond reeds, like a portable slice of water landscape. One need only install Crispino & Scala in the little boat to have a living replica of Manet's famous double portrait, Claude Monet and his wife on their boat-studio, 1874. But one is also tragically reminded of refugees, smuggled often with deadly results across international borders in trucks like these, seeking the peaceful refuge of the lake surface, but trapped in



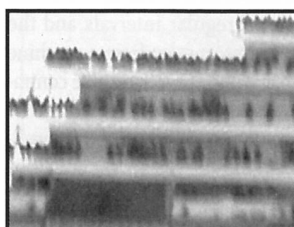
the murky waters below. Another work, *Stella Maris O.G.M. (Ocean Genetically Modified)*, 2001, recreates with chemical precision the exact conditions of the Pacific Ocean, in a small pool set within an underground space carved out of a mountainside. Unlike the vast and unfathomable oceans of Tacita Dean and others, Vedovamazzei's is a tamed, domestic sort of ocean, unexpectedly alive in a sort of funerary pit. This underground space also recalls the hide-outs kidnappers dig to conceal their victims, darkly suggestive again of life trapped and buried within the hills.

But the widow is not obsessed only by death; she also likes to dabble in slapstick humour. In *After Love*, 2003, the pair built a life-size reconstruction of the house that falls behind Buster Keaton in the 1920 film *One Week*, featured also in Steve McQueen's stony-faced version, *Deadpan*, 1997, a kind of architectural testimonial to a joke played out some 85 years ago. In a similar vein, at the Commes des Garçons shop in London, the pair installed a wall-size tilted mirror, *Butterfly Effect*, 2004, which sparkles glamorously but faces luxury shoppers with the uneasy possibility of involuntarily re-enacting Buster Keaton's gag – this time however without the benefit of a fortuitously placed window to save them.

Hung at an extreme slant, it behaves like a funhouse mirror, shortening bodies within it, constantly reminding visitors to this high fashion setting that they are never as tall and lithe as they would hope. Like the mirror image, things with Vedovamazzei never are what they appear to be. ■

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Vedovamazzei
Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood 2005



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