

Between Myth and Memory

Mila Tenaglia (September 29, 2016)



Serena Scapagnini is a multifaceted conceptual artist who uses mixed media, such as ink, oil, photographs, and sculptures. Her formal training in literature, semiotics, and history of religions serves as an integral part of her artistic process. Serena was able to bring the sacred and the symbolic into her work between Europe, Asia, and the United States.

[Serena Scapagnini](#) [2]'s latest show, [Synapses](#) [3], has been on show at the Studio Vendome Art Gallery in New York from July through September 2016. The project will soon return to Italy with a major exhibition scheduled for 2017. We sat down with Serena for a chat about her life and art.

Your studies allowed you to become the eclectic artist you are today. How would you describe your intellectual and professional journey?

In both my literary and artistic training, there was always a strong influence based on a type of comparative approach to the language of art, which was later deepened by the approach of [Mircea Eliade](#) [4], an anthropologist and historian of religion who studies rituals, symbols, and mythology. At the University of Siena, I continued my studies of Art History, focusing particularly on the High [Middle Ages](#) [5]. I studied visual structures in theophanic representations of the fifth century, which demonstrate the concept of a stratified universe with different layers of dense matter. I found this period to be very stimulating for my research in contemporary art because it was an expression of profound cultural syncretism that was practiced long ago, and, in some ways, revives itself in the

present day.

You then studied at SVA, the School of Visual Arts in New York. What's the role this city played in your artistic research?

At the [School of Visual Arts](#) [6] I pursued strictly artistic training; my master's degree was in painting and mixed media. This stems undoubtedly from the influence of my maternal grandmother, who was an artist - Laura Caravita di Sirignano - and from my uncle, Fabio Mauri, who strongly encouraged my research from the beginning. As for the role that SVA and the city have played in my journey, the most important aspect would be putting me in direct contact with the people from the art world: the lectures, the meetings with curators and young critics, and the system of galleries. That is vital.

Continuing with New York, what relationship do you have with the city, artistically speaking?

New York is a privileged place for art, not only for its natural inter-cultural identity, but also because it's a place where the interaction among people happens spontaneously. I adore the United States' ability to give life to projects, to dreams, and its ability to put creative thought into effect. In New York I was also able to meet different artists; I formed friendships and artistic partnerships with some of them that have lasted for years. Take Indian visual artist Remen Chopra, for instance. Our common vision has allowed us to work together in several international exhibitions.

On September 9, the Synapses exhibition ended with great success at the Vendome Art Gallery in New York. Curated by Nicollette Ramirez, Synapses is a project dedicated to the mind and was developed in collaboration with the Highley Lab - Program in Cellular Neuroscience of the Yale School of Medicine. Would you tell us a little more about it?

The research on synapses started four year ago as a natural continuation of a study of wave frequencies. Brainwaves and the dendritic forms of neurons that allow the brain to function have been a great source of inspiration, for which I must thank my scientific partner, Professor Michael Higley from the Yale School of Medicine. This exhibition is dedicated to the mind and to its boundless possibilities, a good part of which still needs to be explored. In observing thought, I devote space to its absence and, in the more esoteric areas of my work, to an instant of inner silence. Synapses is part of an international exhibition that started in 2015 at the India Art Fair of New Delhi, then was presented at the Contemporary Art pavilion at the Expo Milano 2015, and finally made its way to the United States in December 2015, with a personal show for Art Basel Miami held at the Miami Cultural Arts Center. After the US tour, the project will return to Italy with a major exhibition scheduled for 2017.

The exhibition also presented a yet unpublished work, NOW. What is it?

NOW includes an unpublished video produced in vivo on synaptic processes in motion. In other words, light that passes through a transparent support, activating at regular interval, which corresponds to the scanning of the dynamics of some synapses, performed by fluorescence. Their running towards each other allows for the flow of thought.

Your works have been shown in many parts of the world. How would you describe the original value that you bring with your works?

My artwork is like a stratification of levels that overlap in the construction of an image suggesting different levels of density. It's a recurring element in my work which I always bring with me in different exhibition contexts: Asia, the United States, and Europe.

You work with different materials. Which do you love to experiment with the most?

They all have a role to play. Ink drawings and thick paint treated with pure pigment create more elegant forms, which tend to thin out until they seem to disappear into the white surface of the paper. The paper itself is specifically prepared with acidic solutions, so the image itself can be rarefied. In some areas of my work, homage is paid to the memory, to those familiar places of our mental circuits that are inhabited by figures and memories; in others areas these forms are furiously broken down.

What is art to you?

I believe that when a work of art is able to express its conceptual content, relying heavily on a poetic instance, then its language can be considered universal. The measure of a piece of artwork's value, I



believe, depends, after all, on its intuitive eloquence, based on its visual rhythm

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