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CHIARA LECCA

By Andrew Brown

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Chiara Lecca's work charts the boundary between the natural and the artificial. In some respects, her sculptural 'still lifes' continue the legacy of this most ancient of art forms: to depict inanimate natural or human-made objects, to pause time, and to encourage the viewer to reflect either on the processes of nature or on some religious or philosophical concept. In particular, they resemble Dutch flower paintings of the mid-seventeenth century. But Lecca's sculptures also remind us of the inherent contradiction between the different names used to describe this artistic genre. In northern Europe and in the English-speaking world, its name is, as we have seen, 'still life', after the Dutch *stillevens* – that is 'life stilled'; but in the Romance language of the Mediterranean (and in Greek and Russian), a very different term is used: 'dead nature'. With the former, the suggestion is that the work of art preserves and celebrates the beauty of life, death is denied by preventing the onset of decay for ever. With the latter, however, it is the already dead natural world that has been frozen for eternity; life has gone with no prospect of return.

Lecca's works combine both of these meanings in a single piece. They contain not only life stilled in the form of the cut flowers, but also dead nature (nature morte) in the form of taxidermied animal parts. They also demonstrate two of the aesthetic conventions that were common to virtually all forms of still life/nature morte in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: illusionism and symbolism. At first, her clever trompe-l'oeil arrangements seem to be bunches of real flowers placed artfully on display on tables and plinths. It is only on closer inspection that we realize that what appear to be attractive lilies or tulips are in effect rabbits' ears and tails. And like earlier vanitas paintings, Lecca's sculptures are replete with symbolic references to mortality, not least the dichotomy between organic and inorganic materials, between once-living flesh that has now become dead matter. Lecca thus takes elements from the animal and plant worlds and subverts them in uncanny presentations that beguile and almost seduce, only to unsettle and even repel once their hidden, grotesque secret becomes apparent.