

# Ugo Schiavi \_ LEVIATHAN

3 april – 19 june 2022

The globe began with sea - so to speak,  
and who knows if it will not end with it,  
in its supreme tranquility?

The sea does not belong to despots.  
(Jules Verne, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea)

Ugo Schiavi's exhibition «Leviathan» represents the fourth - and perhaps last - chapter of an investigation in four acts: “Le naufrage de Neptune” (Nantes), “Gargareôn” (Arles), “Le sang de la Meduse” (Paris) and now «Leviathan» in Grenoble. Each step of this research puts the finger on the pulse of our contemporaneity, in which the notion of human identity is dissolved into a collective effort aimed at surviving through the remains of a millennial evolution - against a fate that is a menacing monster originated by our own society.

Like many cosmogonic myths, Ugo Schiavi's story begins with water. All forms of life originate from the sea, and the artist, like a modern demiurge, also extracts his molding matter from the sea. The Gorgones emerge from water: they resemble rocks or thousand-year-old shellfishes whose fascination dwells in their mysterious and garish bodies. In medieval bestiaries, creatures born from the encounter of fantasy and empirical experience have hybrid features, derived from the combination of various natural or imaginary parts. Similarly, the Gorgones are curious, charming sea creatures in which sadly familiar artificial elements like plastic bottles blend with natural organisms such as shells and gorgonians - the corals that take their name from the myth of Medusa. In this visual calembour, Ugo Schiavi plays with a suspended archaeology, presenting the fossils of a toxic present. To build his creatures, the artist has used the objects - including a large amount of plastic waste - deposited by the sea on the shore of Lavéra (Martigues, Marseille) where the biggest petrochemical plant in Europe is located. Indeed, the Gorgones are parts and emblems of the paradoxical loop of plastic which originates from the seashore and eventually returns to the seashore.

As if to give a chance of rebirth, Ugo Schiavi retraces the evolution of mankind through glories and mistakes, by means of a fictional, and at the same time frighteningly powerful narrative. In his previous works he mainly confronted real history, borrowing effigies of heroic figures, symbols of courage and glory - and yet also of human hubris. Now the artist turns his gaze to nature and passes from history to legend, as if to seek a parallel path, a possible alternative. Thus, the Gorgones are both archaeological finds from the past and souvenirs from the future - fragments of dystopian ecosystems.

As we venture into Ugo Schiavi's myth, we encounter a colossal construction, a totem with monstrous features pouring out water from his enigmatic body, like a beast breathing laboriously. Thus, rather than a fountain gush, it resembles a fatigued and intermittent breath, which, however, does not expire. Detaching itself from the aesthetics of monumental sculptures and archaeological findings, this multifaceted installation presents itself as a living being, hic et nunc. It proudly exhibits its artificial nature, made of discarded objects, branches, reproductions of ancient statues, plastic bottles, cables... while also revealing its tormented genesis: an accumulation of achievements, responsibilities, attempts and failures. Like the Gorgones, it is a living being that emerged from the sea, and one might wonder if it is meant to frighten or alert us, like a kraken, a pistrix, or the monster of monsters: the Leviathan.

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Old pagan myths and biblical legends present the Leviathan as a sea creature, the monster of chaos. It spits fire, eats humans and fights with God. In philosophical literature, Leviathan is the embodiment of the modern state, which rises above us as a great authoritarian being to whom we have entrusted, by means of a pact, our freedom. Observing this mighty creature, we are inevitably reminded of those modern Leviathans that have betrayed the pact, and that we are now trying to defeat. Legendary animal and allegory of institutions: the manifold facets of the Leviathan are embodied in this mighty totem. In Jewish tradition the Leviathan dwells in the Mediterranean Sea, the sea on whose shores Schiavi collected the residues that make it up. It now stands in its postmodern glory, an anti-monument to humanity.

Not only Ugo Schiavi's sculptures originate from the sea, but they also share a strong connection with the mechanics of the sea: a kind of current flows within the works of the French artist as a natural force orchestrating its parts in a visual atlas that speaks about men's past and future, as we've seen. Indeed, current is a permanent agent in Schiavi's production, not only in its liquid but also in its electric manifestations. Electricity and the internet, the stream connecting us, run along the seabed like artificial veins, under the aquatic currents of that sea which originated us all. Thinking of those underwater cables and plastics, there's no doubt that today we are connected more than ever by manifold currents, in a globalized scenario that highlights our responsibilities towards the planet.

Current carries us toward the last act of a story that has probed the depths of human agency. Like a reversed Dantean journey, we ascend to the top of the last circle. In the video *Main-Stream-Memory* (2021, with Jonathan Pêpe), realized with the most advanced technologies in digital shape-capture scanning, we literally return in the sea. After having explored the demiurgic power of water, now the artist reveals its destructive and regenerative force. This time, current reveals itself in the form of the Great Flood. Schiavi, however, does not make us witness the flood, but rather what follows it. In the 3D simulation, an agglomerate of monuments, garbage and undefined objects floats on the surface of the sea. In the background a construction appears: after having permeated the other works with its ghost, it finally manifests itself: the Lavéra petrochemical plant. The following scene is a mix of reality and fantasy by means of a mesmerizing sci-fi aesthetics. Thanks to an underwater camera we discover an eerie Atlantis: ancient ruins pile up on garbage, pipes and cables. Unlike the legendary city, however, this archaeological discovery belongs to a still-living civilization, which therefore, perhaps, can still be saved.

The wrecks in the video all float curiously in the same way - bottles, statues, even an entire church - as if they had the same weight. They resemble dismantled stage objects, fake architectures which once simulated reality. Ugo Schiavi collects what remains of our play, he dismantles the stage where the great show of humanity took place. Then, with a gesture that recalls the one of God defeating the Leviathan (Isaiah 27:1), he throws it into the abyss. He knows that he will probably never sink. The video is a potentially infinite loop, an ouroboros grasping its own tail with its teeth - history repeating itself.

"Leviathan" confronts key issues of foremost global concern, while also resonating profoundly with the past, present and future history of the sea. Schiavi's work speaks to our current moment of social and environmental crisis and our desperate need to imagine a different future, while also quietly embracing the monstrous one that we forged.

-Lucia Longhi