

## THE ITALIAN DREAM

The ultimate image of Berlusconi's era



“IN AN ERA IN WHICH, IN THE WORDS OF ANDY WARHOL, EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO THEIR FIFTEEN MINUTES OF FAME, SILVIO BERLUSCONI SEEMS TO BE THE MOST WARHOLIAN POLITICIAN, THE PERFECT SUBJECT FOR A PORTRAIT: THE ETERNITY OF THE PRESENT MOMENT.”



These few introductory lines from Marco Belpoliti's book – *Il corpo del capo* (The body of the leader) (Guanda, 2011) are enough to set the scene perfectly for the conceptual premise from which we set out when we decided to work on Silvio Berlusconi, and it was instinctively clear to us that we would work on Silvio Berlusconi's body. A body that has become an icon of a power stretching over twenty years of the history of Italy, with all the weight of the serious implications that the thought of twenty years evokes. An icon that very quickly reached beyond the national borders to be elevated to the level of an idea what it being Italian means to the world, often confirming certain stereotypes of the comedic Italian character. Body language is so strong in Silvio Berlusconi's communication strategy that the philosopher Giuliana Parotto was right to emphasise (*Sacra officina. La simbolica religiosa di Silvio Berlusconi* (The sacred workshop. The religious symbolics of Silvio Berlusconi)) how “the persistence and attention with which Berlusconi's body is presented, dissected, analysed, and even broken down leads back to the idea that the body of the leader is a sort of body-icon that epitomises aesthetic values and morals”.

Steeped in religious symbology “the phenomenon of Berlusconi deserves to be subjected to the renowned theory proposed by Kantorowicz: the king has two bodies, one of flesh and blood, one symbolic and sacred.”

We therefore thought of Berlusconi, of his body, of the idea itself that all of us spectators have formed for ourselves over the years of the Italian leader, enclosed in a shrine that in the Christian tradition is reserved for preserving the bodies of saints, but also from a secular point of view for the preserving the bodies of leaders and heroes (from the mummy of Mazzini to those of Mao and Lenin), to emphasise the cult of personality of which he was the centre, and perhaps will be for years to come. And at the same time to erect a barrier between contingent reality and historic judgement.

If, in the final analysis, Italians are “a people of saints, poets, navigators...” then the arch-Italian Silvio represents a worthy simulacrum of this people. An object of worship, in fact.

Of course, it's not up to us to analyse a historical period for the truth that is not yet clearly defined in its historical context and socio-political dynamics, or to put a person into the context of their historical importance.

We as artists felt inspired by the media and cultural phenomenon of Silvio Berlusconi in its iconographic meaning, and what we have attempted to do is to encapsulate an era, the era in which we are immersed, in an image.

THE ITALIAN DREAM  
2010-2011

Total dimensions of the shrine 185x80x70cm  
Dimensions of the figure approx. 165x65cm

Various materials (silicone rubber, hair, fabric, wood, glass,  
metals)

- THE DREAM (the message)
- THE SMILE (the essence)
- THE RIGHT HAND (history)
- THE LEFT HAND (sensuality)
- THE SLIPPERS (the character)
- THE SUIT (desire and decline)
- THE SHRINE (passing into history)



THE DREAM - On the 16th May 1994, straight after the first victory in the general elections, Silvio Berlusconi begins his career at Palazzo Madama with a long speech on the Italian dream: "I too, like others before me, have a dream", and this is the ongoing theme that will recur again and again like a mantra in the years to come. Therefore all we have done is to capture the figure in the dimension that constitutes the essence of Berlusconi's message: the dream. Extensive literature identifies Berlusconi's true appeal in his ability to awaken in people the power of the dream as the possibility of redemption, faith, and positivity: "The dream in which each of us can identify ourselves". The dream, however, is also the dimension of the total self-sufficiency of the ego, enclosed in its own individual virtual reality, without any contact with the real world except through the mental processing of the stimuli that come from it. The closure is therefore twofold: physical closure of the shrine, mental closure in the self-referential nature of the oneiric dimension.





THE SMILE – the element that encapsulates and encompasses the deepest meaning of the figure of Berlusconi is without a doubt the smile, the ever-present smile, the smile as a message that “pierces” through the screen straight to the heart of the public, instilling them with the warmth of optimism and faith. The smile sits on Berlusconi’s face like the enigma on the masks of the pharaohs.

His head is tilted to the left and alludes to the figure’s obsessive aversion to the progressive political culture that Berlusconi always referred to as communism tout court.

However, the function that it fulfils is to conceal, at first glance, the blissful serenity of the face, so as to provoke a feeling of confusion in the spectator between the sanctity of the vessel (the shrine) and the somewhat prosaic behaviour of the content (the body).

In reality, the most attentive observer will be able to make out the expression of the face in the reflection on the glass on the shrine, but will, however, find their own “portrait” superimposed on it in a short-circuit of involuntary identification. The smile, therefore, will unequivocally ward off the idea of death, suggesting instead the image of someone sleeping, and the observer will almost be moved to wonder if he is breathing.



THE RIGHT HAND - The right hand is immediately visible on the side we call “institutional”, diurnal, so to speak. It rests on a copy of *Una storia italiana* (An Italian story), the booklet that Berlusconi sent to millions of Italian families, and which represents a kind of summary of the life and works of the man, the entrepreneur, the politician. In short, it is everything that Silvio Berlusconi is, or rather, everything that he wants people to know about his own private and public history. Millions of Italians believed in this official story, thus often having faith in the figure that they believed they knew like the backs of their own hands.



THE LEFT HAND - The left hand tells a story kept hidden, for which there was certainly no room in the official vulgate of Berlusconi’s biography. It tells of an unbridled obsession with sex that reaches the point where commodification is the only mode of erotic relationships. “My husband consorts with minors” is the shocking revelation of his wife, Veronica, who even describes Berlusconi as the “Dragon they offer virgins to”. And minors, according to the most recent and embarrassing scandal and subsequent trial. (Ruby-gate). This hand therefore marks the counterpoint to the official hagiography that unfolds on television screens, where at one time a hero appeared in “the odour of sanctity”. This hand reveals the most intimate gesture of a man completely given over to, and in the end overcome by, the uncontrollable urges of his own libido. It is not up to us to evaluate him from a moral point of view, it’s not our place to judge him by this yardstick; we have captured and revealed the psychological significance of the figure and that which ultimately turned out to be his “Achilles’ heel”.



**THE SLIPPERS** – Universally known for his convivial, cheerful, clownish character, Berlusconi has the role of the stereotypical spaghetti and mandolin loving Italian down to an art. (The gags in international meetings of leaders where he is intent on being the centre of attention are world famous, from the rude gesture in the group photo to the delay with Mrs. Merkel. And then the jokes, quips, and capers because Silvio always love to please others). The Mickey Mouse iconography thus alludes to the “cartoon-like” character of the figure and nevertheless, it falls to these improbable (though perhaps not too improbable given the eclectic personality in question) slippers to balance out the sanctity of the shrine with a post-modern effect of mixing up languages. Finally, they indicate that the figure is captured in a moment of relaxation and intimacy that certainly contrasts with the dignity reserved for the corpse. And this clarifies immediately that it is not a dead person.

**THE SUIT** – The loosened tie, the rumpled shirt and jacket, the open trousers, all suggest a man fast asleep and dreaming deeply. The upturned label of the tie reveals to the attentive observer that the suit is a creation of DESIREE, the tailors in Naples. The “desire”, therefore, which led Berlusconi to the young Noemi in the suburbs of Naples, and which marks the point of no return in the breakdown of his relationship with his wife, in private, and of the official image shown to Italians in public. An image that from this moment on will seem increasingly on sale in gossip magazines, and in this sense the suit, that is, the official image of the figure, has been bought at the Castel Romano outlet near Rome. Sic transit gloria mundi.

**THE SHRINE** – Whether you like Silvio Berlusconi or not, he is the most representative figure that has emerged of the intimate character of the Italian nature, or of the average Italian, sociologically speaking. “I don’t fear Berlusconi himself, I fear the Berlusconi in me” sang Giorgio Gaber. The shrine consigns to the history of Italy, and not just of Italy, a figure that has left a profound mark on the era in which he lived, consigning him to the past in a first attempt to historicize him. On the other hand, the religious symbolics of Silvio Berlusconi, the mystical significance and magical power of his persona, even miraculous cases, have all been extensively investigated. “The Lord’s Anointed” is, however, also the “Holy whoremonger”; the parable of our post-modern Saint lies in these two extremes.

#### NOTES.

Among the numerous texts consulted, we are obliged to cite the following authors and their studies, which we used to complete the work of conceptualisation of the initial idea:

- Marco Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo* (The body of the leader) ( Guanda,2009 )
- Giuliana Parlotto, *Sacra officina – La simbolica religiosa di Silvio Berlusconi* (The sacred workshop. The religious symbolics of Silvio Berlusconi)( Franco Angeli, 2007 )
- Filippo Ceccarelli, *Sua maestà il corpo* (His master the body)( Almanacco Guanda,2006)
- Federico Boni , *Il superleader – Fenomenologia mediatica di Silvio Berlusconi* (The super leader – the media phenomenology of Silvio Berlusconi) ( Meltemi, 2008)
- Alexander Stille, *Citizen Berlusconi – Vita e imprese* (Citizen Berlusconi – life and works)(Garzanti,2006)
- Carlo Chiurco,a cura di, *Filosofia di Berlusconi – L’essere e il nulla nell’Italia di Berlusconi* (The philosophy of Berlusconi – being and nothing in Berlusconi’s Italy)(Ombrecorte, 2010)
- Paolo Guzzanti, *Mignottocrazia* (Rule by whores) (Rizzoli, 2011)

It is impossible to site the entire extremely long list of articles published in the main daily papers, magazines, and websites both Italian and foreign here.



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