



Bea Bonafini interviewed
by curator Paul Luckraft,
9 May 2017



Paul Luckraft: Can I ask you about your initial response to the Invites space, and your approach to transforming its interior? What drew you to wanting to use the floor in particular?

Bea Bonafini: This gallery space is unusual, as it's a converted Methodist church. For a little while I've been making work around the idea of a non-religious chapel. During my Villa Lena Foundation residency in Italy last year I was looking at domestic-scale spaces dedicated to prayer and contemplation. The Invites room has dimensions that are very similar to most domestic chapels. In Italy it was customary to have your own family chapel if you could afford it. They tend to be long, narrow side rooms, which is exactly what the room here is like. In regards to the floor piece, I was particularly attracted to one of the 15th century marble inlay floor pieces in the Siena Duomo, which, unlike any other in that cathedral, has had its details erased through people walking on it over time. It has ended up as a pattern of interlocking shapes, from which figures emerge, but also then disappear back into abstraction.

PL: So, as well as being decorative, the floor contained a civic message for the local population?

BB: Yes, this one in particular is a battle from the Old Testament that was reset in the context of fighting between Siena and Florence, as a way to endorse the political authority of the city. There are dozens of these floor pieces in the Duomo, and their purpose was to tell a story without the need for words, as there was a low literacy rate. Some floor pieces acted as propaganda in a way.

PL: Would you say your installations involve an invitation for people to enter into a narrative space?

BB: Yeah. I've been taking spaces that have a function and an ideology, and changing the regular use of them. The notion

of a café space is something I've used a lot: appropriating a space that has the function of consumption and social gathering, but then placing delicate art objects there. These might have the form of coffee tables, but people have to be extra careful when using them, in turn making them aware of the objects' hand-made, unique qualities. The domestic is another key space for me. The home is our own exhibition space: we curate it according to our aesthetic preferences and ideas of comfort. These decisions, alongside the dynamics of relationships that occur there, make it fascinating. In my installations, things are slightly off. Functional things are made dysfunctional, or furniture might become anthropomorphised.

PL: Have you always had an interest in the design of objects?

BB: No, that has come through a lot more recently. My background is in painting. Although I rarely go back to making paintings in the traditional sense, the work I make is approached with a two-dimensional pictorial quality in mind. Imagery and colour are really important. When I started using a computerised jacquard knitting machine when studying at the RCA, I began looking at how textiles could hang from or wrap around objects. Until then, I'd been making flat textile works that were all stitched by hand and wrapped round a stretcher, much like a painting. When I discovered there was a machine that could interpret drawings into soft objects, it was another way for me to release control. I would draw an image and choose the wool, but what came out was something the machine had imparted its own interpretation onto. I then shifted it again by cutting and stitching the textile up, and slowly things started to get further away from being wall-based and became looser. It didn't make sense to have a textile that wanted to be touched so much stretched so rigidly.

PL: The textiles became more in dialogue with the body of the viewer, would you say?

BB: Yes, I moved towards increasing the intimacy between an artwork and the viewer. The works had a close connection to the body, either in size or the way they were presented. They also started to have resonances with high fashion and furniture design: one-off pieces you might see in shops.

PL: Was that a comfortable move for you, or was there a tension when the work began to open itself up to being read as design?

BB: What fascinates me most is when things operate between gaps, between languages. A way for it to be OK for me was to pair the textiles with 'low' materials such as paper mâché or salt-dough structures, and to cut them up and have them hanging loose. There was a thrill involved in a polished, finished machine-knitted object being made to unravel.

PL: Your work also involves cutting forwards and backwards between different periods of art and design history. Is there one particular moment that you keep returning to, or is your gaze pretty wide?

BB: It is really broad, but one particular artist who has inspired me for many years is Fortunato Depero, a futurist who worked from the 1920s to 50s. He's relatively unknown internationally, but much more famous back in Italy. There is such force and cohesive vision in Depero's practice. He started as a painter, but then moved into advertising in New York, and came back to Italy to extend his practice into woollen tapestries, furniture, and even toys. This jumping between mediums, but with a distinctive linking aesthetic, is something I look to.

PL: You've undertaken a number of residencies in recent years. What is it about traveling to new locations that has been of importance?

BB: I grew up in several countries, which definitely had an impact on my need to inhabit unfamiliar environments. Residencies give me a lot of fuel to work from. To be able to work somewhere new, with the specific intention of absorbing things in a critical way, really influences my work going forward. Strands of things I began in Villa Lena that I wasn't really aware of when I was there all feed into the work I am producing for Invites.

PL: Has the studio we're sitting in now, high up with its natural light and view of the park, affected how the work is taking shape?

BB: Definitely. I've been reading an amazing book by Italo Calvino called *The Baron in the Trees*. It talks about this boy who's grown up in a noble family, and the close relationship between him and his younger brother. At one point he rebels against the family and decides to spend the rest of his life in the trees. It was a very timely book to read, as I feel I'm in a bit of a treehouse here, both disconnected and connected to the rest of society. I feel the need for a space of my own in which to go through creative thinking, and one thing that destabilises me is not having a studio. Psychologically it's important for me, even when I'm not in it. The specifics of a studio always influence what I make. This one is almost like being outdoors, in touch with nature and the wildlife that inhabits the treetops. The way daylight enters, how shadows fall on surfaces, and the sense of intimacy and containment feeds into my work for the show. For the exhibition I am keen for the notions of the interior and the exterior to be explored. A chapel is an interior space in a building, in which interior things might start to happen to the mind and body. But then the battle scene depicted on the floor is much more to do with the exterior: a chaos of things breaking apart, an ungraspable whole. The large paper drawing on the wall is, in contrast, much more geometric and ordered.

PL: Do you think the images will reveal themselves slowly, particularly with the carpet, the more time people spend standing or sitting?

BB: I wanted to offer something recognisably domestic, especially in the UK where you have a lot of carpet! The thing about a cathedral is that it invites you to spend time there, it soothes you and slows the pace down, but they are often cold spaces. In contrast, I've gone towards warmth and softness. I do want a tension to be present, though. There's a violent scene on the floor, and I hope this starts to work on you when you are in the space. I also looked at Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano* paintings at the National Gallery, as they depict another Florentine–Sienese battle scene, but this time the artwork was made for the Florentines. The process I used to make the carpet involved a mirroring of shapes and figures to evoke the two sides of the struggle. It is this very swapping of cutout material that allows the images to appear.

PL: How does the title *Dovetail's Nest* play out in the show?

BB: I was thinking about interlocking, which occurs in most of this work in various ways: for example, the paper tiles of the drawing, or the puzzle-like sections of the carpet. The term, dovetail, was new to me: it's a particular kind of carpentry joint, and the verb means to fit together and harmonise. 'Nest' can be related to a chapel or the home as an enclosed space that nurtures. What I am drawn to is how religious spaces today have been replaced in some way by museums or galleries. People use these cultural spaces as their meeting point and destination.

Reverse: Studio production image, May 2017

Artist's presentation
Sunday 9 July, 3pm. Bonafini is joined in conversation by curators Stella Bottai and Mia Pfeifer, surrounded by a handmade pasta backdrop, which will then be cooked and shared.

Bea Bonafini (b. 1990, Bonn, Germany. Lives and works in London) studied for her BA at the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, London, from 2010–14 and took an MA in Painting at the Royal College of Art, London, from 2014–16. Selected recent exhibitions include: *A World of One's Own* (solo), Fieldworks Gallery, London, 2017; *Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavour (On The Bedpost Overnight)?*, J Hammond Projects, London, 2017; *La Diabliesse*, Tramps Gallery, London, 2017; *The House of Penelope*, Gallery 46, London, 2017; *Summer Blue*, Lychee One Gallery, London, 2016; and *At Home Salon: Double Acts*, Marcelle Joseph Projects, London, 2016.

Zabludowicz Collection Invites is dedicated to solo presentations by UK-based artists who do not currently have representation by a UK commercial gallery.

Upcoming Invites 2017
Rebecca Ackroyd
28 September–5 November

Beth Kettel
9 November–17 December



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