

to Silvia, Leone and Cosme

Giovanni Ozzola
FALLEN BLOSSOMS

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○ *Sole, Istanbul*, 2011
giclée print on cotton paper, framed
29.7 x 21 cm

The Green Box

Giovanni Ozzola kept his earliest photos in a small green box he sometimes described to me as a keepsake, a consumed object that accompanied him wherever he went, a kind of portable studio.

In those years, Ozzola, not yet twenty, knew little of Duchamp (in spite of his box and Duchamp having the same name). He worked as an assistant in various photography studios (a practice that amounted to his real training ever since the time he'd spent in his grandfather's studio, an architect with a passion for photography) and shortly after starting work as a fashion photographer, he spent a few months in London. Although he had no intention of becoming an artist or any awareness of poetics, he shot photos at the fringes of his new profession.

I don't know what that box contained, but I like to think that it included photos such as *Autoritratto* (Self-Portrait) and *La mia mano* (My Hand), those on which Pier Luigi Tazzi wrote his first text on Ozzola shortly after meeting him, with that with those first words that Giovanni likes to repeat whenever he talks about his debut: "Tell X and Y it's better not to mention age".

When I met him, Ozzola had a studio instead in Calenzano on the extreme outskirts of his city, Florence. His studio in a large shed in an industrial zone was bare and bright, and the sunlight that came into the room from a small window ended up on one of the walls at sunset together with the shadows of the window's shutter and the ironwork. Ozzola photographed that light often, and one of those shots became *Studio Marzo* (March Studio), an image that condenses many things into it – an idea of time, of the passing of atmospheres and seasons.

Moreover, the light that colours the surrounding wall with an unstable tone – a range of blue-azure greys that contaminate each other around the sunlight – is a presage of imminent darkness.

Even though the eye does not perceive them like this, in our mind's eye, the walls of a room are white. Ozzola often talks of how the observer's brain activity tailors the landscape to his or her idea of the landscape, reality to an idea of reality, and lets knowledge, memory, and experience take over through a series adjustments of colour and light. But before the brain starts doing this comes naked, raw vision, and Ozzola's intent is always to subjugate the tool to the purity of this experience and make the camera resemble an eye separate from the brain in every way possible, a subjugation that always involves a diminution of the ego of the photographer behind the camera, a complete openness to the epiphany of the vision. So the walls in Ozzola's photos are never white; colours mutually contaminate one another in his photo; they vibrate and overflow their boundaries, just as when the eye perceives them for the first time in a place full of light and contrasts. This aspect – faithfulness to the excitation produced by the light on the retina and in the brain – brings Ozzola's photographs closer to Impressionistic paintings, where the hues can become refined on the basis of a small range and the shades extend even over the entire canvas.

Basically, it is in the history of painting (more than in the history of photography, where Giovanni claims that he is unable to find a secure position for his work) in which the roots of Ozzola's photographic work should be sought: the artist feels he has learned more of the image from Richter's paintings than from any photographer. The floodlit rooms of his early years seem like tributes to certain rooms by Matisse, a painting like *Rooms by the Sea* by Edward Hopper, the vision of an unlikely proximity between the interior of a home and the open sea, a house that seems to float on the sea, rooms flooded from the sea nearby with a daylight that to me seems germinal for Ozzola because he himself often uses this image of a platform suspended over the sea, a dreamlike point of observation, as occurs in *Garage*, a series of videos works where the light, a unifying light between inside and outside, besieges the space occupied by the observer through a progression, the opening of a great shutter placed on the horizon.



○ *Scars towards ourselves*, 2013
engraving on brass plates
98 elements
343 x 686 cm (49 x 49 cm each)

Studio Marzò makes reference to an empty space, the essence of the composition, the presence of things that furtively enter the image, such as the outline of the two photos resting against the wall, a daytime sky and a night-time image, again an allusion, an underlining of the mutability of time and the movement of light.

If, acting like the other authors called to write in this book, I had to select an image by Ozzola on which to focus my attention, an image that provides a brief account of an experience, my choice would fall on *Studio Marzò*, a shot that dates back to the day we met and shows (in part) the place where our first conversation took place.

Several years have passed since then. Ozzola moved to Tenerife and travels continuously, and except for the room where he works on the computer, it's been years since he's had a real studio of his own. If you ask him why, Giovanni jokes about his "suitcase studio", an idea of nomadism that has to do with photography and loneliness. Again, a reminder of the green box.

Let's now go back to the "green box" and what it could have contained.

Autoritratto (Self-Portrait) is a blurred image, a photo taken by the artist of his face from close up while lying in bed, a corporeal measure, one of an elongated arm a few moments after an awakening, a moment of semi-consciousness or a rebellious, embryonic awareness of self, his own position in space and time. Sunlight appears to have flooded the room, indistinctly striking the pillow (that takes up three quarters of the image) and his face, distorting its contours.

Self-Portrait is an emblematic image, despite being one of Ozzola's very few in which a figure appears. But, of course, it is the artist's: the photo seems to recount a symbolic awakening, a first affirmation of poetics.

While we were looking for a way to organize the progression of images in this book (the first one that Ozzola has dedicated to his entire career, from the beginnings to present day) that ignores both simple chronology and (as alternative hypothesis) a succession of series and themes/recurring motifs, searching for the right angle from which to tell the tale of these poetics, Giovanni, after having taking a blank sheet and drawing lines that seemed to delineate territories, sets, or areas of his work, wrote on each of these sets with one resolute gesture three simple words: light, darkness, balance.

So then Ozzola's images are simple, divisible into series, and mostly represent recurring themes and subjects: interiors, the light-flooded rooms of the early years; windows, doors, horizons; water; garages, and bunkers, night views of trees and plants.

These recurring themes or motifs can come to an end in precise periods, or (more often) sink out of sight and disappear to re-appear over the years or recombine in new series.

This is what happens, for example, with the image of the horizon photographed by Ozzola in different and distant times and places, seen either frontally or through windows of rooms looking onto the sea or openings in the landscape like those in the *Bunker* and *Garage* series. Ozzola's horizon is a kind of continuous line, a thread that unifies Giovanni's movements and seasons, his different landscapes.

Ozzola's photos recount light, the epiphanies that take place in light, a light of sunrises and sunsets, dying or rising, or dazzling, diurnal, midday, light that is capable of languishing when it is not overwhelming things, blurring them, dissolving them or breaking up their contours, then returning them to the world as apparitions and intangible presences. This is the case with an entire series of images from the beginnings of his career, including one of his most famous, *Poltrona* (Armchair): a worn, wobbly chair that seems to find its point of balance in contact with the light, in the halo of light that strikes it from behind and envelops it.

Light can also trace long trajectories, start from a point very far away and arrive to graze the observer, the place, in the foreground of the image – a room – ideally occupied by his body. As in *Port Nolloth Winter*, a recent shot that describes a path of light – a trajectory of orange, the vision of a distant horizon, at dawn or at dusk, that traverses the orange to the neon of a vertical sign, HOTEL, where it is re-lit, re-launched and carried inside the room of a hotel by the sea.

And again: light can be seen to frontally or laterally penetrate environments through doors and windows, to push/press (from outside) insides through a screen, a diaphragm (I refer to filters such as windows, curtains or shutters) and quietly creep into a room to cause a diffused, unified tone to emerge [as *La stanza rossa* (The Red Room), *La camera verde* (The Green Room), *La camera gialla* (The Yellow Room) and other photographs of interiors by the artist appear]. Light can dazzle and strike the observer, each time producing in the observer a loss of consciousness, a decrease in the presence of the ego, a dilution (and extension) of the boundaries of the ego into the horizon and the light.

This diminution, this dissipation (and momentary disappearance) of the ego is one of the distinctive features of Ozzola's poetics, a "making oneself indistinct", the expression sometimes used by Giovanni to describe the most emblematic feature of his approach to the experience of light and photography, a posture, a vision that refers to the idea of a photographic shot as a diapason of this experience of the author's becoming lost in the landscape and the light, a concept mediated by the idea of *stimmung*, mood, and romantic culture, but which is a prelude to a momentary state of regeneration. "Making oneself indistinct" is also a formula that describes the traits of a *weak, disarmed* author, far enough removed from concerns about the style and total control of the image, whose willingness to abandonment coincides with that of any observer, hence the absence of the author, which could correspond, as Roland Barthes would say, to the birth of the spectator facing the image.

There are those photos by Ozzola that speak of darkness, the condition of those who see in the dark and show how things appear in darkness: distant flashes and contrasts in the night, a night that reveals new forms and relationships between things (as in *Vulcano*, a photo of a black triangle in semi-darkness, a perfect shape that emerges in a moment when contours tend to blur or, on the contrary, light up) or of things seen very close up, like the beam of light that draws the outline of a half-closed door or the patterns of branches, plants and flowers lit by artificial light in the night.

The pictures in darkness mark another moment in Ozzola's work, and like the others refer to what is contained in the image or the body of the observer or the author (it almost goes without saying that darkness also strikes the spectator facing the image, especially since Ozzola tends to show his photos of darkness in dim rooms with artificially lighting), a body which, however, has an experience that is complementary to that of becoming indistinct (in the light): groping and moving forward in uncertainty and the unknown, seeking, by way of adjustments and attempts, a point of view, a posture and an awareness of one's position in space, as happens – says Giovanni – for those who seek, in semidarkness, and discover a fresco in the chapel of a Renaissance church, a "way of seeing" that has so frequently been part of his Florentine training.

Finally, there are the recent works that are part of a recent series that seem to encompass the contours of a wider, cyclical path (of light and darkness), and can be resolved in a different temporality (as in the *Garage* works), alluding to a synthesis or a balance between two polarities, to a movement, a transformation of the body in the light. There are the *Bunker* works, for example, where the contrast between light and dark is resolved in an absolute, clear view of the things in the foreground (murals and graffiti on the wall) and the horizon seen through openings and windows of different shapes.

In addition to the photos, there are the sculptures, installations, and other works that narrate light and darkness, the contrast and balance between these opposites: the dazzling brightness of the etchings and bas-reliefs (in gold on silver plate) that describe the outline of the mountains or the spiral motion of cyclones; the light (in the dark) of the line etched on a plate of slate in a series of works that Ozzola began in 2012 that are the translation of routes into the unknown by explorers from different ages and countries (flashes overlapping other flashes: those on the slate struck by the light that makes the surface vibrate in relation to the spectator's movements); the contrast between light and dark in *Chioccioline* (Snails), bronze castings in 1:1 scale of selected work tools – milling cutters, hammers, bar clamps, girders, scaffolding and chains – where snails have come to perch through time and neglect. As in the photographs, Ozzola's sculpture also provides a setting for exchange, transition and contagion. The contrast between surfaces, between different materials – the coldness and hardness of the metal, the fragility of the shells – is softened and made uniform by the bronze, or only faintly evoked by the different surface treatment given to the metal, by a light dusting that makes the snails stand out as reflections in the darkness.

Stealth – History – Pathos is a work that Ozzola made after spending much time with the researchers of the IDS centre in Pisa. It shows geometric shapes immersed in light, fragments of aircraft designed to be invisible to the eye and radar.

A recent exhibition by Ozzola (whose beginnings I saw and followed) was held in a large empty apartment/shop in Berlin, a very large space with rooms that opened one into the other, with two show windows on the street, many doors, and windows that overlooked an inner courtyard.

Ozzola's photographs divided the space even further, complicating the perception of it with images of other doors, windows, and floodlit rooms.

In that exhibition, the forms of *Stealth – History – Pathos* "opened/multiplied" the environment along another direction, not the horizontal plane, but from the bottom up, making them appear as if they had risen from a subsoil where something very large was trapped, a wreck hidden in time and history.

The elusive figural nature of those forms and the impossibility of tracing them back to regular geometric structures contradicts the vaguely minimalist appearance that seems to permeate *Stealth – History – Pathos*, which recalls minimalist language, however, in the way the sculptures design the space around them, weaving lines and trajectories that spread from the objects to the surrounding environment, a weaving of differences that is also reinforced by the various viewpoints from which the spectators regard the work.

Stealth – History – Pathos also enabled interaction with the photographs in the *Settecento* (Eighteenth Century) series in another room at the same show: another apparition (in darkness) of flowers created through a negative pictorial treatment of the photographic surface in which pigments are stripped from the colour of a film that has been exposed on the support, a cardboard whose tone emerges and colours the flowers to create a subtractive effect.

From photography to painting, the distance can be short.

The latest series of works that Ozzola did are completely painted, translating the vision of graffiti-painted walls (an image that the Bunker photos show often) through a process that seems derived from photography (and recalls the ancient *strappo d'affresco* technique): that of a silicon sheet which when exposed "on contact" creeps into the graffiti's gaps and creates a positive image of their pattern. Only after tearing them off does the artist work with colour and create other layers, providing the impression of another time (that of painting) that overlaps the incalculable time written in the history of the graffiti.

Sculpture and installation (and painting), therefore, are only apparently another chapter in Ozzola's career and should not be separated from his photography. On the contrary, it is precisely from photography that Ozzola's need to make sculpture emerged, a need for the object, as if a quality inside the images had pushed him more closely to the material side of his work. The photographs, for example, nearly always in large format, almost always life-sized, indicate the possibility for sculpture in the way that they occupy space and the way the image is accommodated in space through a very close foreground which is the observation place/platform that comes so close to the spectator – a body that is, except for very rare exceptions, always absent from the image.

...

This book combines Giovanni Ozzola's geography (Tenerife and Italy, Florence, South Africa and China) and binds the artist's work (photographs, videos, sculptures and installations) together in a form not intended to be merely anthological. More than an anthology, this volume offers a broad look at Ozzola's work after a period of more than fifteen years, from the "Green Box" to the present.

The progression of images follows no chronological order and is traversed, like an undercurrent that reorganizes the order of work, by the suggestion of contrast and balance between light and dark, continuously interrupted by the texts that the authors invited to comment on individual works have written in recalling their memory of a meaningful encounter with a work by the artist. This one-to-one relationship is the best way to interpret Ozzola's work, and the one that this book suggests, inasmuch as it refers to that interchangeable dimension between the experiences of the author and the spectator that every single work by Giovanni enshrines.

Davide Ferri

