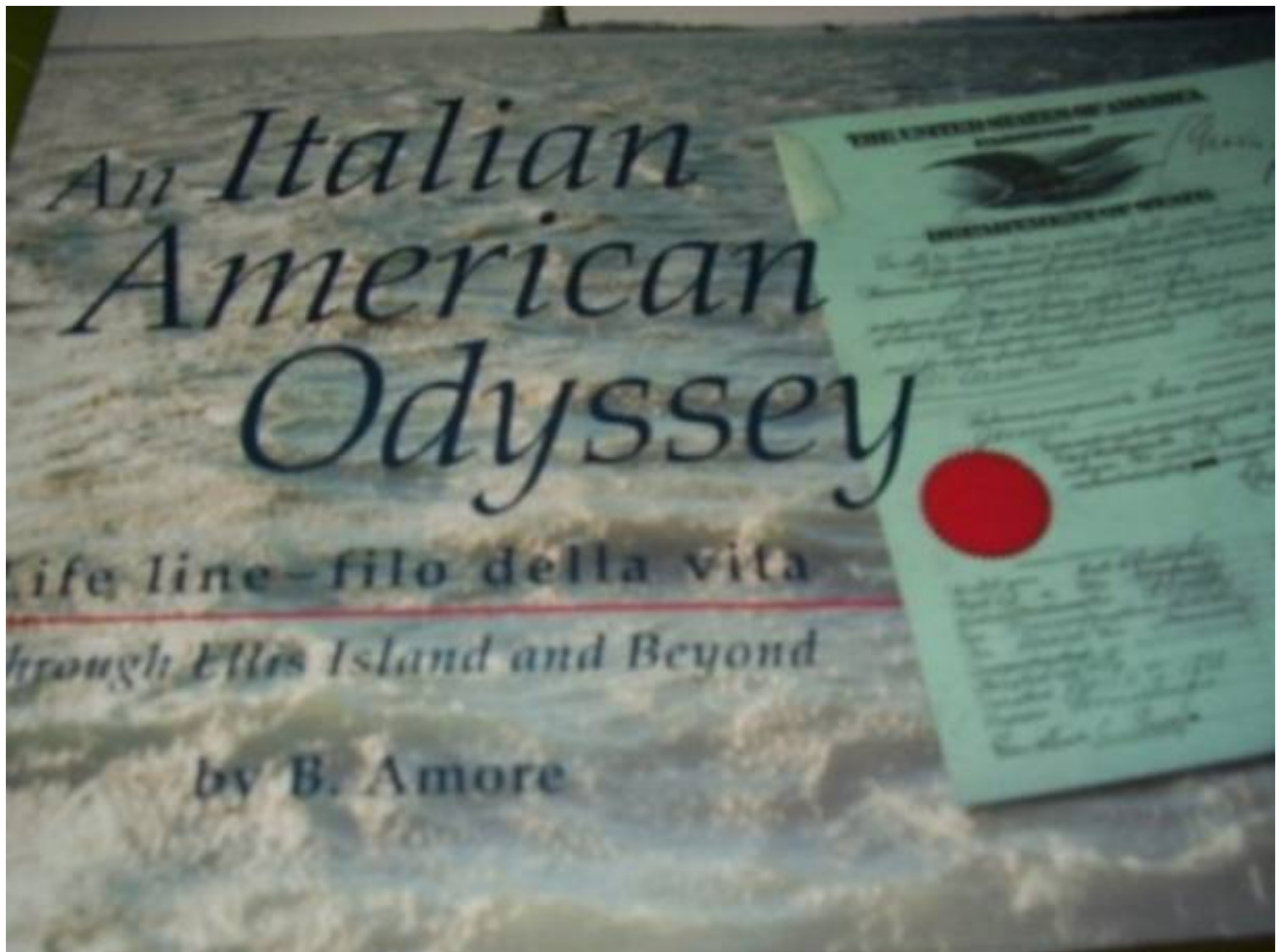




B. Amore's "multi-book" in Rome. An Interview

Simona Zecchi (March 22, 2009)



B. Amore's exhibition "Life line: filo della vita" (Ellis Island, 2000) consisted of a series of tales told through images and sculptures, threads that had united generations of her family together with those of other Italian Americans. These tales now take on a new narrative in the form of a book in which they are collected.

The decision to drop her first name, Bernadette, as well as the D apostrophe from her sweet last name, Amore, came when B. was already an adult. It was a sign of her new life to come. Gradually, the letter B followed by a period replaced her first name in the minds of her fans and friends. B., as a homophone for the verb "be," goes along with Amore, and her full name ostensibly means "Be Love." Almost unconsciously, the phrase expresses the essence of her art, and it may very well be that the stern and imposing name Bernadette could never convey such an immediate message. B.'s



journey to create this “multi-book” (as she referred to it during the interview) took her ten years. It was a decade full of research, study, exhibits, and hard work on her sculptures, the objects she preserved, and interviews with her family members and the descendants of other immigrants. The first exhibit opened in 2000 at Ellis Island, followed by major exhibits at the Dreams of Freedom Museum in Boston, the Godwin-Ternbach Museum in New York, and photography shows at Gallery 54 and Centro Studi Americani in Rome and San Severino in Salerno. The exhibit at Ellis Island in 2000 visually collected and brought her artistic work together. The exhibit spanning six rooms on the third floor in the old immigration center was created by the artist and entitled “Life line: filo della vita,” the very thread that has united generations of her family together with those of other Italian Americans.

The exhibit consists of a series of tales told through images, sculptures, collages, and inscriptions which unite seven generations through the past and present while looking toward the future. These tales now take on a new narrative in the form of a book in which they are collected. We can attempt to define or categorize this work of art as a visual novel, photographic essay, reportage, art book, etc, but the book, in fact, embodies each of these genres while fusing them together to create a larger mosaic. The book includes narrative text that gives a historic reconstruction of the Italian American immigration experience intertwined with the history of the De Iorio and D’Amore families. The work ends with a series of essays, “Commentary on Life Line,” written by Italian American scholars and authors such as Fred Gardaphé, Joseph Sciorra, Robert Viscusi, and Edvige Giunta among others. The Italian translation, sponsored by Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Franco Bagnoli, has been prepared

for publication by Professor Caterina Romeo and researcher Clara Antonucci, whose precise translation skills are especially evident in the shades of language that are revealed in the immigrants’ voices.

B.’s was first inspired while watching her grandfather as he concentrated on his stone work, and it was a fatal attraction from the start. They both experienced a passionate relationship with stone; her grandfather was disturbed by B.’s early interest, and as a child she withdrew her hands out of deep respect. Those hands trembled while waiting to work in stone. I plunged into the book she gave me at our meeting and I finally understood the instrument that attracted her so profoundly from the start: a pickaxe mounted into a winemaking cask, which was one of Nonno Antonio’s reliquaries.

As the years passed, the pickaxe became an inherited cultural symbol that dug through the personal and collective testimonies which found their place in the vast Odyssey of immigration. “Working with stone,” B. declares, “is like working with history.” This is such a petrifying statement to me, since she explains that “any stone from any building on earth, any monument or statue, represents the only element rich with stratifications which has collected over the years. They provide us with a lot of information on the passage of time, and therefore touching stone is like touching the innumerable events that made history.” History, memory, the present and future are driven by art itself. The very instrument that is able to interpret and reconstruct is also the basis for the acquired heritage that is necessary to delve into and relay one’s stories. Among the works of art fully representing this concept of stone as history, the “Ancestors’ Scrolls” are particularly interesting. They consist of layers of transparent silk and veils, with transparent material on the back as well. Inside the scrolls, one finds a representational human body on which the history of that ancestor is inscribed. The scrolls contain the true characters in the book: the ancestors. B. Amore starts out by telling me how she composed the scrolls as if it were a confession. She was led by the various voices of her ancestors beginning with preserved diaries, documents, and letters. It felt and still feels like a new approach to history while simultaneously being a part of it.

At this point in the interview, the usual question and answer format is transformed into a dialogue, more of a discussion that a spokesperson for history has with someone from the present day. It seems like another chapter for the book or even another art form; it is an instrument of historic reconstruction.

I am so curious to know how her ancestors’ memories and personal experiences interact with those of other Italian Americans. While turning the pages of the “multi-book,” we stop at two pages that depict one of her installations created in 1998. There are nine wheeled boards made out of marble



and stone from the Trentino region. At the top, objects from both of B. Amore's families, the middle-class family and the peasant family, are wrapped up in black fabric. "Fabric," as she explains in the book's preface, "was so much a part of my childhood, of my mother's life, and my grandmother's and great-grandmother's existence." Therefore fabric and the pickaxe appear over and over in her work, not only as decorative objects but as a bond to keep the objects of memory together. And so the characters from the Odyssey suddenly appear in front of you. "The addition of wheels," remarks B., "was due to the sense of movement I wanted to give the installation, to convey to the audience that those characters were there for real, not just still figures in a picture, but real, living people." On the ground there are some piles of randomly placed linen that refer back to those figures.

All of a sudden these images clearly reply to my unasked question. I soon realize that the objects are under a human form, expressing the living essence of each one, not as lifeless reliquary objects. The addition of small wheels gives a sense of movement and reveals how much they are still alive in the present and not just as characters in a book. They also play a symbolic role as an archetype of immigrants in general. There are so many of them, a crowd of mixed classes, genders, identities, and backgrounds; they are lost at the beginning and then gradually one becomes aware of their double identity and citizenship. What it is most important to note is that they are intermixed: peasants and merchants, farm laborers and landowners; tireless workers among pickaxes and tools along with lawyers, artists, and teachers. Such a variety of people interacting was unthinkable in the Old World but it becomes very real in the New World, and it was something that B. Amore's families, with their own diverse backgrounds, witnessed firsthand.

The characters in the installations are mainly women as they are the ones who play the lead role in this Odyssey beginning with Concettina De Iorio.

In the book's preface, the artist talks about her secret: during her childhood and adolescence she lived with and spoke the dialect from Lapio, near Avellino, where her family is from. In fact, she was not allowed to speak it in public, but was forced to speak the official language, whether it was proper English or standard Italian. The dialect had then become an integral part of her double identity and a secret code: it was a linguistic system to communicate beyond conventional and official expressions. This distinctive feature characterized her idea of what it meant to be Italian until her mid-twenties – that is to speak English and Italian (or dialect) in only certain situations. It was after a pivotal moment when she realizes her double identity, a double consciousness of being Italian American.

B. Amore's approach to art, as she explains to me while turning the pages of the book and showing me other photographic material, is to transform the ordinary events of common people into extraordinary things. This is exactly what happens in both the book and the exhibit: the voices of common people together with their memories that are "unmarked by history" become important testimonies and the missing link in historic discourse. The common theme throughout both the book and the exhibit is undoubtedly that of a journey: journey as research, discovery, and adventure where everything merges into one unique harmonic tale.

What we referred to as a "multi-book," in an obviously an overly-simplified term, is effectively an innovative cultural product when it is compared to standard genres, especially categories that a critic, author, or journalist may use to define B. Amore's work. In fact, B. Amore admits her own lack of interference when I ask how the book will be marketed in terms of literary genres such as autobiography, memoirs, letters etc. The various facets of the book and the exhibit will hopefully give the audience a real sense of personal history along with a broader collective history. Through the short anecdotes, hopefully the audience will see the similarities in their own stories and their overall importance to the reconstruction of human history. Among the many aspects in which her family members' personal histories were connected to larger stories of immigration, I was particularly struck by the part dealing with military service called "Serving America." Some Italian American men who served in the United States armed forces during the Second World War were stationed in their home countries.

Two pages in the book are devoted to this historic account, about the servicemen's role in Italy or at other posts, and how they were viewed in America during that time. Strangely, some soldiers were actively serving in the armed forces while their families were forcibly moved to internment camps or forced to observe strict curfews and carry ID cards. These pages also display Tony D'Amore's letters



to his wife Nina, B. Amore's mother, while he was serving in New Guinea. The fear that he may never return home and the horrors of war and death compel him to pour every emotion and thought out on paper: his children's future, their education, the love and the esteem he felt for his wife.

The definitions and restrictive categories used to reduce this work of art no longer make sense. The pickaxe and the other artifacts and works of art, such as letters and photographs, that were passed on to B. Amore, work together to grant a sense of harmony and create an expression of a unique artistic vision.

I hope that reading this book will inspire you to take this journey of knowledge as I found myself swallowed by the sea of history.

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