

The idea of the object

By Brent Gregston



Isabelle Cornaro uses the object d'art as inspiration for her work

Sitting in her Montmartre studio in Paris, surrounded by models of artwork that she's organizing into an upcoming show, Isabelle Cornaro admits she has no problem with contradictions. "I like it if my work can say one thing and then something else that is the complete opposite."

While her art is cerebral, it doesn't leave you cold. To the contrary, it is often tactile and strangely sensual. For inspiration, she has drawn on the film techniques of French New Wave cinema and a fascination with "emotionally charged" objects like bracelets, coffee spoons, perfume bottles and light bulbs. Her willingness to experiment has led her into a variety of media, including installation, painting, sculpture,

video and drawing. Cornaro is part of a younger generation of French artists who are winning international recognition.

One of her notable works is an artistic translation of an idealized landscape by Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), a series of installations called "Paysage avec Poussin et Témoins Oculaires" (Landscape with Chick and Eyewitnesses). Poussin's painting is a two-dimensional work created from objects in a three-dimensional layout. Cornaro's installations reverse the process, recreating it as a three-dimensional space we can wander in and out of, discovering its abstract, geometrical truth: "The abstract quality comes from the way he worked – drawing from little

figures arranged in a black box." Cornaro has transposed the painted figures into objects again – mostly decorative domestic objects – arranged on plinths organized to give linear perspective. She is also trying to show how the objet d'art was transformed into consumer junk. "We are talking about unique objects originally made from a natural model for people living in castles, and then, in later times, mass reproduced and reduced to kitsch, copies of copies, with no value."

"Savane Autour de Bangui et le Fleuve Utubangui" (Savannah Surrounding Bangui, and the River Utubangui, 2003-07) is a series of abstract works Cornaro created by arranging jewelry on plywood. They're



actually drawn from family photographs (her family lived in central Africa when she was a child). “It was the first work that I created with objects that have a sort of emotional charge and also a symbolic meaning,” explains Cornaro. “I used jewelry – bracelets, rings and so on – that once belonged to my mother. So it also has a personal meaning for me, and I was fascinated by its impact on other people. It made me think about how we project ourselves on an object, giving it financial and sentimental value, turning it into a fetish. We do this, by extension, with works of art.”

Cornaro’s “Homonymes,” currently on display in the newly reopened Palais de Tokyo in Paris, are objects heaped

together on a table and cast with remarkable veracity in plaster. The fish seem ready to leap out of the plaster, the fans to flutter open and the typewriters to strike. But they’re meant to represent a kind of Platonic ideal. “They’re not just objects but also ideas,” insists Cornaro, pointing out that she has grouped them based on abstract qualities like geometry, decorative stylization and representation of nature.

Cornaro works with the gallery Balice Hertling in Paris, where you can currently see two of her wall paintings: “Spray Paint On Wall” and “Of Cinematic,” reproducing images from a film called *Floues et Colorées* (*Blurry and Colored*). “It’s really about translating images from



one media to another,” says Cornaro. “What I’m interested in is that if you’re far away it looks blurry, but if you get close you see the sharp little dots. It might remind you of pointillism. Ultimately, what interests me is the perception of the painting.”