

Text by Veronica Santi

The artistic research of **Gonzalo Borondo** stems from painting and immediately develops within urban spaces with the goal of generating unexpected emotional atmospheres. The desire to activate a dialogue with the chosen locations and the people traversing them has led him in recent years to expand his artistic language, creating increasingly monumental and complex installations enriched by found objects, sculptures, video, and sound. His taste for antiquity and time-worn materials is put at the service of an imagery influenced by his Spanish roots, rich in historical-artistic references and a Baroque aesthetic rhythmicized by a perspective and illusionistic rigor derived from the Italian tradition. For the 2023 edition of *Fotografia Europea*, **Borondo** consolidates the experiential and environmental vocation of his work, choosing here for the first time to use photography exclusively—incorporating both analog and digital techniques—to explore the theme of memory and the issues surrounding the preservation of cultural heritage in a conceptually new way. How far can we keep our past intact? What do we decide to archive, and by what criteria? Inserting itself into the folds of a debate initiated by postcolonial studies, further developed by heritage and museum studies, and recently heightened by the Black Lives Matter movement, Borondo's works approach cultural heritage through a transformative lens. Heritage is understood as a dynamic device whose processual nature allows for reflection and the construction of a society open to diverse Histories, multicultural and multiethnic.

As Maria Pia Guermandi highlights in *Decolonizing Heritage*, we are dealing here with a terrain of “inevitable conflicts”—often exploited by the media and politics—ranging from *cancel culture* (the boycott of a culture deemed socially unacceptable) to *repatriation* (the return of museum collections to their communities of origin).

Borondo navigates these sensitive topics with awareness and authenticity, offering his perspective as a European artist formed in the streets rather than in academies, constantly oscillating between a political / historical / collective dimension and a personal / emotional / unconscious one. Precisely through self-portraiture—a genre par excellence that transforms subject into object—the artist presents himself in the work “*Giano*” (Janus), which occupies the two showcase windows adjacent to the gallery entrance. Like the two-faced Roman deity looking simultaneously toward the past and the future, the artist's face and the back of his head outline the contours of a double vision: one populated by a graveyard of ancient monuments scattered in the fog, the other illuminated by an old window overlooking the unknown. The tension of opposing forces is clear: on one hand, the museums and streets of European cities exude a history in which to mirror oneself and find sources of identity; on the other, a crystallized view of their management blocks the drive toward change and the renewed ethical demands of the present. Are these deep roots, or are they anchors that prevent us from setting sail toward new shores? If, as Susan Sontag noted, every photograph contains a *memento mori* that attests to the inexorable flow of time by isolating and freezing a specific instant, for **Borondo** photography becomes a medium to explore his poetics conceptually. By overlapping multiple images from his extensive personal archive or historical archives, the artist composes installation-environments—“core samples of existence”—that deconstruct a linear view of history. This additive approach, made explicit in the exhibition's title “SUBSTRATUM”, unfolds across different techniques and mediums, intensifying the complexity of the layers and the narrative:

“**Scatole di Memorie**” (Boxes of Memories): Photographs of landscapes, architecture, wall carvings, and graffiti are printed on Plexiglas and assembled directly inside light boxes, offering the viewer the illusion of a single, yet subtly three-dimensional image of an abandoned ruin.

Courtyard Installation: The overlapping layers are scaled up and thinned out to generate a physical and mental space where visitors can physically step in, discovering—layer by layer—the different images coexisting in harmony thanks to a shared vanishing point.

The Pantheon in the White Cube: To crown the exhibition, the artist uses the gallery's white cube as a magical chest housing a small imaginative Pantheon against uncertainties, highlighting humanity's ancestral need to believe in something. Six timeless icons (*the despot, the mother, the hermetic, the martyr, the father, the beautiful soul*) become chimeras—or perhaps Frankensteins—of the artistic tradition through a complex technical process: each image consists of multiple photographs layered and reprocessed through several analog-digital passes, turning into a “skin” printed in the darkroom with silver salts directly onto large glass surfaces.

Despite their two-dimensionality, each work rests on a time-worn wooden pedestal, as if to tell us that as long as the pedestal remains, the icon atop it can only change—re-elaborating, from era to era, the inherited film of the world.

gonzaloborondo

spazioc21





Gonzalo Borondo (Valladolid, 1989) is a multimedia visual artist, one of the most talented of his generation.

He grew up in Segovia and studied in Madrid, where he deepened the technique of figurative painting; since 2003 he has engaged with the underground art scene, standing out for the originality of his murals in unauthorized spaces, powerful inspirations that activate a dialogue between the subject and the space in which he places it.

In 2011 he moved to Rome, where he attended the Academy of Fine Arts and bonded with the art scene of the city, the first to consecrate him as a protagonist on the international urban art scene. Borondo's pictorial poetics is expressionist, intimist and humanist: he investigates feelings, the fragility of the psyche, moods, restlessness and the movements of conscience; the work is imbued with spirituality and nature. In his imagery, the physical and psychological context intertwine in a continuous dialogue characterized by the experimentation of techniques, by the choice of unconventional supports and by a trait that is personal, aware, full of energy and identity that transforms the artistic dimension into an immersive experience. Borondo has painted dozens of murals in the main capitals of the world, has staged numerous solo shows and has been invited to exhibit his works in many museums and institutions.

*The most recent projects include the installation at the Urban Nation Contemporary Art Museum (Berlin, 2016), the intervention in the temple of Charteons acquired by the CAPC (Bordeaux, 2019), the installation **Non plus ultra** at the Macro (Rome, 2019) and the solo exhibition at the Esteban Vicente Museum of Contemporary Art (Segovia, 2021).*

*He was awarded the **Arte Laguna** prize in Venice in 2018 and the **Golden Street Art** award in France in 2020.*

