

**ANDREA MASSAIOLI**  
*Primordium*

Opening on thursday **13th november** 2008 at 6.30 pm  
From 13<sup>th</sup> november to 31th January 2009

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**41 artecontemporanea**, via mazzini 41, Torino  
from 8th november 2008 to 31th January 2009

**'Primordium' ... a two-site project by Andrea Massaioli**

written by James Putnam

The large spiral, Andrea Massaioli has drawn in red pastel on the floor of one gallery and in blue pastel on the ceiling of the other, link his complimentary installations at Ciocca artecontemporanea, Milan and 41 artecontemporanea, Turin. These include wall drawings, delicate watercolours on paper or fine canvas and small ceramic sculptures, some of which are suspended on wires. The red and blue colours correspond to the earth and sky respectively and the spiral relates to his project's broader theme of primordial life force. The universal appeal of the spiral through different cultures, suggests it has some mysterious resonance with the human psyche. As a naturally occurring shape, it is probably the earliest sacred symbol found in caves dating back to the prehistoric era. In folklore tradition the spiral is associated with the womb and the Mother Goddess, representing the cyclical flow of energy embodied in the feminine principal. Yet in the wider context of the project's title, it could also allude to the evolution of the universe from primordial gases.

Parallel to various pagan symbols in Massaioli's new work are recurrent images of the dove, the lily and the ear that refer to the Christian iconography of the Annunciation as depicted in Medieval and Renaissance paintings and more specifically to the notion of *conceptum per aurem*. This proposed that the angel Gabriel whispering in Mary's ear, announcing Christ's 'supernatural' conception meant that she would be impregnated through obedient hearing rather than sexual intercourse. This has a parallel with the Adam and Eve story in Genesis where Eve receives carnal knowledge from the devil in the guise of a serpent. And it is the word that penetrates her ear as a symbolic phallus, not the serpent. Other Massaioli drawings relate to traditional Annunciation depictions where the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove hovers above the Virgin. Mary inclines her head to listen and passively accept her new condition symbolized by the descending, fertilizing dove. In Christian iconography white doves are divine messengers that represent purity, light and peace while the red dove is connected with sacrifice since it redeems mankind with its blood for the promise of everlasting life. Massaioli has also made drawings of the white lily with its red stamen, the flower's male reproductive organ, 'impregnating' an ear.

To him the lily, the dove and the ear are not just emblems of the Annunciation but are also connected to life force and fertility, with nature's seasonal change from birth, death, and then rebirth again. His work is not intended to have any religious significance and although as a child he was educated in a school run by German nuns, he doesn't adhere to the Catholic faith. Also Massaioli doesn't regard himself as a conceptual artist and rather than intending to provoke some intellectual discourse, his work is more personally reflective with some of the smaller sensitive watercolours seeming like intimate thoughts drawn on sketch book pages. And it is significant that he shares the same birth date of March 25<sup>th</sup> with 'Lady Day', the Feast of the Annunciation in the Christian calendar. The Roman Catholic Church adopted its official date of the Annunciation from an earlier pagan celebration of the union between the virgin Mother Goddess and the young Sun God for the conception of their child. This took place annually on

the threshold of spring, at a time of great fertility and fresh growth, so signified the renewal of nature herself as a sacred life-bestowing goddess. This ancient festival of the conception of the virgin Mother Goddess and 'Lady Day' may also refer to other female deities like Venus and Aphrodite who had festivals celebrated around this time. The juxtaposition of pagan and Christian imagery that runs through Massaioli's project also creates a dialogue between the two modes of experience the sacred and the profane. With this in mind he has also produced a series of erotic drawings that refer to a sexualized 'Annunciation' where the protagonist is a hybrid between man and animal, half divinity, half human resembling a satyr or Pan, the Greek god of nature.

'Primordium', the title of this project, may allude to evolutionary theory and the earliest stages in the development of life forms - primitive primeval creatures that include slugs, snails, snakes and worms that Massaioli parallels to the brain and the sex organs. They symbolize the primal, regenerating energy of nature - moist, vigorous and fertile. His images of hybrid and fragmentary animal forms are like totems that suggest the similitude between the anatomy of animals and humans like his penis-fish or propose a form of parallel instinct or even consciousness. The slug, which predominates much of Massaioli's current imagery, may seem a rather bizarre creature to monumentalize but in this context it becomes an apt symbol of procreation, creeping about on its belly while secreting its familiar trail of slime. The slug is hermaphrodite since it possesses both male and female reproductive organs but usually finds a mate rather than fertilizing itself. During intercourse slugs can become so entangled in each other's genitalia, that they can only be separated if one of them chews off the other's penis. Once its penis has been removed, a slug is still able to mate using only the female parts of its reproductive system. Some species of slugs have excessive growth in their genital structures where their male organ is often bigger than their body!

In one painting a pair of giant slugs hover in the night sky above Turin, a view Massaioli can see from his house on the hill above the city. The interlocked slugs are also depicted in his large painting of the artist, Carol Rama who was born in Turin in 1918. Although long regarded as an iconic figure in Italian art circles, she only received proper international recognition at the 2003 Venice Biennale when she was awarded the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement. At the age of 21, in an era when women artists were scarce, Rama's controversial dark erotic drawings and paintings challenged the censorship of the then Fascist Italian government. Her progressive, free-spirited attitude and unconventional lifestyle has been a great inspiration to subsequent generations of young Turin artists including Massaioli who befriended her in his formative years. In real life she is only of small stature but she appears monumental in his imposing portrait with her voluminous blue dress, like some archetypal earth mother figure. Her characteristic plaited hairstyle resembles the diadem of a pagan high priestess and its form is echoed in the seemingly emblematic coiled creatures at her feet.

Massaioli's depiction of interlocked slugs relates to the sacred symbol of the snake consuming its own tail, the *oureborus*, (from the Greek meaning "tail-devourer"), which is used in many ancient cultures and alchemy to express both unity and [infinity](#). It represents cyclicity and eternal return, especially in the sense of something constantly re-creating itself, like nature regenerating itself by a perpetual act of self-consumption. This fits with a notion of the primordial in Massaioli's current work - something existing in or persisting from the beginning of time with such force or qualities it cannot be extinguished. His project conveys the idea of the dual nature of all things and more significantly, that these opposites are not in conflict. It also illustrates the dialogue between pagan and Christian iconography and the idea of an intermediary between man and deity. The sense of duality that pervades Massaioli's current work makes it seem all the more appropriate to have two parallel site-specific installations in the Milan and Turin galleries where the earthy red and the ethereal blue spiral drawings allude to the downward and upward movements of the human psyche ... a union of the conscious and unconscious mind.

London, October 2008