

*Manolo De Giorgi*

## **LAYERS OF MOLLINO**

Threadbare second-rate sofas from the late Seventies in emerald green satin deliberately arranged against 20 x 20 cm Vietri wall tiles that trace a precise zigzag to meet the steps of the staircase. On the right, a trashy ornamental deep-sea diver containing a light bulb.

We throw up our hands in horror to see the Lutrario ballroom so defiled, so contaminated, so shoddily furnished as to no longer resemble the original. Is Mollino himself under attack?

Interiors are fragile creatures, difficult to maintain and protect, vulnerable to changes in taste and the whims of the proprietor. All the more so when they are public, commercial spaces.

But such annoying accidents of fate cannot impair the Lutrario that appears in Claudio Gobbi's photographs, where objects and spaces are used in superimposed layers of meaning. The first is Mollino's original design (sublime, powerful, visionary, a separate world that virtually supplants reality). Then there is its use (imperfect, debatable, utterly earthly and human, made of bodies and behaviour that blindly encroach on and transform the space). Whether in the Lutrario ballroom or the Teatro Regio, Gobbi allows these two aspects to coexist. He doesn't remove the ugly couch, he leaves the doily on the table where the cleaning crew left it. The result is if someone had just passed through the room and left their impression on the scene.

This stratified reading of spaces coincides with Mollino's approach to photography.

We know that Mollino never considered interior photography on a par with his other interests, and never as a tool for mere reproduction. Up until 1941, when he handed over photographing his interiors to Riccardo Moncalvo, Mollino's photos always incorporate a form of stratification. Often using the term "setting", he photographs the space in order to redesign it, to change it. The Leica or Rolleiflex is used to perform a litmus test, a mechanical and only apparently objective eye through which he can generate many possible places from one original, as in a kaleidoscope. In other words, it is Mollino himself who is the first to reuse it, before anyone else.

In this way Mollino builds a second project on top of the first one and perhaps even adds a third. He places a mirror in the hall or at the end of a corridor, he sets a mirrored door slightly ajar, moves a sculpture or a plaster bust to form the new subjects of the scene. And everything changes, everything is renewed, to the extent that it is impossible to detect the "original". The two-faced nature of things, the surrealist layering of conscious and unconscious themes, comes through forcefully in Mollino's photography. And Claudio Gobbi allows for stratification too in his interpretations of Mollino's work. A dialectic superimposition of design and anthropology.

Like a Ghirri of interiors, Gobbi blends these layers together in images that look as if they were varnished or waxed. A mix of "high" culture (the design) and lower (the purpose) which confirms the

fragility and susceptibility to change and destruction of all interiors, even those of the greatest architects.

Claudio Gobbi's images contain no trace of the abstract-geometrical rhetoric of the still life, nor the sociology of everyday life typical of interior reportage. In these, as in his earlier works, Gobbi never attempts to recover the interior's virginity.

Instead he suggests the mystery of a passing presence (a rustle of behaviour), without which the image, as Alighiero Boetti would have put it, is 'watered down'.