

CHIARA CAMONI
CALL AND
GATHER.
SISTERS.
MOTHS AND
FLAME
TWISTERS.
LIONESS BONES,
SNAKES
AND STONES.

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LIONESS BONES,

SNAKES AND STONES.

curated by

Lucia Aspesi and Fiammetta Griccioli

Pirelli HangarBicocca

15.02 – 21.07.2024

Public Program

The exhibition is accompanied by a series of events that allow visitors to learn more about some of the themes of the show and of Chiara Camoni's work.

Cultural Mediation

Cultural mediators are present in the exhibition spaces to answer questions from the public, give information and context elements that can deepen the fruition of the artworks.

Catalog

A volume dedicated to the exhibition will be published in spring 2024 and will be available at the Pirelli HangarBicocca's bookshop and online.

Discover more on our website.



Chiara Camoni
Photo Andrea Rossetti

The Artist

Chiara Camoni's (b. Piacenza, 1974; lives and works in Seravezza, Lucca) artistic practice encompasses diverse forms of expression, from drawing to vegetal prints and sculpture, with a special focus on ceramics. Her poetics is distinguished by the use of artifacts that recall the domestic world and hover on the border between object and artwork. She creates sculptures with natural materials that determine the earthy tones and changing forms characteristic of her corpus. Camoni gathers different kinds of herbs, berries, and flowers along the rivers and in the woods, which she incorporates in her production together with clay and ashes using organic processes. These elements are then modeled, reassembled or intertwined, and sometimes even fused, to create various bodies of works, some with zoomorphic traits—such as snakes or moths—and others evocative of architectural language, such as floors composed of marble fragments. Through the repetition and ritualism of the gesture, the artist explores the relationship with craftsmanship, its development in the history of civilizations, and its legacy within the contemporary art scene.

From the beginning of her creative practice, Camoni has engaged with the unpredictability of materials and her interest in the transformation of traditionally simple ones, such as clay and glazes, which are nonetheless closely connected to ancestral worlds. At the same time, she goes beyond the history of craftsmanship by incorporating unusual elements, for example sand and soil with different mineral properties to create the polychrome effects in several series of ceramic sculptures, such as *Sisters* (2019–ongoing), large, primordial-looking female figures of striking grandeur. This openness to the unexpected and wonder also embraces the collective dimension, another central aspect of her art. Indeed, during the creative process, she often draws on the cooperation of people close to her through workshops and seminars. These encounters generate moments of exchange that, even in their transience, are essential in defining the principles and beauty of her work. Camoni draws from everyday materials and re-elaborates techniques, such as the use of looms or vegetal prints on silk deriving from the traditional tools of female activities. Her vocabulary recalls the collaborative practice of artists such as Maria Lai (1919–2013), a leading figure on the Italian art scene known for the originality

of her production, expressed through weaving and embroidery, and the staging of large-scale performances in urban settings featuring the involvement of entire communities.

The relationship with the natural and animal worlds—central to Camoni's work—is also conveyed through the relationships between forms and materials, where the chiaroscuro effects of natural light and the little flames that dimly illuminate certain works frequently reveal and conceal metaphysical landscapes. Similar to architectures with a suspended atmosphere, these compositions call to mind the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), who juxtaposed ancient objects and statues with sharp areas of color with a modern slant in visual narratives capable of combining different histories and times.

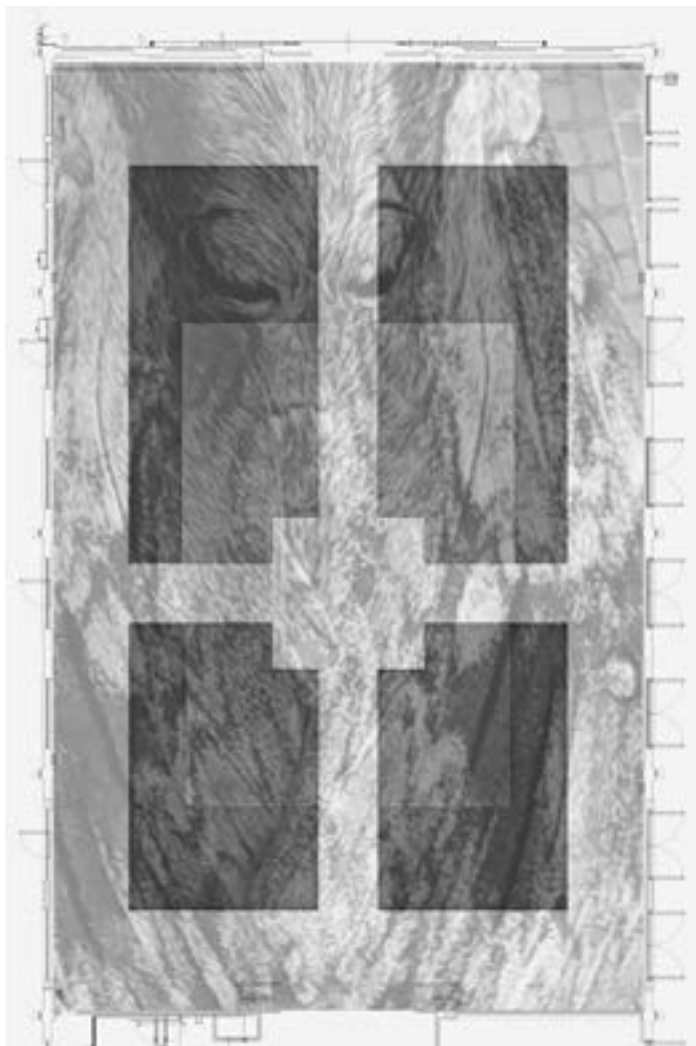
Camoni studied sculpture at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts in Milan in the late 1990s and has been working with ceramics since the beginning of her career, using lathes and high-temperature kilns. She began employing glazes of her own production, shifting between a deep knowledge of the craft technique and a more instinctual approach, guided by the material itself. As she explains, «Clay is a readily available, ductile, affordable material, but with an element of surprise.» In 2002, at the beginning of her artistic career, Camoni established a valuable collaboration with her grandmother, Ines Bassanetti, who became her assistant at the age of 89 and, invited by her niece, began to produce a substantial collection of pencil drawings of flowers and animals. The project, entitled *La Grande Madre*, later became an artist's book, which was followed by other series of works. Commencing with this unique relationship, Camoni showed an attitude toward the inclusion of relationships and intimate dimensions in her production, that would become her personal methodology. The same approach can be found in her partnership with the Istituto per la Diffusione delle Scienze Naturali in Naples between 2002 and 2006, an institution committed to the promotion of scientific culture through multidisciplinary means. In this context, Camoni presented a series of lectures on the link between ancient art and magic at the National Archaeological Museum. In 2018, together with curator Cecilia Canziani, she developed "La Giusta Misura," a series of encounters involving various institutions and guests from academic backgrounds such as sociology, gender studies, and medieval history. The project

is emblematic of Camoni's practice, which combines the artistic gesture with in-depth theoretical research. Concurrent with these experiences, she established her studio in the place where she currently lives, the forests of the Apuan Alps, allowing her to develop a very personal working method.

The languages employed by Camoni also include literature and writing, which are important sources of inspiration and reflection during the creative process, even if not explicit in the final result. An example can be seen in the œuvre of Italian female writers, like the poetess Chandra Livia Candiani, in which a common sense of wonder is found. Moreover, seminal texts, such as the collection *Autoritratto* (1969) by the art critic and feminist Carla Lonzi (1931–1982), have influenced the actual form of Camoni's *Autoritratto (una luna)* (2020–21) series on paper, a corpus of 29 pencil drawings representing the physical features and facets of her inner self. While the fragments of writing shape the concepts of her art, this theoretical tendency is counterbalanced by drawing, leading Camoni back to repeated gestures, aimed at marking the passage of time. The temporal component is an essential element of her language and is intertwined with an imagery that blends a fascination with antiquity and archaeology. In several cases, she evokes hybrid creatures spawned by the merging of animals and objects which recall the illustrations of medieval bestiaries, where the natural world is depicted in symbolic and religious terms. An example is the stone sculpture *Serpentessa* (2021), installed around the edge of a grotto in the basement of Palazzo Bentivoglio in Bologna, whose head brings to mind a prehistoric reptile. The artist is fascinated by objects like the votive offerings discovered inside the Etruscan sarcophagi that lie in the most remote folds of time: «When I visit an archaeological museum, I feel that I am in front of something unreachable and wonderful: those objects—oil lamps, vases, jewelry—accompanied the deceased on the journey to the afterlife.» Starting from her interest in the intimate and mythical narrative of these artifacts shrouded in darkness, the artist creates a series of jewel-sculptures like the delicate objects shaped by melting down pre-existent jewelry. The pieces are manipulated and reworked to highlight, on the one hand, the close links that can be established with them and, on the other, the infinite possibilities of transformation of the material to express the deepest meaning of existence.



Sister (Hut), 2022 (detail)
Black terracotta, iron, fresh and dry flowers
Nicoletta Fiorucci Collection
Photo Camilla Maria Santini



Preparatory sketch of the exhibition
made by the artist, 2023

The Exhibition

Upon entering the exhibition, you will find yourself in a unique place that may remind you of a “garden,” or an ancient amphitheater. It is a barren landscape, at the same time elaborate and decorated, composed of works made of geological and perishable materials, such as minerals, wood, herbs, and ceramics; ascending and descending rhythms of natural elements that create volumes and indentations; and moments of brightness and shadow. We invite you to stroll around this space, sit on the benches, look around and get to know the works that compose it with the delicacy they require, paying attention to the many elements arranged on the floor.

Chiara Camoni’s exhibition “Call and Gather. Sisters. Moths and Flame Twisters. Lioness Bones, Snakes and Stones,” features the most comprehensive body of works ever presented by the artist in Italy. Large sculptural groups such as the *Sisters* (2019–ongoing) series and numerous new productions are brought together in a radial architecture inspired by Italian gardens and specially conceived by Camoni for the Shed space.

The title, which hints at a poetic composition in its musicality, anticipates some of the themes explored in the exhibition, including the interest in the mystical dimension of reality, explored through everyday gestures and rituals in the sphere of craftsmanship, and the relationship between animals and the natural context, intended in the artist’s vision as a generative and cyclical system.

The symmetrical arrangement that defines the space and stems from the empty center recalls the paths typical of late Renaissance Italian gardens. Visitors can walk through the various rooms illuminated by natural light that—just as in a garden—creates a bright atmosphere alternating with more secluded shaded areas where they can immerse themselves in a contemplative and collective experience.



Lionesses, 2024 (studio shot)
Leccese stone, inserts of glass
and labradorite stone
Photo Camilla Maria Santini

1. *Lionesses*, 2024

The exhibition opens with two Leccese stone sculptures specifically made for the occasion and composed of several elements that form animal figures with carved faces that look like lionesses. The dimensions of the blocks resemble those of the felines and their figurative heads, adorned with two eyes made from glass and labradorite stone, contrast with the square, abstract bodies. Traces of fossils, including shells and bones, sedimented over thousands of years in

limestone, emerge from the compact surfaces of these parallelepipeds, designed as though they were architectural elements. The *Lionesses* lie on the threshold of the exhibition, in a pose reminiscent of the lions on the gate of the ancient Greek city of Mycenae or the column-bearing ones in Romanesque churches, as symbolic guardians of the space.



Serpentessa, 2021
Stone material
Part of *Ipogea*, permanent
site-specific work
Installation view,
Palazzo Bentivoglio, Bologna
Photo Camilla Maria Santini

2a. *The Three Snakes*, 2024
2b. *Serpenti e Serpentesse*, 2024

Composed of hundreds of salvaged onyx fragments (*Serpenti e Serpentesse*) or little porcelain and stoneware bowls made by the artist (*The Three Snakes*), these sculptures form the stylized figures of snakes whose scales wind their way across the floor to mark the edges of the exhibition paths. These new works are part of a series of symbolic figures resembling prehistoric reptiles, made by Camoni since 2019, and highlight the artist's approach towards the sculptural element as a functional object. Their bodies assume an architectural dimension within the exhibition space, tracing or blocking the way in specific areas. With their variegated hues—greenish, milky white, yellowish-brown—and their faces embellished with artificial or semi-precious stones that look like eyes, the snakes appear as archaeological finds and seem to invite the audience to immerse themselves in an archaic, dreamlike dimension.

3. *Sisters*, (2019–ongoing)

Untitled, 2019
Sister, 2020
Sister #01, 2020
Sister #02, 2021

Sister #04, 2021

Sister, 2022

Sister (Hut), 2022

Sister (Flowers), 2022

Sister (of Scraps), 2023

Sister, 2023

4. *Regarding why everything winds leftward in Nature #02*, 2013–23

5. *Untitled (Laocoön)*, 2017

In the exhibition ten *Sisters* are presented together with two works which led to the genesis of the large sculptural group. Clay is employed in its natural state or with colored glazes, modeled in various formats as rough blocks with flowers and branches inserts, or thousands of little ringed pieces that still bear the prints of the fingers that shaped them. *Regarding why everything winds leftward in Nature #02* and *Untitled (Laocoön)* are agglomerates of mutable and ductile—sometimes sharp—forms that anticipate several distinctive elements of the more recent *Sisters*, such as the repetition of gestures and the long, encircling garlands wrapped around themselves. Starting from these primordial and generative figures, arranged to adapt to their architectural setting, Camoni conceived other creatures, the works entitled *Sisters*, which seem more stable and autonomous in the variety of their human-like poses. Some appear to be kneeling or sitting, illuminated by the glimmering lights of multicolored candles, others hold small discarded objects in their laps, while others unsheathe their claws made of agave flowers. The enigmatic faces give these presences that seem to emerge from a fantastical past an aura that is both benign and terrifying. Protective deities such as the *Sister (Hut)* sculpture create places of contemplation, while others, like *Sister #04*, who proudly shows her she-wolf face, always seem on the verge of possible new metamorphoses. Each embodies its own essence that emerges from the combination of natural materials and tangled threads, whose mutable forms render their different temperaments: ironic with a barely noticeable smile or assertive with a scepter-like branch. Displaying multiple facets of femininity, the *Sisters* series conveys the concepts of sisterhood and solidarity, central themes in Camoni's art. The sculptural group also opens a dialogue with previous generations of women artists whose work, recently rediscovered, has had a considerable impact on forms of artistic expression.

6. *Carrozzone*, 2021

Carrozzone is a structure in the shape of a small caravan reminiscent of a traveling theater or an old traveler's wagon. Presented as an assemblage of salvaged materials, it contains numerous shelves that house the memorabilia and books that collaborators and friends employed to adorn the work at Camoni's invitation. Colored doors and drapes, just like a little stage curtain, reveal the objects inside, among which the text of the performance *Ombre Solide*, 2024, presented on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition. A pinhole offers an upside-down view of the world, and a monitor displays a video selection that changes according to the setting. The body of the sculpture, with its large wheels and puppet-like figures on the sides, renews the sense of wonder and links the imagery of this work back to the Italian fairytale tradition.

7. *Insect Table*, 2022

8. *Selection of Dishes and Pitchers*, 2021–24

Insect Table is a zoomorphic sculpture that has been transformed from display stand to art object, extending its form and function. The coated wooden boards open up like the wings of a beetle, whose back houses a selection from the *Dishes* and *Pitchers* series, their distinctive glazed protuberances resembling tentacles or branches. Tables are a central feature in Camoni's oeuvre, and she often creates her sculptures starting from the tables in her kitchen and garden, in a process closely connected to what she calls "the promiscuity of everyday life" and which, she believes, gives the right perspective frame to her artifacts. In this group of sculptures, the domestic and aesthetic essences intermingle, blurring the distinction between artwork and object. Everyday convivial moments, such as a table carefully set to welcome diners, become occasions for performances during which Camoni uses the precious ceramic tableware in floral or zoomorphic shapes to organize special dinners and events, thus bringing her work back into the real world, in a process of continuous metamorphosis.



Untitled, Mosaic #04, 2018
Marble
Variable dimensions
Collezione Agovino
Photo Studio Gonella, Turin

- 9. *Living Room*, 2019–24
- 10. *Floor (for Clarice 02)*, 2022
- 11. *Untitled (Mosaic)*, 2024

The series of site-specific floors on display forms an architecture that takes shape from the generative center of the exhibition space, delineating different areas and corridors. The three floors extend as disjointed, sparsely distributed surfaces, similar to the foundations of mysterious places. *Untitled (Mosaic)*, develops as a fragmented mosaic in golden-yellow, grey, and greenish tones. The marble from which it was made was found by the artist on her walks along the streams in the Alta Versilia area, where she lives and works, near the quarries. With the passage of time and the flow of water, the previ-



Untitled (winter) #10, 2017
Vegetal print on silk
87 x 42 cm
Photo Camilla Maria Santini

ously dressed and squared marble slabs have been smoothly polished, revealing the archaeology of the stone itself. Another example is ***Floor (for Clarice o2)***, an open, angular paved composition, started during a collective workshop. The tiles (partly made in Nove, in the Veneto region, known as “the town of ceramics”) were glazed by mixing various materials collected by the artist, such as sand, soil, and vegetable ash, and are inspired by the floral motifs of traditional ceramics. The decorations were painted by several hands with multiple overlaps, in some cases with clear, careful strokes, in others with explosions of color that, extending beyond the outlines, allude to transformation and merge with the world of the insects that inhabit them. The work is a tribute to the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector (1920–1977), whose novel *The Passion According to G.H.* (1964) offers a profound existential monologue triggered by the sight of a crushed cockroach. In contrast to the solidity of *Untitled (Mosaic)* and *Floor (for Clarice o2)*, ***Living Room*** is made by interweaving wildflowers and herbs and is accompanied by a suspended ceramic sculpture in the shape of an owl. While the marble and ceramic floors are made of durable materials, *Living Room* is characterized by arboreal elements that symbolize the life-giving force of nature that is both ephemeral and resilient. The presence of the grassy ground may recall the vegetation that grows over ruins or takes root near abandoned monuments.

12. ***Untitled (a Tent)***, 2019
13. ***Untitled (a Tent) #03***, 2023
14. ***Tapestries***, 2024

The two circular brass structures ***Untitled (a Tent)*** and ***Untitled (a Tent) #03*** house several silk drapes on which figures are impressed by means of direct printing with flowers, leaves, and herbs with dyeing properties. The process results in the appearance of mysterious beings, whose specular composition immediately recalls corporeal, albeit elusive and ethereal, presences. The spirits fixed on the silk are emanations of the very landscape in which the plants were sourced; they dance in a circle as in a ritual, transforming themselves from thin veils into a sculpture within the space, whose shape reminds to a tent or a hut. The artist made many vegetal prints using herbs from her garden or the surrounding woods, or



Butterfly Vase 03, 2020
 Glazed stoneware with flowers ash,
 vegetal elements
 34 x 16 x 17 cm (variable dimensions)
 Photo Camilla Maria Santini

sometimes from elsewhere, expanding the creative process, holding workshops, and collectively creating new silks. In the *Tapestries* series, the printing and dyeing process remains the same, while the brass structures change, arranged in a modular configuration that suggests domestic features such as stained-glass windows or paravents. The fabrics on which the essence and colors of the landscapes are printed were made by the artist while in Puglia for an artistic residency, when she closely collaborated with the Constantines, a group of craftswomen and philanthropists who have promoted the art of weaving as a means of women's emancipation since the early 20th century. The geometric patterns that make up these canvases may resemble snake scales or spider webs, which Camoni "stains" with organic materials from her home and kitchen, to evoke abstract and ambiguous incorporeal entities.

15. Selection of *Butterfly Vases*, 2020–23

Made from stoneware and modelled by hand, the *Butterfly Vases* form an extensive series of sculptures that probes the ambiguity between the dimensions of craft and art. Indeed, the shape of these works reminds of various archaic traditions: from the vessels made in antiquity to preserve food, to Egyptian canopic jars with the sacred function of housing the organs of the dead, and the magnificent decorative vases that have recorded human history over the millennia. Camoni adds her own glazes to this process, mixing sand collected from rivers with the ashes of flowers from her garden that, when fired at high temperatures, vitrify to create iridescent multi-colored reflections. The sculptural form of the double-sided vases is embellished with plants and dried flowers that recall the alluring and monstrous shapes of the wings and antennae of butterflies and moths, as well as insects, bird feathers, and coral.

16. **Ninessa #01**, 2015

The sole work in the exhibition displayed on a pedestal, **Ninessa #01** is entirely made of clay and takes the form of a female figure emerging from the shapeless material. The sculpture is part of a series of small characters modeled by the artist with quick, instinctive gestures. Prior to the sculptural group *Sisters*, **Ninessa #01** alludes to Neolithic statuettes of the Mother Goddess, a primordial divinity linked to the concepts of fertility and abundance found in numerous civilizations. In this case, the artist interprets these little idols in autobiographical terms, dedicating the series to her daughter Anna, having made it during the months immediately following her birth.

17. **Casetta**, 2024

18. **Burning Sister**, 2023

Conceived for the exhibition at Pirelli HangarBicocca, **Casetta** is a wooden structure in the familiar shape of a dresser that, however, is stripped of its usual features to become an installation. Its white-washed back wall acts as a screen for the **Burning Sister** video, which shows a *Sister* made entirely of plant material, burning in the twilight on a deserted beach in Greece. Unlike the other works in the *Sisters* series, made of clay, this one is composed of garlands of flowers, leaves, and berries, which disappear among the flames. The video captures its combustion from beginning to end, revealing the true essence of the *Sister* in the very instant it disappears. The artist collected the ashes and transformed them into a glaze, whose rosy hues color the bowls placed on one of the few remaining shelves on the front of the dresser. The single shelf in the structure also houses some jewelry, which is the result of the action of fire: a necklace and rods made from pieces of other melted-down jewelry and aluminum flakes recovered from the casting of *Dogs (Bruno and Tre)* included in the exhibition.

19. **Barricade #1**, 2016

The line composed of numerous clay pots, which blocks the way around the edge of the Shed, invites visitors to reflect on spatial perception. Each vase in **Barricade #1** contains natural and ephemeral elements, such as fresh cut grasses and flowers, suggesting fragility and care as opposed to their function of containment and resilience. The work leads back to the idea of collectivity and craftsmanship found in some of the sculptures in the exhibition, such as *Sisters*. Indeed, the vases are hand-modeled by the artist and symbolize archetypal concepts, but also the idea of the manual nature of sculpture, as she explains: «When I work with clay strips, proceeding from the bottom up, I repeat one of the oldest gestures in the history of mankind, probably the first sculptural form: a hollow and a convex space, a solid and a void. I have the sensation of building the whole universe.»

20. **Dogs (Bruno and Tre)**, 2024

At the end of the exhibition path, the aluminum castings of two dogs lie on a soft, light grey wool carpet. With its shimmering lunar silver glints, **Dogs (Bruno and Tre)** marks the exit while dialoguing with the stone *Lionesses* at the entrance. The two domesticated animals are set in contrast to the hieratic alert felines, from which they also differ in their naturalistic features and contemplative poses. The show thus opens with the warm colors of Leccese stone and ends with the cold hues of aluminum, echoing the natural cycles of light.

Selected Exhibitions

Several international institutions have hosted solo exhibitions by Chiara Camoni, including *A Tale of a Tub*, Rotterdam (2023); GAM, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin (2022); Capc, Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, CEAAC, Centre européen d'action artistiques contemporaines, Strasbourg (2021); Mostyn Centre for Contemporary Art, Llandudno, Wales, Middlesborough Institute of Modern Art, United Kingdom (2019); Nomad Foundation, Rome (2015). The artist has taken part in numerous group shows, such as Biennale, Borger-Odoorn, The Netherlands, Fondazione Luigi Rovati, Milan (2023); Biennale Gherdëina, Val Gardena, MAMAC, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Nice (2022); CENTRALE, Brussels, Nottingham Contemporary, GNAM, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome (2021, 2019); Rome Quadriennale, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, Centrale Fies, Trento, Maison des Arts Georges & Claude Pompidou, France (2020); *Magazin des Horizons*, Grenoble (2019); *Gallerie d'Italia*, Milan, Museo Novecento, Florence (2018); Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza, ar/ge Kunst, Bozen (2017); CAC-Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, Milan Triennale, MACRO, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rome (2016); Museo Villa Croce, Genoa (2015).

This publication accompanies the exhibition "Call and Gather. Sisters. Moths and Flame Twisters. Lioness Bones, Snakes and Stones." by Chiara Camoni

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Pirelli HangarBicocca is a non-profit foundation, established in 2004, which has converted a former industrial plant in Milan into an institution for producing and promoting contemporary art.

This dynamic center for experimentation and research covers 15,000 square meters, making it one of the largest contiguous exhibition spaces in Europe. It presents major solo shows every year by Italian and international artists, with each project conceived to work in close relation to the architecture of the complex, and explored in depth through a calendar of parallel events. Admission to the space and the shows is completely free of charge, and cultural mediators are on hand to help the public connect with the art. Since 2012, Vicente Todolí has been the foundation's Artistic Director.

The complex, which once housed a locomotive factory, includes an area for public services and educational activities, and three exhibition spaces whose original twentieth-century architectural features have been left clearly visible: Shed, Navate, and Cubo.

As well as its exhibitions program and cultural events, Pirelli HangarBicocca also permanently houses one of Anselm Kiefer's most important site-specific works, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015*, commissioned for the opening of Pirelli HangarBicocca, while the exterior area hosts *La Sequenza* (1971–81) by Fausto Melotti.

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