

MAI 36 GALERIE

JACOPO BENASSI

Eden

Exhibition opening: Thursday, 23 January 2025, 6pm

Duration: 24 January – 29 March

For an artist today, nothing is more challenging than dedicating oneself to photography. The proliferation of devices has made it possible for anyone to take photos at any moment. The unstoppable tide of images flooding the world has led to an inevitable devaluation of this medium, comparable to what happens when a nation prints too much money. It's as if a question lingers: how is it still possible to create meaningful photographs in a time when everyone has a camera in their pocket? Almost all great artists who use photography seem to seek a way to elevate it into another realm, one that is inaccessible to the average person.

For Jacopo Benassi, this space matches that point where photography meets sculpture and installation. But perhaps I am not being accurate: the truth is that Benassi's work is nothing less than a way of giving photography a tangible form. It all began quite naturally, progressively, about ten years ago now. The first step was to use cut glass for his frames: glass, that material most photographers would like to make disappear, rendering it as thin, transparent and without reflections as possible, becomes for Jacopo a noble material, one to be highlighted, celebrated by cutting it, showing its thickness and the beauty of its physical consistency. He talks about giving oxygen to his images, but the truth is that, for a type of photography already often deeply introspective and dramatic, cut glass intensifies even more the psyche of the subjects (not necessarily human, as in Benassi's photographs, objects, animals and plants also have a psychological three-dimensionality). My immediate reaction to these early experiments was to think of Lucio Fontana, or the way Mario Merz's igloo glass panels convey a sense of precariousness and danger through the simple fragility of a material called upon to play a part after having been a supporting element throughout art history.

That seemingly minor intuition turned out to be like removing the cork from a bottle under immense pressure, unleashing an entire vocabulary of insights, images, and emotions. Benassi's focus then shifted from glass to the frame itself - manipulated, assembled, burned, brutalized, painted, and made from scraps. Next came the exploration of how these photos, even when framed and theoretically ready for display, could be arranged in installations of varying scales, incorporating different supports, salvaged wooden pieces, sculptural tables, and pedestals. All of this was created in his La Spezia studio, a workshop, playground, and hub of the artist's do-it-yourself philosophy. This evolution culminated in the breakthrough that radically transformed his work: the layering of multiple photographs in framed assemblages, where image censorship plays a crucial role. This is achieved both through the foreground photos obscuring parts of the background images and by flipping some photos to reveal their backs, where handwritten titles begin to take on significant meaning. In the same phase, Benassi started incorporating paintings (also created by him) into these compositions, adding further variety to the mix, and more recently, fragments of sculptures or casts.

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This approach allows Jacopo to create endlessly new and different combinations, showcasing his innate elegance in crafting poetic and moving juxtapositions. In these works, the layered and concealed images engage in dialogues of resonances and meaningful tensions, amplifying one another's impact.

Everything is held together by indestructible belts, the ones usually used for car roof racks, often painted by the artist. These belts are stretched to the brink of breaking the frames and glass, thereby heightening the impression of strength and extreme fragility in the installations, which they also become a formal element of. In fact, one could argue that, rather than giving 'a' body to photography, Jacopo Benassi's journey is aimed at giving 'his own' body to photography, so that there is no longer any distance between his physical being and his work. Jacopo's body has always been central to his art, embodying a contradictory combination of power, great strength, heaviness, and density, while simultaneously expressing extreme fragility, declined over the years in a number of ailments, aches and pains, which have been poured into his work both as the subject of his lens and metaphorically.

Not surprisingly, from his earliest steps as an artist, when Jacopo was creating "only" photographs, self-portraits formed a predominant part of his work. Even the shots documenting his community and circle of friends became part of a broader journey of self-recognition and an increasingly precise emergence and definition of his identity - an identity often presented as "monstrous," exceptional, deformed, grotesque, and caricatured. It is no coincidence that in this exhibition at Mai 36, another autobiographical reference is subtly evoked: the artist's twin, Cristiano Benassi, who is also an artist. A significant portion of the works explore duality, mirroring, and the concept of the double. This theme emerges in the paired insects and their forms, such as the wings of butterflies, in the slippers - a recurring subject in his photographic production - and most notably in the rotating demonic statue, a Janus-like figure created from a cast of the artist's own face and done together with his twin.

The tribute works to great artists of the past, loved by Benassi, also reflect this dimension of the double as a means of self-reflection. The most obvious examples are the two dedicated to Dan Graham, a portrait partially obscured by frosted glass panes that engage in dialogue with his work, and to Goya, represented by a photograph of his tomb in Madrid. These are deeply moving pieces, imbued with an atmosphere of melancholy and perhaps even nostalgia that permeates all of Benassi's work, revealing the essence of the exhibition's title, Eden, the mythical lost Paradise.

Antonio Grulli