

# Letizia Cariello

di Caroline Corbetta

Letizia Cariello once mentioned that she identified with the boy who can see dead people in the film *The Sixth Sense* (1999). Not that Cariello can see ghosts, but, like most people she's afraid of the ones that haunt her unconscious. Her most recent show (which was curated by Francesca Pasini), 'Don't Breathe/ Breathe', was an exhortation to immerse yourself in your fears in order to overcome them. She was, in fact, urging us, almost literally, to plunge into our emotional background. The swimming metaphor was introduced in the exhibition's courtyard, where blue tape marked out a lap lane. At the beginning of the lane an inscription read 'don't breathe' while at the end another one read 'breathe'.

In the first gallery, another invitation to hold our breath was written on the wall, and so, with bated breath we beheld the exhibits: a pair of wedding shoes tied to each other with a piece of red wool, and two pairs of chairs also tied together with the same red thread - objects that allude to painful stories about daily routines.

The second room, the core of the exhibition, was transformed into a waterless swimming pool, its lanes suspended in the air by means of nylon cords fixed to the ceiling. The 'water level' was a pink line which circled the room. The idea of swimming as a solitary and meditative activity which demands regulated rhythm and breathing was transformed into a litany or a mantra which helps the mind to empty itself and thus reveal its real feelings. The viewer had to choose whether to dive in or not, to swim or sink under sorrow.

At the opening, some guests walked up and down the 'pool'; the sound of their footsteps creating a rather hypnotic effect. For swimmers a pool is a place of solitude and contemplation, which is the kind of environment the artist wished to create. To Cariello voluntary isolation means a lifestyle caught between psychological suffering and creativity.

The artist also explored the subtle connection between isolation as a liberating activity and painful confinement. Like the markings on the wall of a prison cell, there were inscriptions along the walls of the swimming pool: calendars obsessively marking the passage of time and little drawings recalling those of a children's book, of upturned tortoises and storks with their beaks gagged or their legs knotted. These rather terrifying images refer to childhood and adolescence, periods which are all too often full of solitude and exclusion.

Although Cariello's work deals with emotions and fears, it looks extremely controlled: pristine, flawless, almost affected in its attention to detail; like a polished and transparent surface beneath which uneasy depths lurk.