

*A HOUSE
MADE OF STEEL
AND FLESH*

Text by Fosco Bianchetti





1975

On the 22nd of April 2008, Giulia and I, coming from opposite directions, converged on Lubbock.

Lost in the middle of Texas, a point in nowhere, Lubbock has condensed into a substantial town the fine dust of farms and villages which once spread over miles of farmland.

Living in Europe, we would have never known of its existence, if not for a remarkable structure that Giulia had discovered in its vicinity and whose purpose was somewhat obscure to us. The memory of that day is still vivid to me, but many months have gone by since.

And, as you will later understand, this lapse of time has now taken on a poignant resonance.

So far, in this play, I have introduced the place and our humble storytellers, but the two leading characters are still missing: Maria and Robert.

Maria, shining with the splendour of her youth and beauty, arrived from New York. Robert, our beloved Robert, didn't have to come.

He had been there, on and off, for a good part of his life and was expecting us.

The extras reached us piecemeal.

With the entire troupe in place, the next morning, we were ready to work on the task of shooting a fashion story for 'Twill, the very purpose of our trip.

And this we did. Or, at least, so we thought. In hindsight, I have the sensation that a mysterious design had called us for the precise mission of acting the last scene of a play started 30 years ago. But let's step back a few hours, to our first meeting with Robert.

The shape of the Steel House, our extraordinary shooting location, was not unknown to us, because our trip had been thoroughly planned for a long time. As anticipated, the massive structure, covered by a delicate skin of thin rust, projected itself towards a deep canyon; its gigantic eye overlooking those lands with a curious gaze.

But, when we came close, we felt something that we could not have perceived in the small pictures that had attracted Giulia's attention: a sort of supernatural energy emanating from the globular roundness of that immovable space ship.

Not frightening, and yet, that shell of knitted scrap-iron plates appeared to hide something mysterious.



1975

There was a door, but, wisely, no locks or bells.

We timidly tapped on the entrance and, as you would expect from a piece of art, nothing happened.

The elaborate glass panelled gate was ajar and we found natural to push it a bit, and timidly step inside.

We paused, in awe of an astonishing, timeless cathedral that did not resemble anything we had ever seen, when Robert, suddenly, materialized from some opening, cheerfully greeting us. Expecting a quixotic artist, his normality took me by surprise, because, with some exceptions, I have always regarded contemporary artists as performers whose fame needs their look, and overbearing ego, as much as their work.

It has always amazed me how often their search for the key to universal art drowns in vane pretence, choked by hopelessly egotistic narcissism.

Which, in the market, is more sellable than art, thus, as often, conveniently hiding their artistic failure in commercial success.

Conversely, Robert's unassuming demeanour and his curiosity for our work revealed a modest disposition untouched by the arrogance of the weak.

Nothing in him revealed any pride for the years of toil and his achievement, but the tender affection that tied him to that inanimate creature was palpable.

Timid and gentle, he played the polite host. We played the polite guests. And yet, there was something else looming behind the friendly atmosphere of that encounter, intriguingly touched by just a speck of sadness.

The next day was hectic.

Giulia, possessed by a creative frenzy and tormented by the anguish of not being able to capture the essence of that place, was taking pictures from all possible angles.

Her restless agitation contrasted starkly with the detached calm of Robert and Maria.

Robert was casually coming and going, while Maria, obedient and thoughtful, duly executed the usual modelling routine.

I tried to help with the lights.

But, between each take, the dress switches and make-up fixes let me a lot of spare time to talk.

I didn't want to pry into Robert's personal life, though, because, the day before, masked by his courtesy, I had perceived a certain uneasiness in letting strangers intrude into his own life.

May be, even a certain regret for having let us come so close to his nest.

He had not called us there; he had not been paid for the use of the location. He had simply and naively accepted, out of kindness, our request.

Therefore, curious as I was, I felt that it would have been unfair to punish him with direct questions.

Our conversation, for a while, proceeded in the most conventional way, clearly disconnected from our deeper thoughts and from the weight of the past, and of the future.



1978



Useless as they were, those fake and formal exchanges, broken by spurts of intense shooting activity, slowly developed into a growing complicity. I told him of our chimerical 'Twill project and of Giulia's photographic dreams. Robert told me of his younger days, when, long before Maria was born, 35 years in the past, he had chosen this wild and isolated cliff as the site for his architectural sculpture. He could not exactly recall how and when the project of the house had suddenly become his recurring dream, an artistic urge that he could not escape. The house, though, had never been part of a plan to astonish the world, to redeem humanity with a message of beauty and introspection. Or so he thought. Not that he were spiteful of people, but he had absolutely no interest in becoming a celebrated artist, an oxymoron to him. He was in no

hurry, then. With the boundless future of the young fully open in front of him, he had easily committed to an inevitable journey with no destination.

He also explained how he had planned to transpose the Steel House from his mind to the real world.

The calculations, the foundations, the trusses, the plates... everything had been conceived and put in place by him, all alone. I was listening, deeply fascinated by his fantastic story.

And while he was talking, the album open on the table, my eyes glided over those grainy old pictures that had frozen instants of the construction phases and the merciless progress of time on his body.

My imagination wandering around that solitary fusion of flesh and metal, my mind pondering the meaning of that affectionate intimacy that excluded everybody else.



1980

Then, he described how, plate after plate, year after year, the embryo of the Steel House developed into a fully formed being.

To impress those wonderful curves on the sculpture, he had flexed each single steel plate, his muscles pulling a hand-hoist then entrapping the rebellious energy of the springy metal with stitches of arc welding.

He was carefully proud to emphasize that the plates had not been “bent”, only “flexed”, ready to bounce back to the native flat, if let loose. Subdued, but not beaten! Each surface had absorbed moments of his life and this, to him, was no minor detail. In fact, it was the essence and soul of the house.

The rounded forms of the house shared with him the memory of the past negotiations between his artistic vision and the will of steel.

Having being made part of this secret, now I could nearly see how, in the constrained iron, his toil and soul

were preserved. The ferrous material reluctantly bowing to his genius, the energy of his body, inexorably, transferred to the house.

And I finally understood why he had passionately begged us not to scar that silky layer of rust that covered everything: it was his own skin. And the mysterious aura we had perceived the day before found its explanation: over three decades of endless efforts, a tremendous amount of energy had accumulated into the sculpture, finally enveloping the house in a powerful field of force. At this point, you may wonder if my recollections, entwined with my fantasies, can tell the tale from the truth. But does it matter? The luscious pictures of Giulia give enough of a foothold to our story. And a reliable witness, the Steel House, is still there.

During the day, I had noticed how Robert had shared, with growing participation, our emotions and, eventually, I considered him part of the group.

The evening, we had dinner all together and, at the restaurant, I found a round table. It was clearly too small for the number of people. But I like the cosy feeling of physical contact and we squeezed next to each other, ready to enjoy the comfort of backstage complicity.

The thoughtless and gay atmosphere created by our youthful band definitely charmed Robert, the guest of honour. At times, I could even see him radiant with glimpses of childish happiness. The princess of the table was Maria, but Robert, after having watched Giulia at work, was definitely seduced by the energy and devotion that she offered her art. Most of all, I believe, he affectionately envied her naïve faith in the future.

The next day we started to work early and, like the day before, we kept talking, and talking. The three of us bound into one of those rare and strange friendships that are not based on common experiences or familiarity, but rather on untold feelings and deep respect. Friendships that live in a world, parallel to your ordinary existence, where



they can be cherished and forever stay silently close to your heart, needless of constant care.

As he was a man of wide interests and culture, our conversation touched varied subjects. I avidly enjoyed those casual chats, because the vantage point of his seclusion offered a different and enlightening perspective.

But, surrounded by the house and its countless fascinating details, we came frequently back to this subject.

So I learned that only recently, after all the years of work, the house had been brought to a liveable condition, with still a few unfinished bit and pieces.

He had just moved in a few weeks before. His mission nearly accomplished, I asked what plans he had for the future. After a long silence, he briefly hinted to a much larger undertaking that did not leave him much room for anything else. He did not elaborate, but I noticed a pensive light in his eyes. Cowardly, I did not pry further. I didn't want to know

more, because, somehow, the gravity of his comment made me fear that his life was at stake.

And, in fact, it was, as I later understood. The undertaking he had mentioned was a war. The battlefield his body, evil cells the enemy and chemotherapy his sword. He appeared neither scared nor overly concerned, thought.

As always, as working on the house, his focus was in the process, not in the outcome.

Hiding my sadness, I let the show go on, take after take, because it had to go on, as we both knew.

Soon the curtain had to be lowered and we all had to play our role, 'Twill being the last paragraph in the story line.

The Steel House had been Robert's journey for 35 years and now, long expected, but suddenly too close, the decree of time had to be executed. And the transmutation of Robert into his sculpture being completed, the journey was close to the end. As guided from

above, we had been called there to celebrate that moment with joy rather than sorrow, to give a happy ending to the play of his life. According to the script, Maria, white skin in white dress, had to be there, standing in sharp contrast against the rusty plates of the house, as a symbol of the ever renovating flow of life. Her innocent face a tribute to a forthcoming rosy future, as it had yesterday been for the young Robert. We finished the shooting in the afternoon, as always, too late. In a rush, we warmly thanked and kissed Robert, the lack of time providentially hiding from me the meaning of that farewell. I quickly escorted everybody to the airport and they dispersed in opposite directions. Suddenly the day had grown colder, and, in the approaching dusk, I began my long and solitary drive to Dallas. When home, as woken from a dream, we all went back to our daily chores, all absorbed in self-consuming activities bound to leave no trace. Occasionally, I thought of those two very special days, of Robert and his reassuring peace of mind, of his majestic



1994

Steel House and its mysterious secret. And I imagined Robert, inextricably melded with his sculpture, sometimes, thinking of us.

With Giulia we discussed the photo-story many times, something always delaying the publication. But time flies so fast, life is so greedy that, lost in the glittering of the world, I quickly forgot the brave fight of my friend. Thousand of miles away, time had another meaning and Lubbock was again a remote point in nowhere. In December, Giulia received the following message from Mark, Robert's neighbour and friend.



2007

Dear Giulia,

Many photographers have “documented” the Steel House including Robert himself, but he told me that your pictures were the first to “add” to the art of his home. To me, this is the highest compliment that he could have given. He was looking forward to visiting you in Europe. Alas, our dear Robert is gone. Tuesday morning on December 8 he died of an infection he contracted because his immune system was so lowered from his chemotherapy. Heroic measures were employed, because he was responding so well to his chemo. If only we could have got him over the infection. Giulia, your encounter and pictures gave him joy and excitement near the end of his life. Thank you for that.

Sincerely, Mark Lawson

Giulia was desperate and cried for days. I felt guilty for not having yet published those pictures, which he liked so much. Our plans to go back to the Steel House and hand him a few copies of Twill, with the Steel House on the cover, shattered in emptiness. Eventually, time healed our grief and I was able to look at Robert and our adventure in a light of beauty, joy and hope. Hope in art as an expression of our feelings, not of our vanity. Hope in the individuality of man that can always redeem, and be redeemed, even when lost in the damnation of the masses. Then, so as not to forget, I wrote this piece. ■

