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IN VINCENZO'S FIELD

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A look back on the ten years of surf and art of Vincenzo Ganadu

On an A4 sheet, written in ink, Vincenzo has jotted down the following order of events:

“1994, finish military service, start the practice of wave-riding.

1995, growing awareness, beginning of an artistic journey; surf art.

1997, first painting of surf.

1998, graduate in Sculpture, first trip to Biarritz.

1999, exhibition in Diddo Ciani's surf shop, meet Mike McNeil”.

The mistral wind appeases the warm air as it enters the living room. Dozens of paintings and a few photos adorn the walls. On a circular table sits a flower vase with photo negatives scattered around it.

'Latte Dolce' district, Sassari, 18th August 2010: 'When did your first meeting with Mike Mcneil in Cagliari happen?'. 'Before 1999, I still hadn't graduated at that point'. 'Sorry, Vincenzo, but that's not what it says in your timeline here...', I point out this inconsistency, placing a finger on the sheet. 'Actually, I find it difficult to remember the dates well, everything is still happening'. His fingers, with nails dirtied with colours, make a dull tapping sound on the table as his eyes flow over the sheet full of dates, works, encounters, travels; a whole life summed up with a single breath of the black ballpoint in his hand. Suddenly the notes on the sheet become incomprehensible even for him, confirmation of the fact that Vincenzo lives in an eternal present. Together we try to piece together the threads of his story: Vincenzo, at 37, has seemingly amassed ten years of a career in the world of “surf art”. In fact, since 2000, he has given his all to break through in this elusive field; 'That was the real turning point, from then on came my most important collaborations'. Once understood that, for Vincenzo, chronological precision is a trivial detail, I completely trust his telling of events as he attempts to capture a collective image, rather than a list of facts, from his past. Self-conscious, almost shy despite the long friendship that we share, Vincenzo lets on only what's necessary, without ever uttering anything extra. According to him, life is 'a painting, where you can draw what you want, if you have talent', obviously like one of his paintings; full of dreams of vivid, radiant colours. Placid, a lover of healthy living, hardworking and punctual like an office worker. Vincenzo could seem an atypical artist. But upon closer inspection, he is hypertensive, distracted, a storyteller and very, maybe overly,

generous. One story goes, for example, that, once disembarked for Marseille en route to Biarritz, he filled up his Panda 1000 with petrol and headed off at full speed for the French Basque coast.

After around 400km, as told by his travel partner, 'he touched his heart, then checked his wallet and realised he'd forgotten his credit card!'

Obviously, it had been left on his workbench alongside palette knives and paintbrushes. This episode is indicative not so much of his distraction, but of his almost hysterical enthusiasm for travel and new adventures. An artist lives among dreams, not in a real world. His inspiration, however, comes from circumstances actually lived, moulding situations and facts as he chooses. Let's put it this way, if we take the foundation of good journalism to be objectivity, Vincenzo Ganadu wouldn't be a very reliable source! Yet, sat at the dining table with a pizza before him, he is able to entertain his audience with stories as absurd as they are true. On one such occasion, after hearing the same old tall story, Maria, his partner, exclaimed 'Don't talk nonsense!'; the same tale had already been repeated to three different people, each with its own unique ending, and he even had a fourth version, obviously yet to be published! As for his work, however, he has always been nothing but serious.

Probably beginning around the age of seven, Vincenzo started to wake up early with a military precision, stirred by visions of projects to bring to life. Not even his parents, Antonello and Rossana, nor his sisters, were ever able to calm him down, neither did his childhood friends lead him to juvenile distractions and mischief, nor has he ever been tempted by drugs or alcohol. At fifteen, the *pitzinno* (or 'boy' in his local Sassarese dialect), was already impressing his school art teachers with his complex and contorted *chiaroscuro* drawings. 'I had to produce at least one of them every two weeks' he says, 'at that time I used a pencil as if it were an extension of my body, these days I wouldn't be able to produce such complicated works'. At that time, he regularly attended his art classes but consistently neglected the rest; Mathematics and Italian, for example, remained alien to him.

At that point his direction was already fixed and, from then on, only sport competed with art for his undivided attention. In the family photos, faded with time, one can see the now relaxed stomach was once a rippling washboard; roller-skating and hockey had sculpted his physique. Then came windsurfing and shortly after, the shot in the arm that was surfing. According to his telling of events, this happened in 1994. Back then, at 21, Vincenzo often went to the workshop of Elio Pulli, an artist from his native Sassari, and got to know the muralist, Angelo Pilloni. He also began a friendship and esteemed working relationship with the sculptor, Pinuccio Sciola, known throughout the world for his '*Pietre Sonore*' (or 'Sound Walls'). Some years later, in 1997, a canvas emblazoned with reds and yellows was born, cohabited by a longboarder hanging five and a slashing shortboarder. This was a first naive attempt that Vincenzo defines as 'the beginning of my own artistic journey'. He tells of events which flow freely between past and present and follow no timeline; 'Each day I went to the countryside, dug the soil, watered the plants and cultivated my own small vineyard. I had no work, no money and no inspiration to paint. As with these past few months in Australia, I tried to think, re-evaluate, find new ways. I was clinging to the only thing I had, the land'.

Nowadays, Vincenzo Ganadu has in his eyes the awareness of a mature man, different from the innocence and ingenuousness he wore during the latter part of the nineties. His bucolic tale refers to when, upon returning from Australia in 2008, he found himself faced with the realities of the economic recession. Sat in his chair, he writhes when explaining all that he didn't want to portray in his painting. Every so often Maria glances over as she listens to fragments of his life, facts well-known to her, leaving Vincenzo free to tell his story. The career of an artist isn't only joyous, but often torturous, denoted by gaps, setbacks and failures. This is the same for Vincenzo Ganadu.

At the foot of the A4 sheet is written:

"2009, poster for Noosa Longboard Festival.

2008, exhibition at Phil Jarratt's 'Back Beach', Noosa Heads.

2005, project for line of t-shirts, expo in Sao Paulo, Brazil".

But there is a three year gap, unmentioned, a void; years in which he lent his talents and vocation to the instinct of survival.

'After a trip to Hawaii in 2004, I abandoned my paintbrushes and canvas, I no longer portrayed waves and surfers', he explains, 'I had started my own business, Ganadu Creations, and I worked in interior design. Surf art had been a dream, but I had to think of my family'. Vincenzo donned the clothes of an artist, put on workman's cap and threw himself into the world of decoration; creating signs for businesses and painting the interior of houses gave rise to a style that soon brought him both clients and money. Art, however, understood *tout court*, was always what made him tick. He continued to travel the world with a suitcase of sketches and dreams. In November of 2004, he was invited to Lima to attend lessons on ceramics.

He would later return home to Sassari with a passion for Peru and pass this on to other friends who, two years later, were to follow him in a return journey. In May of 2006, he put his name to a cyclopic mural, a wall painting in Callao, Lima, measuring 15 metres x 30 metres. For one month, he climbed up and down the shaky scaffolding and painted scenes from the Italian immigration to Peru. 'That work really put my technical knowledge of muralism to the test. At first the dimensions frightened me but I had to use all the skills I had learnt from my mentors and doing so successfully was extremely satisfying.' During his stay in Lima he found time to travel, discovering Nazca, admiring the pre-colombian 'Chan-Chan' drawings, getting lost in the majesty of Lima's old town, surfing the waves of Chicama and following the coast as far as the Ecuadorian border to the north.

After the said journey, he was lovingly welcomed home to Sardinia by his son Joel and partner Maria, both of whom are always present in his thoughts.

Readapted to the Italian pace of life, he resumed work with his artisan's hand. It was 2006 and still a burgeoning time.

Turnover was constant, his bank balance on the up. It was the time to make things happen and to realise a personal dream, that of building a house in the country.

Vincenzo bought three acres of land near Porto Ferro but a regional law concerning rural development and environmental protection forbade him to build on it; the Ganadu family experienced a small trauma.

Meanwhile, his accountant was knocking at the door to remind the young entrepreneur of the small fees and debts to pay. In Italy, the news and television began talking of a 'crisis', an economic recession that soon became tangible. Customers no longer had money to spend, no new commissions came in, the money dried up and everything ground to a halt.

'I began to ponder an escape to Australia, the goal was to emigrate, even though it didn't work out,' he says.

Meticulous in the preparation of his trip, he looked up some contacts in the land of kangaroos and left in May 2008 with an open ticket. He travelled far and wide for six months, slept on the beach and was hosted by new friends, leaving indelible marks of his generosity by giving presents of paintings, prints, and, of course, his good humour. This renewed happiness inspired him to paint once more. Without knowing a word of English, he encountered, among others, the shaper, Tom Wegener; the artist, Blair McNamara; and journalist, Phil Jarratt, one-time editor of the famous 'Tracks Magazine' turned event organiser. The latter was seduced by his Vincenzo's paintings and bought the rights to

make one of them into the poster for the Noosa Festival, the most important exhibition of surfing in Australia, organised by Jarrat himself.

'Vincenzo has a bold style that fits surfing really well,' says Phil, 'I chose one of his paintings because his art is authentic and really captures the feel of Noosa'. Rewarded by the many personal satisfactions, Vincenzo returned home to Sardinia happy and relaxed. Unexpectedly, a new period of suffering and reflection was to begin. 'The social situation was even more disappointing than when I left,' he recalls, 'the whole system had come to a standstill, so many young people like me, especially in Sardinia, were without work'. After months of living in a carefree land, he was catapulted into a world of 'sadness and unemployment'. Thus began what his closest friends have called a 'spiritual retreat'. Every morning at first light he went to the countryside to cultivate his land. He once confessed to having placed a chair in the centre of the field, being there merely to observe nature, to think. 'Think what about what?' I ask. The answer is slow in coming, Vincenzo sighs and ten seconds of silence pass.

'It is not easy to put into words; thoughts about my whole life, about my son. I was wondering what I would say to Joel if I couldn't manage to build the house?'. The subject of the house often recurs in his conversations, even though, as he states, 'in order to create my work, it's not the space that is important so much as the energy and passion'. Overcome with worry, Vincenzo also gave up the sport, the passion that had started it all, the driving force behind his art: 'Surfing has always given me the drive to produce in every field', he admits. Lacking this element of "waves" both 'depressed and distressed' him, until when a message appeared in his e-mail inbox from Randy French. With the founder of Surftech, a new partnership was born and in a few months, after a short negotiation, a courier arrived at the gate of his land in Porto Ferro with four brand new surfboards, directly from Santa Cruz. Randy, an admirer of Ganadu's art from the first appearance the cover of 'The Surfer's Path', could not refuse the oldest form of trade: the exchange. Thus, in the Californian shaper's living room, amongst vintage boards from shapers Severson, Rietveld and Auster, also stands a small Ganadu art collection. For French, the works of Vincenzo have a magical, almost metaphysical quality; 'In the same way a dancer interprets music through movements, Vincenzo interprets waves and surfers, translating them into brush strokes on canvas'. Among the four boards were also two hybrids - a 6'4 ' mini-longboard and a 6'9' single fin. Vincenzo discovered surf for the second time as he forgot the inhibitions of a fundamentalist longboarder and opened himself up to the idea of riding any kind of board; 'Going in the water with boards shorter than nine feet was like being reborn!'.

On a corner of the A4 sheet particularly dense with notes, Vincenzo has put together his thoughts on his joint exhibition in Laguna Beach with photographer David Pu'u, his work for the calendar for 'Surf Session' magazine, the cover for 'The Surfer's Path' magazine and his first cover for 'SurfNews' magazine. The box below this marked '2010', however, is still empty. After a winter spent chasing waves in Sardinia and some work as a decorator, Vincenzo has gone back to painting waves. A few days after recording this interview he left for Australia where, with the Sardinian Association of Queensland, he exhibited his surf art in an elegant building in central Brisbane.

The media interest was such that both Italy's ANSA and Australia's SBS television channels have covered the exhibition. The latter, an Australian equivalent of the Italian RAI network, has even dedicated a special radio broadcast to it.

As a result, his paintings have appeared at the Rainbow Bay Surf Club in Coolangatta. At Kirra, he has also decorated some boards for the shaper, Darcy, and painted a restaurant in a classical style. 'Do you have any regrets?', we ask.

'None. Being from Sardinia, coming from outside of the established surf world, I've accomplished a lot!'. Among the many characteristics of Vincenzo Ganadu, we have forgotten to mention 'tenacity'; an obstinacy that is unique to his nature, a mix of both stubbornness and energy, and a typical trait of us Sardinians. And it is maybe this characteristic that makes him say, just before I press the stop

button, 'There's one thing I want clarify, it's that I never once thought about giving up painting "surf art". I'll do it till the day I die'. If we think about it, after all, it would be the same as to stop surfing altogether. Impossible, or at least very traumatic.