



Gina Pane © photo. Anne Marchand.

# GINA PANE

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**Terre protégée**  
 December 12, 2018 – January 12, 2019  
 kamel mennour  
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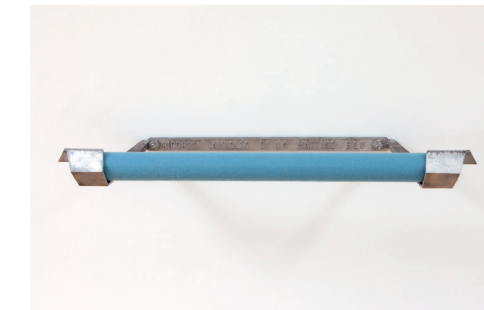
‘On the level of communication, Gina Pane’s work constitutes a remarkable success for language, a culmination of the environment, a masterpiece of applied ecology. [...] On the eve of our great mutation, we must prepare ourselves for the revolutionary options of passage: the efficiency of our responses depend on the clarity of our analyses. Questioning our most established values requires lucid investigators. And here we have one. Gina Pane undoubtedly has more than a word to say on all this, and I’m sure she will say them, when the time is right.’<sup>1</sup>  
 —Pierre Restany, Paris, May 1970.

Kamel Mennour is please to present for the third time an exhibition of the work of Gina Pane, a central figure of the artistic scene in France in the 1970s and 1980s.

Throughout her career, Gina Pane practiced with equal ease drawing, painting, lithography, sculpture, installation, ‘action’, and photography, using the latter in her ‘Constats d’actions’. She used a wide range of materials (sand, earth, wood, aluminum, copper, tin, felt, etc.), which she chose for their intrinsic qualities and their symbolic weight, together with a range of objects she collected or made herself, without forgetting of course the use she made of her own body, which she established as her principle creative material and the instrument of the new language of body art.

The exhibition at the gallery kamel mennour (47 rue Saint-André-des-Arts) focuses on the first period of her production, particularly the end of the 1960s. This often under-recognised period precedes the highly symbolically charged, ritualised actions centred around wounding that

she made in public between 1971 and 1979, and her final sculptural productions, inspired by the lives of the martyrs, the *Partitions* of 1980-1989. The drawings, paintings, installations, sculptures, photographs, poems, and archival documents exhibited here (some of them for the first time) testify to the richness of the work of this visionary artist, an artist full of life. A body of work that continues in its different aspects to pose questions that are still relevant today. ‘Terre protégée’ [Protected Land] (a title that comes from a triptych of Pane’s) wishes to show Gina Pane’s politically engaged practice in relation to mother earth: an enchanted, nourishing, inhabited, protected, loved, remembered but also threatened, exploited, devastated, dirtied, polluted, drowned earth...



*Souvenir enroulé d’un matin bleu*, 1969  
 Blue felt, wood and aluminum. 8 x 90 x 30 cm.  
 © photo. archives kamel mennour.

A critical exploration at the crossroads of the poetic and the political, at once metaphysical and earthly, philosophical and social, somewhere between earth, water, and sky. A simple, direct dialogue with reality, for ‘art is not longer a diversion from reality’<sup>2</sup>, as Catherine Millet wrote in 1969.

Very early on, Gina Pane had an acute awareness of the fragility of our natural environment,

of the irremediable transformation of the world and its landscapes caused by industrial development, urban sprawl, militarisation, and intensive agriculture. The preservation of the land and of the earth, which symbolise promises of life and hope, becomes one of the recurrent leitmotifs of her productions at the end of the 1960s. In her determination, Pane wanted to make her audience aware of ecological questions: air pollution, lack of green space, rising water levels and contamination, resource depletion, natural catastrophes, etc. The photograph *Situation idéale : terre – artiste – ciel* [Ideal situation: earth–artist–sky] (1969) could in this sense be read as the programme underlying her whole body of work: ‘Between two horizontals: earth/sky, I placed my body vertically in order to provoke an ideal situation.’ Her feet planted firmly on the ground, staring straight before her, Pane rises between the earthly world and the cosmos.



*Situation idéale : Terre-Artiste-Ciel*, 1969 (Ecos, Eure)  
 Color photograph on painted wood. 51,8 x 68 x 1,8 cm.  
 Collection Frac des Pays de la Loire.  
 © photo. Stéphane Bellanger.

According to her, the artist must always be an intermediary, a *porteur*, a catalyst towards concrete realisation. The artist must moreover

be able to participate conceptually: ‘demand the raising of an area of land, the need for a water course, [...] the need for a rising and falling ground, etc., for [...] there must be no rupture between the natural environment, the individual, and her creation.’<sup>3</sup>

Before 1968, influenced by the vocabulary of suprematism, Gina Pane produced in her studio an important series of drawings and paintings proposing simple and complex geometrical forms: round, triangular, polygonal forms caught up in the attempt to blend with the interior of the surface of the paper or the canvas. Layered and combined, they are painted in primary colours—the cool colours appearing to recede and the warm colours to advance in respect to the ground—with the aim of introducing a movement and a feeling of space (Room 1).



*Untitled (n°20)*, [1962-1965]  
 Oil on canvas. 146 x 113 cm.  
 © photo. archives kamel mennour.



But 2D was very soon not enough for Pane, who was tempted to extend her practice into sculpture with a strong minimalist bent. This is how *Structures affirmées* [Affirmed structures] came into being, so many large metallic prisms, often blue, reaching towards the sky. ‘*Peinture–Sculpture primaires* [Primary painting–sculpture] but penetrable/impenetrable, where the body would be considered in the very conception of the work by creating spaces<sup>4</sup>, sculptures made by people for people, subtly playing with the idea of architecture and which are involved in life. “The aim of my investigations is to construct by concerning myself with everything the environment gives,”<sup>5</sup> Pane wrote.



*Acqua alta/Pali/Venezia*, 1968-1970  
12 elements in Duralinox, metal tray, muddy water, lettering painted on the floor, ceiling and walls.  
Height: 250 cm; surface on the floor: 6 m<sup>2</sup>.  
Exhibition view, Galerie Rive Droite, Paris, 1969-1970.  
© photo. André Morain.

Amongst this series of investigations based on the problems of ecology, it is worth considering her first major work, *Acqua alta/Pali/Venezia* (1968-1970): a sculptural and environmental installation, formally linked to *Structures affirmées* and reconstructed for the exhibition (Room 2). Pane offers up here a very personal vision of an anguished Venice. ‘I chose to express this city, for, through the complexity of its problems, it symbolises the aspirations, the refusals of our civilisation [...]. It is at once the symbol of anecdote as well as drama. Ecologists, urban planners, etc. have succeeded—by underlining the causes of “the death of Venice”—in raising consciousness of the precariousness of our current environment. Venice stricken strikes by turn, right into politics.’<sup>6</sup> In a pool of dirty water, a group of minimal posts—figuring the old Venetia posts—rise towards the gallery ceiling. Made in Duralinox—‘a modern material that summons the coming contemporary technology’<sup>7</sup>, writes Pierre Restany—the posts nonetheless tilt under weight of the threat that haunts the city of the Doges, a threat created by technological expansion and the too-rapid industrialisation of its ports. The structure is accompanied by a commentary that invades the space: *Acqua alta* (a Venetian expression for high tide) takes up the entire floor, while the word *pali* spreads across the walls and the word *Venezia* is repeated on the ceiling like a litany, as if the city was struggling to keep its head above water before inevitably going under...

To go back to the beginning: July, 1968. Gina Pane is walking through the Orco valley around Turin when she sees a pile of stones placed on the shadowy side of the mountain. ‘Seeing a pile of stones, between 0.15 and 0.2 metres exposed to the north, covered in moss and set

into the damp earth, made me realise that they never perceived a single sunray, never a ray of warmth. I decided to move them by taking them one after the other and putting them in an open, southern-facing place’ (*Pierres déplacées*). It was with this ‘first *in vivo* act’, this spontaneous drive to ‘right a wrong’, that Pane became conscious of the limit of her ‘pictorial and sculptural works. ‘In nature,’ Dany Bloch writes, ‘she found problems of space that [seemed] to her more important to resolve than those posed by the surface of the canvas or the environment of a sculpture’<sup>8</sup>.

On returning to Paris, she decided that the enclosed space of her studio would no longer be the only place of her work: nature would now be the catalyst her investigations. Using her body as an element of transmission (receiver/emitter), she undertook a series of *in vivo* actions, at times tender, at times protective, dangerous, or derisory (Room 3). Gestures that were often ‘very simple [...], the beauty of which comes from their extreme fragility’<sup>9</sup>, as Anne Tronche said, and whose end is to set up new possibilities of communication between threatened nature and the people who inhabit it.

At the end of 1968, Gina Pane exhibited her triptych, *Terre protégée*. On a bed of arable earth in the Italian countryside, she set up 120 wooden structures tied together by hemp belts and orientated according to the points of the compass. Under each wooden block (which make one think of lifebelts), she placed a small packet of seeds in order to protect the richness of the earth—a theme that can also be seen in the installation *Le Riz no. 1* (1970-1971), which is made up of a fragment of a rice paddy (rice, a universal food, acting for Pane as a link between the opposed ideologies of the capitalist and socialist countries).



*Terre protégée I*, 1968  
Installation: wood, hemp and earth.  
Approx. 7 x 400 x 420 cm. Exhibition view ‘Gina Pane’, kamel mennour, Paris, 2012.  
© photo. archives kamel mennour.



*Terre protégée II*, 1970  
Black and white photograph. 102 x 70 cm. Collection MAC VAL—Musée d’art contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Vitry-sur-Seine. © photo. Jacques Faujour.

The following two parts would appear in 1970. For *Terre protégée II*, Pane lay down on the ground, her back to the earth, her arms crossed, to block aggressions, take possession of the space and establish a link with the natural environment, while letting herself be absorbed by it. And for *Terre protégée III*, she made a circle of stones to protect the eponymous inscription sculpted in the ground.

In July 1969, in Écos (Eure), ‘on a stretch of arable land, [she buried] a ray of sun in the earth with the help of mirrors’ (*Enfoncement d’un rayon de soleil*).



*Enfoncement d’un rayon de soleil*, 1969  
4 color photographs. 110 x 163 cm (overall).  
© photo. Ville de Nantes, Musée des beaux-arts, Cécile Clos.

In December 1969, near Turin, she threw four drawings into the current of the Chisone, hoping that the water would carry them to the sea (*J’ai jeté 4 dessins dans le torrent Chisone (Turin) destination mer. Acte raisonnable, ennuyé, autocritique* [I threw 4 drawings into the current of the Chisone (Turin), destination: the sea. Reasonable, boring, autocritical act]). In October 1970 in Ury (Seine-et-Marne), she accomplished the vertiginous act of scaling the wall of a sand pit, an effort that pushed her to experience her limits. She would say: ‘The walls of sand were terribly high [...], I knew there

was a danger of a landslide, it was a perceptible danger, I could physically feel it.’<sup>10</sup> The silence that fills the pit is experienced as a necessary condition for a more intense relationship with nature—in this case menacing (*Deuxième projet pour le silence* [Second project for silence]). In November 1970, again in Ury, she extended a rural byway with wooden planks in order to try to establish new possibilities of communication (*Continuation d’un chemin de bois pour aller d’un lieu à un autre dans le but d’une quelconque communication* [Continuation of a wooden path in order to go from one place to another with the aim of making any kind of communication]). Finally, if the 1969 work *Stripe Rake* (Room 1), which pays homage to Malevich’s black square, can no longer be handled, it was initially placed in order for the viewers to use it. They were invited to inscribe traces with this rake made by the artist, to link together the desert sand, dead matter where nothing grows, and earth, living matter, a symbol of future crops.

However poetic these actions and works can appear, it must not be forgotten that most of them emerged from a desire to manifest a despair, a justified anger at the future of the planet, a desire to communicate with the spectator (communicate in the sense of *warn*, but also *communicate with, meet*), to provoke a surge in consciousness. Gina Pane would write in 1974, in *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*: ‘It is to YOU I am speaking because you are the “unity” of my work: THE OTHER.’<sup>11</sup>

Emma-Charlotte Gobry-Laurencin

1. Pierre Restany, ‘Acqua Alta/Pali/Venezia’, in *Gina Pane*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Rive Droite, Paris, 1970, n. p.
2. Catherine Millet, ‘Gina Pane : L’art comme moyen d’action’, in *Les Lettres françaises*, Paris, 1969.
3. Excerpt from a quote by Gina Pane, in *Artitudes International*, n°3, Saint-Jeannet, December, 1971-January 1972.
4. Gina Pane, ‘1965-1968’, in *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*, École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, Paris, 2003, p. 74.
5. Excerpt from a quote by Gina Pane, in *Artitudes International*, n°3, *op. cit.*
6. Excerpt from a text written by the artist found in her archives.
7. Pierre Restany, ‘Acqua Alta/Pali/Venezia’, in *Gina Pane*, *op. cit.*
8. Excerpt from a text written by Dany Bloch found in the artist’s archives.
9. Anne Tronche, *Gina Pane. Actions*, Fall édition, Paris, 1997, p. 9.
10. Excerpt from a quote by Gina Pane, in *Gina Pane. Travail d’action*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Isy Brachot, Paris, 1980, n. p.
11. Gina Pane, ‘Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)’, in ‘Dossier Gina Pane’, *Artitudes International*, n° 15-17, Saint-Jeannet, October-December 1974, p. 34.

All works: © Gina Pane—Adagp, Paris  
Courtesy Anne Marchand and kamel mennour, Paris/London.

Born in Biarritz to an Austrian mother and Italian father, GINA PANE left Italy in 1961 to study at the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts de Paris. She took courses in sacred art with Edmée Larnaudie and in lithography and made Paris her home. In parallel to her artistic practice, Pane taught painting at the École supérieure des beaux-arts du Mans from 1976 to 1989. In 1978, she created and ran a performance workshop at the Centre Pompidou. She died in Paris in 1990 from the complications of a long-standing illness.

Gina Pane’s work has been included in important private and public collections (Guggenheim and MoMA—Museum of Modern Art, New York; Centre Pompidou and Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris; La Gaia, Busca; MAMbo—Museo d’Arte Moderna di Bologna; mumok—Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien; Frac des Pays de la Loire, Nantes; Frac Bretagne, Rennes; MAC VAL, Vitry-sur-Seine; CNAP, Paris; [mac]—Musée d’Art Contemporain, Marseille) and has been widely exhibited, including at Centre Pompidou, Paris; Tate Modern, London; Mamco—Musée d’art moderne et contemporain, Geneva; Art Institute, San Francisco; Documenta, Kassel; Palazzo Grassi and the Venice Biennale; and recently, CAMH—Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Henry Art Gallery, Seattle; Centre Pompidou—Metz; Galerie Art & Essai, Rennes; Hangar à Bananes and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes together with Frac des Pays de la Loire; Mamac—Musée d’Art Moderne et d’Art Contemporain, Nice; Mart—Museo d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, and MUSAC—Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León. Her works are currently being exhibited in collective exhibitions at CDAN—Centro de Arte y Naturaleza in Huesca (Spain), Le Musée national de l’histoire de l’immigration in Paris in collaboration with the MAC VAL, and at La Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul-de-Vence.