



TOMMASO BARSALI HULK'S TOYS

The toys in Tommaso Barsali's photograph series remind us that, given the opportunity, inspiration makes it possible to create, rather than destroy.

At the beginning of the 20th century, when psychoanalysis was in its infancy, Melanie Klein kept coming across a problem in her clinical work with children. Her contemporaries, like Freud, could travel into the minds of their patients, using dream analyses; however, the children Klein saw were not that adept at expressing their dreams. This led Klein to develop a ground-breaking method, which involved observing how children interact with toys and the different ways they play with them. Today, toys remain a crucial instrument in developing a better understanding of child psychology; however, that is not all - toys also allow adults to express themselves.

The toys in question are the works of Franco Bellucci, a patient who lived in a mental institution in Volterra, Italy for more than 40 years.

Documentary photographer Tommaso Barsali admits to feeling a deep sense of admiration for Bellucci's creations, the moment he set eyes on them. Franco Bellucci was restrained in his hospital bed for 15 years, after suffering brain damage from an inflammatory disease he developed during early childhood. Even Reformation Law Nr. 180 of 1978, aimed at preventing inhumane practices at mental institutions, following the efforts of whistle-blower Psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, was not enough to grant Bellucci freedom.

Bellucci was lost in the depths of bureaucracy and it took 20 years for him to be sent to Centro Franco Basaglia - an institution that was much more suitable for his condition. The centre was founded to provide humane psychiatric services for dependent patients like Bellucci, who had already spent years in conventional mental institutions. This is where Bellucci breathed life into his toys, which ultimately earned him the nickname, 'Hulk'. Using various cables, old toys and unused odds and ends collected from the staff at Centro Basaglia, Bellucci gave a clear message: everything that gets pushed to one side, destined to be forgotten, is in fact merely awaiting the right opportunity (or place) to be imbued with new meaning. Tommaso Barsali visited Bellucci regularly, for four years, for the *Hulk's Toys* series.

Hulk's Toys is like a journey into the mind of Franco Bellucci, all of his toys have one thing in common: they are invariably wrapped with cables, chains or coils. A toy, made up of two beefy male torsos and two heads, is fastened with a blue cable - a screaming dinosaur is surrounded by a red coil. Could these knots be a reminder of the restraints that kept Bellucci tied to the hospital bed for decades? Or could it be that he installs a plate of armour around these discarded toys, in the hope of preserving his own identity?

Over the years, Tommaso Barsali learned many lessons on art, justice and life through photography. As for his first memory on photography, Tommaso points to a photograph of his late mother that was fused with his mental image of her. The artist's thoughts on childhood changed completely following the birth of his son, in the second year of the *Hulk's Toys* project. He started questioning how little moments - however insignificant they might appear - would etch a place in his son's mind.

The photographer does not claim to understand what goes on in Bellucci's mind: "These photographs merely serve the purpose of trying to preserve moments that might be otherwise forgotten. Who could have a clear idea of what Franco remembers from his years as a prisoner in the mental institution?" That said, Barsali's photographs underline one thing very clearly: "A more humane world is always possible with a little effort."

A world that can even encourage Hulk to create rather than destroy. ●







