

Vannacci's
Phenomenology

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Siena, the Sibyls speak again. The Duomo through Bill Armstrong's lens.

A dialogue between contemporary photography and the floor of Siena Cathedral. In the "Crypt," until November 15th, ancient prophetesses reemerge as unstable images, between revelation and mystery.



Works on display

Siena, May 16, 2026 – The **Sibyls have never been so uncertain**, so alive, so contemporary. In the SibylsI project, American artist **Bill Armstrong** traverses one of the absolute masterpieces of Italian artistic heritage—the **floor of Siena Cathedral**—to transform it into a radically new visual experience, where history is not merely contemplated, but questioned.

The prophetic figures inhabiting the Renaissance marble here lose all stability: they dissolve, split, and vibrate. Their image, stripped of clarity, becomes vision. Armstrong doesn't photograph the past: he destabilizes it. Through blurring—a hallmark of his work—he constructs a language that denies documentary precision to instead restore ambiguity, oscillation, and doubt. The result is a powerful short circuit: the solidity of the stone dialogues with the fragility of the photographic image, the engraved sign confronts diffuse color, permanence with instability. In this suspended space, the Sibyls reemerge as mobile presences, traversed by a constant tension between appearance and disappearance. Figures born in the ancient world as oracular voices, reinterpreted over the centuries as heralds of higher truths, the Sibyls today find a new dimension: no longer images to be deciphered, but enigmas to be explored.

Their fragmentary and contradictory nature—already evident in classical sources and their Christian reinterpretation—is visually translated by Armstrong into a grammar of the indefinite. "The distinctive feature of the Sienese Sibyls," emphasizes Cardinal Augusto Paolo Lojudice, Archbishop of Siena-Colle di Val d'Elsa-Montalcino, "unlike Michelangelo's, is also that they reproduce the texts of their prophecies, albeit reinterpreted in the light of Christian faith: they are expressions of elevation and contemplation, of hope and trust in the future, which certainly remain timely today. My warmest congratulations, therefore, to the artist Bill Armstrong, who through his contemporary works helps us rediscover significant languages of our past. A heartfelt thanks to the organizers of the exhibition, since bringing diversity into dialogue is not a given, but always bears fruit in human and spiritual growth." To all the wishes of the most famous of the Sibyls, the celebrated "Cumana" cited by Virgil: Nova progenies caelo demittitur alto, "a new lineage descends from the heights of heaven".

May it be the generation of peace that comes from Christ, who welcomes and exalts those who seek goodness and beauty as a path to God." The project, which brings one of the most famous decorative cycles of the Italian Renaissance into dialogue with contemporary photography, continues the artist's research. He is also the author of the Sistine Gestures cycle in the Vatican Museums, a dialogue with Michelangelo Buonarroti's Last Judgement, and the celebrated Infinity series, in which blur becomes a tool to interrogate the mechanisms of perception. Continuing this path, Sibyls takes the reflection even further: it is no longer just the body that dissolves, but vision itself. Images do not offer answers, but open up possibilities. They do not fix meanings, they multiply them.

For Carlo Rossi, rector of the Siena Metropolitan Opera, "at the heart of the project" are "ten female figures who have traversed the quest for knowledge and who, today, create a bridge to the contemporary world. Created by the greatest exponents of the Sienese Renaissance in the 1480s," the rector explains, "the Sibyls on the floor of Siena Cathedral represent a fundamental element in the narrative of the entire sculptural work." The floor of Siena Cathedral—described by Giorgio Vasari as "the most beautiful, largest, and most magnificent ever created"—thus becomes the terrain of an unexpected confrontation between past and present, in which heritage is revealed not as a stable surface, but as an active field of interpretation. For Beppe Costa, president and CEO of Opera Laboratori, "Bill Armstrong's work does not simply reinterpret the floor of Siena Cathedral, but challenges its very perception. Through the blurring, the Sibyls once again become unstable figures, suspended between vision and mystery. It is precisely in this tension that heritage is reactivated, becoming a contemporary experience and not just memory."

"If in the Sistine cycle," explains Tommaso Casini, professor at IULM University, "dissolution affected the body, here it focuses on prophetic vision: the Sibyls appear as images in transit, traversed by a tension between revelation and loss. Blur thus becomes a cognitive device, capable of visually conveying the indeterminacy of oracular knowledge. Armstrong's work occupies a space between an original, visionary reinterpretation of art history and contemporary abstraction, reactivating images of the past not as objects to be contemplated, but as open fields of interpretation." Sibyls, open from May 16 to November 15 in the spaces of the 'Crypt' of the Monumental Complex of Siena Cathedral, promoted by the Opera della Metropolitana di Siena and the Archdiocese of Siena-Colle di Val d'Elsa-Montalcino and organized by Opera Laboratori, is an immersive experience capable of redefining the gaze: no longer oriented toward recognition, but toward loss. Because it is precisely in bewilderment — Armstrong seems to suggest — that the image begins to generate meaning again.
