

Elena Ceretti Stein Sunburn

Curator: Adi Gura

May 29 - July 10, 2026

The second solo exhibition of Elena Ceretti Stein at Braverman Gallery, **"Sunburn"**, explores the balance between humans and other animals. Through a series of paintings on wood and canvas alongside a video work, Ceretti Stein examines the delicate equilibrium between these elements and the ways in which it is constantly disrupted. The exhibition's title hints at a moment of imbalance, when the body is overexposed to the sun and the skin burns to the point of injury. A process of material and bodily transformation lies at the core of the exhibition as a whole.

Ceretti Stein creates a visual world situated on the threshold between mythology, nature, and memory, between sanctity and entropy. Her works appear as remnants of an ancient ritualistic world, yet one undergoing continuous transformation. She draws visual inspiration from Renaissance art, religious iconography, and archetypal imagery, while simultaneously charging them with contemporary meanings related to the climate crisis, global consumerism, and the disruption of balances.

The exhibition emerges from two years of research into natural systems and plant life, focusing on invasive species and extinct creatures. Most works bear the scientific name of the species to which they refer. For Ceretti Stein, the concepts of "native" and "invasive" are not absolute, but part of a broader system striving for balance through shifting relationships and evolving processes. She refers to the idea of **"emergent properties"**, qualities that arise only when different elements interact with one another in a system, and do not exist when each component is examined separately. In this sense, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

At the center of the exhibition lies the question of how change emerges through encounters between forces, and how every interaction generates transformation. In one work ("Ips Typographus"), carved surfaces become a kind of organic topography, an image oscillating between abstraction and reality. The mark-making created by the movement of insects across the wood

gives the surface a painterly quality, while simultaneously testifying to a process of penetration, damage, and change. Thus, an aesthetic element also becomes evidence of transformation and extinction.

Ceretti Stein connects the natural, the cultural, and the human through the manipulation and disruption of images drawn from Renaissance painting and visual traditions associated with artists such as **Botticelli, Dürer and Antonello da Messina**. A subtle alteration in a visual detail or cultural context leads to a disruption of balance and the creation of new meaning. Nature, like culture, exists in a constant state of change, whether through invasive species, evolutionary processes, or human influence.

Most of Ceretti Stein's paintings are created on carved wooden panels associated with the Orthodox tradition of Christian religious iconography. The choice of wood is not merely material or historical, but essential: the surface of the tree (a live material), the absence of canvas texture, and the icon-like ritualistic quality lend the works the presence of sacred objects or archaeological relics. Within these quiet and precise spaces, nature no longer appears as a background to human activity, a scenography, and a stable realm. Insects, fungi, and invasive species become the main characters, penetrate the scenes and transform them from within.

About two years ago, as she was researching the "invasion" of the **Popillia Japonica** around the green areas of Milan, Ceretti Stein encountered the research of Dr. Liron Shani, which examined the cultural and political meanings around the prickly pear cactus - a symbol associated both with Israel and Palestine. Today, the cactus in Israel is under attack by an invasive insect called *Dactylopius Opuntiae*, threatening its survival in the Middle East. The research describes how the popular cactus is in fact not native to the region at all, but originates in Mexico. There, a natural predator maintains balance within the insect population, whereas in the Middle East this balance did not (yet) exist.

As a result, a specific ladybug was recently imported from Mexico in a controversial effort to save the plant. For Ceretti Stein, so similarly to its counterpart in Milan, this story illustrates how trade, capitalism, and the movement of goods and people reshape both natural and cultural systems.

Indeed, in "Popillia Japonica (Lady Holding Leaf)", a female figure holds a leaf consumed by this insect from Asia threatening entire vegetation systems in Italy. The way she presents the leaf recalls the holding of a sacred relic, almost a religious gesture. Yet instead of redemption, what emerges here is beauty born precisely through a process of awareness and deterioration. Even the veil covering the figure appears as a human-organic shell, a body itself undergoing transformation.

Other works in the exhibition leave behind only traces of human presence: a hand, a foot, a texture, a remnant of a body or of a rare plant on the verge of disappearance. Alongside the oil paintings are minimalist material works made of gesso, engraving, and pigments. These depict natural forms facing severe extinction or already extinct in the Mediterranean region due to human activity and climate change. The silence of these works feels almost fossilized, like the memory of a disappearing world.

Another painting depicts a milkvetch plant on the verge of extinction in Israel. The *Aquilegia Nuragica* plant, native to Sardinia, is likewise on the brink of disappearance and now survives only in a single mountainous area. Other works address the impact of *Ips Typographus* on trees in Trento in the Dolomites, and of *Ceratocystis Platani* on trees in the Venice region.

At the center of the exhibition stands a large triptych opening like a religious icon or ancient altar. It echoes imagery of Eden, Adam and Eve, yet the world it presents shifts perspective away from humans. This is a nature caught in an ongoing process of invasion, migration, and disintegration.

The works engage with invasive species and their movement across continents, yet they do not approach the subject from a judgmental position. Ceretti Stein seeks to observe the complex relationships between nature, commerce, and culture. She examines how tourism, imported goods, and human consumption also transport insects, fungi, and invisible life forms that gradually alter entire ecosystems. Balance is continuously disrupted, and new life forms emerge in place of those disappearing.

Each painting in the exhibition is dedicated to this fragile and beautiful equilibrium, in which the local and the imported continue to transform one another endlessly, though not without consequences. Ceretti Stein asks what it means to be "invasive," proposing that we think about the world through the concept of **allostasis - stability through change**, rather than through fixed notions of homeostasis and stable equilibrium.

Within this world, humanity does not stand outside nature but functions as part of it. The works address not only the fragility of balance, but also human responsibility toward the living systems and the diversity we continue to shape, damage and alter. Every act of consumption, importation, or resource exploitation generates a chain reaction far broader than what is visible to the eye.

The exhibition offers a slow, almost meditative perspective on the ways life, change, beauty, and renewal coexist simultaneously. In Ceretti Stein's world, mythology and biology function as complementary languages. Light, darkness, growth, and consumption flow through the works as different states of the same body.

This is a world in which there is no longer a clear boundary between the human and the nonhuman, the sacred and the earthly, the past and the future. What remains is the recognition of the invisible connections linking all forms of life, and the daintiness of the balances that sustain them.