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From Pinocchio to Star Trek and Bernini, artist Ilaria Vinci builds imaginary worlds we can step into

By Giorgia Aprosio

28.09.26

# From Pinocchio to Star Trek and Bernini, artist Ilaria Vinci builds imaginary worlds we can step into

## At her first institutional solo exhibition in Italy, Ilaria Vinci transforms familiar objects into fragments of imaginary worlds to walk through.

A felled forest, a wishing well, a bathroom built inside walnut shells. These are some of the access points to “Goodnight Morning”, the artist Ilaria Vinci’s first institutional solo exhibition in Italy, curated by Lucrezia Calabrò Visconti and on show at the Istituto Svizzero in Milan until November 29, 2026. A universe constructed through fragments, where the objects we know remain recognizable, yet begin to follow rules different from our own.

The sculptures come together in a space suspended between waking life and sleep, where familiar things retain their usual shape but seem to evade everyday rules. One navigates within a different logic, akin to that of a dream. The forest has been cut down, yet it retains something of the enchanted woods; the well still promises a wish, even if it cannot grant it; a domestic bathroom sits inside a nutshell.




**Ilaria Vinci,** Key to Revolution, 2025. Photo Flavio Karrer

Objects remain recognizable, but are no longer entirely reliable. Vinci shifts them, changing their scale, function, and relationship with their surroundings. It is thus that a crate can become architecture, a shell a room, and a stump the clue to the passage of someone unseen. And it is precisely from this gap that, for her, world-building begins.

Shaping a World

In fantasy, science fiction, and video games, world-building serves to give coherence to an imaginary universe. It establishes its structure, rules, and the objects that inhabit it, defining what can or cannot happen within it. Ilaria Vinci's works do something similar, but they bring this process into the physical space traversed by the viewer. To do so, it is not necessary to tell an already written story. It is enough to make certain clues visible and let the objects, together with the memory and experience of the observer, complete the narrative. "In my work, the transition is from the fragment to the environment," she explains. "Tendentially, all the elements of my installations are designed to function autonomously, but when brought into relation, they outline a setting—objects that might belong to one or more characters, creating the conditions for a narrative." Rather than proposing a fully defined universe with a mythology to learn or a plot to follow, Vinci builds new relationships between shapes we recognize and to which we have already attached specific fairytale functions.

" I'm intrigued by the idea of physically being part of an imaginary space. "

Ilaria Vinci

In this sense, her installations act as a story of stories: a place where fragments of different narratives can meet and give life to infinite new variations on a theme. A stump can suggest the passage of an unexpected character, a crate can transform into miniature architecture, and a shell can contain an entire micro-room. The scenes she offers are never complete, but they are always coherent enough to allow viewers to complete their message. "With my work, I primarily create the conditions for a story: scenarios, characters, objects." In doing so, the artist refrains from predetermining the possibilities of the environment she has brought to life—and, with it, what might occur within it.



**Ilaria Vinci,** This window is my sky, this room my world, 2021. Photo Luca Guadagnini

“The narrative always remains open. Whoever encounters these elements can construct their own. The idea is to trigger curiosity, not to direct it.”

## Living in Fiction

When asked why she chose sculpture, Vinci mentions her long-standing interest in how an invented environment can produce concrete physical reactions. “I am intrigued by the idea of being physically part of an invented space. It’s a bit like bringing the imagined back into reality, much like what happens in theme parks or theatrical set designs.” Years ago, she participated in a study conducted by an architecture university in Zurich on the effects of urban density on the body. While walking through virtual reconstructions of cities, electrodes recorded her physical reactions. The experience showed her how even an immaterial space can alter the behavior of someone moving through it.

“ For me fantasy is one of the places where a society stores its desires and fears, in a form fair enough to handle them”.

## Ilaria Vinci

“This operation is somehow already intrinsic to the idea of figurative sculpture,” she observes. “When we look at Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne*, we see a fragment extracted from a specific world, except that, unlike literature or painting, the work connects with our perception of reality, with our sense of touch.” If Botticelli’s *Venus* doesn’t spark a desire to shake her hand while Daphne does, it is

because the difference between the two figures lies in the distance between an image to be contemplated and a presence capable of physically engaging the viewer.




**Ilaria Vinci**, Starry Night (Sirius), 2025. Photo Cedric Mussano

Scale also contributes to altering this perception. An object can become fantastical without losing its recognizability, simply because it is enlarged, shrunk, or placed in an unexpected context. “A walnut can contain a room, a bottle a spaceship. It is not the object itself that is extraordinary, but the way it is displaced from the logic we know.”

## Codes for other Worlds

But if it is true that through world-building practices Vinci transfers the logic of imaginary worlds into physical space, it is equally true that the imagery she draws from often originates elsewhere—such as science fiction, cinema, gaming, pop culture, or online subcultures. In some works, spaceships from *Star Trek*, *Alien*, and *Battlestar Galactica* appear inside glass bottles. In other pieces, Vinci uses Elvish and Klingon to write entire sentences. “It was an observation on the specific skills acquired by fanbases of these sagas—skills that can only be used within the fanbases themselves.” Sharing a code means recognizing one another and building an identity, but also drawing a line between those who know it and those who remain excluded. Digital environments have accelerated this process. Images, aesthetics, and characters shift from one context to another, constantly quoted, modified, and recombined. It is the mechanism of memes, where repetition does not devalue an image; it makes it progressively more understandable to those who know its rules.

The narrative always remains open. Those who encounter these elements are left to construct their own.

**Ilaria Vinci**

“As a millennial, I feel constantly straddled between the idea of the past and the future,” she says. “I enjoy using iconic imagery and aesthetics from another decade to dissect existential questions happening right now, in real time.”



**Ilaria Vinci,** Installation view, Artissima, Alice Amati Gallery, Turin 2025.

The generational reference should not, therefore, be seen as a nostalgic factor. “An image, a song, or a character can re-emerge in the digital environment at any moment and thus become contemporary once again for those who had never encountered them before in their original form.” On the other hand, the opposite can also happen: images born online can escape the digital dimension and become part of the fictitious environments constructed by Vinci. “I see the present as a stratification of contemporary elements, residues of the past, and projections of the future that simultaneously inhabit the collective imagination,” she notes. “Modern fantasy—that of the twentieth century—is often considered a form of escapism. Fantastic narratives, however, have always existed: in mythology, religions, folklore, and fairytales.”

“For me, fantasy is one of the spaces where a society deposits its desires and fears, in a form light enough to be handled.” Unsurprisingly, among the starting points for “Goodnight Morning”, she mentions good,

old *Pinocchio*. “A log of wood a bit more alive than usual,” which this time found itself coming to terms with an almost Dantean forest.

Exhibition: Ilaria Vinci. Goodnight Morning Where: Swiss Institute, Milan Dates: through November 29, 2026



**Ilaria Vinci,** “Goodnight Morning”, Istituto Svizzero, Milan, Italy, 2026 Photo Giulio Boem

ALICE AMATI



Ilaria Vinci, “Goodnight Morning”, Istituto Svizzero, Milan, Italy, 2026 Photo Giulio Boem,
Ilaria Vinci, Interior design, 2026 Epoxy putty , oil painting70 x 94 x 78 cm



Ilaria Vinci, “Goodnight Morning”, Istituto Svizzero, Milan, Italy, 2026 Photo Giulio Boem
Ilaria Vinci, Shadows of the evening, 2026 epoxy putty , oil painting, 41 x 72 x 61 cm

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Ilaria Vinci, “Goodnight Morning”, Istituto Svizzero, Milan, Italy, 2026 Photo Giulio Boem

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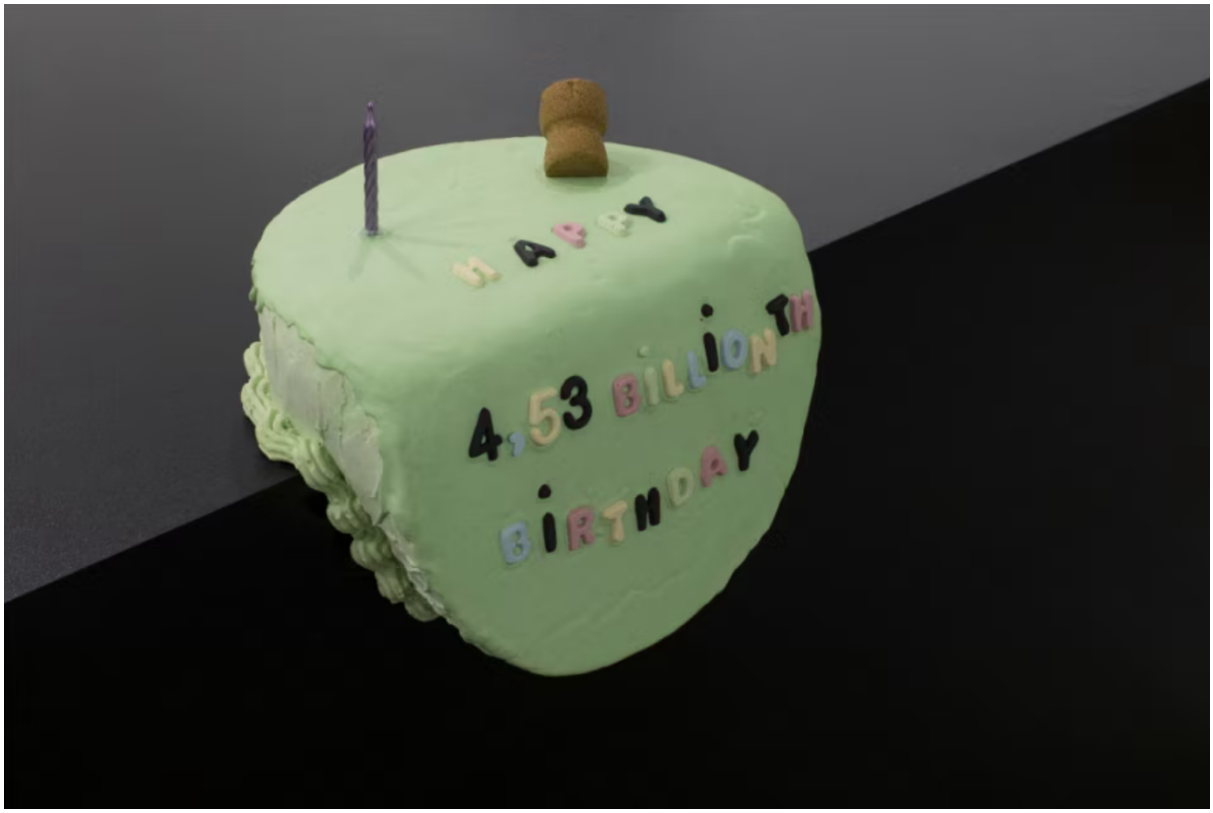


Ilaria Vinci, “Badly Buried”, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Guarene, Italy, 2021

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Ilaria Vinci, Knock just in case of good suggestions or real emergency, 2021. Photo Margot Montigny
Fibreglass and spray paint, 120 x 70 x 75 cm




Ilaria Vinci, Starry Night (Mercury), Uster, Switzerland, 2025 Photo Gabriele Abbruzzese
Jesmonite, birthday candle, 26 x 24 x 16 cm

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Ilaria Vinci Photo Luca Guadagnini, A beating of giant wings (Narcissus), 2021
Glass jar, Alien action figure, mixed media, 55 × 25 × 25 cm



Ilaria Vinci, A Great Cosmic Joke with No Punchline (Museion), Key to Freedom, 2023, “HOPE”, Museion, Bolzano, Italy
Photo Luca Guadagnini
Artworks: A Great Cosmic Joke with No Punchline (Museion), 2023, inkjet print on Sihl paper, 3 × 2 m; Key to Freedom, 2023, fibreglass and pigments, 120 × 50 × 5 cm



Ilaria Vinci, Introverse, 2025, “Introverse”, Alice Amati, London, UK Photo Tom Carter




Ilaria Vinci, Are you thinking what I am thinking?, 2023, “Zurich Biennale”, Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich, Switzerland
Photo Cedric Mussano