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Parte del circuito
MASILugano

Pietro Roccasalva

Chi è che ride

18 September – 18 December 2022
Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati

PRESS RELEASE

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From 18th September to 18th December 2022, the Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati presents *Chi è che ride*, (Who's laughing) a solo exhibition by the Italian artist Pietro Roccasalva.

The exhibition, which is the first dedicated to the artist by a Swiss institution, came about with the idea of presenting and reconstructing some key themes in Roccasalva's oeuvre, with a project that brings together around 50 works from the late 1990s to the present, including new creations, pieces from the artist's studio never previously exhibited, and others from prestigious public and private collections.

Pietro Roccasalva's work revolves around painting as a specific field of action, even when it involves the use of other media, which are always integrated into the process that precedes and follows the creation of a painterly image. The formal and conceptual research that the artist has been engaged in over the last twenty years covers a broad spectrum, in which painting intersects with other media such as sculpture, photography, video and performance, a mingling of genres that however always begins and ends in painting. With multiple references ranging from everyday life to art history, from cinema, literature and philosophy to digital and media culture, Roccasalva has developed a vast iconographic repertoire made up of characters, objects and architectural structures, and a very personal lexicon that combines the most traditional painting techniques and genres with the most recent digital practices.

The show is organised into different areas which present a combination of early works, drawings and iconic pieces that illustrate recurrent themes and imagery in Roccasalva's art.

It opens with the painted image of a rooster wearing the uniform of the Papal Swiss Guard, *Untitled* (2011) and a neon sign, painted black, that reads "chi è che ride chi", a phrase taken from an old Italian edition of "Le Baphomet" by Pierre Klossowski. This expression is a distortion of the onomatopoeic sound of the rooster in Italian (chicchirichì, i.e. cock-a-doodle-do in English). The artist's intentional malapropism "chi è che ride chi", (which literally means "who's laughing who") has accompanied his work for more than 20 years. Roccasalva deploys this enigmatic, slightly ominous, questioning phrase like a rooster crowing at the crack of dawn and inciting us to get on with the day, in spite of everything. Set out like a refrain, in the sign the phrase comes back round on itself, and the final "chi" coincides with the initial one, becoming *Chi è*

che ride (2022), while the black paint covering the front only lets the light through on the back, like the sun rising after the night.

This work - which epitomises the concept of language as a source of misunderstanding, and the idea of repeating refrains as an attempt to impose a ritual and symbolic order on the chaos of reality – acts as an introduction to the whole show, pinpointing the focus of the artist's entire oeuvre: a reflection on the crisis of the subject, and therefore of identity, image and form. This crisis, which is most keenly felt in times of transition, is an existential predicament that has afflicted humans since time immemorial. All Roccasalva's works are an attempt to tackle that chaos, which images filter, acting as both obstacle and shield, and the artist explores its interstices to gain insight into where they come from, and disappear to.

Behind the large neon sign, the first room brings together for the first time a significant group of paintings from *Just Married Machine #1*, a tableau vivant of 2012. These works portray a bride and groom in a landscape packed with objects designed and produced for the tableau vivant, which was inspired by opening shot of the film "La Ricotta" by Pier Paolo Pasolini. The artist re-imagines that richly laid table in an operation similar to the homophony between phrases of different meaning in Raymond Roussel's work: Roccasalva replaces the elements in the original image with similar objects on a human scale, as well as living figures – the basket and draped fabric become a hot air balloon, the bunch of grapes a person carrying some balloons, a flask of wine is substituted with a woman holding a racket, the garlic heads with large glasses formed by assemblages of sanitary ware, and so on. At the highest point of the composition is the rooster we encountered at the beginning of the exhibition, perched atop the mast of a strange-looking boat. The result is a scene featuring human figures, animals and objects that possesses the grandeur of sacred, historical or mythological compositions but nonetheless remains a still life. Starting from that scene, the artist began working on a series of pieces in which the vision that gave rise to it continues to ferment, generate variations and branch out. In the exhibition, this subject matter is rendered in various works that illustrate its inception and evolution, starting from the studies on paper hidden on the back of Moleskine notebooks that characterise *Rear Window* (2016) to the large canvases portraying a married couple entitled *Study from Just Married Machine* (2018; 2019; 2022), to the small black and white paintings in the series *Hetalvó* (2018). The latter arose in turn from a 2013 tableau vivant/installation entitled *The Seven Sleepers*, in which seven students – those portrayed in the paintings - were invited to design a scale model of *Just Married Machine #1*.

The bride goes on to be the focus of an entire room that presents a selection of thirty unpublished drawings and a series of recent paintings entitled *The Western Bride* (2021). The figure is portrayed together with its iconographic attribute, a racket, whose strings have been arranged to form the pattern that appears in the centre of Michelangelo's drawing of Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome. This motif - which appears in previous works by Roccasalva – also has the effect of making the racket resemble a dreamcatcher. All these drawings dedicated to a single subject exert a significant presence in the space. The fact that they are juxtaposed with the paintings not only recounts the inception of the painterly image, but also highlights how for Roccasalva drawing is a step that is not set aside when the painting is done, but remains very much to the fore, above all in the finished work.

The encounter between masculine and feminine and the polarity between animate and inanimate returns in *The Argon Welder* (2019), a series of works that explores the artistic gesture in general, and its power to sublimate the ordinary by altering the very substance of things. The subject matter is the classic Italian bread roll (rosetta) that also appears in some of Manzoni's Achromes, and a wine glass created by taking a cast of the bread roll, so with the same shape but in negative: two elements whose form reveals that they

have been coupled. Roccasalva paints objects in a realistic way, but arranges them in compositions that make them look like something else. To borrow a term from James Joyce, these paintings could also be referred to as "epicletes." For Joyce, the power of art and its ability to "give people a kind of intellectual pleasure or spiritual enjoyment by converting the bread of daily life into something that has a permanent artistic existence", can be likened to epiclesis, the invocation of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of consecrating the bread and wine for the Eucharist.

The exhibition also bears witness to Roccasalva's versatility, the way he switches from oil to acrylics to charcoal or soft pastel without fixative. This emerges in particular in the rooms featuring the paintings devoted to the bellhop, *The Skeleton Key* (2007; 2015) and the waiter, *Il Traviatore* (2012; 2014). These works reveal the stylistic evolution that accompanies the succession of variations, as well as the use of different techniques. One particular medium the artist has always used is soft pastel without fixative - as can be seen in the 1998 portrait *The Good Woman* - because it is the most "virtual" of traditional techniques, enabling the image to be changed constantly, thus leaving it open-ended.

From the scenes featuring objects and figures in the first room, in the last we encounter a series of apparently monochrome paintings, a radical shift that tells of the tension between abstraction and figuration, the amplification and disappearance of the image that is present in all Roccasalva's works. The title reveals the nature of these works, which are both *imprimatura* and *d'après* - before and after, in other words: a *d'après* is a reworking of another artist's work ("after"), while *imprimatura* is the technique historically used to prepare a surface before painting, "prima" referring to it being done before the painting. These paintings are all *d'après* of famous Futurist works that the artist produced by blending the pigments used for the originals to create a single colour, thus bringing them to a state of entropy and final calm. They are frameless, showing the edges of the canvas and the special solid gold nails used to fix the canvas to the stretcher bars. While the paintings represent the stretch of time between a before and an after, the gold nails - like the GSSP markers used on special sites to indicate the transition between two geological eras - mark the shift between two periods. The nails themselves evoke the sun's rays: Roccasalva imagines the Futurists, who he views as emblematic of the Anthropocene, being melted by the sun in their drive towards progress, just like Icarus was.

The sun is a central motif in Roccasalva's visionary universe. One of the most iconic images in his repertoire is *Giocondità*, an uninhabitable, headless cathedral whose dome has been replaced with a lemon juicer that rotates with the daylight, a visual representation of the sun's entropy and gradual death. A cathedral, which traditionally lends meaning and order to everything, here has a dome that shatters and dissolves that meaning and that order. The exhibition features a sequence of six paintings - part of a bigger series from a digital animation of 2002 - which depict the structure from different angles and at various times of day, from sunrise to sunset.

The final work is *Fanfaro* (2014), which portrays a boy biting the tail of a monitor lizard, which in turn is holding a fried ball of rice, a recurrent element in the artist's work representing the dead sun. The sculpture looks like an inversion of Caravaggio's "Boy Bitten by a Lizard", but evokes much more, from Bernini's Boy with a Dragon to the Chinese dragons depicted with a flaming orb, and the child/lighthouse Duchamp talks about in his notes for *The Large Glass*.

The exhibition therefore begins with the sun rising and ends with its death. Between the two extremes there is a path that resembles a journey through an "in-between world", crowded with visions that the artist navigates with every available means, painting first and foremost.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue in two languages published by Mousse Publishing, Milan, which includes comprehensive photographic documentation and critical texts by art historians Ara H. Merjian, Professor at New York University, and Flavia Frigeri, Curator at the National Portrait Gallery in London. Ara H. Merjian's essay traces Roccasalva's oeuvre in the light of twentieth century art history, while Flavia Frigeri explores his work through the prism of temporal, spatial and narrative *slippage*.

Pietro Roccasalva

Pietro Roccasalva (1970, lives and works in Milan) has had solo exhibitions at various institutions including: Fürstenberg Contemporary, Donaueschingen (2019); The Power Station, Dallas (2016); Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (2014); Le Magasin, Grenoble (2013); GAMEC, Bergamo (2007), and the Querini Stampalia Foundation, Venice (2006). He has taken part in major international shows such as the Venice Biennale (2009) and Manifesta (2008), and his work has been included in group exhibitions at institutions such as Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; The David Roberts Art Foundation, London; Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw; MoMA PS1, New York; Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; MAXXI, Rome; Kadist Art Foundation, Paris, and S.M.A.K., Ghent.

Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati

The Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati open to the public in the exhibition venue next to the LAC cultural centre, displays over 200 important artworks, selected according to different criteria on the basis of its presentation. It is one of the most important collections of Italian art from the early 20th century to the present day, the Nouveaux Réalistes and the international contemporary art. It is presented twice a year, always with different layouts and accompanied by temporary exhibitions focusing on the work of artists featured in the collection. Giancarlo and Danna Olgiati believe that the City of Lugano, with MASI, could become the natural heir to the entire collection. Consequently, the collection has been granted in trust to the city of Lugano since 2012. In 2018, the two collectors donated 76 works to MASI, further strengthening their ties to the city's museum, in keeping with the Swiss museum tradition in which public institutions and private collectors have always had a close relationship.

Information

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Friday – Sunday: 11 am – 6 pm
Free entrance

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Press images

01.
Pietro Roccasalva
Untitled
2010
Ink and acrylic on paper
36.5 x 26 cm
Collection Isoli Stefano



02.
Pietro Roccasalva
From Just Married Machine
2018
Acrylic on canvas
194.6 x 160.1 cm
Collection of the artist
Photo Todd White Art Photography
Courtesy the artist and MASSIMODECARLO



03.
Pietro Roccasalva
Untitled (Giocondità VII)
2020
Oil on canvas
76.7 x 94.7 x 4.5 cm
Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati, Lugano
Photo Alessandro Zanbianchi
Courtesy the artist and MASSIMODECARLO



04.
Pietro Roccasalva
From Just Married Machine
2022
Acrilico su tela
194 x 152,5 cm
Collection of the artist
Photo Agostino Osio



05.
Pietro Roccasalva
From JMM
2022
Acrylic on canvas on panel
60 x 133.5 cm
Collection of the artist
Photo Agostino Osio



06.
Pietro Roccasalva
La Sposa Occidentale
2021
Oil on canvas
72.7 x 57.3 cm
Private collection, Genova
Photo Roberto Marossi
Courtesy the artist and MASSIMODECARLO



07.
Pietro Roccasalva
From Just Married Machine
2019
Acrylic on canvas
91.6 x 68.3 cm
Collection of the artist



08.
Pietro Roccasalva
From Just Married Machine
2018
Acrylic on canvas
194 x 160 cm
Collection of the artist
Photo Todd White Art Photography
Courtesy the artist and MASSIMODECARLO



09.
Pietro Roccasalva
Fanfaro
2014
Painted wood, fried rice ball
121 x 73 x 127 cm
Photo Agostino Osio
Courtesy the artist and Zeno X, Antwerp

