
3. Pietro Roccasalva: The Unborn Museum

MAGASIN

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Pietro Roccasalva is a generator of images. Though they include drawings, pastels, installations, tableaux vivants, digital animations, sculptures, neon pieces, lithographs, and photos, when asked to provide a definition of his practice, he usually sums it up as painting. Hybridization, shapeshifting, and the compression of information are frequently encountered in his works, and he has often appealed to the metaphor of the "microchip" to describe their framework, overloaded as it is with archival data. But he doesn't draw on the digital reservoir of existing visual matter: he builds his *situazioni d'opera* ("worksites") from scratch, with painstaking attention, time, and contemplation. His ever-expanding cosmos is a self-referential one, so that if you've gained access to his "construction yard" at least once, orientation becomes easier. Figures, forms, subjects and titles crop up over and over again, as if in a theater of mental images or a verbal sequence of free association. Thanks to maquillage, an owl roosting on a microphone pole morphs into a macaw. The dome of a church becomes a lemon squeezer. A pictorial still life expands into an installation where the fruit basket has become an hot-air balloon carriage, the tray a boat, the grapes a set of purple balloons for children (as in *Just Married Machine* (2011), presented at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles). Well-versed in philosophy and fond of the Sophists, Roccasalva is drawn to paradoxes and destabilizing inversions of meaning. Painting, for him, is an *Intelligent Artifice*(?) — to quote the title of an oil on canvas from 1999-2003 — built around the impossible task of picturing vision. "The gaze can not look at itself while looking. Take, for instance," says Pietro, "what Wittgenstein says in proposition 5.633 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 'Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be found? You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field. But

really you do not see the eye. And nothing in the visual field allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye.'"

So how can one approach an exhibition that brings together some forty works from the last decade, but refuses the mindset of the retrospective? The answer lies in "The Unborn Museum", which is running at Magasin in Grenoble from June 9 to September 1. Instead of historicizing a process, the show focuses on the potential of things to come. "Think of it as if in a future perfect tense," Roccasalva explains. As points of reference, he quotes a favorite poem, "Ritorno", by Giorgio Caproni: "I have returned to the place / where I had never been. / Nothing has changed from how it was not"; as well as Paul Klee's epitaph: "I cannot be grasped in the here and now. For I reside just as much with the dead as the unborn, somewhat closer to the heart of creation than usual. But not nearly close enough". A sort of limbo, where works lie waiting for their next public manifestation.

The exhibition occupies the galleries of the Magasin and unfolds through a series of small rooms, to underscore the movement from one *situazione d'opera* to another, but audio is the first element to be encountered by visitors upon entering the vast emptiness of La Rue. They hear a mysterious, recursive sound diffused by seven loudspeakers, whose origin can only be grasped at the end of the *parcour*. Since the perspective has been turned from past to future, the exit becomes an entrance to the entire exhibition, as well as to Roccasalva's multifarious artistic endeavors. It is here, at last, that the artist installs a new work, titled *The Seven Sleepers*. The space is akin to a recording studio, where a live action takes place. Nothing else can be revealed here so not to spoil the pleasure of the encounter, but the theme explored is that of "painting at rest". Make sure your reading list includes the Christian legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus and Robert Walser's novel *Jakob von Gunten* (where pupils are trained in subservience at the Institute Benjamenta), and please come in. (text by Barbara Casavecchia)

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Pietro Roccasalva, *Il Traviatore*, 2012.
Courtesy: the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles