

PASSAGES

# SALVO (1947–2015)

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Salvo in Turin, 1982. Photo: Cristina Tuarivoli.

**IT WAS 1975**, and although very young, I still remember the annoyance I felt at seeing a very small image of *San Giorgio e il Drago* (Saint George and the Dragon) by Salvo, published in the weekly column of a popular magazine. I was already hanging out in the art world—my father was an artist of some renown in Italy—and while the reproduction of that work was scarcely bigger than a stamp and one amid many others on a page with art-world announcements, its pastel colors seemed scandalous to me, in light of the reigning Conceptualism, analytical rigor, and “black-and-white” aesthetic of those years.

Well, it was precisely this “scandal” on the part of an artist who until then had been a more or less “canonical” Conceptualist who “towed the line” but who had turned to painting, and, what is more, to folkloric and religious imagery, that should have given me pause. It took some years for this to happen, and the work still resonates for me today as one of the strongest critical warnings that comes to mind every time I find myself looking at art I don’t understand and might attempt to dismiss as “passé,” and which, instead, might presage a possible future.

Salvo, *San Giorgio e il drago, da Raffaello* (Saint George and the Dragon with Raphael), 1974, oil on board, 27 1/2 x 27 1/2". Courtesy Mehdi Chouakri Gallery, Berlin.

This is precisely what this work by Salvo was: a harbinger of the 1980s, with its triumph of painting, chromatic impudence, and rehabilitation of popular images, which in turn were borrowed from art history (in the case of his *Saint George*, the model was Raphael), or from

postcards. From that moment on, Salvo—who never wanted to belong to any movement but who could have been a leader of the Transavanguardia—gifted us with infinite landscapes, foreshortened city views, places without people, almost all small scale, more or less as big as the square backdrops used by strolling balladeers who, for a few decades more, could still be seen in Sicily, where he was born in 1947.

These are images that constantly surface, during both his Conceptual and pictorial periods. Indeed, his work contains perennial references to this island, so strongly marked by traditions, whether when he lists on a marble plaque the names of all the great Sicilians (with his own name as the final entry), or when he paints a stereotypical image of the Magna Grecia temples of Agrigento, Italy, conveying the same visual image as photographs used in ads. In fact, beginning in the mid '70s, Salvo became a prolific and successful producer of paintings, all constructed according to a chromatic scale very close to the one associated with postmodern design and architecture. In this choice of his, to be a producer of paintings (the definition is mine, not his) instead of a painter (another somewhat emphatic concept, again mine), we might prefer to see yet another, very subtle conceptual action that addresses the new idea of art and the world that emerged in the '80s, rather than to see a market-driven activity for which many have reproached him.

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*Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.*

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