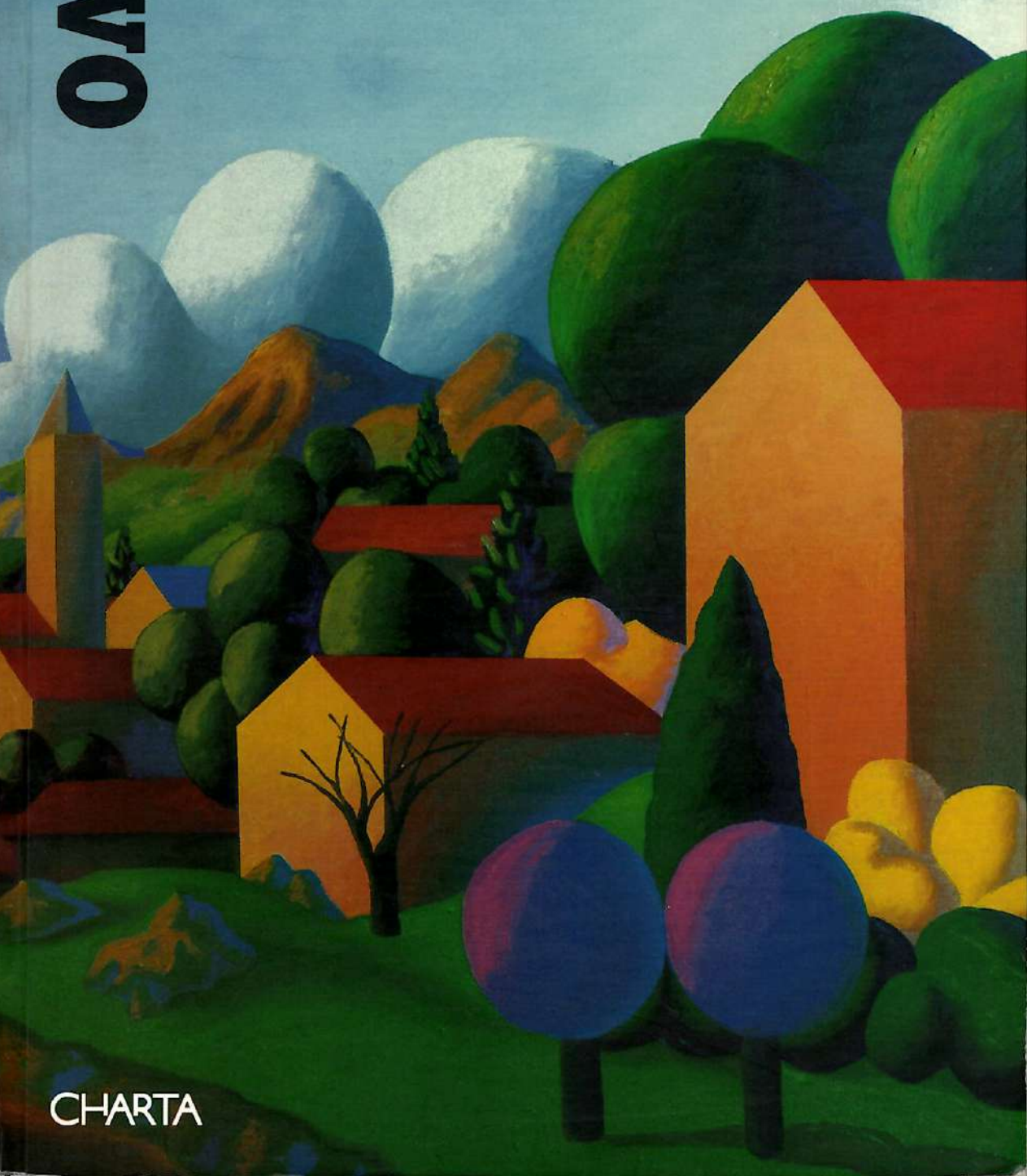


Salvo



CHARTA

Salvo

a cura di
edited by
Luca Beatrice

CHARTA

Salvo

Caraglio, ex Convento
dei Cappuccini

4 luglio - 31 agosto 1999
July 4 - August 31, 1999

Organizzazione / Organization



REGIONE PIEMONTE

Regione Piemonte

Direzione Promozione

Attività Culturali

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Marcovaldo

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*Per il prestito delle opere in
mostra si ringraziano/Thanks are
due to those who have lent works*

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e quanti hanno desiderato
mantenere l'anonimato/and those
who desired to be anonymous

Un grazie per la collaborazione
Thanks for the collaboration

Alessandra Galletta, Milano
Cristiana Perrella, Roma
Gianni Pozzi, Firenze
Ludovico Pratesi, Roma
Marco Senaldi, Milano

The former Capuchin convent provides a splendid and ideal setting to introduce the Piedmontese public to Salvo and his masterly use of shape and colour to speak of himself and his feelings.

The exhibition of paintings, thematically arranged in the small, evocative monk's cells with some subjects repeated almost from memory, seeks to provide a critical overview of Salvo's artistic output. While his early works drew inspiration from the fifteenth-century masters, in the 1970s he became fascinated by the atmosphere of radical upheaval in art and society through the stimulus of the *arte povera* movement, especially in Turin, and the conceptual artists of the United States.

Salvo has never left anything to chance. He expresses himself with irony, amusement and a hint of the bizarre. He delights in phenomena that are blown up out of all proportion by current language and culture only to be forgotten perhaps the very next day.

This may be why Salvo's work proves so ravishing, capable of totally entrancing any viewer despite the fact that it never leaves the rails of absolute normality.

I am sure that this event will be as successful as all the others organized together with the Associazione Culturale Marcovaldo in the splendid setting of Caraglio, by now established as an indispensable point of reference for the cultural life of the province of Cuneo and the Piedmont region as a whole.

Giampiero Leo
Head of the Department of Culture
of Regione Piemonte

The idea of organizing an anthological exhibition of Salvo's work in the Convent of Caraglio, built by the Capuchin order at the end of the seventeenth century and then restored and revitalized by the Associazione Culturale Marcovaldo with the support of the Cultural Department of the Piedmont Regional Council, was born in the summer of 1998 during a visit paid by the artist.

A meeting was arranged by Luca Beatrice, whom I had met a few weeks earlier in Turin and who struck me as someone with a clear vision of his goals and how to accomplish them, someone I instinctively trusted. Thank you, Luca.

This meeting of people who love culture and experience it as an essential dimension of their everyday lives gave rise to a host of emotions and plans, some of which have already been carried out while others are still under way. The affinity between the inspiration underlying the cultural activities of the Association and Salvo's own creative inspiration was immediately evident. Was this sheer coincidence?

The aim of the Association is to promote culture in order to enable the greatest possible number of people to enjoy the pleasure of seeking out the essential in every situation of life. This stems from a determination to put people on their guard against everything that is merely show, tinsel, frills, TV glitter.

In Salvo we find the same desire to grasp the essential. As Giuseppe Pontiggia observes, "Behind the simplification of his painting there is an analytic awareness of the past, a silent wisdom fed by the direct sources of tradition. Salvo's apparent ingenuousness is the fruit of tireless conquest, the hallmark of a master who has learned simplicity, not someone who has learned to avoid complexity."

Simplicity and the essential thus constitute guidelines both for an artist who has sought to become great at all costs and for an association that sets itself the ambitious goal of creating a

cultural point of reference in south Piedmont capable of staging top-level initiatives to draw attention to an area that is rich in history and cultural traditions but has remained for too long on the sidelines of debate and the national and international cultural circuits.

Among the aims of the cultural center, priority is given to spreading knowledge and appreciation of contemporary art, hitherto linked almost exclusively to metropolitan environments. The exhibition of Salvo's work thus constitutes an integral part of this endeavor.

In the cultural area stretching from Portugal to Italy and aptly described as the "Latin arc," Piedmont has a key role to play in the development of cultural projects. It is thus essential to create the right conditions to ensure that the responsibilities and benefits of this commitment are not concentrated solely on Turin but extend to the region as a whole. With the former Capuchin convent and the splendid premises of the Rosso textile mill, Caraglio possesses cultural space capable of accommodating projects of European scale and has all the necessary credentials to become one of the most significant cultural centers in Piedmont. The achievements of the past and those of the future depend essentially on the contribution made by the Piedmont Regional Council, and I therefore wish to express my warmest thanks to Giampiero Leo, head of the department of culture, who fully shares the Association's cultural vision.

I also thank the staff of the regional directorate for the promotion of cultural activities in Piedmont who, under the direction of Rita Marchiori, have shown great sensitivity to the involvement of the Piedmontese provinces in shaping cultural policies.

Fabrizio Pellegrino

President of the Associazione Culturale Marcovaldo

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I am the-Best-Painter

Luca Beatrice

"I have been literally overwhelmed by painting: it gives me space, it opens up knowledge and ideas to me."¹ It is immediately clear from this statement by Salvo in one of his rare interviews that he is totally committed to painting and has been for the past almost thirty years. Although the preceding sentence may seem redundant to those who know his work, it is in fact necessary because Salvo's creative beginnings in conceptual art have often and rightly been stressed. For example, in Renato Barilli's art criticism in the essential *La ripetizione differente*,² starting from the self-referential and cerebral painting of the last de Chirico, he goes on to study the various links with Italian art of the 1970s. He puts together in a very challenging way exponents of *arte povera*, such as Jannis Kounellis, pop artists such as Valerio Adami, painters such as Salvo, photo performers such as Luigi Ontani, playful artists such as Ugo Nespolo, and purists such as Giulio Paolini, highlighting the solid conceptual background of all these artists over and above their chosen languages. Later on, Luigi Meneghelli and Danilo Eccher made their own contributions to art of the Seventies.³ And yet in view of what has happened, of how Salvo's work developed from 1973 (the year he produced his first paintings inspired by the masters of the 15th century) to the present, the early phase seems quite limited, almost a passing phase, an obligatory stage for a twenty-year-old artist fascinated by the climate of change in art and society around 1968. The stimulus of *arte povera*, especially in Turin, his familiarity with American conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Robert Barry who are associated with Gianenzo Sperone's gallery, the unexpected contact with various international art environments from Paris to Cologne, were certainly decisive in Salvo's apprenticeship. But, on the

other hand, he has always had painting in his genes: "Painting is a special love of mine, I have painted for so many years. I started in 1963 with my first show at the Promotrice delle Belle Arti, where I exhibited an oil painting. I still have that first painting; I discovered it at my grandmother's. It's from 1961, that's thirty-six years ago. You can imagine how much ground you cover in thirty-six years. As a kid I had so much enthusiasm, I would go and buy those little books . . . those 'diamonds of art,' do you remember them? . . . I bought them all, I copied them — those small books, I can't remember who published them — with Paul Klee, Mondrian, Utrillo."⁴ Salvo had what could be described as an innate tendency to seek out images in the history of painting and to repeat them. He dedicated himself to this around 1974, first of all reflecting on the idea of a return to classical painting and on the idea of the museum as the storehouse of memory,⁵ therefore going back to classic iconography with an ingenuous touch and modern coloring. This was combined with the



Senza titolo, 1984

equally necessary re-emergence of elements tied to his own personal and biographical memory, and came to light in the first works dedicated to Sicily in 1975-76, which forms a sort of bridge between his last work in conceptual art and his definitive choice in painting. The above mentioned genes hold sway over the intensely lively phase of the late Sixties and early Seventies,

precisely because the two motivating factors behind all painting, nature and culture, are present together.

His painting is about the impossibility of narrating and representing. Whether you want to study the course of its evolution or divide it up by suggestion or image, with frequent swings back and forth like a pendulum, Salvo's art is an art of description and compilation. As a keen traveler and lover of literature, it is essential for him to describe a motorway, a station, a landscape or night scene objectively, putting in only the primary elements, without tending towards one sensation rather than another. This attitude, which is not one of detachment but of order and principle, fits in well with

Giulio Mozzi's⁶ thoughts on travel literature: "I have found certain very descriptive books such as *Blue Highways* and (still more) *Prairie Earth* by William Least Heat Moon very enjoyable, as well as some descriptive works by a group of writers called *Grafio*, who were involved in a town-planning project in Prato. I have always

had a great desire to describe. Once at a writer's conference I even read a paper that opened with the words, 'Italians, I exhort you to description' (but I didn't actually say these words because I felt ridiculous). . . . I have never managed to read a travel book. I find them very boring. William Least Heat Moon is an exception because his are not travel books but books with descriptions

and stories. But Chatwin, or Herzog, to mention those that have been suggested most often to me ("Ah, you are going on a long walk . . . then you should read . . ."), I have never managed to read them. In Walser's *Tanner Brothers*, there are some long walks. They're ok. But they are crazy one-off episodes. . . . There was beautiful sunshine, the grass was green, the birds were singing, the bees buzzing . . . Walser can write ten pages of description like this, ten pages of beautiful description."⁷

The key element of any description is therefore objectivity, an objectivity that captures the essence of things rather than getting lost in literary ramblings about places. And so it is in Salvo's paintings where the bridge over the motorway that connects Milan and Turin is exactly that bridge at that kilometer, the date palms are the precise species that grows at Punta del Hidalgo, and the view of Etna from Taormina has been taken from that precise observation point. Salvo therefore classifies, puts in order, a whole series of information, in exactly the way Georges Perec considered essential for a correct approach to literature in his essay *Penser/classifier*:⁸ neither of them are interested in the narrative and emotional vein that derive from the lived experience but in the objective, even neutral, fact of observation. For this reason Salvo deliberately chooses to express himself within the confines of the genre which, if it is to be recognized as such, must correspond to and respect a set of rules or at least conventions that contain within them the capacity to manipulate, more or less skillfully, style and language. Salvo can move between landscapes, still lifes and interiors like a consummate genre author — like a writer of detective novels, but also like a film director of American comedy, which calls to mind the famous "Lubitch's Touch" — immediately

bringing out the essence, defining where that particular visual code belongs. Salvo, it was said, is a great lover of literature but is a totally unliterary painter. Take, for example, his paintings with books: the point of departure is the primary condition of knowledge, classification — they are mute forms, open or closed, leaning against a monochrome support without any additional detail. Here we have a simple objective description, there is no story-telling, just what is seen, is seen.

Salvo has taken a phrase from another writer, Giuseppe Pontiggia, that summarizes in a few words his approach: "Great value is to be found in the apparently mundane." Since the mid-Sixties but especially since the Eighties, Salvo's painting has taken a different path that is in sharp contrast to the marked restraint in vogue. He is not interested in particularly bombastic or rhetorical subjects, he is not trying to vindicate himself as an artist through rhetorical exercises, even though he chooses a style of painting that may explicitly be the eulogy of common sense, influenced by Wittgenstein, one of his principal points of reference and the inspiration for his theoretical treatise presented in the form of aphorisms *Della pittura. Imitazione di Wittgenstein*.⁹ At point 120, where Salvo states that "we have conventional language and behavior, but also conventional images, representations, thoughts," we are introduced to another key point: communication through rules of representation. And here there is an important paradox: Salvo is a painter that convention would define as "figurative," and yet he has achieved the complete denial of the subject. That is, nothing makes you think of the content or the literary allusions of classic figurative painting. The painting is all order, created out of a series of internal rules and precise space-time coordinates. Whatever the format, you will never find a painting by Salvo in which

something is floating in space or is not proportionally related to space. Salvo says "I tell you, I have thought of the desert many times because it is fascinating, but I have never painted it because there is a division of space in the structure of my paintings and therefore certain things have to be there to achieve both a horizontal and vertical spatial division."¹⁰ In the same way time also has its own set of rules, so that certain colors correspond to particular seasons of the year, a different light corresponds to different times of the day, and nothing is ever left to chance or treated superficially. Salvo denies the subject because his figurative painting tends to abstract purity as few others do today. Among the old masters, who were much more conditioned than today's painters by iconography and the role of the commissioning body or person, what is most evident are the characteristics of the individual style that makes it recognizable. Similarly, in Salvo's painting it is not so much the idea of the landscape that counts as the way of representing it; he can take you by surprise with the detail in the sky on a beautiful spring day, the tones that go from intense blue and fade almost to white on the horizon. This is the result of numerous layers of color, and only a painter of great skill, an artist who knows all the secrets, can obtain such results. It is what you could call "rare excellence" because Salvo's painting has the capacity to seduce the eye, any and every eye, in spite of the fact that he keeps strictly within the bounds of total normality. His attitude is therefore closer to Morandi's rather than de Chirico's, even though at the beginning more than one "conceptual" reference to the *Pictor Optimus* may have been intuited: "If Morandi had traveled as much, perhaps he would have made his bottles slightly different . . . but nothing else. The good artist can always paint a glass or a bot-

tle, what counts is the way they are made in the infinite possibility they have of being represented."¹¹

What counts, what gives it quality, what determines a great work is contained right here in its very normality. John Ford said, "I always make the same film, I just change the horse." Rare excellence then is to make a good western with a few essential elements, thus creating an unmistakable style, while imitators will always aim exclusively for a surfeit of content in order to be noticed faster. Patricia Highsmith, the famous writer of suspense novels, wrote: "There is suspense in every story with a beginning, a middle and an end; one assumes that a suspense novel has even more of it. . . . The beauty of the genre is that a writer can write deep thoughts or pieces where there is no action, if that is what he or she wants, because the framework is a substantially lively story. *Crime and Punishment* is a splendid example of this. I think that most of Dostoevskij's books would be classed as detective novels if published today for the first time. But he would be asked to cut it, because of the costs of production."¹² In literature and the cinema the gap between genre and *d'auteur* work is becoming ever narrower – James Ballard even maintains that any work of science fiction is preferable to the best mainstream novel. On the other hand, art in the second half of the 20th century has tended to get caught up in itself and the production of genres has been omitted even though centuries of painting suggest the contrary. Salvo tackles this knotty problem with great theoretical lucidity and not the slightest reactionary impulse. Should you want to proceed according to genres and to put similar topics and subjects alongside each other, as has been done in this exhibition, you will notice that Salvo's paintings include a number of solutions orga-

nized in different times. In some cases a topic appears only to disappear after a limited group of works for a certain period: such is the case of the *Ottomanias*, paintings for the most part from the late Eighties, their starting point being the contradictory reality of a border town, Sarajevo. They manage to combine the oriental element of minarets with the survival of what is old, within a westernized landscape that represents the new to a certain extent.

There are bars, open-air kiosks or smoke-filled interiors with flipper machines or billiards (not many, created between 1983 and 1991), *Night Scenes* (late Eighties-early Nineties), some connected to Sicilian landscapes, others to mountain scenes.

There are stations (early Nineties) and cathedrals, including one splendid cycle entitled, *Interiors with Extraordinary Functions* from 1990. It has been influenced by the paintings of Peter Saendram, who worked in Holland in the mid-seventeenth century, and whose "naves of Gothic cathedrals and rows of columns are immersed in a magical atmosphere created by an elegant study of perspective and light."¹³ Then there are the *Fabbriche* (1981-83), geometrical simplifications of Sironi's model. In other cases, we find topics and subjects that recur, presented with different chromatic tones and solutions, because they have not yet been worn

out. This is what happens in the *Sicilie*, for example, that are first anchored to the conceptual period (works from 1975-1977), geographical maps to which the names of illustrious Sicilians, painters and writers, have been added¹⁴; and later on (in the Eighties and Nineties) to intense evocative landscape

versions with subjects such as Etna, the church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti in Palermo, and the ruins of Magna Grecia solemnly outlined against the sea of Selinunte. Or again, the archaeological quirks typical of the late Seventies but that recurred at various other times; the *Books* and the *Self-Portraits*, those in the Seventies associated with photographic experiences and others from the Eighties



Senza titolo, 1991

that are like light-hearted whimsical jokes.

"The subject is brought to maximum tension, to a level of extreme freedom as regards color but right at its peak it dies and I have to re-invent something else."¹⁵ This need constitutes, purely in terms of pictorial solutions, the point of no return and the end of a cycle. Salvo is currently enjoying a particularly successful creative period and his painting is rich in intuitions and new ideas, coinciding as it does with a period when he is traveling more and gathering more ideas. The *Exotic Landscapes* created after trips to the Canaries are proof of this, especially his wonderful *Spring* and *Autumn* cycles (1997-

1999). These are rather big paintings with such intense blends of color that they look tachiste. They recover a level of vitality that overtakes what Salvo himself feels is a normal strain on doing, on repeating the same topic almost by heart.

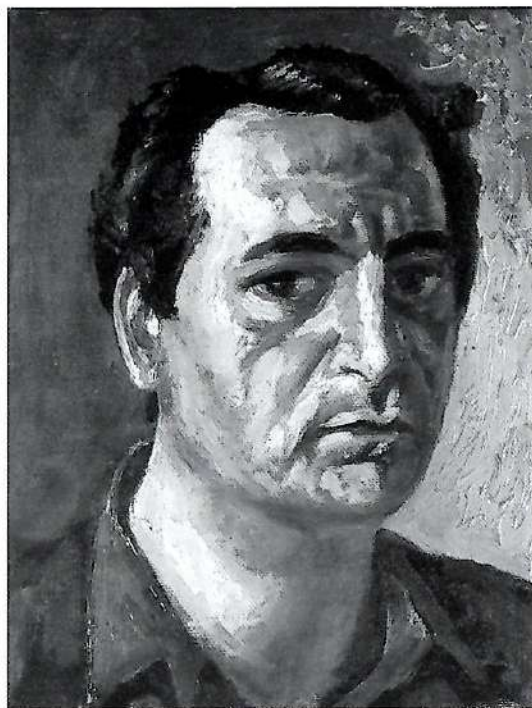
Every artist submits to and in turn gives back a series of influences from the history that has preceded him or her. The comparisons between Salvo and the Italian twentieth century are certainly no mystery – de Chirico and Morandi, albeit for opposing reasons, have already been discussed, and Rosai's landscapes or Carrà's seascapes could also be mentioned, but Salvo's curiosity has shifted to other less eloquent forms, certain mysterious legacies from classical art, the lesser and little known nineteenth century, and finally the illustrated subject, the postcard. "You often hear people say, Salvo and de Chirico, Salvo and Sironi. My influences have been much more

numerous and derive from a number of periods and styles. Our era is the era of the encyclopaedia, of photography. I have seen the sculptures of the Cyclades, small jewels, pregnant women of the Neolithic period, the marvelous Benin sculptures of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and thousands of painters. So you see, if you start investigating influences you really do end up in a detective

novel."¹⁶ With a touch of playful eccentricity, Salvo is really looking for the forgotten name; he is fascinated by what the language and culture of time can enlarge to the maximum and which in another moment, no one even notices. It is basically very similar to the memory exercises Salvo and his closest friends practiced, the true foundation of the intellectual construction of his own imagination.

On looking today at his powerful body of work, Salvo can be said to be one of the few Italian artists that is central to the culture of

our times, capable of putting the painting medium through a true revolution without creating easy effects or superfluous sensations. For this reason he has sought a young audience — among whom, with very different languages and choices of field, Perrella and Pozzi, Pratesi, Galletta and Senaldi definitely constitute stimulating examples — to "read Salvo" with a fresh eye. From a completely personal point of view Salvo's



Autoritratto, 1981

vo's painting has constituted a milestone as regards training my eye, just as the all-encompassing lightness of Alighiero Boetti and the unbridled vitality of Mario Schifano have been other essential parameters of comparison. But there is something more in Salvo that belongs to our time and that I feel is particularly important: the lucid awareness that richness and purity is to be found

in common sense (once again from Wittgenstein). "If one is clever, even the most worn out, most unbearable subject can be transformed into a beautiful painting."¹⁷ And to

paraphrase one of his early works from 1970, Salvo's affirmation in stone that "I am the best," indeed "I am the best painter," means more all the time.

1. "La pittura: due o tre cose che so di lei. Intervista di Luigi Meneghelli a Salvo," in *Salvo. Archeologie del futuro*, exhibition catalogue Galleria dello Scudo, Verona, 6 December 1992-31 January 1993 (Milan: Mazzotta editore, 1992): 199-211.
2. Renato Barilli, *La ripetizione differente*, exhibition catalogue, Studio Marconi, Milan, October 1974. By Barilli see also *Salvo. Archeologie del futuro*, in Verona op. cit., 11-31 and "Un'arte che salva," in *Salvo*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria d'Arte Moderna Villa delle Rose, Bologna, 23 January-22 March 1998 (Milan: Electa, 1998): 29-60.
3. Luigi Meneghelli, "L'io, l'altro, l'altrove," in Verona op. cit., 33-55; Danilo Eccher, "Una frontiera per la pittura," in Bologna, op. cit., 11-16.
4. Dede Auregli, "Intervista con Salvo," in Bologna, op. cit., 87-113.
5. In July 1974 Salvo was invited to the international exhibition "Projekt '74" in Cologne where, in a room at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, he hung one of his paintings, *Saint Martin and the Pauper*, alongside classic masterpieces by Simone Martini, Cranach the Elder, Rembrandt and Cézanne

6. Giulio Mozzi (Padua 1962) is one of the most interesting young Italian writers. His published work includes, *La felicità terrena* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996) and *Il male naturale* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998).
7. Giulio Mozzi, "Ritorni," in *Fantasmî e fughe* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999).
8. Georges Pérec, *Penser/classifier* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1989).
9. *Salvo, Della pittura. Imitazione di Wittgenstein*, ed. Paul Maenz & Gerd de Vries (Cologne, 1989), also published in Verona, op. cit.
10. Dede Auregli, in Bologna, op. cit.
11. Ibidem.
12. Patricia Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*.
13. Francesco Sandroni, "Itinerario di Salvo," in Verona, op. cit., 213-221.
14. Together with the *Sicilie* Salvo also created the *Italie* using the same writing mechanism as the famous painters, 1975-77.
15. Dede Auregli, in Bologna, op. cit.
16. Luigi Meneghelli, in Verona, op. cit.
17. Dede Auregli, in Bologna, op. cit.

The Spirit is not Naïve

Marco Senaldi

It is widely held that disciplines that are indirectly related to art, such as archaeology or restoration, develop in their own particular way around a central metaphor of discovery and restitution.

“Ruins newly brought to light”; “findings that shed new light on ancient civilizations”; “works returned to their former splendor”: it is as if an aura of splendor and discovery surrounded the untiring efforts of the researchers, as if the light of the here-and-now was also invested with the ancient, as if nothing should be kept hidden any more from the eager eyes of our contemporaries, as if the torch held up by scholars might reveal the final truth of what had been forgotten for centuries.

Nevertheless, the very fact that all restoration work and all archaeological discoveries throw “new light on the past” – a bit like detergents that make dirty laundry “whiter than white” – raises a doubt, as if the “obscurity” of a work, the darkness of an ancient building, the shadow of a painting, were simply something negative to be washed away, to be removed like something dirty.

It is as if this luminous metaphor hides a misconception: that it is Time itself, in its constant “becoming,” that is perceived as dirt, as a patina; or that Time is perceived only as negation, as that which removes and destroys man’s delicate workmanship. And yet, if it weren’t for Time, there would not even be an opportunity for discovery or recovery, there would be no chronological distance in which to place what is old, the *antico*, and thus enable it to be compared with the present – neither archaeology nor restoration would exist either, and so for them Time has not only a positive but a foundational value.

The light-dark dialectic, therefore, like that of the Enlightenment, is naïve but not useless. It indicates that what is really discovered is light itself, that is, that the place

where everything is illuminated by awareness is Time, in that it is present, and that therefore the contemporary is not merely a chronological fact but is itself a result, the fruit, of a reconstruction.

As in Battisti's song, "For a while now/the ancient has been recent too/ At the Pyramids there is the constant/ click of the shutter/Everything is present/ like the ring of an alarm" (Battisti-Panella, *Hegel*), the true meaning of archaeology and restoration is the reconstruction of the present – their task coincides with that

of contemporary art. The more faithful the reconstructions, and the more cleaning revitalizes old works, the more they demonstrate not the truth of what is old, but *our* need for completeness and reconstruction – the more they tell us that the original, whether it is a temple or a painting, had become imaginary, or rather that it has left its reality as an object shut up in the past and entered into our imagination, our frame, our field of vision, our picture.

In this sense it is quite remarkable that Salvo's first painting (1975) on the theme, recurrent in his case, of Greek and Roman ruins has not been based on an actual sighting *in situ* but on a photograph of the ruins, indeed on a postcard or illustration from a book, an impression confirmed by the fact that there is a caption below it reading: "Agrigento. Temple of Castor and Pollux.

Fragment recovered in 1836 by S. Cavallari and V. Villareale." The legend demonstrates that Salvo's painting does not take into the slightest consideration the ruins as such – as

they would be in the case of a Piranesi or a Guardi – his focus is *modern archaeology*. Right from the start, modern archaeology reveals a highly imaginary reconstructive necessity, not only because, for example, one of the above mentioned, Saverio Cavallari, was a painter as well, but also because the period in which it began to take root as a "science" (first half of

the 19th century) coincides with the arrival of photography. Nineteenth-century scientific archaeology changes the point of view of the past, and from then on ruins can no longer inspire the same sentiments that the *vedutisti* of the 17th and 18th centuries delighted in. Indeed the ruins can no longer be "ruined," they must be put back together again, raised up again. They are not, however, rebuilt to regain lost social functions (temple, forum, aqueduct, baths . . .) but to become coherent imaginary objects, objects that can be reproduced, archived, photographed. The ruins of antiquity must have a further meaning, it has to become its own backdrop, as has in fact happened in the 20th century: Roman arenas have become television sets and Romanesque churches backgrounds for wedding photographs. The aura that emanates from these "new" ruins is already



Senza titolo, 1991

clear, and the historic cinema of the "ancient Rome" genre is already waiting in the wings.

Salvo's first step therefore consists of showing the ancient as a totally contemporary "genre" or style. The reconstructed ruins let us see not the ruins themselves but rather our very desire to see. And so we come to the second step set down by Salvo: what do we really want to see? This question refers to a famous reflection of Georges Peréc's in *Espèce d'espaces*: "what do we really want to see? The portrait of Melantone painted by Lucas Cranach? The hat that Audrey Hepburn wore in *Sylvia Scarlett*?" And if it were really the case, if we only wanted to see the remarkable, the exceptional, the one-off, what would happen to the normal, the everyday, the ordinary?

Would we not perhaps stop seeing them? But isn't this dialectic between the exceptional and the obvious not perhaps related to that between the forgotten and the rediscovered, between light and dark? And don't both perhaps mask the deeper dialectic, between awareness and unawareness?

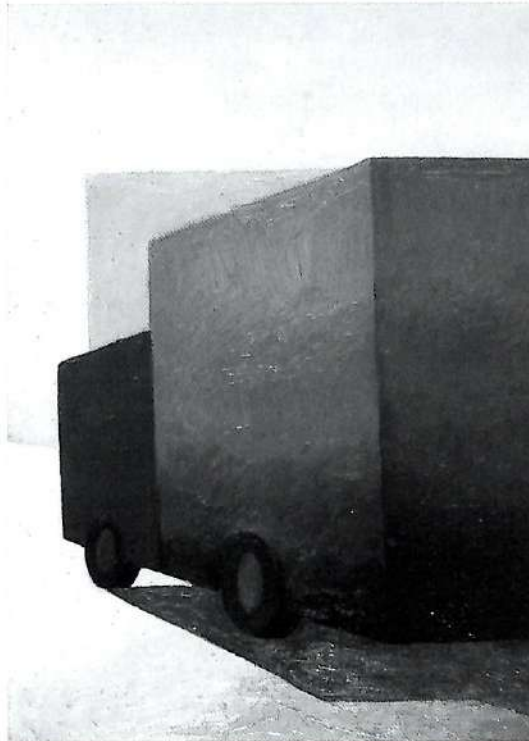
In a symptomatic way, the whole of Salvo's treatise, *Della Pittura*, circles around the problem

of seeing, but seeing understood not in a perceptive way but in a logical way. The triumph of the contemporary period as an era

of the visible, tells us that everything is destined to become image, but that, at the same time, it is precisely the image that stops being directly visible. In fact "seeing" stops being a natural act: since the early 19th century, through the invention first of photography and later of x-rays, including first cinematography and then television, "seeing" has become a conscious action, an object of choice; "seeing" has become a reflective action, that reveals itself before the object, and this is why even today we still talk about "knowing how to see" – because there has been a "seeing the seeing."

Salvo's second step therefore consists of making us think about seeing, in reflecting what has been seen: this is the true meaning

of *d'après*, this is the true significance of "copy": copying is the truly cultural way of understanding, of putting ourselves in the position of what is old in order to construct the contemporary – a meaning that Salvo obviously infers from de Chirico (in *Self-Portrait in Baroque Clothes*, 1953, for example), and that many artists continue to pursue today, from Ontani to Morimura. But copying is also the only way to take the past from the point of view of its



Senza titolo, 1980

recent existence, copying the present of the past: this is what he does in so many of his works, and in particular in his Saint George-

self-portrait. This means that if the past manifests itself – and it can no longer not do so, because it can no longer hide itself! — it manifests itself in light of the present, and that light will also be the subject of the copy. Leaving aside the metaphor, when Salvo painted the famous *Ruins* in 1984, or the *Tower of Pisa* or *Assisi* (1992), we can see exactly what would escape us on an inspection *in situ*, that is, not the monument itself, but the lighting that capable technicians and diligent administrators have set up to render the monument “more visible,” to bring it out of the darkness.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this: this is the very work of contemporary imagery, provided it is clearly understood, that is, as an aware piece of work. Because here lies the last and decisive step to which all of Salvo’s work leads us, a desire to

understand his work in its deeply cultural nature: that contemporary is no longer synonymous with naïve, it no longer evokes an era of Socratic modesty and “knowing that you do not know.” No. It is moreover as Salvo demonstrated in 1974, when exhibiting his *d’après El Greco (Saint Martin and the Poor Man)* at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum alongside Rembrandt and Cranach, that this is the era of total awareness, of “knowing about seeing” and “knowing about knowing.”

And even if we suffer a little over the loss of naïvety and innocence, even if we aspire in any case to the uncontaminated and the original, we have to realize that, even if we do not like it, we are the heroes of this era of the reflective spirit, and that we really are – as we can read on one of Salvo’s early tombstones – “the best,” precisely because we came last in the race of Time.

When the Artist Becomes the (Lead) Actor

The beginnings of Salvo's art through his self-portraits

Cristiana Perrella

On 7 February 1970, the 22-year-old Salvatore Mangione, known as Salvo, made his debut with a solo exhibition at the Galleria Gianenzo Sperone in Turin: a prestigious venue, which had hosted the first, beautiful monochromes by Schifano, American Pop Art, Pascali's "weapons," the Conceptual Art of Kosuth, Barry and Sol LeWitt, and above all the whole of the *Arte Povera* movement from its very outset. In this arena, the young Salvo presented a series of twelve photomontages, of different sizes, produced the previous year. All the images are self-portraits, depicting him in turn as a factory-worker, a guerrilla, a Nazi officer, a ballet-dancer, a pilot and a Russian resistance fighter, replacing faces in newspaper photos with his own in a sort of *Face Off* ahead of its time. Salvo chooses photos that do not show particular individuals but general representatives of social categories featuring for some reason in the news, avoiding the temptation to turn himself into the heroes of important events or into the most famous figures of those very intense years at the end of the Sixties. Transmigrating rapidly from one body to another, from one role to another, and yet always still himself, Salvo chooses a fine manner of making his debut by staging an amused, ironic phenomenology of the condition of being one, no one, and one hundred thousand, in complete empathy with the spirit (and the contradictions) of the times, which on one hand encourages a new relation with individuality, a more open and complex conception of the author, and on the other hand makes the body a central element, in a sort of continuous performance, of self-love taken to a narcissistic extreme.

The doubling, or even multiplication of the self that Salvo performs involves the discovery of multiple possibilities, and therefore the necessary contact with contradictions, with diversity, with the other. At the same

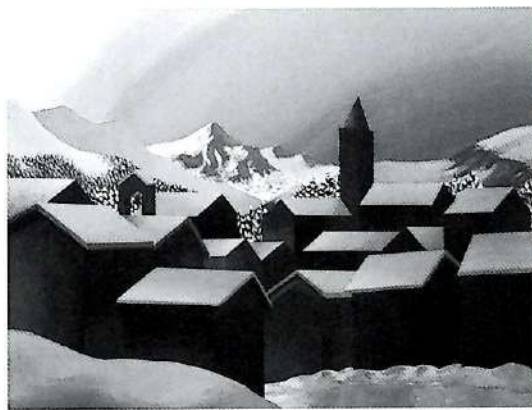
time, however, it constitutes an extension, a reinforcement of the demiurgic ego, "a form of defense against its disappearance, a forceful denial of the power of death."¹¹

In is increasingly from this point of view that his subsequent works should be interpreted: the photographic self-portraits as he blesses a city (first Brescia, then Lucerne), or as Raphael – an anticipation of the later copies of classics in which he often portrays himself – and above all the marble tombstones on which he engraves epigraphic phrases such as "I am the best"; "Salvo is alive"; "Love me"; or simply "Salvo." The "staging" of the subject takes shape here in a form of an exaggerated, histrionic self-promotion, reminiscent of the narcissism of de Chirico's "Pictor optimus sum," whose challenge to common sense and current good taste it continues. Just as de Chirico makes use of "shifts" that are unthinkable in his time, taken from a deliberately rhetorical vision of the past in order to oppose the drive towards standardization of yet another

return to order, likewise Salvo uses the self-celebratory anomaly of his epigraphic proclamations to break the rules of the dominant Conceptualism – pure, disembodied and tautological – moving towards a determined recovery of subjectivity, direct responsibility, very much unwilling to separate himself from his own self. Rather, as Renato Barilli writes, Salvo is "ready to make that self take a walk through time and space, detaching it from the here and now."¹² In the use of the tombstone, a sup-

port which is extremely rhetorical in its monumental and antiquarian connotations, there is in fact a further step towards history, especially the history of art, in preparation for a new exploration of the rooms of the museum that Salvo, among the first in his generation, was about to carry out. There is also, however, the stated desire, barely veiled by irony, to be immortal, to live forever, to pass himself on thanks to his work as an artist beyond the limits of human finiteness. "Creativity, that is the desire for the new, is an implacable tug-of-war between the passive, certain power of dead artists important in the history of art, and the active, unstable power of living artists, insecure and anxious about their own importance, about the capacity of their art to survive in terms of the history of art,"¹³ writes Donald Kuspit, reflecting on a statement by Duchamp about the brevity of the life of a work of art. Salvo resolves this test of strength by usurping the place of the historicized artist, thus declaring his own importance and fame, finally even placing his own

name at the top of numerous lists of illustrious men: from the tombstone *40 nomi* (40 Names) of 1971 to the surfaces of his first paintings, *Italie* and *Sicilie* taken as the cradle of "poets, saints and navigators." Curiously, at around the same time there is a similar self-historiciza-



Villaggio, 1993

tion in the works of Guglielmo Achille Cavellini (for example his personal edition of *Kunstkompass*, the league table of the most important contemporary artists that was popular in the Seventies, where Cavellini includ-

ed himself in 33rd place), while from the point of view of reflection on the existence of the artist in time there are similarities with various other contemporaries, above all Boetti.

To award one's self immediate fame, to become a part of history, is undoubtedly an act of provocation (this is true of the presumption of his intervention in the catalogue of Documenta V in 1972, where he simply prints his own name larger than everyone else's), but it also demonstrates a profound understanding of the art system, of the conscious and unconscious mechanisms of the search for success. Maurizio Cattelan recently said: "It is difficult as an artist to admit that you want to be famous. Being an artist has nothing to do with fame, but with art, that intangible thing that requires integrity. I believe, however, that we must admit that we want to be famous, otherwise we cannot be artists. Art and fame are the expression of a desire to live forever, the two things are closely related."⁴ One of Cattelan's earliest

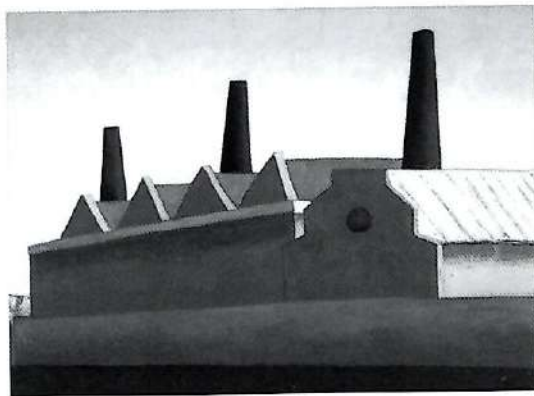
works, a neon sign with the name Cattelan, with three "T"s that resemble the crosses on Golgotha, is reminiscent of Salvo's electric *Tricolore* of 1971, creating a short circuit between a number of common features – ambiguity, irony, paradox, disorientation – displayed, though undoubtedly in very different ways, by the works of both artists. With hindsight and daring, we could define Salvo's participation in *Projekt 74*, an important exhibition in Cologne, to be "Cattelan-like". All the pre-ordained rules of exhibition are, in fact, sub-

verted by his request to be shown not in the Kunsthalle, with all the others, but in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, where he places his own work at the conclusion of an encyclopedic path (chosen by him) through the history of the art of the past, one work for every one hundred years, as if to recreate a sort of imaginary genealogical tree within the museum's collection.

"When I said it was me who had done the last picture the custodian said 'Get out!' There was a Cézanne for the nineteenth century. For the eighteenth century they didn't have much, I would have liked a large Watteau. But there was a Rembrandt for the seventeenth century, a Cranach for the sixteenth, for the fifteenth there was. . . , for the fourteenth Simone Martini and for the thirteenth I can't remember who."⁵ The work by Salvo chosen to represent the twentieth century is *San Martino e il povero* (St. Martin and the Poor Man), after El Greco, one of his earliest paintings, a heretical work at a time

when the return to painting is still not on the agenda. But for Salvo the die is cast, at the end of a path that proves to be a logical and consequential progress. Through painting he performs a descent into the history of art, but also, and above all, a process of identification, of incarnation, bet-

ween the artist and his works. In an interview on his work, Francesco Clemente has stated: "The moment I surrendered to the ineluctability of painting was with my first self-portraits in Indian ink on paper. It was there that I accepted my body, and therefore



Fabbrica, 1981

also my drawing."¹⁸ Salvo's early paintings are all self-portraits: as St. Michael, St. Martin, or Ali Adel Sha; the painting shown in Cologne was also originally a self-portrait, although in the last version the face of the saint is replaced by that of Salvo's wife Cristina: "Under Cristina there is actually a self-portrait, but I realized two or three months later that it was very realistic, with a rather unkempt beard, and that it didn't work in the picture, so I covered my face and put in Cristina's, because the face of a woman seems to me more fitting for a male saint . . ." To graft one's own image, face, or name onto one's works means recognizing one's self in them, accepting one's own being, body and art as a function of this recognized and accepted body. On the subject of narcissism and the

mirror, Pistoletto states: "Man has always attempted to double himself in order to try to know himself. recognizing his own image in a pool of water as in a mirror was perhaps one of the first true hallucinations that man came across."¹⁸

Salvo's latest self-portrait was produced in 1988. "It was very difficult, I hadn't done any for a long time," says Salvo. "For me painting soon acquired a relation with reality, though always filtered by memory. Self-portraits, on the other hand, are painted in front of the mirror, live, and after a while this immediacy no longer interested me. At the same time it's as though everything I paint now were a self-portrait, as though it contained me, my history, my body, and so there is no longer any need to depict myself directly."

1. On the concept of the "double" according to Otto Rank, cf. Sigmund Freud, *Il perturbante* (Rome: Theoria, 1984): 43.

2. Renato Barilli, *Salvo*, catalogue of the exhibition in Rotonda della Besana (Milan: Fabbri Editori, 1987): 9.

3. Donald Kuspit, "La breve e felice vita dell'opera d'arte. Dall'arte-fatto all'arte all'artefatto", in *Duchamp dopo Duchamp*, ed. Elio Cappuccio (Syracuse: Tema Celeste edizioni, 1993): 56.

4. "Voglio essere famoso," interview with Maurizio Cattelan by Barbara Casavecchia, in *Flash Art*, 32, no.

215 (April-May 1999): 80.

5. "Conversazione mobile tra Salvo e Laura Cherubini," in *Il paese delle Meraviglie*, catalogue of the exhibition at Castello di Volpaia, 1994.

6. "Lo scopo non è dipingere," interview with Francesco Clemente by Francesco Bonami in *Flash Art*, 28, no. 192 (June-July 1995): p. 68.

7. "Conversazione mobile...", op. cit.

8. M. Pistoletto, *Le ultime parole famose* (1967), now in *Pistoletto*, exhibition catalogue edited by Germano Celant (Florence, Forte di Belvedere, 1984): 59.

On the Road

Ludovico Pratesi

Invitation to travel

Luca Beatrice invited me to write a few lines about Salvo, an artist I haven't met personally but who has always aroused my curiosity and so I decided to accept. I started leafing through catalogues and monographs looking for a subject that would stimulate an interesting idea. Initially I had thought of phoning the artist to meet him, but then I decided to try and take my inspiration directly from his work, to listen with my eyes and see what they had to tell me. I looked at the photographic self-portraits of the early seventies, with the artist's face framed by an aureola, and the slabs of marble with writing followed by the geography of names of Italian painters from the past. Other artists who had played cleverly with history such as Alighiero and Boetti, Luigi Ontani and Francesco Clemente came to mind; proponents like Salvo of an acute and direct form of art, lived like a free and easy adventure, seasoned with a good dose of irony and self-mockery. This is an attitude that allows Italian artists to make fun of their own past, while maintaining conceptual links with a tradition that still holds many surprises.

On the road

These considerations, suggested more by the eye than the mind, led me to allow my eyes to roam freely over the luminous territories of Salvo's painting, which is packed with memories and influences. This is an ideal starting point for a grand tour of the imagination, one of the few pleasures allowed us poor art critics. And so I set off, using my memory as my "Baedeker," which would help me to choose which paths to take, past or present, through Salvo's paintings. The first encounter, dated 1973, is with *Self-Portrait as Saint Martin*, in which you can already see the germ of the basic elements of Salvo's art. Renato Barilli quite rightly called it "ready-made painting," in that it transports characters and images

from the past into an imaginary highly contemporary world, where artificial acid colors are more commonly seen in video games than on the altarpieces of Andrea Mantegna or Cosmè Tura. There are violent contrasts between the pink of the armor and the dark green of the dragon in

Saint George and the Dragon

(1976), a revised version of Tura's work of the same name, which dominates one of the panels of the organ in the Cathedral of Ferrara, now kept in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. If I am not mistaken, in his famous *Officina Ferrarese* Roberto Longhi had defined Ferrarese art of the late 15th century as mineral painting, underlining the harsh and cruel visionary nature of Schifanoia's mysterious frescoes, where the Duca Borso d'Este's falconry expeditions are interspersed with images of much harsher events, such as the race among Jews and prostitutes without veils before the rapt faces of the Este court. This is probably why Salvo chose Cosmè Tura to introduce us to a world of neon and luminous street signs, screens of videogames and virtual landscapes, all cleverly suggested with the help of paint brushes, canvases and shining colors.

Among the Ruins

"I enjoy looking for subjects even in the rubbish bins" Salvo declared in a recent interview. The first images of landscapes to come out of the bin were painted in the 1980s. They are of archaeological sites in the depths of the countryside in southern Italy, bathed in the

rays of the setting sun. Columns, pediments of temples and capitals that are outlined against calm seas and blue skies, that seem to have come out of a gazetteer for 18th-century travelers, given a healthy touch of bad taste by

street vendors who stand around at the entrance to Pompei and

Herculaneum. Variations on

the theme of "classical

landscape," with a nod

to Poussin's temples

and Lorrain's playful

nymphs and shep-

herdesses, before

leaving for the

"Journey to Citera"

with Watteau. Paintings

that look like signs for

traditional tourist spots, such as

the pizzerias of Sorren-

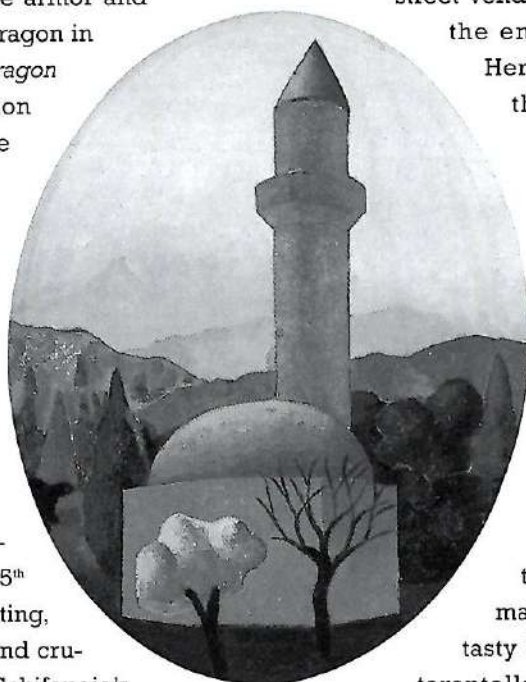
to that promise the Ger-

man and American tourists

tasty buffalo-milk mozzarella,

tarantellas, smoking volcanoes,

and eruptions of pumice clouds.



Senza titolo, 1985

An East Reconstructed with the Mind

From the small temples on the edge of the sea Salvo broadens his sights and his palette to take in other subjects. The path his painting takes leads us to admire the snow-covered streets of a mountain village (*Il Villaggio*, 1993), illuminated by the bright cones of lantern-light, a contemporary and metaphysical version of the towns of the Netherlands captured by Pieter Brueghel the Elder. Since the early 1990s Salvo has become steadily more interested in night scenes, which have become one of the most frequent subjects of his recent work, together with his *Ottomanias*, Islamic landscapes dominated by the silhouette of minarets and little red onion domes of mosques scattered throughout Sicily, Andalu-

cia and Morocco. "Revelation came to me from the East": Matisse's famous words are indicative of the love of middle-eastern esotism that intertwined between orientalist and fauves between the 19th and 20th centuries. But once again, Salvo transforms the delights of the harem and the caravanserai into a virtual place that borders "American-style" kitsch, betraying the wholly conceptual origin of this East reconstructed by the mind.

A Painter "on the road" (Tongue-in-Cheek Conclusion)

"If I hadn't had any luck at painting, you never know, maybe I'd have become something

that allowed me to travel round the world . . . a truck driver! An artist is alone, in his studio or in a truck, with one companion at most, then every so often he meets someone, such as happens at exhibitions, when you relax or recharge your batteries."¹

You may now climb out of the truck, the journey into Salvo's painting is finished. Thank you for being with me on this short journey and see you again!

1. Salvo to Dede Auregli, in the interview published by Electa in the catalogue of the exhibition at Villa delle Rose in Bologna, 1998.

Landscapes of Invention

Gianni Pozzi

Salvo's painting progresses by "genres": and it could not be otherwise given that since the early Seventies he has begun systematically to set himself up as the painter of other artists' paintings, that is, to paint not so much the things of the world as things as they have been represented in the world. In the world of painting, with all its genres and sub-genres that Salvo has tackled one after another in order to make them his in the end, he has tackled all genres in order not to be the painter of only one genre. "He who embraces and succeeds excellently in all genres, is a painter of history" commented Francesco Milizia in his *Dizionario delle Belle Arti e del Disegno* in 1797, and "he who limits himself to only one genre remains imprisoned."

Although Salvo has practiced all genres, often overturning the existing hierarchy, here we shall deal with what is probably his own genre par excellence, the landscape.

It is well-known that, in 1973, after a series of experiments in conceptual art (working on photographs, rewriting books substituting himself in the place of the protagonist, stone tablets with inscriptions) Salvo turned to the subject of El Greco's painting of Saint Martin dividing his cloak with a beggar. First of all he substituted the knight with himself, then he focussed on the theme and repainted it.

He repainted Saint Martin and Saint George, dipping into Raphael, Cosmè Tura, and the *Giants Fulminated by Jupiter*; he re-examined Hercules fighting the Hydra and another Saint George, this time in triumph, by Carpaccio.

In this return to painting, he undertook a style of painting that seems awkward and clumsy combined with the highest rank in the hierarchy, the historical-allegorical genre, which he parodies a little and reinvents a little. This elevated genre clearly serves to maintain distances, to make it clear that this is not really painting, that Salvo is not attempting

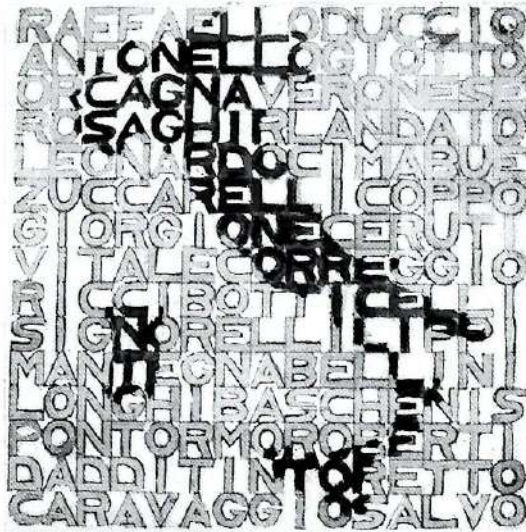
to invent anything; indeed if anything he takes up the empty shapes of the painting, the unmistakable and grandiose shapes of historic painting.

At the same time, however, (1975) he also decided to test his skills in the humblest genre, the landscape: a *Temple of Castor and Pollux*, repainted in a highly conceptual manner, that recalls a holiday postcard, complete with caption below that reads, "Temple of Castor and Pollux/ fragment put together again in 1863/by S. Cavallari and V. Villareale." Then there are his various *capricci* with knights or the many ruins that he continued to

paint over the next ten years. In an even more abrupt change he moved from these landscapes ennobled by antiquity, to more everyday ones, to his most "genre" work of all: four little houses with a bell-tower in the snow and an outline of snow-covered hills behind. Or two little houses and a yellow sky behind a wood filled with a great variety of trees: bluish fir trees, pines, cypresses, olives with fronds like gray-green bubbles. Or again a *Snow Fall* at night: a long avenue foreshortened, with, on the left a row of big buildings, on the right some stunted trees, a few lamps shining and the white of the snow. By 1979 he had completed the shift from one extreme to the other of painting genres, as if he had wanted, in reappropriating them, to bring a series of motifs, worn out with use and overly rigid practice, into the light once more.

Salvo's choices are always supported by very practical reasons: "Painting," he says, "is often a technical problem. At the beginning I did not know how to do trees and so I painted landscapes without trees, castles, ruins, or columns. However, they were in no way remi-

niscences from my Sicilian childhood because I got to know Sicily as an adult . . . let's not start any legends. . . . Later on . . . I only painted silhouettes of trees or plants, as if they were clouds; then gradually I began to distinguish the differences: the distant tree that is only silhouette, the one in the foreground that can only be leaves, or branches or fruit, without



30 pittori italiani, 1976-77

ever grasping the whole. Naturally, since I am an Italian painter I prefer the synthesis to the detail . . ."

In a conversation published in the monograph of 1992, *Salvo. Archeologie del futuro*, Luigi Meneghelli revealed that he too was interested in this path through the different genres. "Does the fact of changing genre," he asked him, "of testing the various subjects in art, the portrait, the still-life, the landscape, represent an omnivorous need to appropriate language?" Salvo, who does not like certain kinds of theoretical speculation, especially with regard to his own work, had replied rather provocatively, broadening the field of discussion: "I would need an analyst to reply. Change comes about for many reasons: it can be a desire for competition, or it may be a personal need for renewal. But then, if you think

about it, even in what does not change there is always an idea of change. What I do not understand is this need to analyze, to weigh up everything. It is like a desire to confront shadows, the dark well of the soul, to discover perhaps that every true change depends only on an aspiration to never finish."²

In a more recent conversation with Dede Auregli he did not hide a certain delight in provocation: "... as I have enjoyed saying on other occasions, I love seeking out subjects, even in the waste bin, in order to put them to the test in a very different situation. And so, why not, I could look through the small neighborhood market. . . . One day I'd even like to paint the clichéd clown, really, I'd like the challenge. If you're good, you can transform the most worn-out unbearable subject into a beautiful painting . . . anyway, my starting point in the spring paintings were those little mountain landscapes with little houses. That's the point really, I love to test myself in provocation."³

Giacinto Di Pietrantonio said something similar in an article in 1991: "I feel like a mountaineer who has to look for a new face to climb every so often, because I know the other one like the back of my hand. I have to look for something new not only in painting, but in nature and life, too. Then I look around me and at a certain point I discover a forgotten theme and I have a go at it, which means I try until I make a mistake, because only then does its personality show through. When I am no longer copying slavishly, then I add my own flaw . . ."⁴

Behind these declarations that tend to reduce everything to the common sense of painting as practice and technique, as a craft, lie other problems that interest him: the history of forms and genres, how they have been layered over the centuries, the infinite ways in which the same thing can be represented, the relationships between one author and an infi-

nite number of others. It is no accident that he warmly recommended to all his friends a short explosive story by Pérec: *Le Voyage d'hiver*. It tells the story of a young literature professor in the Thirties who happens upon a novel by an unknown author whose stories have been imitated by all the most celebrated writers of the period. And not only have these writers imitated him they have totally plundered his work. A sensational discovery, with which the protagonist could wreak havoc in the world – if he did not go mad in the process. "I am interested in origins," says Salvo, "but in terms of phenomena that are centuries long, not in everyday squabbles. . . . Do you know who the first painter to paint the Milky Way was? No? Giuliano Briganti told me it was Elsheimer. He made the Milky Way by spraying onto the canvas with his brush so that lots of tiny points of light appeared. . . . And do you know who the first person was to paint snow? For a long time I thought it was Brueghel, in *Return from the Hunt*, in the early fifteen hundreds. Then I found a *Saint Ursula* by Hans Balduin, depicted in the snow; and finally the miniature of the Duc du Berry, the *Quatre Saisons*, which possibly marks the first steps in the snow in the early years of the 15th century. . . . The genres arose then from these first paintings, thousands and thousands of paintings with the same subject . . ."⁵

In the Eighties, while the many Hercules, Saint Georges and Saint Martins were left behind, the landscape became Salvo's genre par excellence. The motifs unfold one after another: the monuments (*San Giovanni degli Eremiti*, *Alla Beata Vergine di San Luca*, Assisi, Catania), still more columns, often overlooking the sea and silhouetted against a sunset, the beautiful views of Etna, the long series of *Ottomania*, the shipyards, the motorways, the factories, the lights, more snow scenes . . .

Here was a broad range of motifs, but also of technical solutions. There are certain *Ruins*

or *Trees with Ruins* from 1984 where the forms seem to crumble in the background light that reverberates over everything in an overlaying of brush strokes. Other landscapes, completed between 1985 and 1986, are solid and divided into strict fields. There are also columns by the sea where on the other hand everything is entrusted to the effusion of color, to its capacity to reverberate absolutely, to that "sugary palette" – as Danilo Eccher described it in a recent exhibition – "that fascinates and charms but that makes representationality, which is no more than a promise in any case, an ever more remote possibility."¹⁶

Salvo's landscapes, like his other subjects (interiors, Muslim tombs, books), do in fact oscillate between "promised representationality" and idealism, between objective data and *d'après*, and in its oscillation everything refers to something else and everything becomes blurred: "they are all *d'après*, not just mine, but all paintings: Borges said that if you look really closely you will find that all the literature in the world is based on just four themes ..."¹⁷

However, Salvo's landscapes, rather than promising representationality, demand it: they declare it openly, in their references, titles, in the comments of the author himself and therefore ensure that the observer looking at the painting is referred to that reality: the cathedral of Catania or San Giovanni degli Eremiti in Palermo, the monastery of Mariestern in Saxony or the city of Meissen, which he says he has given another view.

Naturally, there have been opportunities to ask him about this (everyone questions Salvo, on any subject, and Salvo allows himself to be questioned with great pleasure), to ask him about these landscapes of his that are halfway between direct experience and what has been carried over from other painting. These are his answers. The first is to this writer: "Once I liked to tell friends: I have never

Painted Norwegian landscapes because I have never been there. Then I went there and I painted Norwegian landscapes, obviously removing the references or details that were too recognizable. Do you reckon that this is a genre that has come out of a direct experience? Yes, but don't forget the orientalist painters of the 18th century ..."¹⁸

At more or less the same time, in his conversation with Luigi Meneghelli, Salvo seems however to give us a different version. Meneghelli, commenting that "art always has something to do with an original, tangible motif," had asked Salvo: "How important is or has been the land of your birth (Sicily) in your work?" Salvo's lapidary response was, "I have already done most of my subjects before I see them ..."¹⁹

So it is a direct experience as well as invention that are united with ease. As indeed Salvo himself has confirmed on more than one occasion: "I behave towards Copenhagen, which I have not visited, in the same way that I behave towards Palermo, which I have: they are two possible directions."²⁰

At times the invention can even take the upper hand, and after the landscapes painted before seeing them and those that are partly his and partly *d'après*, are also those that do not exist, other than as the sound of a name. "How do I imagine something that I have never seen?", writes Salvo in his *Della Pittura*. "They ask me: 'How do you imagine the village of Uzukusky?' I will put together (remember) some images that relate to the word 'village' and the sound 'Usukusky.'"

In this game of referentiality and invention it is easy (and enjoyable) to let oneself become embroiled: something that has already happened to this writer on other occasions.¹¹ Salvo himself collaborates actively with his reflections, his declarations and presenting his own works in such a way as to encourage reflection on (and digressions

from) the genre. For example, the layout for the major monograph of 1992, *Salvo. Archeologie del futuro*, was done so that for every painting of Salvo's there was a historical reference: a *Cavaliere tra le rovine al crepuscolo* of 1978, evoked a painting by Friedrich of 1830 with a similar subject, *Il tempio di Giunone ad Agrigento*; the *Cavalieri medievali tra le rovine* of 1977, evoked the *Capriccio con cavalieri e statua* by Marco Ricci in 1710, and other ruins or various gladiators recalled Giorgio de Chirico, Savinio or Severini. But even some Dutch painters of architecture such as Saenredam, or illustrations from the period – everything contributes to Salvo's store of images. Elsewhere, for example, the Muslim tombs from the mid-Eighties, some photos of those same tombs have been placed alongside every canvas – taken by Salvo at the site – as well as the odd antique illustration of the same place. If they are *d'après*, they are *d'après Salvo*. In other cases, a *Tower of Pisa* for example, an oil on wood from 1980, there are two sketches of the same tower but from a later period alongside the painting. So there are three representations of the same subject but each very different from the other, so much so that the whole sequence taken together brings to mind Magritte's *Words and Images* or Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* from 1966. For Kosuth the naming of the object is based on a chain of substitutions-translations: from the real chair to the photographed chair, to the chair expressed in the corresponding headword in the dictionary. Similarly, for Salvo every tower seems to exhibit a different degree of referentiality: the sketches in fact indicate such an attachment to the object as to suggest that they were taken from life; the painting with that yellow and white tower, against a pale blue sky and soft little pink, blue and gray puffs of vegetation, point up instead a completely ideal interpretation.

It is therefore clear that the genre, the land-

scape in this case, provides – as all genres do – a simple thematic frame of reference, which has a disciplinary and organizational function for the formal structure of the work. It should not be seen as a result but as a means. Cesare Brandi, in *Teoria generale della critica* in 1974 suggested that the category of genres was to be found not in the work but *prior* to the work, "at the moment the content is organized."¹²

At the same time it is, however, a complex system of references, that can give rise to prolonged echoes, memories and endless reminders.

Salvo organizes his content by recovering inert forms that have been definitively consigned to the history of genres and sub-genres; he redefines their essential elements and makes them absolute in a new color, thus re-establishing their actuality their centrality.

In the text for the Bologna exhibition, Danilo Eccher spoke about Salvo's painting as of an experience that is still conceptual, where the need for a "subject," (the egocentricity of the many tablets or of the photos where his hand is raised in benediction) would flow into a work that, "in strange and apparent contradiction" re-establishes its own centrality and 'classic' expressive power.¹³

And the works that are "in strange and apparent contradiction" are those very landscapes where different motivations (his own and his own autobiography, but also painting as history, the whole world of images and the imaginary . . .) exist together in a constant state of flux between re-proposition and differentiation. The many valleys in springtime, with the little houses on the hills and the trees that are so green, the views of Etna at sunset just like the more recent fiery landscapes of Tenerife, are all based on a strict reduction of forms to their essence. The subject in some way disappears and lets the light take over as the true protagonist. That light that "is never in the right place, is never the right light, and

always has something excessive about it," as Luciano Pistoï said once, and that renders every one of his paintings unmistakable.

"The lack of atmosphere," writes Barilli "turns (these landscapes) into arcane, magical, 'drugged' adventures where the pinks and yellows and violets are lavish and unstinting, for the visual enjoyment of the observer. Nor moreover is the light an added extra, it functions rather as a glue in the construction of buildings or trees, as if they were blended with it..."¹⁴

You see, this light that is never the right light is "the error that has to be arrived at," the "imperfection" Salvo talked about in his conversation with Giacinto di Pietrantonio; or, to put it once more as Eccher does, it is "that sort of perceptive rudeness that the artist justifies through linguistic primitivism but which in reality allows the painter to act in a totally arbitrary way."

Because Salvo, in turning painting into a craft once more, into the practice of genre painting, has also recovered the capacity to project the painter's self within given forms by means of (once again) substitutions and redefinitions. And these new definitions are as noteworthy, as unmistakable, as the theme

adopted is tired and worn through over-use.

It is no accident that in the many Saint Georges, Saint Martins or *Battaglie dei giganti*, Salvo has limited his brushwork to a sort of quiet parody: he approaches cautiously, substituting the enormous individuality of the 15th- and 16th-century masters with a non-characterization, an uncertain sign, a succession of hesitant backgrounds. At the opposite end, in the most tired of themes, such as the spring landscapes, he can depict spellbinding colors and glowing atmospheres. In one painting he will carry out a depersonalization, in another a characterization, but the basic idea is the same. That these landscapes may then refer to others, remembered, seen or barely glimpsed from the car window; or only imagined like the village of Uzukusky, or the fruit of all these components together, is not very important.

"You look at one of my landscapes," writes Salvo, "you see prickly pears, Etna, something that makes you think of Sicily . . . Sicily as the place where I was born and whose images reside in my thoughts. This is where you must stop, you cannot go any further: the painting started from here"¹⁵ – probably where the true Sicily ends.

1. G. Pozzi, "Brani da una conversazione con Salvo," in *Salvo, La virtù del mestiere*, exhibition catalogue, galleria Santo Ficara (Florence, 1993).

2. L. Meneghelli, "La pittura: Due o tre cose che so di lei"; interview with Salvo, in *Salvo. Archeologie del futuro*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria dello Scudo, Verona, 1992-1993 (Milan: Mazzotta, 1992).

3. D. Auregli, "Intervista con Salvo," in *Salvo*, catalogue from the exhibition at the Galleria d'arte moderna di Bologna, Villa delle Rose, 1998 (Milan: Electa, 1998).

4. G. di Pietrantonio, *Interni con funzioni straordinarie*, exhibition catalogue (Turin: Edizioni Galleria In Arco, 1991).

5. G. Pozzi, "Brani da una conversazione con Salvo," op. cit.

6. D. Eccher, "Una frontiera per la pittura," in *Salvo*, (Milan: Electa, 1998).

7. L. Cherubini, "Conversazione mobile tra Salvo e Laura Cherubini," in *Il Paese delle meraviglie*, exhibition catalogue, Castello di Volpaia, 1994 (Radda in Chianti,

Siena: Fattoria Editrice Castello di Volpaia, 1994).

8. G. Pozzi, "Brani da una conversazione con Salvo," op. cit.

9. L. Meneghelli, "La pittura: Due o tre cose che so di lei," op. cit.

10. Salvo, *Della Pittura. Imitazione di Wittgenstein* (Cologne: Paul Maenz & Gerd de Vries, 1980) republished in *Salvo. Archeologie del futuro*, op. cit.

11. I am referring to *Viaggi dipinti*, catalogue of the exhibition at the galleria Santo Ficara, Florence, 1997, text by G. Pozzi and L. Beatrice, where I examined the truth/invention relationship as it relates to travel. In this text I have gone back to it and expanded on some of the observations made then.

12. C. Brandi, *Teoria generale della critica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974).

13. D. Eccher, "Una frontiera per la pittura," op. cit.

14. R. Barilli, *Salvo*, (Milan: Fabbri Editori, 1987). Catalogue of the exhibition at the Rotonda della Besana.

15. Salvo, *Della Pittura. Imitazione di Wittgenstein*, op. cit.

Salvo-style

Alessandra Galletta

One summer a few years ago, we met Salvo on the beachfront in Palermo. Squashed around a table in the legendary 'Gelateria da Ilardo' he entertained us in his elegant and enigmatic way giving free rein to his memory games rather like a character created by Borges. This simple event was enough for me to look at Sicily with different eyes, to look for Salvo's Sicily.

"You see a landscape of mine, you will see prickly pears there, Etna, something that makes you think of Sicily . . . Sicily as the place of my birth and whose images inhabit my thoughts. You have to stop there, don't go any further – the starting point for the painting is here."

It is true, the images of Sicily stay with you, and even stay with Sicilians. Much more than the prickly pears and ruined temples, "Sicily is made of" the images that Sicilians have created of their land. The decoration on Sicilian hand-carts are Sicily because they are made by Sicily. You could add not only that Salvo "is made by Sicily" but also that "he is made of Sicily." Or rather, it is Sicily that "is so Salvo." This was confirmed while walking among the ruins of Agrigento, where there was an ice-cream cart decorated exactly according to the principles of Salvo's style, that is, with an unmistakable style. But why unmistakable? Unmistakable with what?

It would be easy to give a description of Salvo's painting style. His clouds are almost always pink cotton-wool clouds; trees and bushes are round like balls; dawns and sunsets are soft and mellow, shadows bluish with improbable colors; the vegetation is always recognizable – palm trees, cypresses, pines, bushes and shrubs are reassuringly familiar. Figures of people are rare and when they appear they are treated as if they were vegetables or architectural ruins. Naturally the question at the time was where this anonymous painter of carts could have learned the rudiments of Salvo's style. Perhaps he was not a

simple decorator, but an educated young graduate from art school? Otherwise you would have to turn everything on its head and assume that Salvo himself had compiled a repertory of images from puppet theaters, with the clouds and tree-tops painted with childish roundness?

In a certain sense, the two truths are equivalent. It is certainly not a coincidence that in 1978 the French film director, Eric Rohmer, made a film called *Perceval le Galois* based on the legends of King Arthur. As opposed to Hollywood productions with realistic costumes and scenography, Rohmer chose to completely overturn the make-believe of cinema. On the set were houses and towers without perspective and smaller than the actors who dressed in stylized costumes and recited the text in verse (octosyllabic) talking about themselves in the third person. The effect was of a sort of mediaeval two-dimensional stylization, with cypresses like cones and trees like round balls. In this case, too, it would be difficult to say with conviction that Rohmer took his inspiration from mediaeval representations and not from the sets of children's television programmes. Nor indeed can we exclude (given the closeness of the dates, the crucial phase between the Seventies and the Eighties) a conscious bow to Salvo's style by Rohmer.

To be honest, with Salvo, *nothing can be excluded*. As he himself says of how things develop and work out: "The sky is made of hydrogen and oxygen, but the blue in the tube is not made of hydrogen and oxygen." Things are always in relation to something else even if it is not clear what the exact nature of the relationship is. Therefore, simplifying and stylizing as various figurative cultures do (such as mediaeval culture, popular culture, conceptual culture, computer culture), becomes the way to gather together as many relationships as possible. "Painting has to remember all the sunsets of a life and all the sunsets of the world

– of Smirne, Naples, Norway . . ."

Therefore, if nothing should be excluded, then *everything is to be included*. Even the postcards on sale in fine cities, illustrated books on archaeology, even Goethe's trip to Italy, even *Conoscere* and *I Quindici*, even the genre paintings that decorate the halls and landings of middle-class houses: dreamy romantic ruins with caption, with the year, with make-up.

Everything is to be included because everything provisionally has meaning, and only time has the right to say what will really remain of an era. Indeed we are inclined to keep everything from antiquity, even the fragments of a vase, which is important over and above its value for the simple fact that it has appropriated so much time. Memory then sees to cleaning up what is superfluous, provided that something is truly superfluous: in a truly complete museum, Salvo himself said, you should look at not only the works exhibited but also the ones that you cannot see and are in storage. But are we not the very ones who put our culture in the storehouse of poor memory? In fact, Salvo asks, "Take the 13th century, can you tell me, off the top of your head, the names of two or three great painters? But you who know so much can give me the names of at least fifty painters from this century!" (*Della pittura*, 182). That is why he is so fascinated by memory and the way memory plays tricks on us.

So you begin to understand that the truth of Salvo's style does not only consist of formal details – it is not just a personal, recognizable view of things, a signature, a marque – it is the tip of an iceberg, it is the definitively visible piece of a boundless culture with submerged images.

It is a wonderful version of the world – a storyteller's, a puppeteer's world, a world of statuettes and snakes and ladders, but also the world of a master of color. "You have to stop here, you can't go any further."

Signorile ed enigmatico pittore, siciliano di nascita (Leonforte, Enna 1947) Salvo, dagli inizi degli anni Settanta vive e lavora a Torino. Amante dei viaggi, appassionato di letteratura, l'artista descrive oggettivamente la realtà, cogliendone solo gli elementi primari, l'essenza, sostenendo che "la pittura deve ricordare tutti i tramonti di una vita e tutti i tramonti del mondo: quelli di Smirne, di Napoli, della Norvegia...". I suoi lavori sono senza tempo e senza paese di origine, pur essendo in tutte le sue espressioni, dalle scelte del colore a quelle dei temi e delle decorazioni, fortissimamente siciliano.

Il volume analizza circa tre decenni di attività dell'artista, dai primi quadri ispirati ai Maestri del Quattrocento, realizzati agli inizi degli anni Settanta, alle "Italie" e alle "Sicilie", ai "Minareti" e ai paesaggi mediterranei, fino alla felicissima più recente stagione che riscopre in pieno il colore attraverso l'evocazione delle stagioni nel paesaggio.

Documentato nel volume anche un esauriente *corpus* di incisioni.

Di Salvo hanno scritto insigni critici e storici dell'arte; in questa occasione si è scelto di sollecitare una critica giovane, con l'intento di leggere il suo lavoro con freschezza e nuovi stimoli.

A refined and enigmatic painter, Sicilian by birth (Leonforte, Enna 1947), Salvo has been living and working in Turin since the beginning of the Seventies. A keen traveler and a lover of literature, the artist describes reality objectively, gathering only its primary elements, its essence, he claims that "painting should recall all the sunsets of a lifetime and all the sunsets in the world: the ones in Smirne, in Naples, in Norway. . ." His works are timeless and have no country of origin, even though in all his forms of expression, from the choice of color to choice of themes and decorations, he is strongly Sicilian.

The book analyzes three decades of the artist's activity, from the early pictures that were inspired by the Masters of the 15th century, and painted at the beginning of the Seventies, to the "Italy's" and the "Sicily's," to the "Minarets" and the Mediterranean landscapes, up to his most recent, felicitous period which fully rediscovers color by means of the evocation of the seasons in the landscape. It also documents his extensive *corpus* of engravings.

Distinguished critics and art historians have written about Salvo; on this occasion young critics were chosen, the intention being to interpret his work with a fresh outlook and with new stimuli.

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