

ON THE RIVERBANK

LISA LICITRA PONTI

SALVO

"If the world were to make it to the year 5000 (I don't really expect it to), and if people were still painting—that is, if men continued to have houses with walls—they would smile at our problems regarding whether or not painting is dead. They'd say, But who did they think they were, the 'last' generation? It's like when you read about people in the year 1000 who believed it was the end of the world because there, where they lived, it was the year 1000—but in Arabia it was the year 600...."

It's lovely, listening to Salvo. Salvo, speaking, gives you many keys to his painting, and none opens the lock. One key is Ludwig Wittgenstein and his revisional mode of questioning, which prevents you from taking a step forward. A raised foot doesn't mean you're taking a step forward, it means you have a foot raised. I've never seen paintings as immobile as Salvo's.

Salvo paints for many hours a day. At home, in Turin. Some of his paintings are dedicated to Cristina, his wife. Some are as small as miniatures. He has discussions and many arguments with Norma, his nine-year-old daughter. He named her Norma. Norma, as in Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma*; Norma, as in norm. The rule. The game. The rule of the game. Salvo knows a lot about the rules of the game.

Among the critics, he likes those who describe his paintings in detail, those who look at them, more than those who distance themselves to judge them. In order to judge them fairly, they'd have to distance themselves not ten feet but some three hundred years.

Salvo is 39 years old. Looking back, he says, "In Turin, in 1968, we were always hanging out. [Gianenzo] Sperone, [Giovanni] Anselmo, [Gilberto] Zorio—I got to know them in the piazza. I was always

Salvo, *Tricolore (Three-colored)*, 1970, painted marble, ca. 15½ x 19½". Private collection.



Salvo, *San Giorgio e il drago* (Saint George and the dragon from Cosmè Tura), 1975, oil on board. Private collection.

together with Alighiero [Boetti]. He had lent me his studio.... Then, we spoke about work every day. And there was a reciprocal play of influences." In Turin, *arte povera* had been a favorable ground for Salvo, a ground from which he nearly immediately departed in another direction. In 1970, at age 22, he was already exhibiting his engraved *Lapidi* (Tablets), which in their turn introduced his first paintings, in 1973. Salvo's present work is the extension of work already done.

Salvo has light in his viewfinder. And he's a good shot. In Salvo's paintings light indicates the hour, the direction of the day, so that there is no danger of losing track of time. You know what time it is. There is an infusion of light in his paintings, a euphoria in its reiteration, as if a single painting would not suffice to express it fully. Each painting is pushed from behind by a crowd of other paintings. The places frequented in the paintings are everyday ones, from dawn to dusk. Unknown territory is not their subject, but painting—the capacity to paint—is. When it rains, Salvo doesn't go out. Sometimes he takes a coffee at a bar. He rarely goes out in the city at night. If he does go out, it's for the light, not the night.

Salvo's light is the light of the Nile. That is, the light of a fundamentally happy people who look at the stars and dream about existence itself. This fantasy is produced by the Nile. Geographically, Egypt is the ideal place for painting, for Salvo on the riverbank. □

Lisa Licitra Ponti has written poems and fairy tales. Since 1947 she has worked at *Domus* magazine, of which her father, Gio Ponti, was founder and editor; she is now associate editor of *Domus*, with particular responsibility for art.

Translated from the Italian by Meg Shore.