

I've always liked the ambiguous side of things: the false primitivism, false naivety, false uncultured, false stupid.

Salvo



Fig. 1

“I’VE ALWAYS LIKED THE AMBIGUOUS SIDE OF THINGS”
Elena Volpato

Salvo no longer shares the daily passing of time with us, nor does he share our space, but there is a place in the mind where one can be sure to find him. At any given moment, Salvo is there, or rather, he is also there. In a museum gallery, spacious and free of shadows, with some paintings arranged on three of the walls so that the eye can view them as a whole, set apart from each other in a relaxed rhythm. This gallery existed in a historical period and in a geographical place, but it still exists, more real than ever, in the suspended world of the mind. When you look at one of his works, when you wonder about his art, Salvo replies to you from over there, with his silence wrapped in an invisible web of words: all those he has spoken and written to explain his convictions about art. He replies without turning round. He looks at his paintings, sitting on a bench in the middle of the gallery, slightly to the side, as though leaving room for someone else to sit next to him. He replies with his eyes firmly set on the history of art. That is what he used to do when talking about painting in his studio, at a café or in his car. Looking back over what he said in his various interviews and recalling his arguments, it is clear how much his thoughts were immersed in the depths of history. It is as though they were caught up in an endless vista that, from painting to painting, from artist to artist, linked the significance of his work to that of painters seven centuries before his time. He worked with his easel standing there, on the edge of time. Long paths stretched out beyond the “hedge,” beyond the plane of the canvas he was painting, circling around the lives of artists and their works down the centuries. These are the stories of painting that Salvo recalled with the air of a connoisseur, ready to pick out the details, the subtle differences in the style and temperament of those inspirational ancestors of his.

Fig.1 Salvo sitting in the hall of the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne, where *S. Martino e il povero* was exhibited among other works of the ancient art collection on the occasion of “Projekt ’74,” 1974. Photograph by Giorgio Colombo.

There is a photograph of that place that has become crystallized over time. It was taken at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne in 1974. In spite of what it appears to be, the picture is not related to many other shots from the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, which turned the portraits of visitors photographed in the galleries of the world's major museums into a sort of genre in its own right. Strange as it may seem, it is actually part of another, entirely pictorial tradition, which culminated in Friedrich's landscapes, in which the silhouettes of observers seen from behind, against the light, redirect our eyes toward the horizon, which is lost in an ill-defined distance. In that photo, and from then on, Salvo adopted a similar role for himself: he redirected his eyes toward the depths of time and to the value that is preserved there. Like those solitary monks of the landscape, he was obliged to arrive at the opening of the view slightly before the others.

In the early 1970s he used photography to go back over the most typical compositional elements in the pictorial tradition of Romanticism. In 1970 he started taking photos under the title *Benedizione di Lucerna* (Blessing of Lucerne) where he is seen from behind, just a black silhouette against the bright cityscape in the distance. He raises three fingers of his right hand, as in the iconography of the *Salvator Mundi*, and has a thin halo drawn around his head. The link with Romantic painting is even more evident in another photograph from 1972, *Autoritratto tra le rovine*, Salvo positioned himself with respect to the camera at the same angle at which he appears in the Cologne photo. He has climbed onto the ruins of an imposing building where the brambles and fallen tree trunks in the foreground are reflected in the distance in trees shrouded in a misty light. Viewed from behind, Salvo appears among the ruins, dressed as a saturnine artist playing the role of the solitary intellectual, while, almost without showing it, meditating on Friedrich's art. Perhaps he had clambered up those ruins, which we see in photographic black and white, in the hope of seeing beyond the horizon, recalling the German's vivid sunsets and dawns, the brilliant lilacs, yellows and oranges that would later find their place in his own paintings. From behind, in the brightly lit museum gallery, Salvo observed the boundless landscape of art, the eternal dawn of painting, as if the sun were rising in the name of every artist who, over the centuries, could resist the oblivion of time. That gallery was his belvedere and his hermitage. In those early years of the 1970s, Salvo was on his own, because painting was possibly the only thing an avant-garde artist was not allowed to do. Today many younger artists, who have chosen painting as their medium of expression, are conceptually seated next to him on that bench. And they acknowledge the courage he demonstrated in keeping open the door of painting and the fact that he did so without tying it solely to the field of lyricism and to an emotional and sentimental nature. He did this without necessarily writing a new chapter of expressionism or performing a purely optical exercise, but rather acknowledging that the canvas could be a place for thoughts, and for the potential of the mind.

In Cologne, he chose to isolate himself, to differentiate himself from the artists who, like him, were part of "Projekt '74." He asked not to show his works at the Kunsthal like the others, but rather to have a room of his own at the Wallraf-Richartz, the city's museum of medieval and modern art. He also asked if he could choose one work from each century, from the fourteenth to the nineteenth, and arrange them on the walls, ending the sequence of works with one of his own paintings representing the twentieth century: *S. Martino e il povero* of 1973. This meant that a timeline was formed in the room, with an artistic lineage spreading out in front of Salvo's eyes representing the enduring values of art. In the photograph, his eyes contemplate the large painting placed in the centre

of the median wall, the work that represents the seventeenth century. It is a portrait of 1644, attributed to Rembrandt and known as the *Portrait of a Scholar*, possibly depicting Jan Cornelius Sylvius, a theologian whom the painter knew. Rembrandt's name was to return several times in Salvo's conversations and in his essay *Della Pittura. Imitazione di Wittgenstein* of 1980. He was rarely omitted from the circle of artists that, with constant variations, he used to mention, like a cleric reciting the lineage of David until the birth of the Saviour. However, one wonders why Salvo, who was able to choose from all the works in the collection—and the extraordinary importance of the paintings he was able to use clearly shows this—preferred the less known and more uncertain *Portrait of a Scholar* rather than Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait* of 1665, in which the now elderly artist faces out from the canvas with a sardonic smile. Yet Salvo must have viewed the *Self-Portrait*, one of Rembrandt's unusual array of self-portraits, as a very familiar theme. But it was not the vibrant recording of the flow of life on the human face that interested him, but rather a very different temporal depth, a depth that was entirely mental, neither organic nor corporeal. What interested him, much more than the ever-revolving cycles of nature, was the propagation of ideas and knowledge through the ages. As well as being the artist of the self-portrait, Rembrandt was the painter who, perhaps more than any other, worked on depicting intellectuals, producing dozens of canvases in which he portrayed scholars, theologians, prophets, and philosophers, generally immersed in reading and sometimes in meditation. I believe Salvo must have loved the Dutchman's canvases, in which the light bursts in through a window and reverberates across the pages of a book and on the broad forehead of a scholar, while all around a space springs to life, not as a physical room but rather as a projection of what is moving through the mind, between the enlightened temples of the sitter. The spiral staircase of the *Philosopher in Meditation* in the Louvre twists upwards like speculation, like Pontormo's disquieted suspended stairs or those of Salvati in the Italian manner. The large vaults alive with blue and yellow reflections in the *Scholar Reading* in the National Museum in Stockholm seem to rotate around the reading space like spheres of madrepores, moving through an imagined universe. Both paintings are incandescent with color and life, just as Salvo's *Interni con funzioni straordinarie* would later be. The Wallraf-Richartz *Scholar* emerges from the darkness, from the depths of time. Two bright whites respond to each other: the pages of the book on the lectern and the face placed on the white ruff like on an open book, while the straight white pen, tucked behind the ear, cuts through the space like a little dart and as though wishing to become the emblem of proper thinking, connecting what lies behind us with what is yet to come. The triangulation between the book, the scholar and the viewer, who is drawn into the work by the sitter's eyes, brings about the idea that the reference is to something beyond oneself: the constant handing down of ideas through time, the fact of belonging to a concatenation of intelligences that emerge from the dark background of the canvas and from the illuminated pages of the book. It needs the scholar's reflections in order to be handed down to the present, which is embodied each time in those who view the painting. This was the true self-portrait, the true mirror in which Salvo once again found himself.

Rather conveniently, the fact that Rembrandt lived in the Golden Age meant that the *Scholar* had to be at the center of the chronological sequence of paintings in the room. As the start of the series, Salvo elected Simone Martini, with a *Madonna and Child*, part of a polyptych dating from about 1316–17. In it, we see the artist's ability to walk on a thin strip of land that winds its way over a gold ground between a slackening of naturalness and an air of the absolute. Everything is human in Simone Martini and yet everything appears

with the inevitability of the emblem. Salvo must have loved that complicated union and, to an even greater extent, he must have seen in Simone Martini's work, as in his life, the landscape of the *Guidoriccio*, where, in the background, the land stretches out devoid of any human or anecdotal presence, turning into an image and allegory of itself. The geometric mass of the turreted castle behind the knight has no trace of any window or slit. It is a world of rhomboids in which colors alone have the right of abode—and only in small numbers. For Martini, and possibly also for himself, Salvo could have subscribed to the words of those who recognized in the Siene's art a capacity for supreme abstraction made with the most evocative elements of the real world.¹

The fifteenth century was represented by a small triptych by Stefan Lochner, dating from 1445–50. The head of the Cologne School, coming after Martini, this illustrated Salvo's passion for the northern tradition and for Flemish painting, on a par with his love for the Italian schools. I believe he must have adored the deep ultramarine of the Virgin's attire, its reverberation on the white lapel of the mantle and on the transparencies of the Child's robe with its tender blue hue fading into lilac. His eyes would have flickered with delight from Lochner's vibrant play of shades of blue to the three shades of red, also side by side, in the clothes of mother and son in Simone Martini's work. But the salient feature of the small fifteenth-century work, and the one that led to him to choose it, must have been the fact that it is an intimate image of contemplation and, like much of Simone Martini's art, a manifestation of a supersensitive lowered into the world of forms in order to reach out to the mind. The central panel shows a *hortus conclusus*, a fenced-in space that can be seen when the two side panels are opened, rather like when a book is opened. The walls, which surround the Virgin and Child in their Eden, are of an unreal pink color, caressed by the gold of the radiant divine light. Five years later, in 1979, Salvo painted a small canvas depicting a crenellated castle, entirely painted in pink, with contrasting blue conifers that recall the two Gothic pinnacles on Lochner's walls. Only those unfamiliar with the Cologne triptych could be deceived into thinking of that painting as a just a fairy-tale fantasy: Salvo's rose-colored castle surrounds the closed space of the mind. It is the effigy of a medieval "City of God" as a city of philosophical intellect. It is no coincidence that, on the ground among the tiny seedlings in Lochner's garden, which are as innumerable and incorruptible as the illustrations of a celestial herbarium, the open volume of the holy scriptures can be seen, also tinged with pink light, repeating the architecture of the absolute in the dimension of the word.

The sixteenth century chosen by Salvo is no less anti-naturalistic and courtly. His champion here is Lukas Cranach the Elder with the *Mary Magdalene* panel of 1525. The work is a play of nested boxes, of forms that contain other forms, all linked to each other in a visual echoing of dynamic profiles and currents: the drawing of the vase is repeated, upside down, in the flared skirt and in its fluted folds; it returns in the profile of the torso held in by the bodice and, again, in the flared cut of the tree that traces out the elegant curves of the body. The crinkling of the dress is repeated in that of the long wavy hair, in the wind-ruffled mantle, and in the vibrant leaves on the tree. Each image maintains an analogy with one that contains it, creating a vision of the universe in which everything is held and everything represents itself and, at the same time, what is

¹ Gianfranco Contini, "Simon Martini gotico intellettuale," *L'opera completa di Simone Martini* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1970): 6.

other than itself. Salvo must have been interested in the intellectual nature of this type of painting just as much as the erudite public in Wittenberg, where Cranach worked for a long time, must have been. Indeed, it is most likely that the cultural life of the court of the electors of Saxony had inspired the artist and filled him with the flourishing scholarship of Renaissance Germany. For Salvo, the presence of the *Mary Magdalene* in the series of works in the room must have formed a perfect link between Lochner's visionariness and Rembrandt's *Scholar*. After all, in one of Cranach's most important portraits, we see not only the face of Luther but also the magnificent portrait of Johannes Cuspinian, a young law professor who holds a weighty red book in his hands while a world with the symbolism of a book of hours unfolds behind him. Cranach thus keeps the figure poised between the volumetric plasticity of the real world and the incorporeality of fantastical illustration, creating a subtle balance between elements that are not far removed from Salvo's art.

Once past Rembrandt's seventeenth century, the sequence continued with *Le Jeu du Cheval Fondu*, 1730–35, an eighteenth-century painting by Nicolas Lancret, the only case in which the artist had to make do with a stopgap: "I'd have liked a great Watteau,"² he said twenty years later. Unfortunately, the Wallraf-Richartz did not have a work by him in its collection, so Lancret and his playing children had the task of making reference to the more adult pleasures of Watteau, indeed, of "a great Watteau." The stress on size suggests a reference to the Frenchman's complex compositions, in which painting enters the world of the theater. The theater, like the sacred visions of the previous paintings, is a declarative mechanism of images, of the fact that they are creations of the mind, and an alternative world to reality. Watteau's works are run through by a single vibration that removes the weight and substance of the figures, assimilating the tingle of a painting made of little touches of vapor, of which illusions are made.

To represent the nineteenth century, Salvo chose Cézanne's *Still Life with Pears*, of about 1885. The transition from Watteau does not appear to be the most perspicuous, if only for the cursive ease of French Rococo painting, which seems to have very little to do with the slow, exhausting and headstrong work of Cézanne. However it is worth recalling that some of his works, such as *A Modern Olympia*, painted before his full maturity, are so manifestly theatrical—complete with a curtain, an apparition, and a white baroque cloud holding up the image in mid-air—that perhaps we need not look that far to see what connects the two pictorial moments of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The fact remains that Cézanne later avoided fantastical images at all costs and became a high priest of studying nature from life. Like Rembrandt, Cézanne too often

² See Laura Cherubini, *Salvo and Laura Cherubini in a Conversation on the Move*, *infra* 584-593.

Before showing Lancret's canvas, however, Salvo had originally chosen *Resting Girl* (1751) by François Boucher, to represent the eighteenth century. It is a nude with erotic overtones, caressed by a reverberation of bright pinks, yellows and blues. It is complete with the inevitable open book next to the sofa, within reach of the young woman. The work, which was not available at the time of the exhibition, is however listed in the place of the Lancret in the catalogue *Kunst bleibt Kunst. Aspekte internationaler Kunst am Anfang der 70er Jahre. Projekt '74*, 1974, 310.

returns in Salvo's genealogies and often, one might say, for different reasons. In that room in Cologne, at the end of the sequence, I believe its task is both to close and, at the same time, to reopen the disquisition that began with Simone Martini: the theme of how the absolute can be attained through aspects of reality. For the Sienese artist it was a revelation of the transcendent in the resplendence of forms, the descent into the immanent of a superordinate intelligence in order to turn it into an image of itself. Yet it only went as far as its possible limit, just one small step from the dissolution of the human in the symbol, though without ever crossing that sign. Cézanne had to start from the earth, from its silent evidence, from the impenetrability of nature. He might not have been searching for the absolute in there, and maybe he just wanted the truth, an opportunity to express on the canvas the fullest truth of what he saw, but by pushing himself to penetrate the presence of the world—whether it was the hills, the mountain or the mortar that holds together the walls of the old houses of Provence—he ended up drawing on the mystery. Like Simone Martini, Cézanne kept his painting wavering on the threshold of the dissolution of reality, but in the opposite direction. There were those who described his progress as the journey of a worm or a woodworm that remains obstinately, desperately stuck within the thickness of the material it feeds on, until it turns out that the wood it is slowly gnawing on is that of the throne of God.³ An expression he liked to use was that of “making real.” In the solidity of his forms he made real the presence of the impenetrable—and in his final works this impenetrability reached the tension of the void that, from deep down, pushes against the walls of solidity. It may seem paradoxical, but sometimes his apples built up with paint—in the body of color, with thick movements of his spatula—appear as if they were formed from the inside, like blown glass, by a pressure that emanates from the inexpressible heart of things. At times, this tension generates a vivid surge of color in Cézanne's work. The arousal of chromatic vibration appears to indicate a form of cerebral exaltation that cannot be separated from the study of the truth of nature. Salvo went on to give full expression to the mental firing up of his colors, and he too let the void contradictorily expand the solidity of his volumes. In his work, he went on to breathe new life into Martini's deserted castles and his walls without slits, just as Cézanne did with his windowless houses. The closed, silent building of both artists would soon come together on Salvo's canvases.

The twentieth century was Salvo. Some of Salvo's most important works had come with declarations of immodesty, from the gravestone with *Io sono il migliore* of 1970, to the presence of his name at the bottom of a different gravestone, *40 nomi* of 1971, preceded by those of 39 of the most illustrious historical figures, through to his name printed larger than those of the others in the documenta 5 catalogue of 1972 and, before these, the various drawn and painted versions of the *Salvo benedicente* (Salvo blessing) self-portrait, from 1969 onwards. The presence of the *S. Martino e il povero* of 1973 in that gallery, however, marked a turning point. The succession of works and the fact that it was the reified quintessence of Salvo's imaginary museum, did not mean it could be dismissed as no more than provocation. Salvo had summoned the majesty of those works in the gallery and had established his own place in a museum of ancient art: “If you want to end up in the Uffizi,” he would say on various occasions, only slightly varying his words, “try painting a picture.”

3 Alfonso Gatto, “Occhio che vede dentro il suo vedere,” *L'opera completa di Cézanne* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1970): 8.

As he saw it, everything in conceptual art and in avant-garde works had gradually decayed into mannerisms, where the dogmas and dogma of the death of painting were cultivated. Painting was viewed as a definitively discredited and superseded art form that was to be demolished, and this could not be done simply as a joke, with humor. The only way to see if painting could be reborn was to paint, and to do so without reserve.

The twentieth century was Salvo, it was said, but in some ways it was also El Greco. Salvo presented himself as the standard bearer for his century with the *d'après* of a work from the late sixteenth century: an apparent contradiction. Only “apparent” because, while adopting in his painting Borges's beliefs in the history of literature, the artist was in no doubt that every work of art was to some extent a *d'après*, and this included the six masterpieces in that gallery. This is a crucial aspect of Salvo's relationship with history. One could return to painting only if one could create a landscape, a still life or a different painting for the umpteenth time, impressing it with one's own personal style. This assessment of the meaning and value of one's work could not have found more ruthless clarity than in the practice of copying. Here the gap between what has been done and what can still be done depends entirely on the style of the artist who copies, in their partly voluntary, partly involuntary deviation from the original work and in their ability to make their own what has been done for centuries. The history of art that Salvo tells is a long succession of these deviations, of the emergence of personal traits on a trunk that grows while always remaining itself. If this were not the case, the artists' names could not be placed in succession. “41. How do you make a sequence?” asks Salvo in *Della Pittura*. “What happens when you say ‘Yes, I see Monet well after Canaletto and Turner.’ Why does Monet seem good there? ‘Because, for example, Turner gives me a new view of in the context of Canaletto's more stereotypical one and so, Monet is with Turner.’” In two of the most concise and imperious points of the treatise, he goes on to say: “84. A painting is placed in a logical sequence. 85. A painting is a terminus: it is an arrival (for the one who has done it) and a departure (for the one who views it).” Further on, he writes: “153. The new is logically determined.”

While this is what the artist was to write six years after his “Projekt '74,” maybe it is reasonable to ask what the rationale was for that room and if the timeline that linked Simone Martini's fourteenth century with Salvo's twentieth really did constitute a “logical sequence” in his thought.

From Cézanne's *Still Life* to the *S. Martino e il povero*, the first evident connection is that of color. If we compare the landscape in the distance in the former, with its fading of light blue and ochre, we find it repeated, though in reverse, in the background of the latter. Then we see the brightness of Cézanne's green and the acid green borrowed from El Greco, the gentle unfolding of the cloth on the left of the still life and the mantle of the apologue in the *d'après*. All these elements suggest that the similarities may have come about almost as a game of verification. Salvo puts the value of his painting to the test in his comparison with El Greco and its meaning in his comparison with Cézanne. It may be no coincidence that the *Still Life*, with the landscape in the background, is the closest possible point of contact between the French artist's study from life and a metaphysical still life by de Pisis. When the act of penetrating the sense of nature means the painter's brush makes contact with the mystery that empties it from within, then the possibility of recognizing an interrogation of the mind, and a philosophical adventure, is just a step away in the work. If we replace the merging of a tenuous landscape on the horizon with the concreteness and mundaneness of a plate of pears with an unlikely history scene, complete with a horse, a

knight in armor and an edifying legend, can that painting survive? Will it stand firm with all its potential? Or will the breakdown of any semblance of natural truth and plausibility of life cause it to collapse on itself?

While the selection of works at the Wallraf-Richartz is a logical sequence, the rationale for its progression is the conviction that painting offers a home to ideas just as much as it does to the eyes and feelings. It does not show itself without knowing, and without thinking and remembering⁴ that painting can live as much on anti-naturalism as on its opposite. A painting can find its value in declaring its otherness with regard to reality and matter, and to feelings and impressions. Salvo viewed painting more as a more conceptual exercise than he did his photomontages, gravestones and performances. It was all the more so because its status as an art of the mind needed to be conquered and re-established from scratch. Salvo did this by closing the act of painting inside his studio, cultivating it like a greenhouse flower in rooms just like the visionary chambers of Rembrandt's scholars. He started by turning the view of painting on itself. This is what the *d'après* are for, this is what taking in the entire history of art is for—to make painting an act of reflection. Believing that there is no work of art that is not a *d'après* means believing that every real work emerges from the artist's meditations on art, on what it has been and on what it can be.

The “greenhouse painting” that Salvo cultivated in the first half of the 1970s has much of the sophisticated elegance that wildflowers lack. All his decisions appear to have been made to expose the intellectual and artificial origins of his painting. He starts by eliminating the depth of shadows and chiaroscuro because he seeks neither the effect of illusion, nor that of pathos. His light is just as diffused as in a miniature and, even in its large format, it may still retain something of its roots in manuscripts. No element of the work is contextualized in a physical space, where the sun, a lamp or a flame might change its appearance. His saints, knights and other mythological figures cast no shadows because they live as ideal images in the light of thoughts. On the contrary, their intensity whittles away the sense of presence, disincarnating them as if washing them away by overexposure. What remains solid and certain is the drawing, and indeed the figures are clearly outlined, mostly reversed out, appearing to let the color of the paper emerge from below. Salvo gives meaning back to outlines as a modern-day Nabis might have done, for while Leonardo in his treatise exhorted artists to abandon them as elements of painting rather than of reality, then they must have been absolutely necessary to him. This was because he worked on painting, and not on the imitation of nature. What remains outside of the outline is only a vague idea of space. The background behind the figures has no real substance and where it does suggest some form of presence it is little more than a horizon line.

The imagery of his early works focuses on different versions of *S. Martino e il povero* and of *S. Giorgio e il drago* (St. George and the dragon). This takes him in the same anti-naturalistic direction since it means he can place his work at the greatest number of degrees of separation from reality: his themes are *d'après* of *d'après* and, as such, they tend to make painting an exercise to be carried out in the halls of an ideal, imaginary and also universal museum. They are also chronologically incongruent since they are drawn from medieval devotion, but rendered in a more or less extreme form of an updated

4 Salvo, *Della Pittura/On Painting/Über die Malerei* (Berlin: Paul Maenz & Gerd de Vries, 1986): 96–97.

Renaissance transported into the twentieth century, almost randomly, only through the face of the artist who, in some cases, appears in the form of the saint.

Even more than the unsettling iconography, however, the ultimately fantastical aspect is the color of these works, and to some extent that of all those that came after. Salvo returned to painting above all with monochrome, as if wishing to linger on the edges of the photographic grey scale. Immediately after his *grisailles*, however, he created a small group of works for his first solo exhibition with paintings⁵ alone, and for these he chose a range of earth colors and ochres, creating an inevitable sense of inlays. And it is also worth noting, even if only incidentally, that they offered themselves to the intellectualistic projections of metaphysical thought more than any humanistic art.

The unusual palette in the works, where color once again comes to the fore, is surprising, starting with the *S. Martino e il povero* shown at the Wallraf-Richartz. These are dandy colors, played out in multiple shades of lilac, purple and pink, with cool indigo and minimal ambient counterpoints of yellows and blues. These colors dominated in his work throughout the 1970s, even when he shifted from his medieval-humanistic iconography to themes of classical antiquity, pushing his works through to 1977–79, with *Apollo e Dafne* (Apollo and Daphne) and *Ercole e l’Idra* (Hercules and the Hydra), toward hyperborean chromatic elisions in which color becomes an impassive temple, a cold background to passions with which it fails to interact.

Salvo's colors have been interpreted in various ways. The earliest one was put forward by Renato Barilli, who had the merit of being the first to show his work, comparing it to that of Luigi Ontani, possibly the only artist who, due to his intellectual nature, could share Salvo's appreciation for that type of palette, with an understanding of its historical implications. But, after comparing Salvo's color to that of the primitives of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Pre-Raphaelites and the second metaphysical period of de Chirico, on more than one occasion Barilli insisted on the electronic and television-based nature of his palette. The most recent interpretation is the one offered by the curators of the 2020 Quadriennale who, in a selection of works, view psychedelic culture as key to Salvo's choice of color.⁶

It is as though one could hear Salvo responding to these ideas: “Well, why not?” with that tone of his that was open to everything that was only accessory, and gravitating around his work, whether in the form of critical writings or in the arrangement of the paintings in the displays. Yet direct comparison shows some distance both from the primitives and from the Pre-Raphaelites, except for some particular choices such as the frequency of purple in the latter, which is anything but the norm in many periods of painting. In Hughes and Rossetti, however, it is accompanied by an intensity of broader and deeper shades, from dark greens to reds, which in Salvo we find only here and there, starting in the 1980s and, later, in the series of *Primavere* (Springs) of the 1990s. Undoubtedly some of de Chirico's paintings, not necessarily only of his second Metaphysics, are the most directly comparable to Salvo's visionary palette. This is especially true of his first *d'après*: the purple sunset of the *Horses by the Sea* of 1927–28 or the pink monochrome *The Daughters of Minos (Antique Scene in Pink and blue II)* of about 1933. However, the color matchings

5 Exhibition at Galleria Toselli, Milan, 1973, where he showed the *S. Giorgio e il drago* and the *S. Michele* of the same year.

6 Sarah Cosulich and Stefano Collicelli Cagol (eds.), *Fuori. Quadriennale d’Arte 2020* (Rome: Treccani, 2020): 268.

that are closest to his early St. Georges, St. Martins and a series of paintings with classical themes that came shortly after—here I refer in particular to *I Giganti fulminati da Giove* (The Giants struck by Jupiter’s lightning) of 1977 and the aforementioned *Apollo e Dafne* and *Ercole e l’Idra*—are, I believe, to be found more in archaeological and literary culture, and in the watercolored engravings of the early nineteenth century with reconstructions of ancient monuments. In these cases, the prominence of the violets and pinks is accompanied by blues and yellows exactly as we find in those works by Salvo. I would like to stress that no reference is made to reproductions from ancient works but rather to literary reconstructions, such as the engraving showing Achilles’ shield as described in the *Iliad*, the drawings of the lost chryselephantine statues starting from the words of the Pausanias, legendary artefacts such as the magnificent hearse that carried the body of Alexander the Great—all works of art that we can only imagine through the words of poets, historians and geographers. The closest examples to Salvo’s cooled-down palette can be found in the colored engravings that accompany Quatremère de Quincy’s writings on ancient art. I do not know if Salvo knew them in detail—he was certainly a connoisseur of archaeological-themed prints—but his chromatic twin can be seen in those cases where the image is an exercise of thought at the service of a reconstruction, at once erudite and fantastic. I believe this says something about the mental nature of Salvo’s painting and about the sense in which his palette, combined with the precision of his brushstroke can be viewed as a form of intellectual dandyism.

Colors that rarely appear in the history of art, and just as rarely in nature, include the lavender color of the horse’s harness in the *S. Martino* shown in Cologne, the triptych of periwinkle, purple and Tiepolo pink in the other *S. Martino*, of 1973, inspired by Bernardo Zenale’s altarpiece, the pinks lightly touched with a blue shading in the *S. Giorgio e il drago (da Raffaello)* (St. George and the dragon [after Raphael]), of 1974, the violet and mauve harmonies in the *d’après* after Carpaccio, the icy indigo of the *Apollo e Dafne* and the deep indigo of *Cavalieri tra le rovine al crepuscolo* (Riders among the ruins at dusk) of 1978. Some purple appears in some of the clothes worn by Piero della Francesca’s angels, in Botticelli’s *The Return of Judith to Bethulia*, occasionally in Pontormo and Bronzino, and then in some clothes by Tiepolo. It deepens into Delacroix’s shadows, it lights up in Redon and in some of Whistler’s touches and then it colors decadent literature no less than the contemporary art of Les Nabis and the pointillists. Its pictorial home is the restless north: from Friedrich’s landscapes to Nolde’s watercolors, through to Munch’s world streaked with anguish. Its breeding ground is the mind and its origin is artificial. It sounds curiously appropriate to find that mauve, a pale but intense, electric violet, first appeared in modern daily attire as a result of the first synthetic dye, which was chemically created in a laboratory without any animal or vegetable ingredient, as a residue from the tar used for making gas for artificial lighting.⁷ When Salvo painted in his studio, he always used electric light, so that his painting would not depend on the passage of time and on changes in natural light, so he preferred to use a color that was born alongside artificial light and that appears to contain it within itself, like a vibration that is at once dark and shrill.

Pink, and its variations of antique rose and Tiepolo pink, is more frequent in the history of art and appears in some instances of the contemporary world in a mental and anti-naturalistic vein: it was the cruel color of de Kooning’s female figures, of their wavering

7 See Riccardo Falcinelli, *Cromorama. Come il colore ha cambiato il nostro sguardo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2017): 116–117.

between figure and decay in a painting that never resolves the contradiction of its own mental and mimetic status before the world. Coupled with purple, it is the color of Bacon’s alarming interiors that Salvo had pondered closely, and united with red ochre, it seals the closed world of Philip Guston’s *The Studio* within itself, in the electric glare of a light bulb. One might wonder what the harsh temperature of these works has to do with a color that, in some of its shades, might well take its name from Tiepolo’s joyful triumphs. But it has already been written⁸ how the Venetian’s paraphernalia concealed more meanings and restless intelligence than the critics have been prepared to acknowledge. And in reading some words about him, it seems we can find some parallels with the misunderstandings that have surrounded Salvo’s painting over the years: “Tiepolo never gave up on his air as someone who works ‘effortlessly and almost without thinking about it’. Succeeding so well as to suggest he had no thoughts of his own.”⁹ I think that Salvo’s own words, placed as the epigraph to this text, resolves the question better than the pages that follow it. It is however interesting to note that Tiepolo pink, the elegant blush we see in his clouds that seem to be made of the same fabric as curtains, was a color, but also an illusion. It was the exhaustion of light when it becomes a theater of itself. He frescoed so skilfully that he knew better than anyone how flimsy the reality of images can be. His color lives on in many of Salvo’s works, bringing with it the awareness of an art that recreates a whole world, even the boundless skies, in the tenuous space of the mind. So it is no surprise that Tiepolo pink is a Proustian hue, no less decadent than purple, chosen for silken dressing gowns and *toilettes*. Accessories and furnishings made to shine in sumptuous interiors, by the flame of a gas lamp or a candelabrum. One can almost see it ruffled in the fabric of a curtain that closes out the tediousness of the world, just like Proust’s curtains, which remain drawn all day long, or Guston’s curtains, which are open in his paintings only when the night sinks into black, behind the burning lights. Salvo, in his lamp-lit studio, used to paint and imagine pink and purple lights like those of unusual dawns, and rare twilights: even when they are real, the lights of the sudden passing of nature seem painted to us.

In the years when he devoted himself to riders and heroes, the doors of his studio were framed in lilac: physical and metaphysical thresholds that, in the soft vibration of that color, marked the transition into a different dimension, just as the purple of the sunset heralds the imagination of the night. What do you think you’ll do? Salvo might have wondered as he went through those doors and got ready for work. “138. ‘What do you think you’ll do?’ Here is a proposition full of expression! ‘You think you’ll do’ without ‘what’ would be like a dream. ‘What do you think’ without ‘you’ll do’ would be like a dream. ‘What’ and ‘you’ll do’ are on either side of ‘think’ like the two thieves beside Jesus, like the past and the future are on either side of the present.”

Once through the door and in his studio, it was the thinking, not the dream, that had to unfold. Thinking up the work and doing the painting: the “what” is the picture, while the painting is the thinking of the what and doing it.

It may be that the blueish light of the television screen, the intense, smudged electronic colors of the 1970s or the colored waves of hallucinatory psychedelic dreams are somehow related to Salvo’s works, but if they are, then I believe it is because of the mental and unnaturalistic origins of his painting and the long historical artistic tradition that held them. Salvo read Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* but he found nothing closer to

8 See Roberto Calasso, *Il rosa Tiepolo* (Milan: Adelphi, 2006).

9 Calasso, *Il rosa Tiepolo*, 19.

him in those pages than the passages in which the author resorts to constant comparisons with works of art when describing his trips. To explain the vivid image of the folds in his trousers, he talks of Judith's pleated robe in Botticelli's painting. Salvo might have pointed to the folds in Cranach's *Magdalene*. Both of them, Huxley and Salvo, refer to El Greco, Cosmè Tura and Watteau. "For the artist as for the mescaline taker draperies are living hieroglyphs that stand in some peculiarly expressive way for the unfathomable mystery of pure being,"¹⁰ wrote Huxley, and a little further on he turns to Vermeer and Cézanne to convey an idea of the clarity of his vision after taking the substance, and to talk about the perception of infinity that it had given him. One can certainly be both—artists and mescaline takers—but for centuries it was enough to be just one of the two to make the works we are talking about. I will be told that Salvo's chromatic flare-ups and his most paroxysmal vibrations go beyond any that went before, but if this is so, how should we interpret what he says about each painting being born from a logical sequence? After the nuances of Grünewald's *Resurrection*, and after Friedrich's horizons and van Gogh's chromatic swirls, come Salvo's countless incandescences and the colors of Fabro's *Clotheshangers*. We cannot exclude that some of these works were inspired in one case by absinthe, in another by psychedelia or by the spread of television, but the rationale underlying the pictorial sequence appeared to be already well on its way toward a progression of its own. After all, Salvo did not work on every painting with the same intensity of color, and the picture can be said to be part of a sequence not only with respect to the history of art but also with respect to the painter's own artistic maturity. Again it is his words that tell us how color reaches the height of tension: "You see, this is what happens to me when I paint, for I follow a precise path: to begin with I am influenced by fear, and I'm always more cautious when working on the first paintings in a series, but by the fifteenth, let's say, I explode with color and I've reached the end. This is always the case, for each subject is taken to its greatest tension, to its extreme freedom of color, but when it reaches its peak the subject dies and I have to reinvent something else."¹¹ Painting is capable of creating its own hallucinations while thoughts and imagination gradually come to life, and while an action that keeps close to it is liberated.

If we consider the writings that the artist left us, which nourished his work, his ideas came to him from the history of art, of course, but also from a vast series of literary, historical and philosophical works. Only one name, however, appears as an essential source for his reflections on art and painting and that name is Ludwig Wittgenstein. It was he who returned the field of philosophical investigation to that of logic and language, and his texts were gradually translated during the 1960s and had not failed to arouse the interest of some artists of the international avant-garde movement. Not that his thoughts were easy for everyone to follow, but one matter was quite understandable in the eyes of the broader artistic community: his theory of representation. In Wittgenstein's view, propositions, the sentences that make up language, are images of the facts they describe. "One name stands for one thing, and another for another thing, [...] And so the whole, like a living picture, presents the atomic fact."¹² He recounted how his idea came after reading about a process in which the dynamics of an accident had been conveyed by using a model, which could be used to make logical deductions from the correspondence of its

10 Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954).

11 See Dede Auregli, *Interview with Salvo*, *infra* 596-603.

12 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [4.0311], translated by Charles K. Ogden, 1922.

parts with elements of reality. He explained how he had thought that this representation performed the same function as a proposition, as a verbal description of the facts, and that it could therefore be symmetrically argued that if an image is like a proposition, then a proposition is like an image. This reasoning seemed to have been written to induce or, at least, to validate the revolution of conceptual art and the possibility of creating visual works of art consisting solely of words. While a linguistic turning point was taking place in philosophy, one could imagine a verbal one taking place in art. But Salvo did not read the *Tractatus* alone, for he read everything that was published, including the texts of the so-called "second" Wittgenstein: his notes on mathematics, his treatment of color, *Philosophical Investigations* and *Culture and Value*. It is not that the core ideas expressed in the *Tractatus* were in any way eliminated by what he wrote later, for indeed there are unequivocal and somehow more advanced ideas, such as: "A thinker is very much like a draftsman whose aim is to represent all the interrelations between things,"¹³ where equivalence neither only nor simply binds the image to language, but the work of art directly to thought. We speak of a second period of the philosopher, for he himself considered the *Tractatus*—which he had published in the conviction that he had solved all the problems that philosophy could face—as the crystallization of a dogma that needed to be overcome: a doctrine of meaning that had no primary basis outside of the complex and stratified interweaving of use, customs and grammatical conventions. The normative form of the early theses had been absolutely solid, just as the writing that followed was dispersive, fragmentary, and impressionistic. Except, perhaps even identifying with the story of the philosopher who recognized the weakness of dogma in his very first works, set out to reveal the void that was undermining the foundations of the conceptual period, making its dictats laughable. Wittgenstein argued that not even mathematics had any foundation, and even colors were not absolute physical entities as Newton had schematically stated, but rather entities of variable existence, as in Goethe's writings. If this was true, then Salvo could conclude that even the value of art did not rest on primary values. At the beginning of the treatise *Della Pittura*, we read: "1. Even in art, are the foundations unfounded? 2. Can the value of the works of Leonardo be doubted? 3. Can Leonardo be defined as one of painting's foundations?" Salvo transposes meaning—which in language, according to Wittgenstein, derives from the length of time for which propositions are used and from the slow modification of the underlying grammar—to the field of art where, as the "use value," it reveals itself in the long time of shared opinions. More ancient works, such as the sculpture of the Delphi charioteer or Leonardo's paintings, are the "foundation" and the yardstick for the most recent art: they are our grammar, due to the opinion and shared idea that has continued to consider them beautiful over the centuries. "24. Time, as a criterion of judgment, isn't replaceable." This meant that art did not need to find its own validation in the new forms that had come one after the other from the early twentieth century onwards, according to the avant-garde conception, but rather in its most ancient traditions and in its interweaving of genealogies. The value of painting was undermined by the latest theory of conceptual art but validated by centuries of history and by long lines of artists.

Meanwhile, Salvo seemed to be one of the few who recalled that the theory of representation expressed in the *Tractatus* was based on a rule of symmetry. If it had been possible to pass from images to words, it would be equally legitimate to go in the opposite direction while remaining immersed in the dimension of thought. From his youth until

13 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* [1931], translated by Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).

1978, Salvo passed seamlessly from word to image and from image to word, just as he passed from pictorial to textual and photographic works and from these back to painting: a far more interconnected coming and going than might be suggested by the schematic, labored view that his career consisted of two periods. The painted versions of his *Salvo benedicente* from 1969 onwards are lined up along the border to protect the crossing.

For three years, between 1975 and 1978, with his “Italie” (Italies) and “Sicilie” (Sicilies), and paintings such as *48 poeti* (48 poets) and his series of books with pictorial covers, dedicated to some of his favourite authors and decorated with their name and portrait, Salvo walked on a tightrope along the dividing line. One has the impression one is hearing the questions concerning the philosophical paradox that he must have formulated in his mind, as he smiled, balanced on the rope: a typewritten text is conceptual art, and this has been established. But if a text is written in a school exercise book in a childish script, is it still conceptual? You say it is. And if a text is carved into the color of marble, is it still conceptual? Yes, sure! And if a text is painted on a canvas? How do you reply? Carved yes, painted no? But what if, instead of substituting my name for Sinbad the sailor or for Jesus in the Gospel, I substitute Wittgenstein and imitate him to show you that conceptual art is not what you think it is?

From the end of the 1970s, thanks to the latest fashion sweeping the art world, many decided to join him at the opening of that belvedere of history where his silhouette had been waiting for some time, seen from behind. All the space, stretching away to an unreachable horizon, all the space in the canvas in front of him, was filled with the shapes and colors of thought.

WORKS