Through the Looking Glass

From *tableaux vivants* to Photoshop, the philosophical and optical enquiries of Pietro Roccasalva inevitably return to painting by Jonathan Griffin
Pietro Roccasalva says he doesn’t believe in chronologies, at least not where his work is concerned; every image or idea that arises is the reflection of another that came just before it or a premonition of one to follow. He likes to think of his oeuvre as ready-formed—a magnificent hall of mirrors.

Nevertheless, once in a while things just appear from the ether. In 2002, the Italian artist had a vision. I ask him if this happens often. ‘No, not often,’ he replies. But there it was: a church, seen from the air, its mighty cupola replaced by the turning dome of a giant lemon-squeezer.

To be fair, it hadn’t come from nowhere. The Milan-based artist had been working in the deconsecrated Chiesa San Francesco, in Como, Italy, on a residency. Roccasalva imagined the building pressing juice from giant, ineffable fruit, and retaining the liquid in its nave and transepts. Giocondità (2002) is a digital animation of this magical image, to the sound of a marching band, the virtual camera swoops out and around the immaculate white church while its lemon-squeezer dome revolves slowly above it. One day, he says, he would like to build this church for real. I don’t think he’s joking.

Roccasalva showed the video along with a related drawing in a wooden-walled booth inside the church, in an installation he titled Messaggerie Musicali (Musical Messages, 2002). He refers to his installations as situazione d’opera or ‘worksites’—open stages in which disparate elements converse with each other, and are very likely to be reconfigured by the artist at a later date. A year later, he found himself returning to a single photograph of this installation: the back of the booth framed by one of the church’s Romanesque arches. He made a precise pastel drawing from the photograph, as...
he often does with documentation of his installations. In the upper section of the image, a circular window, flooded with light, seemed to the artist more and more like a single eye, peering back at him, he decided to plunge through it. He cut away the circle in the paper, and constructed an installation in a derelict hotel bathroom titled Iockey Full Jockey (2003), in which the window became a peep-hole through the wall on which the drawing was hung. Visitors were able to peer through the hole to see another bathroom, with the inverse layout to the one in which they were standing. At the centre of this image, however, perched a brightly coloured bird looking into a mirror. Its reflection stared straight back: a stuffed owl, painted in the gaudy colours of a scarlet macaw.

Roccasalva has said: ‘I believe that the only chance for painting is to recuperate its power of simulacrum.’

In Classical mythology, the owl is the companion to the Greek goddess Athena, and her Latin counterpart Minerva; both are goddesses of wisdom. The parrot, on the other hand, has long been thought of as a trickster: a canny imitator of human speech, which it repeats without sense or discretion. In contrast to the owl’s penumbral permanence, both painting and drawing – the difference that is in no way diminished by its unreal-ity. For the artist, a tableau vivant employs two living people as an art work. Roccasalva’s tableau vivant, in contrast, employs two living people as an art work. Roccasalva’s tableau vivant is the opposite of collage: instead of incorporating positional elements that are not so easily disentangled.

Despite frequent forays into sculpture, installation, digital modelling, film, performance and drawing, Roccasalva’s work is always essentially about painting. If he could, he says, he would only paint, but a bubbling excess of content and ambition seems to make this impossible. He describes his working process as ‘the opposite of collage’; instead of incorporating external elements into the picture, he allows internal elements to spill out. He is fascinated by painting’s potential to fix movement, to stop-time, to bring about a permanent death in something living, and the contradictions that all of these things imply. He understands the term ‘simulacrum’ not as Jean Baudrillard defined it, but rather as Pierre Klossowski used it, to mean ‘not a simulated tableau, but rather a tableau materially simulating an interior vision’. Roccasalva frequently turns to his own conception of the ‘intelligent artefacts’ that is, a refection of the real that is in no way diminished by its unreality.

Following the installation of Iockey Full of Bourbon, Roccasalva took a photograph through the spy-hole in the drawing; in his image, we see the owl, perched in the mirror and the decorated ceiling of the church, but also the light reflected on the glass of the picture’s frame, and the shadowy outline of the photographer himself. Spatially, the compositional elements are almost too complex to grasp simultaneously. Roccasalva then made a pastel drawing from the photograph, and used it as the nucleus of a tableau vivant in which a woman sat facing the drawing, while a young girl rested her head on the woman’s shoulder, coolly regarding visitors to the gallery.

Why, then, was the girl dressed so strangely, with a tattered coat and alarmingly long fingernails? Anyone raised in Germany will recognise her as a female incarnation of Der Struwwelpeter – the titular character from Heinrich Hoffmann’s 1845 collection of children’s tales, who neglected to brush his hair or trim his fingernails. The unkempt character’s change of gender, and her distinctly entropic relationship with her well-groomed mother, both demonstrate that reflections, neither in art nor in life, occur solely at an optical level. The installa-
tion from 2005 was titled The Oval Portrait. A Ventilateur at a Birthday Party in October 2007; implying a further host of associations. The ‘Oval Portrait’ is the title of a short story written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1842, describing a painting which creates such an exquisitely lifelike portrait of a beautiful young woman that he steals her soul, and inadvertently kills her as he puts the finishing touches to his work. Roccasalva’s tableau vivant, in contrast, employs two living people as an art work. Once again we encounter an insensible object seemingly come to life, though frozen by the static composition of Wall’s posed photograph, and reanimated by its translation into Roccasalva’s living picture.
When Roccasalva showed Jockey Full of Bourbon in 2006, and a year later at Manifesta 7, the hole in the drawing had been blocked up, and, instead, a tube of white neon snaked out from it into the gallery, sweeping twice around a column before returning to the ground near the drawing. On the end perched the little owl. Only the most observant viewer would have noticed that the trajectory of the neon precisely followed the movement of the viewpoint around the church in his animation La Giocondità (2002). It was, in effect, a journey of optical enquiry to post-Renaissance linear perspective.7 The complaint was, initially, Lacan’s, who wrote that, ‘in the dialectic of the eye (2008). The complaint was, initially, Lacan’s, who wrote that, ‘in the dialectic of the eye and the gaze [...] there is no coincidence, but on the contrary, a lure.’ In Roccasalva’s installation, the neon sentence turned halfway through and played backwards, right to left. The corrected letters could be read in a mirror on the opposite side of the room.

In between the neon letters and their reflection, three uniformed football referees guarded a stack of square, black-bordered paper, on top of which sat a crusty orange sphere, about the size of a football. The object was, in fact, a massive arancino, a Sicilian snack made of fried rice, and the printed sheets of paper referred to the black-edged obituary notices traditionally posted in Italian town squares. The three men resembled one another: in fact, one was the exhibition’s curator, the other his twin brother, and the third their father. They supervised what Roccasalva conceived as the slow collapse of an edible sun: not so much a ‘still life’, but, as it is termed in Italian, a natura morta.

(Elsewhere in Roccasalva’s iconography, the sun has been codified as a red vinyl record, a canister of film and a red plastic bucket.) Before entering the room, the viewer passed a gilt-framed, near-black monochrome in the hallway, titled D’après La Tempesta (After the Tempest, 2006). Working with a restorer, he had managed to isolate every colour in Giorgione’s ominous but persistently enigmatic painting La Tempesta (The Tempest, 1506–8), and then mixed them together to create an even darkness. This was Roccasalva’s depiction of permanent night, the end of time, the absolute future.

That an object can gaze back at a subject is a fascinating conundrum for Roccasalva, and one that continues to inform not just his understanding of space, but also of time. ‘History’, he says, ‘is only an illusion of perspective’. A related spatial analogy he often turns to is that of the reverse perspective found in Christian icons. As the art historian Clemena Antonova has argued, the primary characteristic binding all icons is the way their makers organize space in direct opposition to post-Renaissance linear perspective: Heads, for instance, are unusually round, as we are shown their sides as well as their fronts, and throats often grow wider as they recede. In such cases, the viewer is not credited with a disinterested, detached relation to the image (as if seeing the world through

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The Skeleton Key (His Latest Flame)
2009
Oil on canvas, turntable, synthetic voice recorded on LP
Installation view at 'Fare Mondi Making Worlds', 53rd Venice Biennale
'The Skeleton Key' (new edition of 2006–9) series of portraits features a figure modelled on Ted the Bellhop, Tim Roth's character from the film Four Rooms (1995). In these, Alessandro consists of the forms of Orthodox Christian art with Cubism and cut-and-paste Photoshop collage.

The sun, a symbol the artist consistently returns to, is subject to a whole slew of perceptual antinomies.

These dynamics have implications for representation that spill over into the temporal as well as the spatial. In icon painting, the object is not ‘represented’ but ‘re-presented’: Christ’s face, for instance, becomes Christ himself, present in the room and staring back at us.7 Roccasalva goes further still, asserting that reverse perspective, through which we see many sides of an object in a single instant, is in fact a demonstration of God’s own timelessness, simulating the way He sees the world: ‘To a God who transcends his tail, but he is compelled by the persisting notion that making art might be the one activity with the power to reverse the process – to contravene the laws of time, to preserve the decaying and bring life to the dead.


1. Unless otherwise stated, all comments attributed to Pietro Roccasalva are taken from an interview between the author and artist, Milan, December 2009
2. Situation = Espera translates as ‘work situations’, but ‘worksites’ is more appropriate, as used in this interview between the artist and Edoardo Gnemmi, in Alessandro Rabottini ed., Pietro Roccasalva, 2009, p.53
5. Alessandro Rabottini, op. cit., Pietro Roccasalva, p.55
7. Clemena Antonova, Space, Time and Presence in the Visualising the World with the Eyes of God, 2010, Ashgate, Farnham
9. Antonova, op. cit., p.205

March 2010 | frieze | 89