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OPENINGS

Pietro Roccasalva

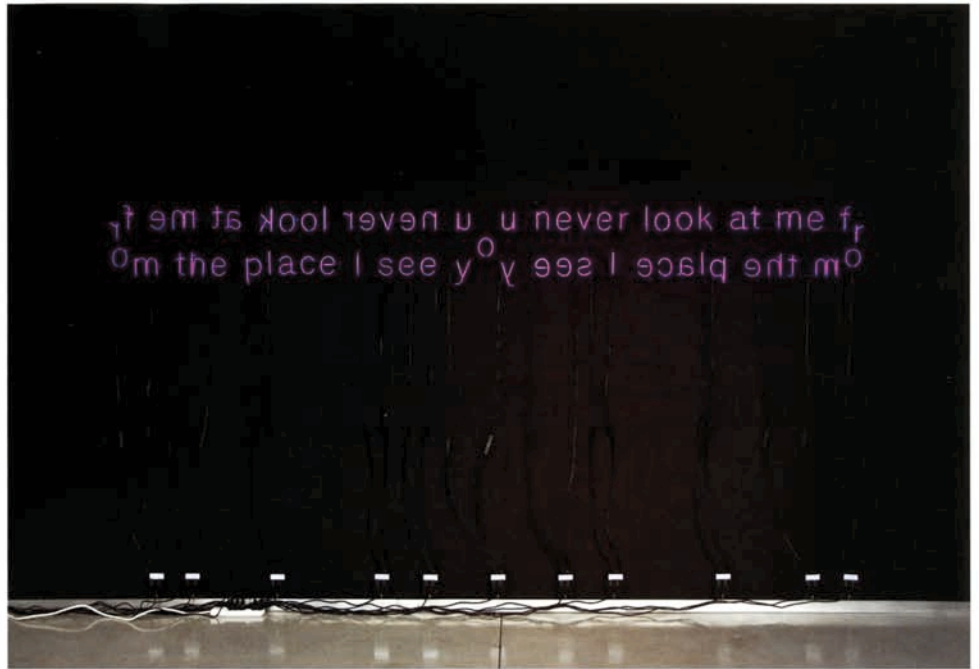
JAN TUMLIR





Opposite page: Pietro Roccasalva, *Il Traviatore*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 30½ x 19¼".

Above: Pietro Roccasalva, *Jockey Full of Bourbon*, 2003, pastel on paper on Forex, microphone stand, resin, stuffed owl, paint. Installation view, Ferretel, Pescara, Italy. From *Fuori Uso* 2003.



Pietro Roccasalva, *You Never Look at Me from the Place I See You*, 2012, neon, 1' 2¼" x 12' 5¼".

FIRST, THERE IS THE PAINTING. For Pietro Roccasalva, this medium occupies the radiant center of an ever-expanding constellation of formal and conceptual analogies that takes in photography, video, sculpture, installation, and performance. All are derived from painting as more or less concrete extrusions of the picture plane, and all return to it at some point as material for further painting. The artist's skill in this department is irreproachable; evidently, he can render by hand anything he wants to see, but this is not to suggest that his imagination is unfettered or that its products can ever be described as "visionary." The image is from the outset a mnemotechnology already overloaded with archival data—Roccasalva terms it a "microchip"—and in his hands it becomes only more so. From one work to the next, the pathways of information processing and association grow increasingly convoluted as the cryptic details accumulate, and yet the threads that bind it all together never snap.

Roccasalva is obviously interested in the play of genres in art as a means not only to isolate the worlds of people (portraiture) and things (still life, architectural studies, landscape) but also to confuse them. For instance, in his first solo gallery exhibition in the

United States, at David Kordansky Gallery this past winter, the artist presented five virtuoso paintings and pastel drawings titled *Il Traviatore*, or a variation thereof (all 2011), that depicted the figure of a restaurant waiter holding a silver serving dish with one hand, lifting its hemispherical cover with the other to reveal a silver lemon juicer. The two domed objects nestle together like *matryoshka* dolls or Chinese boxes, and their shiny surfaces reflect, in turn, a church cupola that ostensibly overarches the scene, thereby clinching the *mise en abyme*. In two works where the waiter also lifts the striated top from the juicer, we may perhaps imagine another smaller waiter inside it doing the same, and so on. This sort of Escher-esque conceit is quickly grasped, but one is still left to grapple with the striking idiosyncrasy of the forms that compose it. The waiter, the lemon juicer, the cupola—these may simply be understood as instances of subject, object, and context caught in a moment of dedifferentiation and commingling, but they are also so much more *specific* than that. As it happens, the conflation of church architecture and kitchen implements has occurred several times before in Roccasalva's oeuvre (notably in *Giocondità*, a

digital animation from 2002), and the *Traviatore*, or troubadour, their sacred/secular go-between, also boasts a long line of descent in the artist's work.

The installation *Jockey Full of Bourbon*, 2003, and the subsequent pieces relating to it may offer one explanation of how Roccasalva's visual lexicon takes shape. A strange stuffed bird perches on a metal bar in an enclosed bathroom, gazing via a mirror back at the viewer, who, in turn, peers at the scene through an *Étant donnés*-style peephole. Closer inspection reveals that it is in fact an owl painted bright colors, as if that vigilant figure of arcane wisdom had been strained through a prism to emerge with the flamboyant coat of a parrot, a more frivolous breed and one that can speak, but without understanding. Able only to repeat, this hybrid creature was itself repeated in *The oval portrait: A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947*, 2005, as a soft pastel likeness inserted into a *tableau vivant*, where it was observed by an actual seated young woman and a wildly unkempt child, who faced the opposite direction. That work's subtitle is lifted from the title of a 1990 photograph by Jeff Wall of a female ventriloquist holding a child-size dummy, but in Roccasalva's *tableau vivant*, the

child is more explicitly modeled on the fiendish mascot of Heinrich Hoffmann's collection of cautionary tales, *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845), whose grotesque appearance is the result of talking back and never listening to his parents' advice. And so it goes: These two actors as living embodiments of the picture world will be absorbed into yet another picture, another oval portrait, this time painted with the child staring directly at us. With every pass between the sheer optical plane and the thick world of things, the image undergoes a process of aesthetic readaptation that steadily builds on itself, while drawing in references from every side.

At the center of each of these works, a figure meets and returns the viewer's gaze, opening a channel between actual and imagined space that always threatens to lead us astray. A work in the Kordansky show reiterated this theme: Facing out the window and into the street, a quote from Lacan's 1964 seminar "The Line and Light" spelled it out for us, twice, in purple-blue neon: YOU NEVER LOOK AT ME FROM THE PLACE I SEE YOU. The letters are arranged in a figure eight running legibly forward, then illegibly backward, as if to highlight the perceptual rift that

threatens to undermine the empathetic union between artist and audience. The lack inherent in every act of looking is here seized as a productive principle, however, for it is also where the viewer's thwarted desire meets the questionable consolations of the *trompe l'oeil*. It is an idea that Roccasalva takes to heart, as the potential for "seeing things," for mistakes on the part of both the producers and the recipients of pictures, is at the core of his practice.

Roccasalva lifted the title of this exhibition, "The Strange Young Neighbours," from a stand-alone chapter within *Elective Affinities*, in this way unfolding his works in Goethe's narrative of love lost and found. The Romantic theme was taken up most directly in *Untitled (Just Married Machine #1)*, 2011, a large-scale sculptural installation that graced the center of the space. The various objects that compose it are derived from the standardized elements of the pictorial still life—in fact, they are loosely based on one glimpsed in the opening shot of Pier Paolo Pasolini's short film *La Ricotta* (1963)—but retrofitted in size and substance to the real and existing world. Accordingly, a basket turns into the carriage of a hot-

air balloon crash-landed on the gallery floor, a bunch of grapes into a cluster of floor-bound purple balloons, and a mandolin into a small rowboat. To complete the scale shift, a recently wedded couple posed amid these various items on the exhibition's opening day, thereby conjoining the *nature morte* with the *tableau vivant*. The husband sat in the rowboat, his chin resting on his fist, while his wife stood nearby but facing away, dressed in a white gown and holding aloft a tennis racket, as if frozen in midplay. The somewhat chaotic, cluttered design of the *mise-en-scène* that joined these static embodiments of *la vita contemplativa* and *la vita activa* served to remind those in the know (and those who had read the gallery statement) that the separated lovers in "The Strange Young Neighbours" are reunited in the course of a near-fatal accident.

Sharply alternating between intimations of tragic loss and of comic fulfillment, Goethe's tale functions here as an allegorical reflection on the role of accident and chance in the historical evolution of art forms. More specifically, it allows one to ponder once more the distinction between "objective chance," as represented by the Surrealist *trouvaile*, or found object,



Pietro Roccasalva, *Untitled (Just Married Machine #1)*, 2011, wood, acrylic resin, rush, fabric, steel. Installation view, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, 2012. Photo: Brian Forrest.

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Pietro Roccasalva, *The Fourteen Stations (You Never Look at Me from the Place I See You)* (detail), 2010, fourteen notebooks, charcoal, graphite, and acrylic on paper, each 15¼ x 13¼ x 1¼".



Pietro Roccasalva, *Jockey Full of Bourbon II*, 2006, neon, resin, microphone stand, acrylic on paper on Forex, mirror, stuffed owl, paint. Installation view, Galerie Johnen + Schöttle, Cologne.

and the "manufactured chance" of Duchamp's readymades. The shadow of Duchamp looms largest over the installation's most enigmatic components, which here were strewn around one side of the boat. Vaguely resembling bisected garlic bulbs, these reiterate the domed shapes within the paintings and recall the *Fountain* of 1917, an impression reinforced by the ceramic appearance of their pristine white finish, as well as by the installation's title. Delivering a polemical counterpoint to Duchamp's meditations on art as a libidinal drive that must be continually rechanneled, Roccasalva prompts us to consider the aesthetic possibilities of consummation. Once the passage from virgin to bride is a *fait accompli*, as it supposedly was for the couple on display, the avant-garde dream of historical liquidation, of starting anew, must be renounced. From here on in, ancient, modern, and contemporary forms are subject to an endlessly recombinant process of propagation.

The crashed hot-air balloon is emblematic of this condition, and it, too, has been revisited by Roccasalva on several occasions: first in his 2007 film *Truka*, which appropriates a shot of the ground as seen from

a plummeting aircraft in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1969 film *Andrei Rublev*, and later in *Truka all-over (The Formula of the Phantom)*, 2010, in which a pair of knights in full armor spray-paint each other lobster red in front of an enlarged still from that film. The owl-cum-parrot reappears as well in the installation *Jockey Full of Bourbon II*, 2006, this time perched on a twisting neon tube whose eccentric, room-spanning shape is derived from the artist's aforementioned digital animation, *Giocondità*. (It is modeled after the route of a shot that traverses the facade of a church with a lemon-juicer dome.) At each stage, these various motifs must conform to a whole new program while retaining traces of the last. In a different artist's hands, this process would yield only entropic degeneration, a generalized blur, but here, with every step from the point of origin—wherever it might lead—the resolution stays crisp, resulting in forms that are increasingly anomalous and at the same time hyper-articulated and vivid. For Roccasalva, this is effectively a means of creation, however compromised, within what he has described as a "closed universe."

Even if the artist sounds a familiar postmodern

refrain, the floodgates of citation are never fully opened to the point of "anything goes"; whatever gets in is carefully selected to work with what is already there and what is still to come, like variables plugged into a sensitive, still-developing algorithm. Within this scheme, the Duchampian maxim "To make is to choose and always to choose" may be reversed, for everything newly chosen is effectively remade as a result of entering into communion with everything already chosen. It is precisely in what Roccasalva makes from his choices that something else, something other than what is simply given, comes into view. Even a massive tumorlike growth sprouting from the head of the waiter in the first painting on view demonstrates this. Here, in a single isolated detail, entire worlds form and deform, as academic cross-hatching breaks into the faceted planes of Cubism and then fragments still further into a Mandelbrot mosaic of digital tiling. Full of accidents both chosen and made, Roccasalva's "Just Married Machine" is devoted to the cultivation of mutant strains and, it would seem, is already partly running itself. □

JAN TUMILIR IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO ARTFORUM.