

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Annelie Pohlen, "Salvo," *Artforum*, March 1985

## ARTFORUM

### Salvo

#### GALERIE MAENZ

In 1977 when the Sicilian artist Salvatore Mangione, or Salvo, was given a comprehensive one-man show at the Museum Folkwang in Essen, his work was provocative to artists and public alike. In cool, soft, pale tonalities on large canvases he depicted the saints of Sicily; old carts, and other folk fetishes; and himself as Saint Martin, in a logical extension of his ceremonial, ironic self-monumentalization in plaques commemorating various cultural heroes. Some of these paintings directly imitated works by Old Masters, while others were in the style of the Old Masters but were based on Salvo's own compositions. He produced them contemporaneously with photographs and conceptual sculptures (marble panels, books, neon objects) all of which centered on a single issue: the identity of the artist, of Salvo the role-player, against the immeasurable backdrop of an entire culture and its historical actuality. Salvo portrayed himself as Christ giving the blessing, as military man, as one among the great painters, poets, and revolutionaries; his signature took on the colors of the tricolor, painted or in neon light; he was a conceptual explorer of the robes and roles of the past (and of an inflated narcissism), supported by the high ceremoniousness of his costumes and by the irony of their disrespectful misuse.

Salvo, who was born in 1947, gave up his initial proximity to *arte povera* artists simply by virtue of his early commitment to painting. He did not share in their attacks on the traditional media of art, but neither did he conform to other fashions in Italian painting. The works in the recent show make this clear. Salvo is a willful outsider who refuses to offer clues for the understanding and classification of his work. One might call him a conceptual painter who defines his position within a space that stretches from a southern Arcadia, through the coldly monumental architecture of pre-Fascist Italy, to neon-lit pinball machines; who appears to veil his arts claim to absolute artificiality with pleasant allusions to art history; and who at the same time uses an obviousness of painterly artifice to neutralize a desire for “beautiful” canvases—for classical columns harmonizing with tall pines, rooms bathed in light, and so on. The short catalogue accompanying this show quotes a passage from Goethe in which the poet writes of his fascination with the Sicilian landscape, culture, light, and sense of time; what Goethe experienced as a living present is a distant past in Salvo’s paintings.

The palette of these still life-like depictions of harmony between nature and culture is of an extreme delicacy, replete with the promise of light. In fact, however, it yields no more than a sense of artificiality, and thus of a lost paradise. In Salvo’s architectural paintings, essentially abstract compositions of illusionistic color fields in obviously distorted perspective, mysterious light sources and glowing tints balance the gloomy coolness of buildings that can hardly have been designed with human beings in mind. Elsewhere, robust, peasantlike figures stand with deadened, harshly lit features over flickering pinball machines. The light illumines a scenario lacking in all sublimity as if it were a site of great cultural meaning—it could as easily be the manger in Bethlehem as a criminal den.

Salvo employs traditional painterly ingredients in a willfully mannerist way. His paintings are anachronistic in the true sense of the word—not in the fashion of the *pittura colta* that proliferates today, but in that they transpose inherited images and styles into a time in which artificial light and color are a dominant experience of everyday life. Salvo is concerned not just with assimilative resuscitation, but with a profanation of the Old Masters in a new kind of painting. Alternating between pastoral and industrial landscapes, traditional still lifes and pinball machines, he neutralizes the significance of content; the mannerism of his work—balancing between the great subject and the kitsch idyll that is beyond redemption—is also its message.

—Annelie Pohlen

*Translated from the German by Leslie Strickland.*