GLADSTONE GALLERY

Pier Luigi Tazzi, "Salvo," *Artforum,* March 1988

ARTFORUM

Salvo

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Salvo's work finds its most receptive audience in refined observers of things artistic; and certain refined discourses have sought in his work anticipations of developments in the late '70s, especially the ephemeral triumph of painting as our primary art form. Yet for me, Salvo remains—and this is confirmed by this recent retrospective of his work—the symptom of a crisis. His work's success or failure—i.e., whether its flowering and continued growth should be seen as healthy exuberance or as a sickly problem—is not, to my mind, the question that should be posed or addressed.

But if it is a question of crisis, a crisis of what? The crisis of Modernity. But not that crisis experienced by the artist-prince who, closed off in his solitary tower, gathers the signs of the world's delusions, and who recognizes in those signs a latent affinity with certain of his own concerns, however private, that are now undergoing a revival under the name-umbrella of post-Modernism after a long period of repression dictated by the proscriptions of Modernism. No, this is a crisis of Modernity experienced by the creative pariah (here under a particular artistic guise) who measures the insufficiency of the heretofore dominant model of Western culture—the Modern—against himself, against his own sensitivity, as the slightly earlier body-artists were to do against their own skins.

This survey of Salvo's oeuvre from 1970 to '87 (curated by Renato Barilli) included some of his exhibitionistic self-portrait photographs from 1970; marble slabs engraved with names (his own; a cultural top 40) or sayings ("I am the best") in Italian, from 1971–72; painted or embroidered "maps" of Italy and Sicily generated out of a field of famous names from Italian culture, from 1976–77; and, in a much more traditional vein, the mythical scenes, still lifes, and landscapes that he has been painting since 1972. The first three groups of works betray a certain climate of influence on Salvo during that period: in terms of style, that of Giulio Paolini, of Luciano Fabro, and above all of Alighiero e Boetti; and in terms of substance, that of *arte povera*, which was centered in Turin, the city where Salvo had moved from his native Sicily. These works show a disturbing imitativeness, evidence of both a loss of initiative and an inability to elaborate upon the discourses (however tentatively defined) on which he drew. Considered in this light, Salvo's adoption of conventional easel painting in an illusionistic figurative style can be seen as a return to certain traditions—specifically those of Italian painting of the 14th and 15th centuries (but minus the magic of scientifically accurate perspective), of popular Sicilian illustrations, and of illustrations of classical myths and legends for children. This sort of appeal to origins, to an archaic purity, can only occur by giving up many of the sophisticated techniques that have been refined over the centuries (including the present one). Despite the brilliance of his sense of design—and particularly the way he uses color—Salvo's revival of a reduced form of figuration is, fundamentally, not positive in nature (but then, no revival is, to any appreciable degree), and it appears as a wholesale denunciation of contemporary art.

From this point on, his paintings are all fetishized genre paintings: bucolic scenes with classical ruins, landscapes with simplified architectonic volumes and strongly stylized trees and plants, up to his recent "*Ottomanie*" (Ottomans, 1985–86), seductive views of tropical landscapes with palm trees and minarets, all equally stylized, a reduced version of the enchanted childhood realm of the *Thousand and One Nights*, expurgated of souls. They reveal winks—more than mere references—to the *pittura metafisica* of Giorgio di Chirico and company (and the visionary ravings of *naïfs* of all types) and to the Futurists' neoclassicism of the 1920s (but also to greeting cards of the 1930s and '40s). What comes across is an ambiguous tension between high values and low values, the former made banal through the simplified assumption of certain styles, and the latter manifested in a chromatic garishness that has nothing to do with the tradition of painting. This is inherent in his approach to making art, and in his very sensibility, and is at the heart of the crisis I spoke of earlier. Salvo, like so many other artists, has lost the true meaning of the great works of Western art in his attempt to imitate the works of antiquity without understanding their underlying revolutionary content; in his work, all that remains of painting's mythic beginnings is a ghost of a style, a flash of forms, gaudy rather than precious, even fatuous, which corresponds to the crudest popular understanding of our classical heritage.

—*Pier Luigi Tazzi*
Translated from the Italian by Meg Shore.