

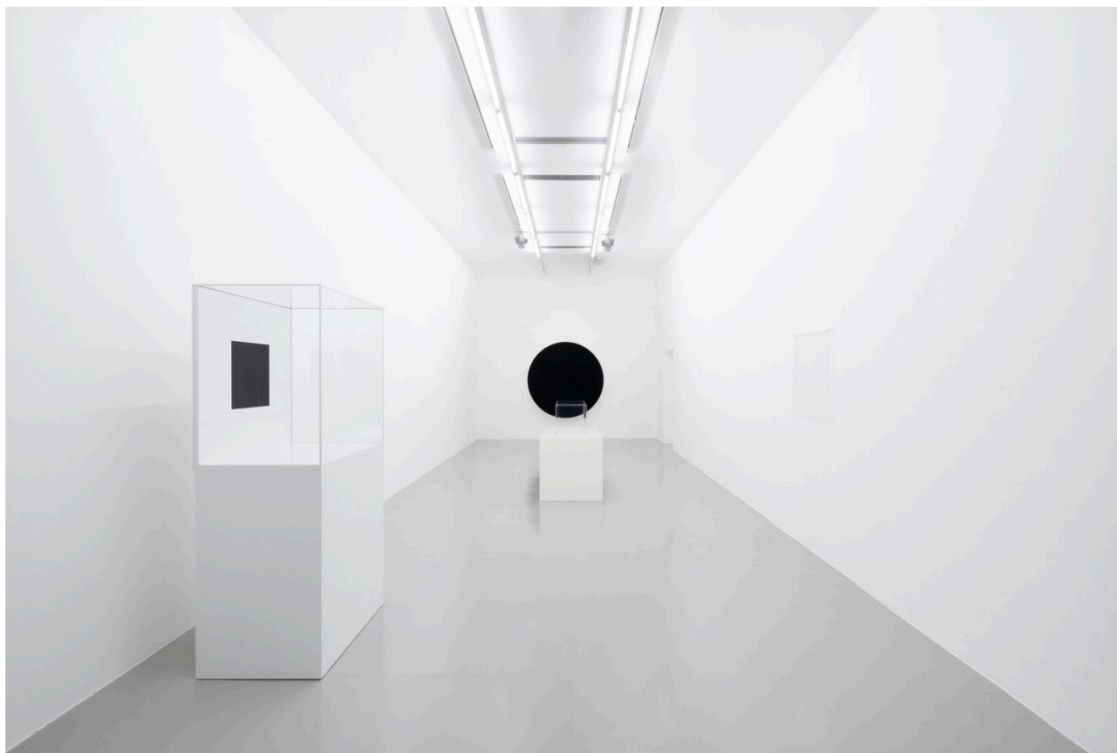


JULIET
April 28, 2023

JULIET

The double encounter: Anish Kapoor and Giulio Paolini at Massimo Minini Gallery

by MANUELA TEATINI • 28 APRIL 2023 • REVIEWS



Anish Kapoor/Giulio Paolini, installation view at Massimo Minini Gallery, ph Petrò Gilberti, courtesy Massimo Minini Gallery, Brescia

"A more minimalist than romantic combination" by Kapoor and Paolini is hosted in the spaces of the renowned gallery, in the exhibition which also establishes the story of a long and beautiful friendship, as it has almost always happened in the long career between the brilliant gallery owner and his many artists. But here's what happens: two famous international masters of contemporary art, apparently very distant one another, unexpectedly converse, generating a particular and ineffable energy. The vision belongs to Massimo Minini, famous in the world of international collecting for having always been a reference and a promoter of projects for museums, publishing and institutions.



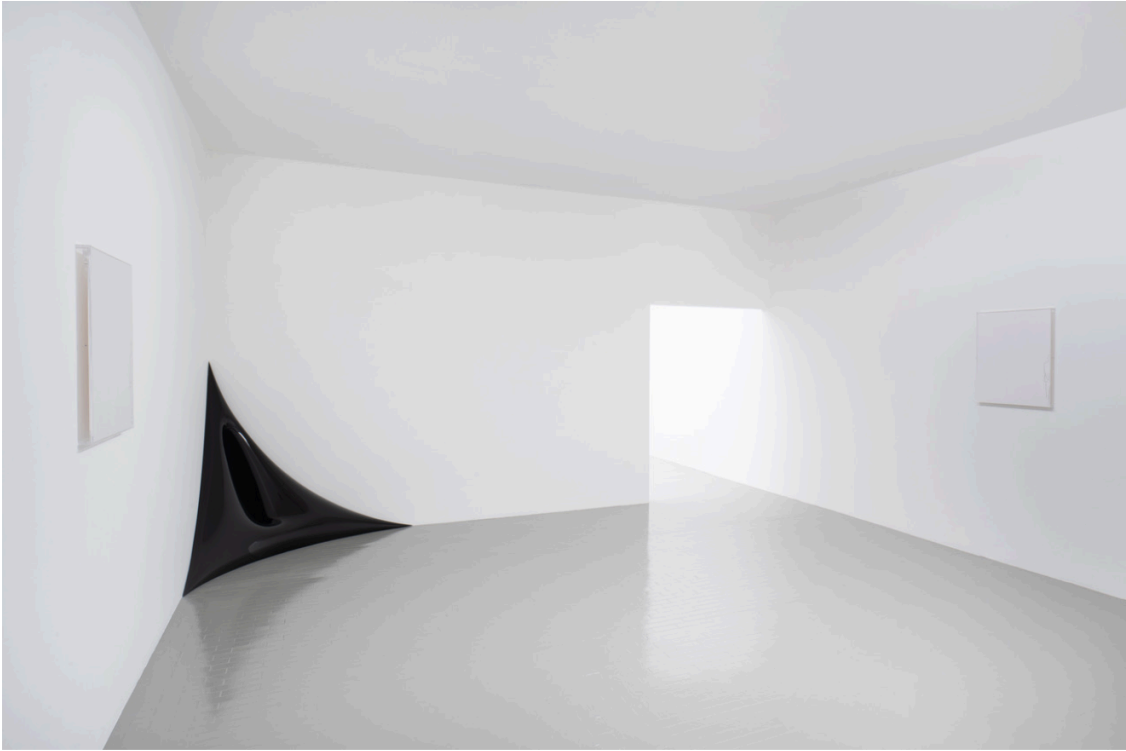
Anish Kapoor/Giulio Paolini, installation view at Massimo Minini Gallery, ph Petrò Gilberti, courtesy Massimo Minini Gallery, Brescia

The gallery had already hosted the two artists several times with personal exhibitions, but the idea of combining the works of both came to Minini by chance, looking one evening at the works of Giulio Paolini that had been on display for two months in his space and which should have been dismantled. The idea of extending Paolini's exhibition with this unprecedented encounter was positively received by both artists and thus the magnificent new exhibition was born.



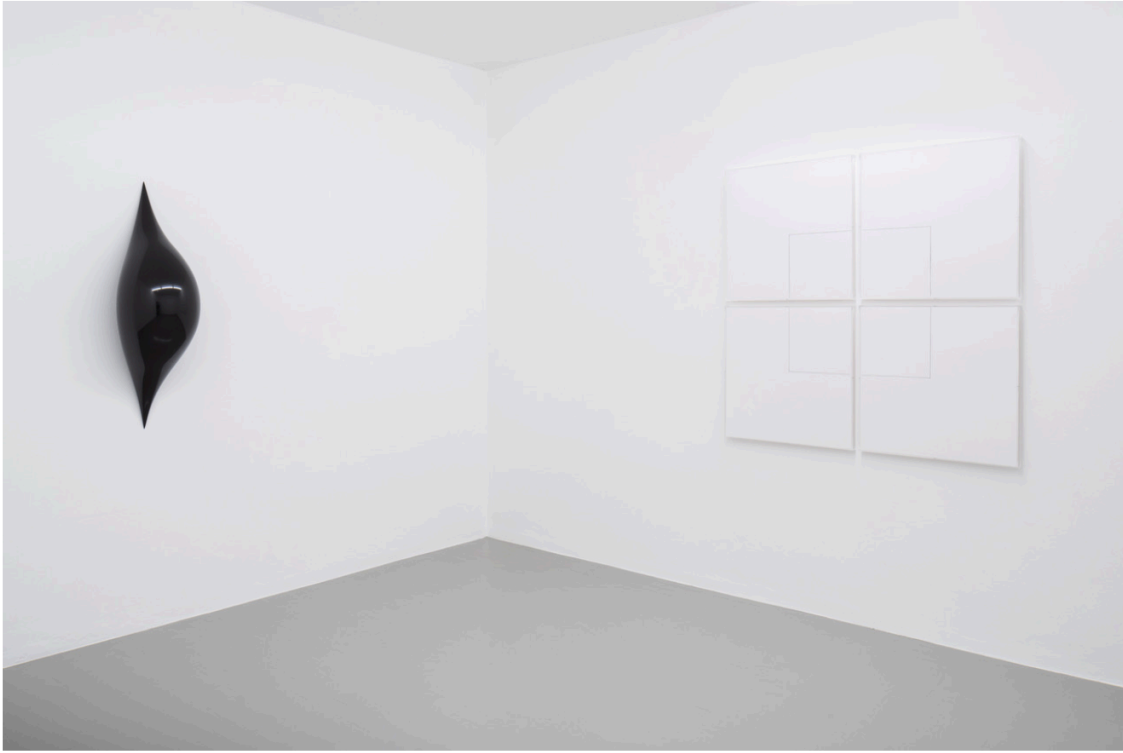
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Anish Kapoor (Mumbai, 1954) is present this time with his deep and absolute blacks, his reflective shapes, unfathomable mirrors, curves and voids that take, for example, the shape of a large vertical almond or an acute angle at the limit of the visible. Giulio Paolini (Genoa, 1940) reveals himself with his minimalist conceptual works, pencil traces, figures on white paper. An immaterial, rarefied and spatial art, where the delicate drawing of a man's silhouette on the walls enters an enigmatic, mental dimension.



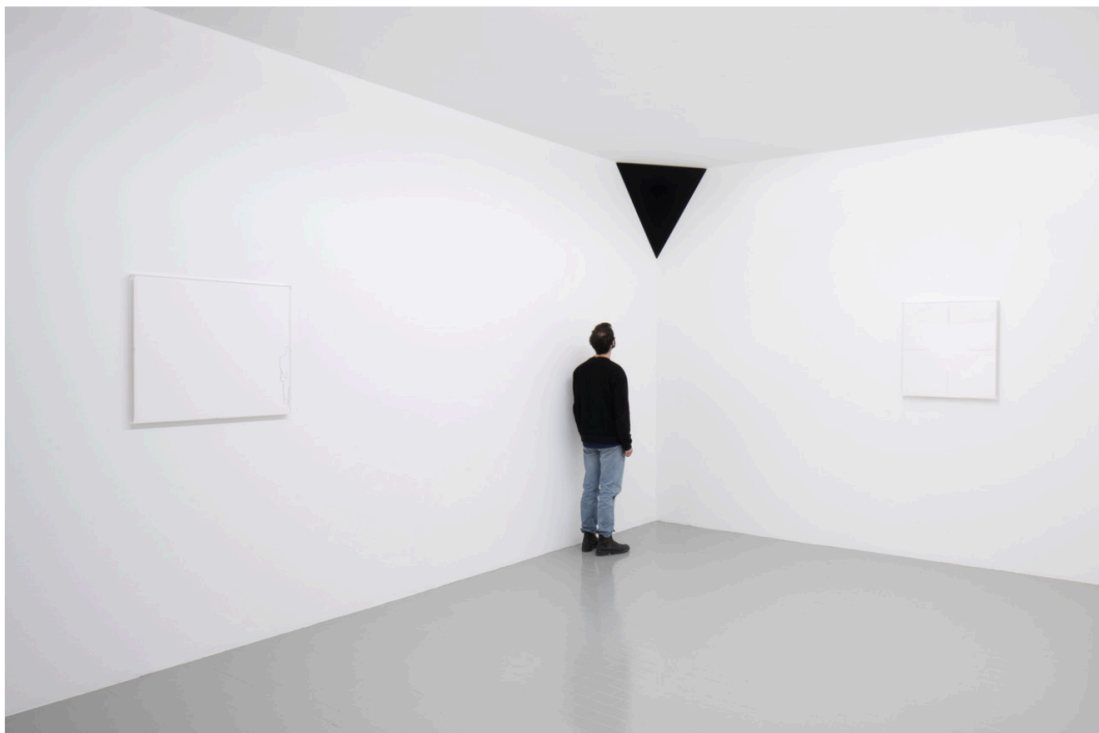
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In the first room you immediately notice a Plexiglas parallelepiped that reproduces the volume of the same room in scale, while on the opposite wall you can observe the silhouette of a human figure from behind representing the artist, a part of which is drawn on a white sheet and the missing part is depicted on the wall. A metaphor exhibition of the contrasts of empty and full, of darkness and light, of Eros and Thanatos, in the mind of two masters.



Anish Kapoor/Giulio Paolini, installation view at Massimo Minini Gallery, ph Petrò Gilberti, courtesy Massimo Minini Gallery, Brescia

"After all, what is art? We realize today that art has been like a great game for us: it's the game of life, it's the job of living", Minini joyfully recounts at the inauguration, "It was precisely by looking at Giulio's whites and voids that I identified this new exhibition, because for me it is "avec" and not "against", continues the gallery owner. "The works on display are made for thinking. Certain things cannot be seen by definition. The black painting on the disk (the work of Kapoor ed) has nothing beautiful about it, but it activates the thought. It's not about good or bad, it's what comes to mind in front of a big black from Anish and which I call a black hole. Our figure is mirrored in front of the mirror and acquires three-dimensionality, on the borderline between Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry. Inside Kapoor's black holes I believe there is life".



Anish Kapoor/Giulio Paolini, installation view at Massimo Minini Gallery, ph Petrò Gilberti, courtesy Massimo Minini Gallery, Brescia

The walls of the gallery, with elegant installations, mark a musical and mathematical rhythm, a collaboration between two minds which, as Minini says, is not a contrast but “the sum of two extreme and basic positions that integrate into a new status”. And for the gallery owner, the white work and the black work are “like a supernova and a black hole”, which invite us to dialogue with them also through the concrete and tactile elements. As Minini recalls, the light and energy that are released along this journey remind us of an important statement by Giulio Paolini: in reality, it is the work that looks at us and not vice versa.

ARTFORUM

Giulio Paolini

Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

By Anne Krauter ☞

An unusual confrontation arose between the newly built Stuttgart Staatsgalerie and the work of Giulio Paolini. In this retrospective Paolini achieved a tour de force by turning James Stirling's idiosyncratic architecture into an arena for his own production. One can hardly imagine a more intelligent, subtle, and therefore subversive conquest of a predetermined environment. Paolini claimed exactly those points in the museum that seem least suited for exhibition purposes: for example, the awkward hall for temporary exhibitions, or the film-and-lecture hall. He thereby influenced our perceptions longer than would be the case with an exhibition in more usual surroundings.

Paolini's greatest success was with the rotunda at the museum's center. Stirling conceived it as the apotheosis of his architecture; instead, the building's highlight became the central space for Paolini's presence, where he asked the question of location (of truth). "*Dove*" (where), was written in transparent letters around the rotunda. The artist gave the answer himself, with Plexiglas letters stacked upon one another: "*qui*" (here). Beside this, in a piece titled *Liebe macht blind* (Love makes blind, 1986), Paolini replaced stone slabs from the floor with blue glass. On top of these lay a pair of shoes turned upside down. They represented the remains of the artist, who, in search of beauty, had failed. The irony of this, the most beautiful installation in the retrospective, was further heightened by a work on permanent view Across from Paolini's piece, and reflected in it, stood a classical marble statue bearing the same title. Here, Cupid covers the eyes of Venus.

Paolini united the works in the rotunda under the title “*il luogo*” (the location). Further stations of the exhibition were “*lo studio*,” “*la visione*,” and “*il museo*.” These rubrics related exemplary works to one another and illustrated Paolini’s philosophical dispute with the work of art. Perspective and painting seemed to be pictorial techniques for their own sake, a conclusion rather easily drawn from the barren esthetic of these works, done mainly in the ’60s. Empty picture planes, inverted canvases, and perspectival constructions do indeed revolve around the “absence” of these works; the concept of design, in its dual role as drawing and idea, is crucial. In the “*la visione*” area, significantly located in the film-and-lecture hall, the staged moment had the upper hand; here the artist, symbolically represented by the parts of a tuxedo (to which the aforementioned shoes belonged), was introduced in the role of conductor.

Under the conductor’s virtuoso direction, the viewer was confronted in “*il museo*” with copies and reproductions of well-known works of art. This favorite device of Paolini set thoughts on mimesis—the presence of an art work and its reception—into motion. The mirror image gained significance in this context. The viewer, drawn curiously to the mirror, suddenly not only was confronted with himself, but saw the plaster cast of a foot attached to the ceiling and reflected in a mirror, lying on the floor. This suddenly shifted view recalled Paolini’s installation in the rotunda. Narcissus caught in the act would not have an easier time of it than the artist searching for beauty.

—*Anne Krauter*

Translated from the German by Cornelia Lauf.



Giulio Paolini, *Liebe Macht Blind* (Love makes blind), 1986, installation view.

was able to awaken the first doubts in opinions that had petrified.

—INGRID REIN

Translated from the German by Cornelia Lauf

Stuttgart

Giulio Paolini Staatsgalerie

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Manfred Stumpf, *Der Einzug in Jerusalem* (The entrance into Jerusalem), 1986, ink on paper, ca. 8 x 12".

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—ANNE KRAUTER

Translated from the German by Cornelia Lauf

Frankfurt

Manfred Stumpf Galerie ak

A lean monk, his body hardened by intense physical and spiritual exercise, nearly always nude (the habit doesn't make the monk), moves about in a universe of dry symbols, of cosmic trajectories, of seemingly powerful machines. The monk is alone, now and then he looks about, he masturbates. Self-portrait and representation of the double, the Angel, projection of desire when desire is a desire for oneself. This is the monodic story of Manfred Stumpf, refined yet hardened by a sharp and banal comic-strip touch (not accidentally, it's a precise reference to something said by Moebius, the great French cartoonist). These small 1986 drawings have more or less the same motif, to the point where they seem exactly the same. The show's monkish spirit invites a series of observations

about the religious iconography that runs through Western, and particularly European, art with increasing inconsistency, especially since the mid '70s.

The final outbursts of religious iconography were made by the Pre-Raphaelites, whose work was nevertheless redolent with sensual worldliness; then, beginning with the Impressionists, the religious was put out of mind in order to concentrate on an increasingly sharp and profound materialist vision. Few of the artists who have "mattered" during the last hundred years have dedicated themselves completely—or even occasionally—to religious subject matter, and yet more often, and with greater validity, they have assumed the subject matter's inner stance rather than its external simulacra. The waning of "ideology" has perhaps contributed to the resurgence of religious figuration: with the sacredness of contemporary mythologies reduced, beginning with the Modern, there is an attempt to revive—in religious symbolism more than in spirit—a series of emotive suggestions capable of soliciting the individual and collective sensibility anesthetized by the mass media and the culture industry. The punks' fetishism; the ethnic painting of Georg Baselitz, Markus Lüpertz, A. R. Penck, and Anselm Kiefer; the neoprimitivism of certain members of the transavant-garde, from the highs of Enzo Cucchi to the depressions of Mimmo Paladino—these express a nostalgic desire for the Middle Ages, and conquer from the right (to use political terminology) that mystical-religious tension that in strong materi-

LISSON GALLERY

The Brooklyn Rail

1 May 2017



Giulio Paolini on Giorgio de Chirico

For Giulio Paolini, Giorgio de Chirico's multifarious oeuvre has been not only a source of inspiration, but also a cornerstone of his way of considering art-making and the role of the author. The short anthology of texts presented here exemplifies this continuous and elaborate reflection. There are many pages of writings and interviews spanning a vast chronology where Paolini talks about the life, work, and thought of his predecessor. This anthology is the result of a selection, enough to grasp that the deep analogies between the two go well beyond what we usually think to see or capture in the younger artist's work.

In the piece titled *Controcampo* [Reverse Angle] (2008), Paolini works in his familiar collage technique, weaving an imaginary dialogue. He cuts and pastes his voice alongside that of Hebdomeros, de Chirico's "double," from his 1929 novel of the same name. The two writings lie almost sixty years apart from one another, and yet the correspondences are striking. The month of September is for both of them a time of revelations and transformation. In autumn 1909, travelling from Rome to Florence, de Chirico experienced moments of profound concentration, and an "other" image of the world appeared to him, which also bore a new pictorial style, that for which he would become famous. Hebdomeros's lazy way of facing life and the beginnings of Paolini's artistic work match the "mythical" birth of Metaphysical art. On a September day in 1960, Paolini made his first and "last" work, that *Disegno geometrico* [Geometrical Drawing] with which everything starts and ends, an operational field encompassing every image.



Giulio Paolini, *Disegno geometrico* [Geometric Drawing], 1960, Tempera and ink on canvas. 15.7 x 23.6 inches. Fondazione Giulio e Anna Paolini, Turin. © Giulio Paolini. Courtesy Fondazione Giulio e Anna. Photo: Mario Sarotto.

In the text taken from *Una costellazione, un mosaico indeterminato* [A Constellation, an Indeterminate Mosaic] (2006), Paolini identifies with de Chirico to such a degree that he takes on the vitriolic criticism lodged against de Chirico by the Italian architect

and designer Gio Ponti in 1942, when he was the chief-editor of *Domus* magazine. Ponti wrote about de Chirico's bad old age, calling it a "juvenile bluff" finally revealed. Angered by the increasingly reactionary opinions de Chirico avowed as the years went by, Ponti pondered how badly old age had affected the painter's critical skills. Paolini claimed (and still does) the opposite; as can be clearly seen in his 1988 conversation with Francesco Poli, he appreciates de Chirico's "viewpoint that is very detached from and openly critical of mainstream art activity," and how he was able to take his role as an artist not too seriously, "distanc[ing] himself from the entire avant-garde, which still viewed the construction of the image in a positive light." And not only did he praise these traits—although alongside an inescapable awareness of decline and melancholy—but he also bought a small self-portrait of de Chirico (1948), a drawing on paper, where the old master had depicted himself outside of time, dressed in 17th-century costume. Paolini keeps this treasured drawing, now on view at CIMA, in a private place in his house.

Paolini's view of de Chirico has not, however, always been a wholly sympathetic one. In *Gli uni e gli altri* [The Ones and the Others] (2010), the artist recalls the first time he met the master. It was April 1958, soon after Paolini had moved to Turin with his family, when he had the chance to attend a crowded lecture given by de Chirico. At the age of seventeen, he felt a sense of "burning resentment" for the painter's strenuous rejection of new art forms. It took some years for his opinion to change altogether; his work of 1969 – 70, *Et quid amabo nisi quod ænigma est* [What Shall I Love If Not the Enigma], best exemplifies this turn of the tables, his first open homage to the older artist. Paolini borrowed the Latin motto de Chirico had written on a self-portrait in 1911 and turned it into a business card and a banner, bringing public notice to an utterly personal and subjective condition.

When reading Paolini, we see the reactionary de Chirico—mercilessly criticised by Ponti—replaced by de Chirico the "acrobat," who attempts fearless exercises in the face of the modesty and norm of many contemporary painters. It is these visions, slightly blurred and repulsive at times, that according to Paolini plunge us into the fertile depth of de Chirico's abyss and that constitute the most precious fruit of his art. In a conversation with Brigitte Paulino-Neto in 1985, Paolini stated: "I am attracted even to those works that critics generally despise... Maybe not all of his pictures are masterpieces, but he succeeded in defining the modern artist who alone was able to live to the fullest." De Chirico's ability to take a sarcastic stand against the pride of certain

members of the avant-garde and his rejection of history (an open anachronism) are among the characteristics that Paolini seems to appreciate the most. With them, as can be inferred many times in the beautiful passages that follow below, comes a sense of edifying melancholy (Hebdomeros's "necessary inutility") that leads to the staging of Paolini's own existence as an artist: "left home to face the day, and entering in the safety of my studio's walls, [...] I manage to pretend that I exist, [...] staging a makeshift and calculated disorder to make myself believe that I am in the process of creating something."



Giulio Paolini, *Autoritratto* (Self-Portrait), 1970. Photo emulsion on canvas. 15.7 × 31.5 inches. Private collection. © Giulio Paolini. Photo: Adam Reich.

Anthology (in chronological order)

1. Excerpt from Brigitte Paulino-Neto, "Giulio Paolini," *Beaux-Arts Magazine*, 25, Paris, June 1985, 36 – 41.

PAOLINI: I am attracted even to those works [of Giorgio de Chirico] that critics generally despise, the ones after his Metaphysical period. He is an artist who has always worked for himself, indifferent to the critiques and mockery that his work has elicited. He was able to choose his own destiny as an artist, with great elegance. Maybe not all of his pictures are masterpieces, but he succeeded in defining the modern artist who was able to live to the fullest.

PAULINO-NETO: What is this notion of the modern artist?

PAOLINI: First of all, de Chirico is an artist who resists categorization. I admit that this is a slightly romantic answer, but I truly mean it. I believe an artist is the one who expresses himself the least. His destiny implies, contrary to appearances, a withdrawal from the scene. We are used to thinking that the artist is always in full control of his expression. Personally, I believe he is present even when absent.

2. Excerpt from Francesco Poli, “Between Space and Time,” *Contemporanea* (international edition), vol. I, n. 2, New York, July – August 1988, 92 – 97.

He [Giorgio de Chirico] is one of my closest relatives, because as a figure, almost outside of his work, he represents a viewpoint that is very detached from and openly critical of mainstream art activity. It seems that in his case, whatever it was he did, in every period of his career, there was always a stance that was specifically that of the artist of our time, one that de-dramatized his role without devaluing it. It is a lateral position with respect to the frontal one of contemporary art culture, an exemplary position. De Chirico understood, better and earlier than others did, the inevitable retreat of the work in the face of the *why* of the work. He, more than anyone else, even while he continued to produce, managed to diminish the imperative of meaning, distancing himself from the entire avant-garde, which still viewed the construction of the image in a positive light.

3. Excerpt from Giulio Paolini, “Una costellazione, un mosaico indeterminato,” *Quattro passi. Nel museo senza muse* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2006), 15 – 16.

Reading Giorgio de Chirico’s *Considerazioni sulla pittura moderna* [Considerations on Modern Painting], one realizes that one of the hardest things for a more or less famous man to do is *to age well*. We have witnessed and continue to witness disastrous examples of this inability, especially in the field of the arts. Men who, thirty years ago, claimed to be pioneers of taste, who lived (in the spotlight) in the most thriving international intellectual landscape, who produced with their own ideas and example that admiration always instilled in the young by such pioneers have now become—due to who knows what collapse (moral, economic, political, or artistic?)—grumpy, naïve, disgusted, reactionary old men who desperately scribble in an effort to remove any coherence from their relatively gloriously conquered past. These cases of flagrant apostasies, superfluous regrets, and pitiful sacrifices (which do not refer only to the “de

Chirico” phenomenon) help us to understand that at the end of one’s life there is often that rigorous and inexorable explanation that a “juvenile bluff” could masquerade with the zeal of a youth spent in good company (G.P.).

This signature of G.P., as will be clear from what follows, clearly does not stand for me, but for Gio Ponti, the director of *Domus* at the time. If only it had fallen to me to counsel on how “to age well” at the age of sixteen months (given that the text dates to March of 1942)—the age in which we start formulating words. Although it would be an honest and honorable thing to take on the legacy of those “superfluous regrets,” I am not, as stated above, the object of Ponti’s criticism—rather it is Giorgio de Chirico. Over the years, I have written a long and bitter story in segments not yet concluded, and I truly wish I could attribute to myself such a delicate and demanding legacy. And there is also the coincidence that de Chirico wrote his *Considerazioni* in 1942, at the age of fifty-four, and I wrote *Lezione di pittura* [Painting Lesson] in 1994, when I was at the same age.

4. Giulio Paolini, “Controcampo,” *Giorgio de Chirico. Werke 1909 – 1971 in Schweizer Sammlungen*, Gerd Roos and Dieter Schwarz Eds. (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2008), 219 – 221 [in German], 224 – 226 [in Italian].

He was only happy when nobody took the slightest notice of him; to be dressed like everybody else, to attract no attention, never to feel others’ glances piercing his back or sides, even if they were kindly gazes...

– Giorgio de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*

Although I am not able to demonstrate that this really took place (in fact, it is an absolutely gratuitous choice), I allow myself to transcribe (but not to document) a dialogue that I was able to reconstruct thanks to a reciprocal exchange of words (as it appears to me), though pronounced and published at different times, between Giorgio de Chirico and whomever writes in these two books, each unbeknownst to the other [Giorgio de Chirico, *Ebdòmero* (Milan: Bompiani, 1942); English translation: *Hebdomeros* (London: Owen, 1968); and Giulio Paolini, *Ancora un libro*, Bruno Corà Ed. (Rome: Editrice Inonia, 1987)].

Giorgio de Chirico: Tired of all these terrestrial and metaphysical adventures, Hebdomeros went to bed and didn’t awaken the following morning until very late. Once

awake, he could not decide to get up, so he remained for several hours in his bed meditating, and finally deciding to look at his watch, which he always kept on a chair beside his bed, he found that it was 5:00 in the afternoon. This is the hour, thought Hebdomeros, that in the twelve months of the year corresponds to the month of September.

Giulio Paolini: It took me almost twenty years finally to draw two diagonal red lines (one September day in 1960), and from those to determine four points—and from those four to determine the other four—necessary to define the portion of space that I have called *Disegno geometrico* [Geometrical Drawing].

de Chirico: When the hands marked the hour that corresponded to the month of September, he should profit by this good luck and not look for, as they say, midday at 2:00. He knew that what he was waiting for was not happiness, as the general run of men understood it...

Paolini: I went as far as turning portion into “proportion,” memory into “duration,” but (now I know) I did not know. Maybe another twenty years have to pass in order to take that step back that brings me back to today’s date (May 26, 1986), both here and yesterday, so to speak.

de Chirico: It was a feeling of security that was going to envelop him and he prepared himself to receive it with dignity, with composure, in the form of the host or otherwise, the God he believes in. Hebdomeros opened the window of his room but he avoided taking in deep breaths of the outside air like a liberated prisoner or an invalid who feels better, etc., etc.

The outside air was, in fact, neither purer nor fresher than the air in his room; that does not at all mean that the air was bad, on the contrary, only that the air outside resembled it perfectly, as one drop of water resembles another, its sister.

Paolini: I am in the countryside, near Siena, where I currently reside: in front of me is a *Broom Tree*, fully blooming, and cypresses spotted with irises in the vicinity... Is it “this” thing—which I cannot yet mention (but have included in cursive)—the “thing” that will reappear one day, as an urgent and unexpected complement of this picture that I referred to (in the first line at top) in a later written-word version? Will it be this—so definitively beautiful and transparent, showered with an inimitable light, both

its own origin and a theatrical spectacle of itself, its own description and pure truth—the “after” that we are unable to renounce that is waiting on the secret stage of our gaze?

de Chirico: He did not like to do useless things unless it was a question of what he called the *necessary inutility*, but in this case, it would no longer be a question of an inutility. His theories of life varied according to the sum of his experiences. What could he in this case conclude, if not that the secret of happiness, that inestimable secret that most philosophers exhaust themselves in seeking theoretically and that the immense majority of men strive practically to discover, consists, perhaps, in admiring nothing, in loving nothing?

Paolini: There is nothing left to do but to trust in the passing of time, in order to join together—beyond that which we can now see—something plausible or obvious with something improbable or even absent.

de Chirico: And once more it was the desert and the night. Once again all slept in immobility and silence. [...] Hebdomeros, his elbow on the ruin and his chin in his hand, pondered no longer... He yielded slowly and ended by abandoning himself altogether.

5. Excerpt from Giulio Paolini, “Gli uni e gli altri,” *Gli uni e gli altri. L’enigma dell’ora*, Daniela Lancioni Ed. (Milan: Skira, 2010), 33 – 35.

That which ties me to Giorgio de Chirico began a long time ago. In 1958, when I was seventeen, my family had recently moved to Turin. Having left my childhood friends behind me, I suddenly found myself behaving like an adult or a precocious adolescent; I spent entire days alone in theaters and cinemas, on trains, in cafes, but above all in museums, where sometimes I managed to stay until closing time. I was overcome with a vivid excitement for all the things that represented autonomy and modernity. For this reason, I remember that crowded conference held by Giorgio de Chirico at the former location of the cultural union, at Palazzo Carignano, when the *Maestro* went as far as to say that “all modern painting is deceit, nothingness.” I remember my burning resentment, the passionate refusal and opposition I felt to his speech, from the first to the last word.

A few years later, I had to reconsider my judgment; the man that I considered an enemy to defeat, a target to hit, became my illustrious model, the personification of the idol. Never could I have foreseen that Giorgio de Chirico, after having kindly kept an eye on the first steps of my now long career, could guide those that are to be the steps of my tomorrows.

As his habit dictated, every morning at the same time the artist left his home in Piazza di Spagna and walked the short distance to the Caffè Greco, where he would occupy the same table, in the same room. There he would stay for hours by himself in silence, in his voluntary exile.

So I too, once I have left home to face the day and have entered into the safety of my studio's walls, can count on my most trusted and habitual working tools (pencils, triangles, compasses...). There I manage to pretend that I exist, to put order to my papers; in other words, staging a makeshift and calculated disorder to make myself believe that I am in the process of creating something. Nearby (only a few steps separate me from No. 6 Carlo Alberto street) Friedrich Nietzsche signed his *Letters from Turin* and climbed to the top floor of that building to cross the threshold of his mental disorder, giving in to the vertigo and venturing into a blind alley.

Now you see him, sort of...

Giulio Paolini's quizzical, mischievous work delights in evasion. Catch it while you can, says **Laura Cumming**

Giulio Paolini: To Be Or Not to Be

Whitechapel Gallery, London E1;
until 14 Sept

The coolest show in London this summer by some way is the terrifically humorous and intelligent Giulio Paolini retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery. Paolini was the great wit of the Italian 1960s *arte povera* movement and remains so at 73. His meditations on artists, pictures and the relationship between them, particularly his own false starts and rueful evasions, as presented at the Whitechapel, amount to a narrative fizzing with riddles and jokes.

Paolini is arguably most famous for an early musing on those traditional eye-to-eye portraits in which the sitter appears to return our gaze. In

1967 he displayed a black-and-white copy of Lorenzo Lotto's 1505 *Portrait of a Young Man* showing a beautiful youth staring very candidly back at the viewer – or so it had always seemed. But Paolini killed that illusion at a stroke simply by retitling the picture *Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Lotto*.

Common sense tells us this can only be true, that the sitter's eyes were only ever on Lotto; but common sense is exactly what we naturally suppress when looking at portraits. It is our willing suspension of disbelief, and if the man is no longer looking at us then this personal connection is thwarted.

The Lotto portrait becomes the record of two long-dead people looking at each other. It is a deflation – you feel it keenly at the Whitechapel – and an exclusion that most portraitists, and self-portraitists, aim to avoid; although not Paolini himself. The Italian sidesteps his own self-portraits every time; he is there, but does not wish to impose.

Here he is in 1965 photographed behind a window, face concealed by the crossbeams and further obscured by Ray-Bans. In fact the window is an empty frame for which Paolini clearly hasn't managed to produce a painting. Such as he is – nothing much – the artist is the picture.

And here he is again, photographed



His shoes are here (you might stand in them); his pencil is here – flung down – but the artist is not

in his studio, arms outstretched like the fisherman with the catch that got away. It would have been this big, he seems to say, if only he'd painted that picture.

Now here's an actual canvas bearing a photographic sequence: the artist leaning forward with a brush and then making his mark. But what is this mark? On top of both is a turquoise flurry that seems to cancel him out, as if Paolini had passed right through the canvas and disappeared behind his own picture.

These are not works of dry theory but gorgeously graphic, quizzical and precise. Considerations that might be oppressively dull in another artist's work – are pictures more like windows or walls; are artists inevitably present in their works; how do ideas actually emerge as images? – come alive.

There is a most piquant twist on theory, in fact, in a big multimedia installation where two guys are clearly trying to work out how to make a picture from first principles – the floor all around them strewn with ludicrous diagrams. Nothing comes of nothing. And as for the death of the artist – Paolini prefigured Roland Barthes's famous Death of the Author essay by two years – there is white canvas in this show cut in the shape of a man, brush in hand; a pale ghost. Stand before it, however, and you have an immediate sense of Paolini's physical presence.

'Jokes that detonate': Big Bang, 1997–98 by Giulio Paolini at the Whitechapel.
David Parry/PA

There are clues everywhere if you only look – shadowy hands, photocopied feet. His shoes are here (you might stand in them); his pencil is here – flung down, rolled aside, or standing upright as if about to make a point with its sharpened tip – but the artist is not. Paolini is always edging out of the picture.

To Be Or Not to Be is the show's title, and upstairs is a dilemma fit for Hamlet – literally, what to do. Inside a Plexiglas box is a miniature studio: an empty seat, an easel bearing a sheet of glass – not just blank but transparently so; and all around are rejected ideas, screwed up as rubbish, each paper ball echoing a crystal globe inside the studio. The artist had the world at his feet and still couldn't come up with a decent idea!

But of course he has and does: a more modest clown one couldn't imagine. His recent works – involving glass pictures, blank pictures, and very beautiful pictures (drawn by Paolini, of course) emerging like rays from a brain – are sprung with jokes that detonate delightfully in one's head.

Most enchanting is a Plexiglas gallery within the gallery, featuring life-size footmen holding up pictures, or at least picture-shaped holes. The artist is only making a beautiful frame through which we may contemplate life. The revelation is just how brilliant the actual world looks through each hole.

On the floor is a faint handprint... the artist really has been here. And how good it is to see Paolini's art in Britain for the first time in a generation in this effervescent show.

Giulio Paolini: To Be Or Not to Be review – fizzing with riddles and jokes

Whitechapel Gallery, London

Giulio Paolini's quizzical, mischievous work delights in evasion. Catch it while you can...



Laura Cumming

The Observer, Sunday 13 July 2014

[Jump to comments \(...\)](#)



'Jokes that detonate': Big Bang, 1997-98 by Giulio Paolini at the Whitechapel.
Photograph: David Parry/PA

The coolest show in London this summer by some way is the terrifically humorous and intelligent [Giulio Paolini retrospective](#) at the Whitechapel Gallery. Paolini was the great wit of the Italian 1960s [arte povera](#) movement and remains so at 73. His meditations on artists, pictures and the relationship between them, particularly his own false starts and rueful evasions, as presented at the Whitechapel, amount to a narrative fizzing with riddles and jokes.

[Paolini](#) is arguably most famous for an early musing on those traditional eye-to-eye portraits in which the sitter appears to return our gaze. In 1967 he displayed a black-and-white copy of Lorenzo Lotto's 1505 [Portrait of a Young Man](#) showing a beautiful youth staring very candidly back at the viewer – or so it had always seemed. But Paolini killed that illusion at a stroke simply by retitling the picture *Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Lotto*.

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Delfo (Delphi), 1965 by Giulio Paolini.
Photograph: © Walker Art Center,
Minneapolis

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Installation view of Giulio Paolini: *To Be or Not to Be* at the Whitechapel Galley.
Photograph: David Parry

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- [Giulio Paolini: To Be Or Not to Be](#) continues at the Whitechapel Gallery, London E1 until 14 September

Giulio Paolini at Whitechapel Gallery

By Rachel Spence

The Italian conceptual master talks about his works, Arte Povera and his doubt about the role of the artist

Any uncertainty that Giulio Paolini was a seminal artist were quashed at the Venice Biennale in 2013. There, in the Italian pavilion, the 73-year-old Turin artist was paired with his co-national Marco Tirelli. The latter served up a buffet of miniature figurative drawings on one wall. Paolini responded with a trompe-l'oeil of an exhibition hung with empty frames in front of which crouched a sculpture of transparent geometrical planes. The result was a mute yet riveting quarrel about ways of seeing. What makes a table more than the sum of its straight lines? If the artist makes no image, does the object exist? Without the image, is it actually the artist whose being is in doubt?

In person, Paolini embodies the whimsical intrigue of his work. When I step into his Turin studio, he greets me with the words: “In as far as I am able, I am ready to respond to your every curiosity.” The archaic elegance of his diction is in keeping with his timeless aura. With silky grey hair flopping over a fine-boned face and brown eyes twinkling behind round glasses, he cuts a judiciously stylish figure in shirt and tie, jeans and black lizard belt.

His workspace is an equally droll enigma. Immaculately tidy, it is virtually empty save for a contemporary, glass-topped worktable underneath the long windows, a filing cabinet, an empty easel and an eccentric array of antique furniture in the centre of the room on which are propped oddities such as a Borges poem and a bottle of Ballantyne’s whisky.

That blend of awe, scepticism and mischief in the face of history has made Paolini a big name on the European contemporary scene. A retrospective of his work has just opened at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Such a prestigious venue bears witness to a 24-carat career that took off in the late 1960s when Paolini, on the invitation of critic Germano Celant, became part of Arte Povera, the radical Italian movement that included Michelangelo Pistoletto, Giuseppe Penone, Jannis Kounellis and Alighiero Boetti.

Given that their *raison d’être* was, ostensibly, to reveal the poetry within humble materials – Kounellis made sculpture out of coal sacks, Pistoletto from scraps of cloth – it’s not surprising that Paolini felt that he never fitted in.

“Arte Povera is essentially made of physical situations,” he says now, glancing for confirmation – as he will throughout our conversation – at his long-time collaborator Maddalena Disch. (Benign yet alert, always ready to proffer whichever image we are discussing on the iPad she holds in her hands, Disch is clearly essential to Paolini’s equilibrium.)

“Even then,” he continues. “I was always more interested in the destiny of the artist, so I was not entirely suitable, but I was [Celant’s] friend and I was in Turin at that moment, so I became part of the group.”

I have faith in the code of the image. I have faith in symmetry. I try to compose in the classical mode

Paolini’s deconstructive gene was whirring by the time Celant spotted him. Yet his early years were marked by the simple desire to represent the world around him. At the age of eight, he won a national drawing competition. At 16, influenced by his father who worked in the commercial office of the Italian Graphic Arts Institute, he was studying graphic design at college in Turin. Those years, he recalls, really opened his eyes to the visible world. “I began frenetically visiting exhibitions in the city. I wanted to see everything: beautiful, ugly, everything. And from this *vedere* [by using the Italian infinitive of the verb “to see” he gives his experience a mystical nuance], and an excess of faith in myself, I began to believe that I too could be an artist.”

At just 19, he made the picture that would mark his sensibility forever. Entitled “Geometric Drawing”, it comprises a canvas covered in white tempera and squared geometrically with a pencil. Essentially identical to the design into which Leonardo fitted his Vitruvian Man, today its expression of pure abstract proportion no longer looks radical. But in 1960 it was strong stuff.

This was an era when artists such as Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni – inspired by Clement Greenberg’s assertion that modernist painting was essentially about flatness – had taken to binning the image entirely and just focusing on the surface. But Paolini’s effort sprang from his own imagination. “I hadn’t seen anything by Klein or Manzoni,” he recalls. “It was like a hallucination. I made it in a trance.”

In 1964 his first show, at La Salita gallery in Rome, stamped him as a militant. “Lots of my friends told me they didn’t dare come in.” Nervous of disturbing the artist mid-set-up, they



Detail from 'Alpha (An Author without Name)' (2004)



©Lisson Gallery, London

hadn't realised that the blank canvases, many with their face to the wall and some still on the floor, were the finished work.



'Big Bang' (1997-98)

Today, as four decades of his efforts reel across Disch's iPad, it is hard to credit that Arte Povera ever claimed him as its own. Assembled from faux-classical sculpture, wall-drawings of perspectival lines, a bank of photographic imagery that arcs from old masters to his own spectacles, and the odd prop – a chair, a table, picture stretcher – his installations are far too sophisticated to meet the movement's criteria of abjection.



Furthermore, his formal purity rescues his work from the trap into which so much conceptual art falls: that of a bright idea masquerading as a half-baked image. "I have faith in the code of the image," he explains to me. "I have faith in symmetry. I try to compose in the classical mode."

We are peering on the iPad at "Copia del Vero" (1975). A photograph of three empty squares drawn like a triptych over the photograph of the back of a wooden stretcher which itself is framed by a wall drawing of shaded rectangles, this Russian doll of images within images – that aren't really images – leaves me vertiginous.

Paolini laughs at my confusion. "It alludes to the total potential that these images might be. But it leaves us out of the scene completely because we can't see them."

Is there, I wonder, an unspoken suggestion that the image is too ideal to be shown? Is Paolini secretly a Platonist in post-structuralist clothing? He laughs. "Certainly I am interested in the things that transcend material reality. That come from the space which is beyond us."

As the years progress, his faith in the work has been matched by his doubt about the role of the artist. "I am not sure that the work comes from the will of the author." He sounds a little embarrassed at the fey turn his thought has taken. "He is simply a witness to a work that was already there, which he gathers and sends to us." His voice drops as if whispering a secret. "I would like to think that the artist is a priest who assists at the arrival of something. A privileged witness."

At the Whitechapel gallery, works on display include "The Author Who Thought He Existed . . .", which was made in 2013. "Look, there he is, in the middle of a *pasticcio*," he chuckles, pointing to the iPad and using charming Italian words for "big mess".

And there indeed is a cut-out photograph of Paolini, with a real pencil in his hand, lying on a heap of other images on a glass-topped table. Is he drawing them into existence? Or is he no more than a random sign himself? There's no help from the slideshow running across the gallery wall. It shows empty frames, blank canvases and Paolini's eccentric studio furniture rendered in monochrome silhouette as if it were all no more than a chimera. On the floor, surrounded by discarded pictures, an overturned chair does not bode well.



'I See (Fragments of the Decoding of My Visual Field)' (1987)

"What's happened?" I ask.

"The artist's run off. He couldn't take any more." Paolini replies with a wry smile. Yet I suspect that he will be cloistered in his studio for many years to come.

'Giulio Paolini: To Be or Not to Be', Whitechapel Gallery, London, July 9-September 14. whitechapelgallery.org

Photographs: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Luciano Romano; Lisson Gallery, London; © Giulio Paolini