

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Perfume: Ettore Spalletti Alessandro Bava

Ettore Spalletti's work is often discussed in terms of spirituality thanks to his capacity to translate material into spatial and emotional experience. Here, the author discusses Spalletti as a painter who uses space as his medium.

One of Ettore Spalletti's first works was a white column standing between a door and a window, which was documented by the artist in a black-and-white photograph with a person jumping next to it. This piece was first exhibited at Pieroni gallery in Rome in 1979 alongside works by Jannis Kounellis and Gino De Dominicis. Interestingly, none of the artists in the show presented a painting—indeed, all of them have engaged with many media and practices over the years—and yet all have insisted on being called painters rather than artists. Thus, before focusing on Spalletti, a short digression is necessary to question what a painter is.

In the Western Renaissance tradition, a painter has often really been a painter-architect-scientist. This is because the role of the artist is primarily to use specific forms of artistic labor that are intellectual and manual with the aim of achieving mimesis, of replicating nature. So an artist's practice, in this sense, is also a para-scientific method of discovery. The painter-architect-scientist of the Renaissance was invested in representing the world, but also in remaking it through forms of abstraction both philosophical and mathematical. If the rediscovery of Vitruvius meant to define architecture as the reification of reasoning, for Piero della Francesca, painting was the result of a mathematically augmented vision that abstracts complex shapes into sets of coordinates to be used in wholly abstract compositions where human forms are stand-ins for ideas. In this sense, much of what we consider art was primarily a project of abstraction, a remaking of the sensible world into forms of virtuality. Renaissance painting thus should be understood as a form of mapping that purposefully resisted material and historical immanence. As this project of mapping has long been left to the exact sciences, painting's (and architecture's) *raison d'être* has had to be constantly redefined and reaffirmed.

Spalletti's first column contains clues to understanding his work as a painter—a painter who is not limited to the two dimensions of the canvas. His work forces us to understand painting as a spatial practice: it is no longer a mapping of reality but the deliberate alteration and modulation of it. It stands as an implicit critique of painting and architecture as practices of pure abstraction, and repositions them as the art of making habitat, a poetics of presence.

Yet Spalletti uses the gaze of the Renaissance painter; he is still an observer of nature. From it he captures colors, which he translates into pigments, and makes light interact with different materials. Most of his works are covered with a material similar to stucco, a traditional wall treatment used in Renaissance palazzos to produce the effect of polished stone. Spalletti has never revealed the exact makeup of the finish, but I speculate it might be a mix of colored pigment and mineral dust from a special white calcareous stone quarried near his hometown of Pescara, which is then polished and scratched with very minute abrasions to diffract light rather than simply reflect it. It gives the works a dusty patina, a seeming inner

light, approximating the environmental conditions of the medieval churches of the Abruzzo region built with the same stones, which Spalletti often credits as inspiring his approach to space and matter.

Spalletti plays with the categories of painting and sculpture as vestiges of an academic understanding of artistic mediums, but in fact he is always simply using these as alchemical tools to design spatial and emotional experiences. His work is often read as spiritual, but in my view it is more simply a rather humanistic approach to the making of art as *modus vivendi*. He uses his sensibility to craft environments that resolutely affirm the necessity for human beings to take care, to curate our material surroundings and collective interactions. This perhaps explains a resurgence of interest in Spalletti's practice: for a long time his work was overshadowed by his slightly older peers grouped under the banner of Arte Povera, who rightfully manifested the urgency to understand creative and intellectual labor in relation to their implied political mandate, while his work was discredited as "perfume." One could say that while the critical work of Arte Povera constituted a necessary *pars destruens*, Spalletti was quietly and gently devising a *pars costruens*, a definition of inhabitation beyond a fraught historical contingency.

In a contemporary condition, where the techniques of abstraction that Renaissance painters/architects defined have helped build the capitalist automaton at annihilates life as we know it, Spalletti's work as a painter of space and experience emerges as a beautiful set of tools to help build the new city.

171 Ettore Spalletti, *Colonna di colore*, 1978. © Ettore Spalletti.

Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Ettore Spalletti

172 Ettore Spalletti, *Presenza stanza*, 1978-2016. © Ettore Spalletti.

Courtesy: the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / London / Paris.

Photo: Thierry Bal

173 Ettore Spalletti, *Ombre d'azur, transparence* installation view at

Nouveau Musée National de Monaco – Villa Paloma, Monaco, 2019.

Photo: Werner Hannappel

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