

Pietro Roccasalva

Io ti saluto, luce, ma con nervi offesi

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MASSIMODECARLO is pleased to present *Io ti saluto, luce, ma con nervi offesi*, the first solo exhibition by Italian artist Pietro Roccasalva at the Milan gallery. The presentation brings together new and long-established subjects from the artist's iconographic repertoire: imaginary landscapes and paradoxical still lifes, alongside a cast of recurring figures - a child with ungroomed hair and nails, a young girl with her doll, a bride holding a peculiar racket, a mother grasping a strange cornucopia. Together, the works trace Roccasalva's ongoing experimentation with the possibilities of painting.

An uncommon space of encounter

Images, with their forms and meanings being passed along the centuries and beyond, have been given a longevity that we might well find rather crushing. 'Crushing' not only like the impact of a blunt truth, but above all, like one that shatters us to pieces. While we are denied permanence, images are granted infinite resurrections: certain iconographies, in fact, might be absent from the course of history for a long stretch, only to re-emerge at some point, mingling with other traditions and transformed by dint of their own persistence.

Rarely do our individual and organic existences encounter the otherwise expanded and enduring lives of images; however, it sometimes happens with painting, which is one of those uncommon spaces that allow a connection between these two dimensions, if not indeed their fusion: the biographical matter of a mortal being blending chromatically with the elusive matter of an image that has crossed centuries and generations.

A similar process is often witnessed in the works of Pietro Roccasalva, where multiple sources of imagery gather like clouds, and where fragments from mythology, literature, philosophy, and popular traditions burst into visual compositions charged with the tension of an electrical storm. In order for

them not to remain inert, frozen in the very history that has handed them down to us, the dilutant used to blend these sources is a vital and intimate one, an element extracted from the present and from everyday life, such as a family bond or a chance occurrence. In this exhibition, for example, two female figures appear: one draws on an image of the artist's daughter, the other transfigures an image of his mother. Both are situated within an allegorical regime where different visual attributes of motherhood and abundance – such as a doll or a cornucopia – hail from the realm of the prosaic and from a codified and remote sphere, respectively.

Next to them are portraits of an imaginary and well-known boy, his hair and nails growing out of control. It is an image from children's literature, appropriated from the imagination of Heinrich Hoffmann and his mid-nineteenth century creation *Struwelpeter*: He is a character that Roccasalva interprets as an 'entropic child', as if his lack of personal grooming materialised the passing of time in the form of unkempt growth. That of *Struwelpeter* is an image the artist featured in his repertoire of recurring iconographies some twenty years ago¹ and which returns here, as often do the characters of a visual universe that Roccasalva nurtures with all the diligence and cyclicity that we usually attribute to obsessive impulses.

The exhibition, as is always the case with this artist's shows, has the thematic coherence of an allegorical tale and the structure of a *mise-en-scène* in which the eternal dwells in the ephemeral. Its register is a mixed, corrupted one, in which the farcical contaminates the tragic. At the heart of this visual tale lies that thing we claim to know as a notion, but which we never really manage to fully understand: the passing of time. A time that, in Roccasalva's ruinous imagination, does not progress along in linear fashion but which precipitates, like the hot air balloon that plummets to the ground and which has also been a constant feature in many of his paintings for many years. Within this gravitational aesthetic,

feature the same character, the artist revisited and elaborated upon the iconographic memory of the work from twenty years earlier.

¹ In 2005, Roccasalva staged a *tableau vivant* entitled *The Oval Portrait. A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947*, dressing up and applying make-up to a performer who very much resembled *Struwelpeter*. To create the paintings presented in this exhibition, which

one which acts on bodies as much as on values and meanings, individual existence and autobiographical data serve as vessels: by embodying images and traditions, they ensure their passage through time.

What we see in these works is everyday life transfigured into the magical and the remote, imbued with something that seems to transcend it. When it comes to a mechanism such as this, which projects symbols and hallucinations onto reality, some might speak of 'escape' or 'refuge', others of 'neurosis'. But this is normative terminology, which favours the idea of a healthy and productive relationship with reality – even in art – based on its observation and analysis rather than its imaginative reworking.

This may give us some leverage with which to prise open the obscure title of this exhibition: *Light, I salute thee, but with wounded nerves*,² as the setting for a sensitivity honed by its exposure to a force by which it is illuminated and, at the same time, infected.

-Alessandro Rabottini

Pietro Roccasalva

Pietro Roccasalva was born in 1970 in Modica, Italy. He currently lives and works in Milan.

Pietro Roccasalva's practice involves a vast array of media, with the aim of questioning and challenging the language of painting. His formal and conceptual research unveils a very distinctive vocabulary that combines personal visions with cultural references, the imaginary with the ordinary, intertwining the traditional genres and techniques of painting with the most contemporary digital shifts.

His work has been exhibited internationally, with solo shows at public institutions including the Leopold-Hoesch-Museum, Düren (2025); Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati, MASI, Lugano (2022); Fürstenberg Zeitgenössisch in Donaueschingen (2019); The Power Station, Dallas (2016); Kölnischer Kunstverein (2014); Le Magasin, Grenoble (2013). He participated in the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009) and in Manifesta (2008), and has also been part of several group exhibitions at museums and art institutions such as the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; MoMA PS1, New York; Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; MAXXI, Rome; Kadist Art Foundation, Paris; and S.M.A.K., Ghent, among others.

² The title of the exhibition is a verse taken from *The Poetaster*, an Elizabethan satirical comedy by the English playwright and poet Ben Jonson, first staged in 1601. The work combines philosophical material and comedy, criticising bad poetry and extolling the moral

qualities of good poetry. The mocking and derogatory meaning of the title (an inferior poet) establishes a relationship with the contamination of registers that we also find in Pietro Roccasalva's art.