

STEFANO ARIENTI

Ut pictura poësis

Galleria Christian Stein - Corso Monforte 23, Milan

Opening 11 June 2025 | from 18 to 21

11 June – 4 October 2025

Christian Stein Gallery hosts its third solo exhibition of the works of **Stefano Arienti** (Asola, 1961). The elegant and spacious high-ceilinged gallery, reminiscent of a neoclassical salon, has three large windows giving onto a garden populated with lofty trees of venerable age, a green oasis. The glass marking the boundary between inside and out allows seasonal light and color to interact with the interior. In his two previous solo exhibitions, in 2019 and 2021, Arienti presented a *corpus* of works based on personal photographs that he had reprocessed using various techniques, printed on special papers, and then manually worked and wrinkled. These works united quotidian banality, a human and a “civilized” presence, with nature in what amounts to a dialogue of the deaf. The artistic gesture consisted in transfiguring and restoring a Benjaminian aura to the two spheres that interpenetrate while remaining largely indifferent to one another: nature and humans, industrial civilization and natural ecosystems. Arienti’s art sought to give poetic value not only to the banality of reality but also to the end of an idyllic relationship with the outdoors, the end of a mythological region, symbol of a harmonious natural unity, now relegated to poetry and picture postcards: Arcadia. High culture (literary and poetic) and low culture (posters, advertisements, clichés) interleaved in these works. The everyday ephemerality of urban reality was juxtaposed with the seductive sublimity of nature, both raised by the power of art to a third level. The artist’s techniques and materials, his language and fertile wit, produced a new perceptual experience and relationship with the work of art. Arienti transformed observation into contemplation, an analytical examination of reality into a sense of wonder and the visual and tactile pleasure that is the original province of painting.

The subtitle of his second exhibition was “Valori luminosi”, reaffirming the traditional values of painting: light, light-color, light-shadow contrast, atmospheric transparency. In this new exhibition at Christian Stein Gallery, the artist reveals additional origins, presenting a dual series of works that explore the tactile value of color, the luminous revelation of the image, a possible reinvention of painting, and a relationship with the landscape and with nature. He gives us the impression of inhabiting a luminous winter garden, an *orangerie*, that protects the colors of the paint and the diaphanous traces of the drawing. I asked Arienti to help me grasp the nature of his inspiration. “The solemn space of Palazzo Cicogna, with its secret view of the garden, frames a sequence of four superimposed periods: classical, Renaissance, impressionist, and contemporary. History, like geography, has always intrigued me,” he wrote. Like many other times in his career, he has gone back to contemplate different seasons of art, united via the shared elements of nature and landscape. In this exhibition, he does so by remodeling the photographically reproduced images using plasticine. The source of the images is a series of paintings by Monet executed in amenable localities on a search for effects of light and color, tactile values, triggers of sensations and retinal impulses: *plein-air* oil paintings on canvas by the grand master of Impressionism in Vétheuil, Varengeville, or Bordighera. Monet sojourned there for a number of months in 1884, attracted by the splendid opulence of the gardens giving onto the sea: “Everything is wonderful, and every day the countryside is more beautiful, and I am enchanted by this place,” he wrote to his Parisian art dealer Durand-Ruel. In just 79 days, Monet painted an impressive thirty-eight canvases, setting up his easel on Via Romana near the Torre dei Mostaccini and Vallone del Sasso, also traveling further inland to capture an infinite range of atmospheres, endless variations of the sky and vegetation. When he visited the Moreno Garden, he had the impression of a grand phantasmagoria, where “all the plants of the universe seem to grow spontaneously.” The period of Impressionism was extraordinary; it will not be repeated in the history of art or in the human spirit. It was perhaps our last Arcadia, a swan song, a season steeped in nostalgia. It acknowledged that the relationship between humans and nature, language and outdoors, was deteriorating and would be fatefully and definitively destroyed by industrialization and overbearing positivism. It was, in truth, an art of lost time. Since then a sense of loss, perhaps of abandonment, seems to have captured the heart and eye of the painter, no longer able to capture the beauty of nature, to practice painting in contact with the air and the colors of the countryside, of gardens, of forests, and skies at various times of the day and over the changing seasons. Cézanne knew it well when he said, “We must act quickly because

everything is disappearing.” A great deal of water has passed under the bridge in the history of art, not all of it crystalline.

Arienti invented his own work method to salve the wound and grieve properly, reworking photographic copies of a series of highly colorful paintings by Monet. He liberally and felicitously applied touches of plasticine over the French painter’s brushstrokes, reconstructing in his own way the essential, tactile impression aroused by the contemplation of the phantasmagorical enchantment of a garden in bloom, the countryside etched with rows of poplars, a trail of pines, a lane crowned with a cascade of flowering branches, or roadsides punctuated with violets and roses, red carnations, and periwinkles. His use of plasticine evokes the free and happy days of childhood, shaping the soft colored compound into objects or scenes, experiencing the pleasure of tactile perception, delighting in combining the pure colors of the red, yellow, blue, white, and black globs of modeling compound. His plasticine paintings take Arienti back to a childhood of creating with colors, the wonder of the vitality of colors and qualities of light, those happy days of visuality, allowing him to rediscover a lost sensation, to dwell once again in that legendary land known as Arcadia.

Portions of the gallery space are wallpapered with tarps whose evanescent surfaces bear tracks of paint. Arienti pointed out to me that they are “objects more similar to large drawn tapestries that spontaneously paginate into the architecture of the space.” They are drawings more than paintings, executed with light, phantasmatic, diaphanous lines that interact with light to create nacre-like highlights as if off the track of a snail. At the threshold of the visible and invisible, processing the unresolved and unpredictable potential of the line, we come to the revelation — a coming into or returning to light — that we are beholding a drawing. Drawing, mother of all arts: the painter’s original idea, first imagined with the mind’s eye and then applied to the canvas. Here, Arienti reinterprets and reinvents in his own personal way the techniques of sinopia and pouncing. These “tapestries”, as Arienti calls them, accommodate his highly colorful plasticine compositions; it is as if Debussy’s *Préludes* were laid over a score by Bach.

Arienti followed in Monet’s wake in his works with plasticine: here he set about manipulating Titian, reproducing a series of paintings by the Venetian painter to decorate the *camerino di alabastro* of the Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso I d’Este, in the 1520s. The subjects of the four paintings — *Bacchus and Ariadne*, the *Feast of the Gods*, the *Bacchanal of the Andrians*, and the *Worship of Venus* — are inspired by classical texts such as *Imagines* by Philostratus the Elder and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Titian created the *Feast of the Gods* by modifying a pre-existing oil painting by Giovanni Bellini. Titian changed the colors of the sky and added new figures. The images of the bacchanalia, Dionysian orgies, libations, and dances accompanied by music, underscore a desire to escape from the harshness of politics, the folly of war, the fear of death. These four paintings made an impression on Titian’s contemporaries for the able use of color, the richness of figures, gestures, and positions, and the beauty of the vistas and scenery, with deep blue skies and white clouds. In this exhibition, where the works with plasticine and those on canvas are exhibited as if in a large painting gallery, Arienti again declares his inexhaustible and unexhausted passion for painting — his true love —, for the history of art, and ultimately for images and their unperishing vitality.

Arienti moves along at least three parallel tracks. He ventures into and plays and experiments with materials and processes, supports, techniques, tools, and also gestures and actions. For example, he pierces and crumples, cuts, erases, scratches, folds, traces, and photocopies. He also gathers images, recovers photographic reproductions with the delight and curiosity of someone drawn to visual repertoires and atlases, attracted to encyclopedic knowledge and collections. And there is a third element that must be considered. His aim would seem to be the regeneration of painting — if not of art history itself — after the death of art. Whereas Kounellis sought to confront this end by dramatizing the artist’s awareness of painting’s demise, Arienti approaches the question with lightness and lyricism, trusting in the creative process. As Chiara Bertola writes: “His works always begin with something that already exists, but which, through various techniques, undergoes a reworking, transforming into something new and original. Arienti himself stated in an interview that he would never ‘produce anything truly new, because all creativity is already out there: we just need to pay attention and go seek it and turn it into something personal’.”

That Arienti is a painter — even when he creates three-dimensional objects or gives images volumetric form — is clear from the fact that he doesn’t work by subtraction, as a sculptor does with marble. Arienti always adds something to the starting material, not limiting himself to the ready-made or gestural manipulation. The most evident example is when he adds bits of modeling compound — scraps, or clumps of colored plasticine —, covering portions or details of photographic reproductions of historical paintings. By adding colored material — and precisely *Pongo* (an Italian brand of plasticine) — to the photographic image, shaping a new one that overlies the original and augments the tactile effect (the sculptural effect of paint) so that the image

becomes perceptible via our sense of touch. Chiara Bertola commented: “Arienti is more a painter than a sculptor: he works with images and indeed considers himself a painter ‘because I mostly make painterly decisions, even if I don’t paint in the strict sense’. But he works with the tactile values of painting, often intervening on painted or photographed figures ‘enhancing’ or ‘augmenting’ them with plasticine, with *Pongo*, with puzzle pieces. He adds material to the image to transform it and make it more tactile and more alive.”

If those pieces of plasticine or puzzle pieces were removed, we would be left with the reproduced image, that is, the condition that causes the loss of aura. Restoring a tactile pleasure, a physical experience to painting, means regenerating the sensory dimension, reactivating the sensitivity dulled by copies, by reproductions. A painting by Monet is reactivated when it is transformed from a photographic copy into a new work, regenerating the concrete experience one feels standing before the original. A Renaissance painting by Titian is reborn once its reproduction is covered or concealed, allowing the drawn trace of the original painting to reemerge. It is as if Arienti seeks to recover the childlike ecstasy of painting, in which tactile sensation and sensory delight take precedence over meaning and scholarly pleasure. Through this invention, he regenerates the aura lost through technological reproduction, but does it via a simple, childlike, joyful practice, playing with the seriousness of history and the drama of death.

What I mean to say is that over all these years, and with a linear progression in his choice of formal strategies, Arienti has succeeded in processing the grief for both the loss of the aura and the death of art, the apparent end of figurative painting. And he has done so without lapsing into nostalgia for a lost world or tradition. Nor has he resorted to the practice of citation, nor to the kitschy, deceptive practice of the hyperrealist copy. He has freed himself from both the dramatic solemnity and the cynicism with which generations of artists in the 1970s and 1980s tried to respond with “impoverished” gestures and stylistic mannerisms. Arienti moves at the boundary of the irreproducible and unrepeatable world of beauty — the history of art and its masterpieces — within a rigorously conceptual framework and a joyful, playful practice, where *téchne* and *poiesis* interweave reciprocally and virtuously. His works are the result of an intelligent, sophisticated practice, masterful handcraft, and a highly poetic impulse. They are a leap or burst of unfettered creativity, bold and uninhibited in relation to academic rules, canonical norms, and hierarchies. This combination of processes gives rise to the conditions necessary to nourish the experience of wonder and astonishment, which is, ultimately, the true pleasure of painting, something vital and joyous achieved with a simplicity of means and intent.

As Arienti puts it, “Using various techniques you obtain results that are always different... Over the years I have sought to show that you can make art, poetically, with a minimal gesture. And that this gesture, even if a bit obtuse and maybe repetitive, is crucial.” Lightness and simplicity, allies of imagination and play, mark the path of the poetic dimension of art, the supreme quality of the Italian figurative *koinè*.

Sergio Risaliti

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From Monday to Friday: 10 – 19 | Saturday: 10 – 13 / 15 – 19

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