

GUGLIELMO CASTELLI

THE MELANCHOLIC PAINTER

Interview by Francesco Dama
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The Italian artist speaks with Hyperallergic about his home city of Turin, the loneliness of his characters, and more.

TURIN, Italy — Guglielmo Castelli makes layered paintings that often feature monochromatic color schemes. He usually starts with an abstract background, which he patiently refines inch by inch to make it a hospitable environment for his enigmatic figures. Here and there, lumps of paint interrupt the smooth surface of the canvas, onto which oil colors are applied with such skill that they look like ink.

Castelli's works evoke a specific aesthetic that developed in Europe toward the end of the 19th century: the decorative interiors of Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, the philosophical landscapes of Paul Klee, but also the fantasy tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann and the decadent atmospheres described by Joris-Karl Huysmans.

I visited Castelli in his studio on the outskirts of Turin, on an unusually warm autumn afternoon. Immaculately dressed, he greeted me on the doorstep while smoking a cigarette, one foot outside and the other in. The studio used to be a workshop for restoring pianos — one of those long-lost businesses once common in the city. The artist has a taste for old things: He has refurbished his studio with vintage furniture and wooden cabinets filled with jars of pigment powders, brushes, tools, books, and his personal collection of curiosities. An even light pours in from two skylights. Wet canvases and recent paintings lean on every free wall.

I studied Castelli's paintings in silence. The more I observed them, the more they appeared to hold onto some sort of narrative element, like scenes from forgotten stories. He frequently

quotes his favorite literary characters as if they were friends: above all, the kids in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Rebeca, the insomniac girl, in Gabriel García Márquez's 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. "They are secondary characters that struggle to be welcomed by the world," he explains before adding, "I myself have always arrived second at things. It takes me a while to understand things, as well as to experience them."

As I looked around, I stepped on a dog toy on the floor, the only misplaced item in an otherwise orderly disorder. "He makes sure I don't work too much," Castelli joked about his pet.

With shows currently on view at Rodeo Gallery's London and Athens locations, and a solo exhibition at Mendes Wood in New York scheduled for March, the artist has been busy. After spending some time with Castelli's art we sat on a velvet sofa and chatted. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Francesco Dama: *You often describe the subjects of your paintings as "characters."*

Guglielmo Castelli: Like García Márquez's Rebeca, the figures I include in my paintings are characters that are looking to be understood. Sometimes they are deliberately uncoordinated, they have [awkward] postures and abandoned bodies, or they find themselves on stages that are too tight for them.

FD: *Your background is in scenography. ... I can see the similarities between painting and theater.*

GC: The pictorial space of the canvas is nothing but a theater stage: it's a limit that I voluntarily set myself. It challenges me to create narratives and stories that, while talking about others, in fact speak about ourselves.

FD: *Very frequently your paintings feature lonely figures. It's like they haunt spaces rather than inhabiting them. Is it a reflection of your own personality?*

GC: I never think of my creatures as a reflection of myself. Rather, I think they compensate for elements of me.

FD: *Would you describe yourself as melancholic?*

GC: I used to be way more melancholic. I would cling to memories, basking in them. Growing up, I kept melancholy at a certain distance to leave room for other feelings, including fear. Because a good dose of fear motivates me better than anything else...

FD: *You and I are the same age and grew up in the same part of Italy: Turin and its surroundings. The rest of the country often depicts people from our region as well-mannered, thorough, and a little detached. I find the idea of the genius loci a little reductive, but I can't help but tracking down in your work elements of our shared upbringing: patience, rigor, and a certain kindness. What's your relationship with your hometown?*

GC: The older I grow, the more I feel I belong to Turin, in my manners, inclinations, and dispositions. When I was a teenager I remember it as a city full of cultural activity and artistic excellence. We had industrial and cultural wealth, a bourgeois aesthetic mixed with a more contemporary one. We had Prince of Wales suits, but also the first deconstructed clothes by Japanese designers. Turin's famous arcades, which mark the slightest changes of light, are a symbol of the rigor that is part of our DNA. Maybe it's the perfect place to cultivate that melancholy we were talking about Or maybe I'm describing an imaginary city? A city that no longer exists and that I would like to return to, a frozen, perfect, and dusty beauty. Simply wonderful.

At this point, I think I should change my answer to your question: I'm incredibly melancholic.

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