

CASEY KAPLAN  
525 WEST 21ST STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10011  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

OPENINGS

# Pietro Roccasalva

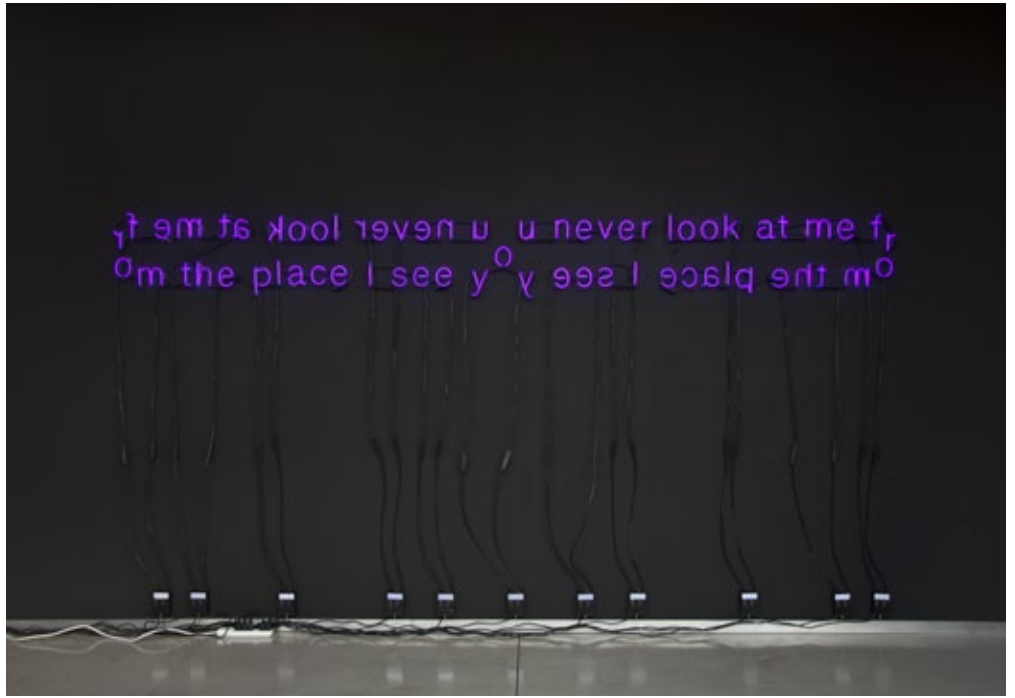
JAN TUMLIR





Opposite Page:  
Pietro Roccasalva,  
*Il Traviatore*, 2011,  
acrylic on canvas.  
30.5 x 29.5".

Above: Pietro Roccasalva,  
*Jockey Full of Bourbon*,  
2003, pastel on paper on  
Forex, microphone stand,  
resin, stuffed owl, paint.  
Installation view, Ferrotel,  
Pescarca, Italy, 2003.



Pietro Roccasalva, *You Never  
Look at Me from the Place I  
See You*, 2012, neon, 1'2.2" x  
12' 5.6".

**FIRST, THERE IS THE PAINTING.** For Pietro Roccasalva, this medium occupies the radiant center of an ever expanding constellation of formal and conceptual analogies that takes in photography, video, sculpture, installation, and performance. All are derived from painting as more or less concrete extrusions of the picture plane, and all return to it at some point as material for further painting. The artist's skill in this department is irreproachable; evidently, he can render by hand anything he wants to see, but this is not to suggest that his imagination is unfettered or that its products can ever be described as "visionary." The image is from the outset a mnemotechnology already overloaded with archival data-Roccasalva terms it a "microchip"-and in his hands it becomes only more so. From one work to the next, the pathways of information processing and association grow increasingly convoluted as the cryptic details accumulate, and yet the threads that bind it all together never snap.

Roccasalva is obviously interested in the play of genres in art as a means not only to isolate the worlds of people (portraiture) and things (still life, architectura studies, landscape) but also to confuse them. For instance, in his first solo gallery exhibition in the United States, at David Kordansky Gallery this past winter, the artist presented five virtuosos paintings and pastel drawings titled *Il Traviatore*, or a variation thereof (all 2011), that depicted the figure of a restaurant waiter holding a silver serving dish with one hand, lifting its hemispherical cover with the other to reveal a silver lemon juicer. The two domed objects nestle together like matryoshka dolls or Chinese boxes, and their shiny surfaces reflect, in turn, a church cupola that ostensibly overarches the scene, thereby clinching the *mise en abyme*. In two works where the waiter also lifts the striated top from the juicer, we may perhaps imagine another smaller waiter inside it doing the same, and so on. This sort of Escher-esque conceit is quickly grasped, but one is still left to grapple with the striking idiosyncrasy of the forms

that compose it. The waiter, the lemon juicer, the cupola-these may simply be understood as instances of subject, object, and context caught in a moment of dedifferentiation and commingling, but they are also so much more specific than that. As it happens, the conflation of church architecture and kitchen implements has occurred several times before in Roccasalva's oeuvre (notably in *Giocondita*, a digital animation from 2002), and the *Traviatore*, or *trou badour*, their sacred/secular go-between, also boasts a long line of descent in the artist's work.

The installation *Jockey Full of Bourbon*, 2003, and the subsequent pieces relating to it may offer one explanation of how Roccasalva's visual lexicon takes shape. A strange stuffed bird perches on a metal bar in an enclosed bathroom, gazing via a mirror back at the viewer, who, in turn, peers at the scene through an *etant donnee*-style peephole. Closer inspection reveals that it is in fact an owl painted bright colors, as if that vigilant figure of arcane wisdom had been strained through a prism to emerge with the flamboyant coat of a parrot, a more frivolous breed and one that can speak, but without understanding. Able only to repeat, this hybrid creature was itself repeated in *The oval portrait: A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947*, 2005, as a soft pastel likeness inserted into a *tableau vivant*, where it was observed by an actual seated young woman and a wildly unkempt child, who faced the opposite direction. That work's subtitle is lifted from the title of a 1990 photograph by Jeff Wall of a female ventriloquist holding a childsize dummy, but in Roccasalva's *tableau vivant*, the child is more explicitly modeled on the fiendish mascot of Heinrich Hoffmann's collection of cautionary tales, *Del' Struwwelpeter* (1845), whose grotesque appearance is the result of talking back and never listening to his parents' advice. And so it goes: These two actors as living embodiments of the picture world will be absorbed into yet another picture, another oval portrait, this time painted with the child staring directly at us. With

every pass between the sheer optical plane and the thick world of things, the image undergoes a process of aesthetic readaptation that steadily builds on itself, while drawing in references from every side. At the center of each of these works, a figure meets and returns the viewer's gaze, opening a channel between actual and imagined space that always threatens to lead us astray. A work in the Kordansky show reiterated this theme: Facing out the window and into the street, a quote from Lacan's 1964 seminar "The Line and Light" spelled it out for us, twice, in purple-blue neon: YOU NEVER LOOK AT ME FROM THE PLACE I SEE YOU. The letters are arranged in a figure eight running legibly forward, then illegibly backward, as if to highlight the perceptual rift that threatens to undermine the empathetic union between artist and audience. The lack inherent in every act of looking is here seized as a productive principle, however, for it is also where the viewer's thwarted desire meets the questionable consolations of the trompe l'oeil. It is an idea that Roccasalva takes to heart, as the potential for "seeing things," for mistakes on the part of both the producers and the recipients of pictures, is at the core of his practice. Roccasalva lifted the title of this exhibition, "The Strange Young Neighbours," from a stand-alone chapter within *Elective Affinities*, in this way enfolding his works in Goethe's narrative of love lost and found. The Romantic theme was taken up most directly in *Untitled (Just Married Machine #1)*, 2011, a large-scale sculptural installation that graced the center of the space. The various objects that compose it are derived from the standardized elements of the pictorial still life—in fact, they are loosely based on one glimpsed in the opening shot of Pier Paolo Pasolini's short film *La Ricotta* (1963)—but retrofitted in size and substance to the real and existing world. Accordingly, a basket turns into the carriage of a hot air balloon crash-landed on the gallery floor, a bunch of grapes into a cluster of floor-bound purple balloons

and a mandolin into a small rowboat. To complete the scale shift, a recently wedded couple posed amid these various items on the exhibition's opening day, thereby conjoining the nature morte with the tableau vivant. The husband sat in the rowboat, his chin resting on his fist, while his wife stood nearby but facing away, dressed in a white gown and holding aloft a tennis racket, as if frozen in midplay. The somewhat chaotic, cluttered design of the mise-en-scène that joined these static embodiments of *la vita contemplativa* and *la vita activa* served to remind those in the know (and those who had read the gallery statement) that the separated lovers in "The Strange Young Neighbours" are reunited in the course of a near-fatal accident. Sharply alternating between intimations of tragic loss and of comic fulfillment, Goethe's tale functions here as an allegorical reflection on the role of accident and chance in the historical evolution of art forms. More specifically, it allows one to ponder once more the distinction between "objective chance," as represented by the Surrealist *trouvaille*, or found object, and the "manufactured chance" of Duchamp's ready-mades. The shadow of Duchamp looms largest over the installation's most enigmatic components, which here were strewn around one side of the boat. Vaguely resembling bisected garlic bulbs, these reiterate the domed shapes within the paintings and recall the *Fountain* of 1917, an impression reinforced by the ceramic appearance of their pristine white finish, as well as by the installation's title. Delivering a polemical counterpoint to Duchamp's meditations on art as a libidinal drive that must be continually rechanneled, Roccasalva prompts us to consider the aesthetic possibilities of consummation. Once the passage from virgin to bride is a *fait accompli*, as it supposedly was for the couple on display, the avant-garde dream of historical liquidation, of starting anew, must be renounced. From here on in, ancient, modern, and contemporary forms are subject to an endlessly



Pietro Roccasalva, *Untitled (Just Married Machine #1)*, 2011, wood, acrylic resin, rush, fabric, steel.  
Installation view, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, 2012.  
Photo: Brian Forest

*The lack inherent in every act of making is seized as a productive principle. It is an idea the Roccasalva takes to heart, as the potential for mistakes on the part of both the producers and recipients of pictures is at the core of his practice.*



Pietro Roccasalva, *The Fourteen Stations (You Never Look at Me from the Same Place I See You)* (detail), 2010  
Fourteen notebooks, charcoal, graphite, and acrylic on paper. Each 15.75 x 13.75 x 1.75".



Pietro Roccasalva, *Jockey Full of Bourbon II*, 2006, neon, resin, microphone stand, acrylic on paper on Forex, mirror, stuffed owl, paint. Installation view. Galerie Johnen + Schötte, Cologne.

recombinant process of propagation.

The crashed hot-air balloon is emblematic of this condition, and it, too, has been revisited by Roccasalva on several occasions: first in his 2007 film *Truka*, which appropriates a shot of the ground as seen from a plummeting aircraft in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1969 film *Andrei Rublev*, and later in *Truka all-over (The Formula of the Phantom)*, 2010, in which a pair of knights in full armor spray-paint each other lobster red in front of an enlarged still from that film. The owl-cum-parrot reappears as well in the installation *Jockey Full of Bourbon II*, 2006, this time perched on a twisting neon tube whose eccentric, room-spanning shape is derived from the artist's aforementioned digital animation, *Giocondita*. (It is modeled after the route of a shot that traverses the facade of a church with a lemon-juicer dome.) At each stage, these various motifs must conform to a whole new program while retaining traces of the last. In a different artist's hands, this process would yield only entropic degeneration, a generalized blur, but here, with every step from the point of origin—wherever it might lead—the resolution stays crisp, resulting in forms that are increasingly anomalous and at the same time hyperarticulated and vivid. For Roccasalva, this is effectively a means of creation, however compromised, within what he has described as a "closed universe."

Even if the artist sounds a familiar postmodern refrain, the floodgates of citation are never fully opened to the point of "anything goes"; whatever gets in is carefully selected to work with what is already there and what is still to come, like variables plugged into a sensitive, still-developing algorithm. Within this scheme, the Duchampian maxim "To make is to choose and always to choose" may be reversed, for everything newly chosen is effectively remade as a result of entering into communion with everything already chosen. It is precisely in what Roccasalva makes from his choices that something else, something other than what is simply given, comes into view. Even a

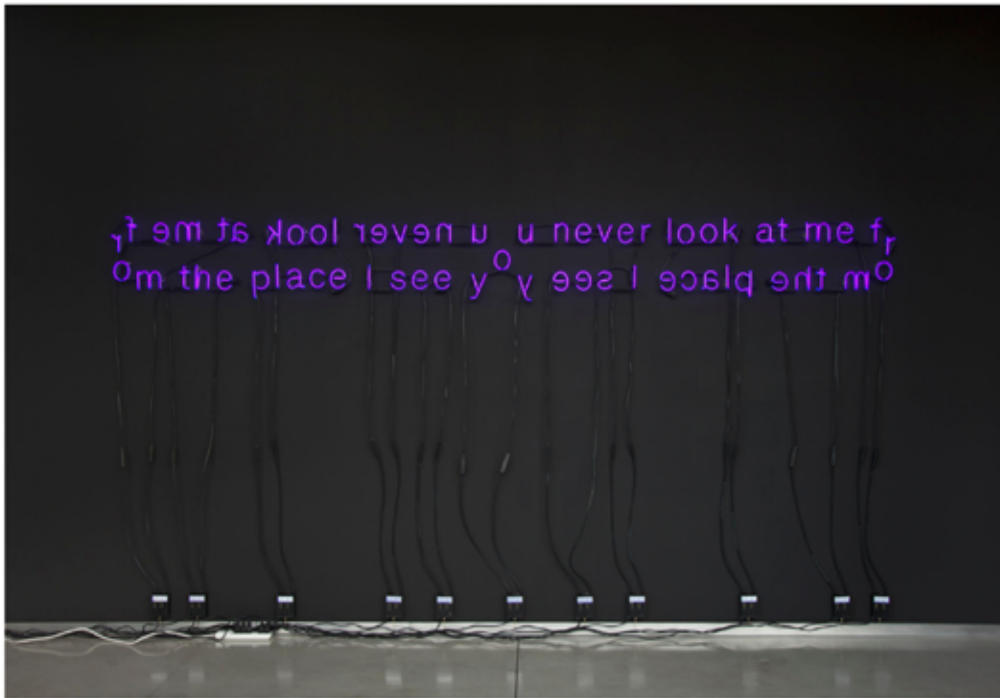
massive tumorlike growth sprouting from the head of the waiter in the first painting on view demonstrates this. Here, in a single isolated detail, entire worlds form and deform, as academic cross-hatching breaks into the faceted planes of Cubism and then fragments still further into a Mandelbrot mosaic of digital tiling. Full of accidents both chosen and made, Roccasalva's "Just Married Machine" is devoted to the cultivation of mutant strains and, it would seem, is already partly running itself.

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Mizota, Sharon, "Art review: Pietro Roccasalva at David Kordansky Gallery," *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2012, p. D18

## Los Angeles Times

### Art review: Pietro Roccasalva at David Kordansky Gallery



The best part of Pietro Roccasalva's U.S. solo debut at David Kordansky Gallery is the first piece one sees: a neon sign that reads "You never look at me from the place I see you." The paraphrase from French philosopher Jacques Lacan is doubled and arranged in a Möbius strip, illustrating its own paradoxical message: The act of looking establishes a relationship between you and me that is constantly shuttling between our incommensurable points of view.

The rest of the show explores this idea in the context of art history. In the center of the room is a giant still life, including, among other things, a deflated hot air balloon, a bunch of grapes (delightfully made of purple balloons) and a wooden boat resembling a lute.

Mizota, Sharon, "Art review: Pietro Roccasalva at David Kordansky Gallery," *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2012, p. D18

The piece's shifts in scale are fun — are they grapes or balloons? — but it feels a bit unfocused.

More intriguing are a suite of paintings and drawings depicting a waiter holding a citrus juicer on a tray. The images exhibit any number of classical drawing techniques, but it's the reflections of a grand architectural space in the tiny silvery surface of the juicer—another art historical convention—that reveal a glimpse of the view from the place where the painting sees us.

-- Sharon Mizota

**David Kordansky Gallery**, 3143 S. La Cienega Blvd., Unit A, L.A., (310) 558-3030, through March 24. Closed Sundays and Mondays. [www.davidkordanskygallery.com](http://www.davidkordanskygallery.com)



*Photos, from top: Pietro Roccasalva's "You Never Look at Me From the Place I See You," 2012. Credit: From the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photograph by Brian Forrest. Pietro Roccasalva's "Il Traviatore," 2011. Credit: From the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photograph by Brian Forrest.*

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Griffin, Jonathan "Through the Looking Glass," *Frieze*, March 2010, p.84-89.





# Through the Looking Glass

From *tableaux vivants* to Photoshop, the philosophical and optical enquiries of **Pietro Roccasalva** inevitably return to painting by *Jonathan Griffin*



Pietro Roccasalva says he doesn't believe in chronologies, at least not where his work is concerned; every image or idea that arises is the reflection of another that came just before it or a premonition of one to follow. He likes to think of his oeuvre as ready-formed – a magnificent hall of mirrors.

Nevertheless, once in a while, things just appear from the ether. In 2002, the Italian artist had a vision. I ask him if this happens often. 'No, not often,' he replies.<sup>1</sup> But there it was: a church, seen from the air, its mighty cupola replaced by the turning dome of a giant lemon-squeezer. To be fair, it hadn't come from nowhere. The Milan-based artist had been working in the deconsecrated Chiesa San Francesco, in Como, Italy, on a residency. Roccasalva imagined the building pressing juice from giant, ineffable fruit, and retaining the liquid in its nave and transepts. *Giocondità* (2002) is a digital

animation of this majestic image: to the sound of a marching band, the virtual camera swoops out and around the immaculate white church while its lemon-squeezer dome revolves slowly above it. One day, he says, he would like to build this church for real. I don't think he's joking.

Roccasalva showed the video along with a related drawing in a wooden-walled booth inside the church, in an installation he titled *Messaggerie Musicali* (Musical Messages, 2002). He refers to his installations as *situazione d'opera* or 'worksites' – open stages in which disparate elements converse with each other, and are very likely to be reconfigured by the artist at a later date.<sup>2</sup> A year later, he found himself returning to a single photograph of this installation: the back of the booth framed by one of the church's Romanesque arches. He made a precise

pastel drawing from the photograph, as he often does with documentation of his installations. In the upper section of the image, a circular window, flooded with light, seemed to the artist more and more like a single eye, peering back at him; he decided to plunge through it. He cut away the circle in the paper, and constructed an installation in a derelict hotel bathroom titled *Jockey Full of Bourbon* (2003), in which the window became a peep-hole through the wall on which the drawing was hung. Visitors were able to peer through the hole to see another bathroom, with the inverse layout to the one in which they were standing. At the centre of this image, however, perched a brightly coloured bird looking into a mirror. Its reflection stared straight back: a stuffed owl, painted in the gaudy colours of a scarlet macaw.

**Roccasalva has said: ‘I believe that the only chance for painting is to recuperate its power of simulacrum.’**

In Classical mythology, the owl is the companion to the Greek goddess Athena, and her later Latin counterpart Minerva; both are goddesses of wisdom. The parrot, on the other hand, has long been thought of as a trickster: a canny imitator of human speech, which it repeats without sense or discretion. In contrast to the owl’s penumbral associations, the macaw has been linked – in South American cultures – to fire and solar energy. Both birds were believed to be ‘psychopomps’, escorting souls from the land of the living to the land of the dead. Roccasalva refers to the bird in his installation as ‘a philosopher dressing itself as a sophist’, an analogy that reminds us that ‘sophist’ derives from the ancient Greek *sophistes* – a professional wise man or rhetorician (a role not so different from that of the contemporary artist). Wisdom and fantasy are not so easily disentangled.

Roccasalva has said: ‘I believe that the power of simulacrum.’<sup>3</sup> Despite frequent forays into sculpture, installation, digital modelling, film, performance and drawing, Roccasalva’s work is always essentially about painting. If he could, he says, he would only paint, but a bubbling excess of content and ambition seems to make this impossible. He describes his working process as ‘the opposite of collage’: instead of incorporating external elements into the picture, he allows internal elements to spill out. He is fascinated by painting’s potential to fix movement, to stop time, to bring about a permanent death in something living, and the contradictions that all of these things imply. He understands the term ‘simulacrum’ not as Jean Baudrillard defined it, but rather as Pierre Klossowski used it, to mean ‘not a simulated tableau but rather a tableau materially simulating an interior vision’.<sup>4</sup> Roccasalva frequently turns to his own conception of the ‘intelligent artifice’: that is, an active reflection of the real that is in no way diminished by its unreality. For the artist, a tableau might equally be a painting or a drawing – the difference for him is merely a matter of the medium’s permanence. Both painting and drawing function throughout his work, in his words, as ‘microchips’ or ‘processors’, orchestrating the elements that spin in orbit around them.<sup>5</sup>

Following the installation of *Jockey Full of Bourbon*, Roccasalva took a photograph through the spy-hole in the drawing; in his image, we see the owl-parrot in the mirror and the decorated ceiling of the church, but also the light reflected on the glass of the picture’s frame, and the shadowy outline of the photographer himself. Spatially, the compositional elements are almost too complex to grasp simultaneously. Roccasalva then made a pastel drawing from the photograph, and used it as the nucleus of a tableau vivant in which a woman sat facing the drawing, while a young girl rested her head on the woman’s shoulder, coolly regarding visitors to the gallery.

Why, then, was the girl dressed so strangely, with a thicket of tangled hair and alarmingly long fingernails? Anyone raised in Germany will recognise her as a female incarnation of *Der Struwwelpeter* – the titular character from Heinrich Hoffmann’s 1845 collection of children’s tales, who neglected to brush his hair or trim his fingernails. The unkempt character’s change of gender, and her distinctly entropic relationship with her well-groomed mother, both demonstrate that reflections, neither in art nor in life, occur solely at an optical level. The installation from 2005 was titled *The Oval Portrait*. A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947, implying a further host of associations. ‘The Oval Portrait’ is the title of a short story written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1842, describing a painter who creates such an exquisitely lifelike portrait of his beautiful young wife that he steals her soul, and inadvertently kills her as he puts the finishing touches to his work. Roccasalva’s tableau vivant, in contrast, employs two living people as an art work. The second half of the title repeats, verbatim, the title of a Jeff Wall photograph from 1990 in which children sit, rapt, around a woman on whose knee rests a ventriloquist’s dummy. Once again we encounter an insensible object seemingly come to life, though frozen by the static composition of Wall’s posed photograph, and reanimated by its translation into Roccasalva’s living picture.



*La Giocondità*  
2002  
Digital animation still  
Working in the deconsecrated Chiesa San Francesco, in Como, Italy, on a residency. Roccasalva imagined the building pressing juice from giant, ineffable fruit, and retaining the liquid in its nave and transepts. He



*Messagerie Musicali (Musical Messages)*, 2002  
Wood, pastel on paper, laser print mounted on Perspex and digital animation  
Installation view  
Chiesa San Francesco, Como



Far left:  
Jockey Full of Bourbon  
2005, Digital colour print  
37x30 cm

Left:  
The Oval Portrait. A Ventriloquist at a Birthday  
Party in October 1947  
2005, Tableau vivant, pastel on paper, panel  
Installation view, Villa delle Rose, Bologna

Above:  
Jockey Full of Bourbon II  
2006, Neon, resin, painted feathers,  
microphone stand, acrylic on paper on  
forex, mirror  
Installation view, Johnen+Schöttle, Cologne  
La Giocondità.

When Roccasalva showed *Jockey Full of Bourbon* in 2006, and a year later at Manifesta, the hole in the drawing had been blocked up, and, instead, a tube of white neon snaked out from it into the gallery, sweeping twice around a column before returning to the ground near the drawing. On the end perched the little owl. Only the most observant viewer would have noticed that the trajectory of the neon precisely followed the movement of the viewpoint around the church in his animation *La Giocondità* (2002). It was, in effect, a journey of optical enquiry played in reverse, the drawing throwing its gaze out into the room.

Jacques Lacan famously advanced the idea of vision as a reciprocal process between a subject and the object of the gaze, a theory that emerged from his work with infants' relationships to mirrors. 'You never look at me from the place I see you,' read the violet neon letters in Roccasalva's installation Z (2008). The complaint was, initially, Lacan's, who wrote that, 'in the dialectic of the eye and the gaze [...] there is no coincidence, but on the contrary, a lure'.<sup>6</sup> In Roccasalva's installation, the neon sentence turned halfway through and played backwards, right to left. The corrected letters could be read in a mirror on the opposite side of the room.

In between the neon letters and their reflection, three uniformed football referees guarded a stack of square, black-bordered paper, on top of which sat a crusty orange sphere, about the size of a football. The object was, in fact, a massive arancino, a Sicilian snack made

of fried rice, and the printed sheets of paper referred to the black-edged obituary notices traditionally posted in Italian town squares. The three men resembled one another: in fact, one was the exhibition's curator, the other his twin brother, and the third their father. They supervised what Roccasalva conceived as the slow collapse of an edible sun: not so much a 'still life' but, as it is termed in Italian, a *natura morta*. (Elsewhere in Roccasalva's iconography, the sun has been codified as a red vinyl record, a canister of film and a red plastic bucket.) Before entering the room, the viewer passed a gilt-framed, near-black monochrome in the hallway, titled *D'après La Tempesta* (After the Tempest, 2006). Working with a restorer, he had managed to isolate every colour in Giorgione's ominous but persistently enigmatic painting *La Tempesta* (The Tempest, 1506–8), and then mixed them together to create an even darkness. This was Roccasalva's depiction of permanent night, the end of time, the absolute future.



Right:  
*The Good Woman*  
2005  
Lacquered wood, painted clay  
sculpture, pastel on paper on  
panel  
10x180x180 cm

That an object can gaze back at a subject is a fascinating conundrum for Roccasalva, and one that continues to inform not just his understanding of space, but also of time. 'History', he says, 'is only an illusion of perspective.' A related spatial analogy he often turns to is that of the reverse perspective found in Christian icons. As the art historian Clemena Antonova has argued, the primary characteristic binding all icons is the way their makers organize space in direct opposition to post-Renaissance linear perspective.<sup>7</sup> Heads, for instance, are unusually round, as we are shown their sides as well as their fronts, and thrones often grow wider as they recede. In such cases, the viewer is not credited with a disinterested, detached relation to the image (as if seeing the world through a window), but is assumed to belong in the same pictorial space – and thus becomes the focus of the image, rather than vice-versa.





*The Skeleton Key*  
*(His Latest Flame)*  
2009

Oil on canvas, turntable,  
synthetic voice recorded  
on LP

Installation view at  
'Fare Mondi Making  
Worlds', 53rd Venice  
Biennale





a window), but is assumed to belong in the same pictorial space – and thus becomes the focus of the image, rather than vice-versa. Similarly, says Roccasalva, the spectator is always ‘an intruder’ into the worksite. According to the artist, the only way to approach his art is to surrender oneself to rapimento, a word that translates as ‘rapture’ or ‘ravishment’, but also as ‘kidnapping’ – in either sense, the viewer is the passive agent in the exchange.

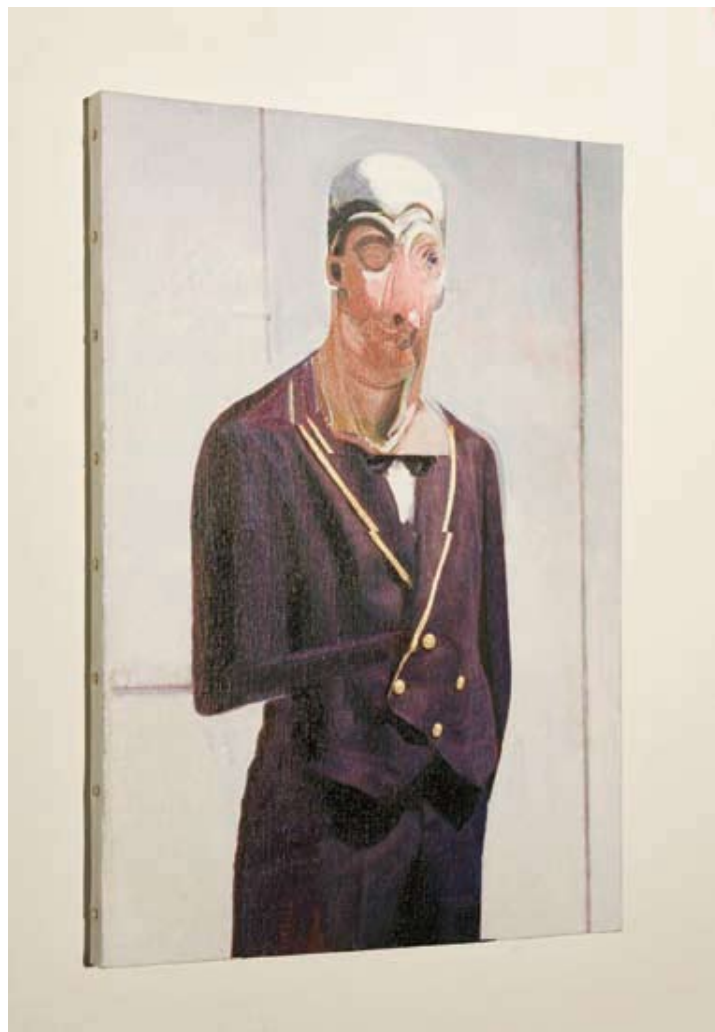
## The sun, a symbol the artist consistently returns to, is subject to a whole slew of perceptual antinomies.

These dynamics have implications for representation that spill over into the temporal as well as the spatial. In icon painting, the object is not ‘represented’ but ‘re-presented’: Christ’s face, for instance, becomes Christ himself, present in the room and staring back at us.<sup>8</sup> Antonova goes further still, asserting that reverse perspective, through which we see many sides of an object in a single instant, is in fact a demonstration of God’s own timelessness, simulating the way He sees the world: ‘To a God who transcends the temporal dimension, events of human history exist simultaneously, all at once.’<sup>9</sup>

Many of Roccasalva’s paintings, such as *Intelligent Artifice(r)* (1999–2003) and the portrait featured in his installation *The Good Woman* (2005), recall icons. Shown at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009 ‘*The Skeleton Key*’ (2006–9) series of portraits feature a figure modelled on Ted the Bellhop, Tim Roth’s character from the film *Four*

### Top, above and right: *A Good Man is Hard to Find*

2008  
Oil on canvas, 16mm film projection, terracotta basin, table  
Installation views  
Art Statements,  
Art 39 Basel



*Rooms* (1995). In these, Roccasalva connects the forms of Orthodox Christian art with Cubism and cut-and-paste Photoshop collage. While he may be heedless of historical chronology, he is deeply concerned with what he calls ‘the present of the past’. For him, the problems of representation that Modernist artists began to grapple with around the start of the 20th century are questions that still beg to be answered. As William Faulkner famously observed: ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’<sup>10</sup>

Roccasalva himself quotes not Faulkner but Pink Floyd, in the lyrics from their song ‘*Time*’ (1973): ‘And you run and you run / To catch up with the sun / But it’s sinking / Racing around / To come up behind you again.’<sup>11</sup> The sun, a symbol so consistently returned to by the artist, is subject to a whole slew of perceptual antinomies: although the gravitational centre of our planetary system, seen from outer space it is just another smallish star. Its reflected light is essential for vision, but we can’t look at it directly. We set our clocks by it, but its birth and death effectively mark the beginning and end of human time. For Roccasalva, the entire universe is a vast mise-en-abyme, bounded by nothingness and gradually moving towards disintegration. In this system, the artist, like an owl, a referee or an elevator operator, is a

psychopomp, burrowing through dimensions and ferrying objects and ideas between the living and the dead. As such, he may be constantly chasing his tail, but he is compelled by the persistent notion that making art might be the one activity with the power to reverse the process – to contravene the laws of time, to preserve the decaying and bring life to the dead.

*Jonathan Griffin is a writer living in London, UK. He edited Grizedale Arts: Adding Complexity to Confusion* (2009), published by Grizedale Books, Ambleside, Cumbria.

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all comments attributed to Pietro Roccasalva are taken from an interview between the author and artist, Milan, December 2009

<sup>2</sup> Situazione d’opera translates as ‘work situations’, but ‘worksites’ is more appropriate, as used in an interview between the artist and Edoardo Gnemmi, in Alessandro Rabottini ed., Pietro Roccasalva, 2008, JRP-Ringier, Zurich, p.53

<sup>3</sup> Egidio Coccimiglio and Kelly Woods, In Geneva No One Can Hear You Scream, 2008, JRP-Ringier, Zurich

<sup>4</sup> Ian James, Pierre Klossowski: The Persistence of a Name, 2000, Legenda, Oxford, p.165

<sup>5</sup> Alessandro Rabottini, op. cit., Pietro Roccasalva, p.53

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1973, published in English 1978, Hogarth Press, London, p.102

<sup>7</sup> Clemena Antonova, Space, Time and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God, 2010, Ashgate, Farnham

<sup>8</sup> Bruno Latour made the distinction between ‘representation’ and ‘re-presentation’ in his essay ‘Opening One Eye and Closing the Other ... A Note on Some Religious Paintings’ in Gordon Fife and John Law eds., Picturing Power: Visual Depiction and Social Relations, 1988, Routledge, London, p.31

<sup>9</sup> Antonova, op. cit., p.103

<sup>10</sup> William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun, 1951, Random House, New York

<sup>11</sup> Pink Floyd, The Dark Side of the Moon, 1973, Harvest/Capitol, London

CASEY KAPLAN  
525 WEST 21ST STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10011  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Sharp, Chris, *The Art of Tomorrow*, Berlin: Distanz Verlag, 2010, pp. 258-261



# PIETRO ROCCASALVA

1970 born in Modica. Italy, lives and works in Milan. Italy

**2009** 53rd international Art  
Exhibition / La Biennale de Venezia  
/ Making Worlds

**2008** Manifesta 7, European Bien-  
nial of Contemporary Art

[www.galerieartconcept.com](http://www.galerieartconcept.com)  
[www.galleriazero.it](http://www.galleriazero.it)  
[www.iels.be](http://www.iels.be)  
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*The Skeleton Key*, 2006  
Soft pastel on paper on Forex  
48.5x58cm  
*The Skeleton Key II*, 2007  
Soft pastel on paper on Forex  
70 x 50cm

*The Skelaton Key III*, 2007  
Pastel on paper on Forex  
147x189cm

*The Skeleton Key IV*, 2007  
(part of the Installation  
*The Silent Woman*, 2007)  
Acrylic on paper on Forex  
39x50cm

Pietro Roccasalva thinks of himself primarily as a painter, and yet the artist's work hardly abides by any of the usual laws of painting or even art-making. Picture, if you can, a kind of rhizomatic Matryoshka doll, whose contents are liable to open up and progressively flow out in any given direction, and you begin to get a sense of how Roccasalva works. It is tempting to refer to his practice as 'intuitive', but that would be misleading. Rather, it is a question of an almost dizzying, continually evolving internal logic that proceeds in one mutational mise-en-abyme after another. Thus, if he is known to work indiscriminately with installation, sculpture, photography, film, performance and drawing, in addition to painting, that is because the above-mentioned logic unpredictably determines the artist's next move, which often strays far beyond the remit of mere paint on canvas.

Take, for example, the work *Jockey Full of Bourbon* (2006), which consisted of an installation in a bathroom featuring a peephole that looked out onto an exact replica of the bathroom on the other side, with, however, an owl perched on a stick in front of the mirror staring back at the viewer. Originally inspired by a circular window from an earlier multi-media installation inside a church, *Jockey Full of Bourbon* itself went on, by some pirouette of personal logic, to mutate into the tableau vivant *The Oval Portrait. A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947* (2005), which consisted of a couple, a woman and a child, sitting in front of a photo of the original church window, which now featured an image of the owl in the bathroom as seen through the peephole. As for Roccasalva's paintings, which are heavily influenced by an interest in early Christian icons and the graphic linear style of such compatriot forebears as Gino de Dominicis, their figurative nature complements his strange and inimitably organic practice, making it a quasi-mystical affair.

*Chris Sharp*



*Jockey Full of Bourbon II, 2006*

Neon, resin and handpainted feathers, microphone pole, acrylic on papezr on Forex, mirror  
290 x 680 x 580 cm  
Installation view, Johnen + Schottle  
Cologne

*Jockey Full of Bourbon, 2006*

Pastel on paper on Forex  
33 x 45 cm





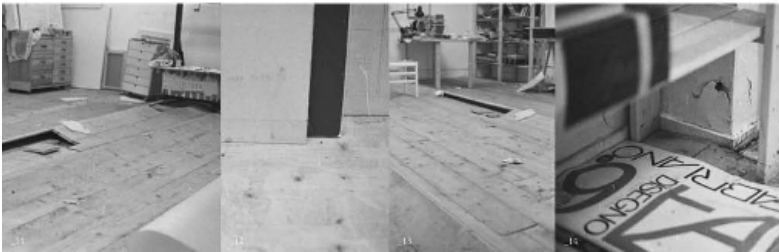
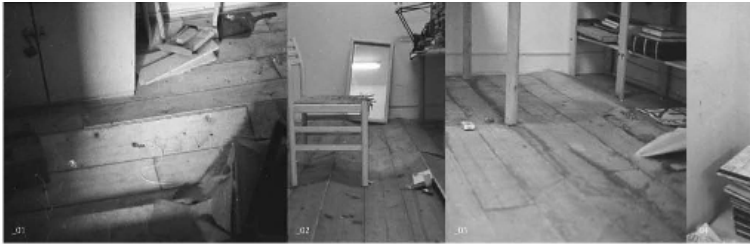
Z, 2008  
Tableau Vivant, offset print on paper,  
fried rice ball, oil on canvas, neon  
Dimensions variable  
Installation view,  
Park Avenue Armory, New York

*The Oval Portrait. A Ventriloquist at a  
Birthday Party in October 1947*, 2005  
Soft pastel on paper on panel  
91 x 150 cm



CASEY KAPLAN  
525 WEST 21ST STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10011  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Daneri, Anna, "Skeletons in the Closet," *Mousse*, Issue 17,  
February-March 2009, pp. 98-99



## Skeletons \_ *in the closet*

## Pietro *Roccasalva*

I've never seen Pietro's house, it might not even exist... To me, Pietro's house is his studio. When he's working he can stay shut up there for weeks on end, without answering the phone, avoiding all contact with the outside world. That's how I imagine him, focused on his thoughts, reading, taking notes, and painting with the precision of a medieval scribe.

And like in a game of mirrors, life is reflected in the work that wraps around itself, as can only happen in Pietro's workshop, moving from reference to reference as if along a spiral. But these are never literal references, as might appear from the images that accompany us here, showing the studio after a flood; they are "pregnancies" clottings of sign and meaning that only superficially seem what they are not. The parrot in many pieces is actually an owl trying to avoid recognition, the photographs are often actually pencil portraits or paintings, snapshots of a catastrophe instead depict a moment of happiness, becoming a Raft of the Medusa whose sense of tragedy is capsized...It's not just images that can be deceptive, therefore, but things themselves, or houses...So perhaps it's not so accurate to say that they represent us, because we could be quite different or want to conceal what we are not. It is a question of language, not of position...

"(...) it is in vain that we say we see what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendor is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequencial elements of of syntax" (Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Knopf Publishing Group, 1994, p.9.

The skeleton poking out of Pietro's closet is an old roll of film that contains, among other things, the fourteen photos in question, originally meant for an accident report. They "magically" number fourteen, no more, no less but are not the stations of the Cross... the mounting numbers accompanying the images instead refer to the fourteen mountains in a world over 8000 meters high, and represent Pietro by subtraction: "often the space you're in has nothing to do with what you are; I was everywhere, I was recording a period of euphoria".

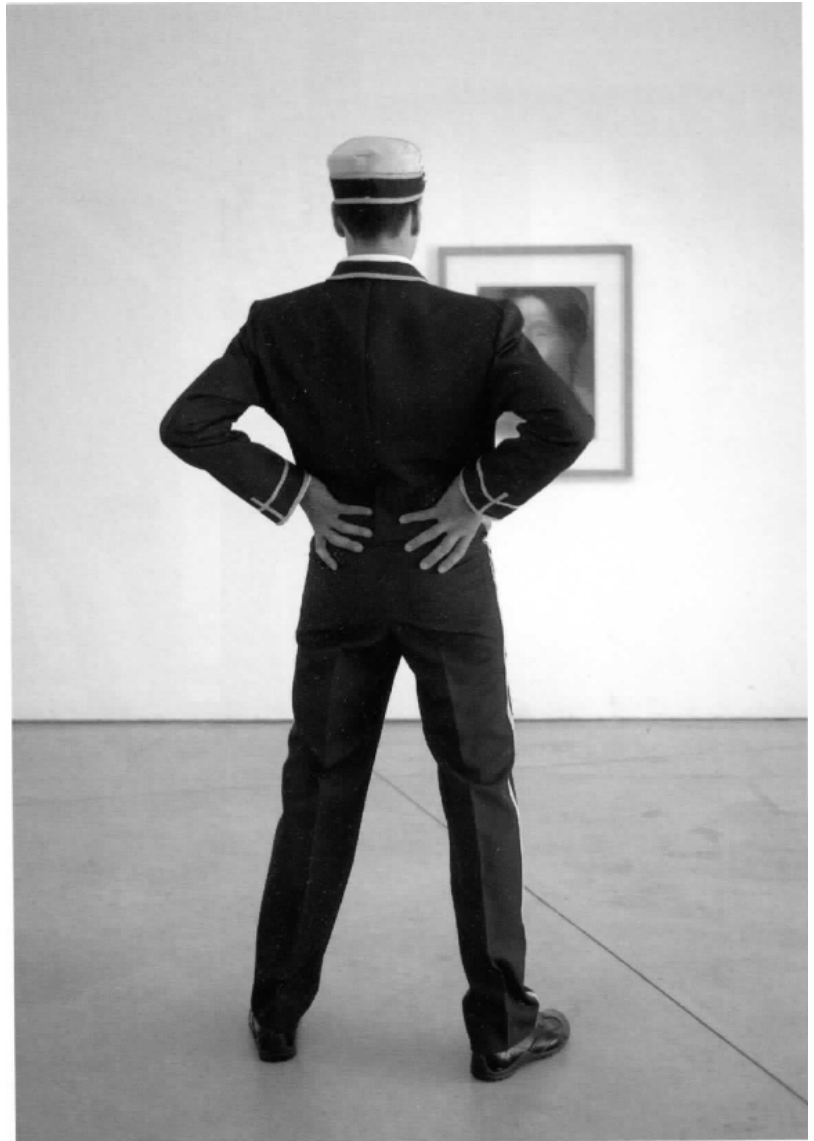
CASEY KAPLAN  
525 WEST 21ST STREET  
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TEL +1 212 645 7335  
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WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

## Pietro Roccasalva

Born in Modica Italy,  
in 1970. Lives and works  
in Milan, Italy

Pietro Roccasalva's artistic research is studded with a wide range of references, from popular culture to the history of art, from ancient philosophy to cinema. Owls disguised as parrots, gigantic Sicilian rice croquettes, lemon-squeezers turned into church domes, and stilllives in which bread takes the form of a skull are all found in his symbolically laden, visionary, enigmatic world. Different media, including video, photography, sculpture, and performance, are combined with painting, giving rise to composite installations that the artist defines as "work situations." This expression summarizes the possibility of making visible the various stages during which the pictorial image is manifested. In Roccasalva's methodology, every work triggers and nourishes another work; his is a constant, generative process of transformation. *The Skeleton Key* (2006-2009) is a series of paintings that revolve around the figure of a lift attendant, who appeared for the first time in Roccasalva's art in a 2004 performance. Inspired by a character from the film *Four Rooms* (1995), this individual embodies a condition of perennial change, one in which, despite moving, you make no progress. Through continuous overlays, the image is molded, distorted, and fragmented, using a language inspired by the techniques of digital elaboration to achieve a new morphing. In its metamorphosis, the figure's face seems to enclose the paradox and absurdity of human existence, forced into senseless movement. [CB]

"*Pietro Roccasalva*, 2009 Venice Biennial (exh. cat.), 2009, p. 144"



Pietro Roccasalva, *O.H.*, 2004. Tableau vivant.  
Photo Mario Di Paolo. Courtesy the artist, and ZERO..., Milan

# BELIEF SYSTEMS

*Alessandro Rabottini connects with the complex installations of Pietro Roccasalva, taking a mind-boggling journey through the many narratives of this artist's work.*

What kind of political value can hermetism have today? The work of Pietro Roccasalva, an Italian artist born in Modica in 1970, who now lives and works in Milan, asks this question in his work, despite its apparent distance from contingent reality.

A vast arsenal of media, including painting, drawing, sculpture, and the tableau vivant, is adopted in Roccasalva's complex installations, a series of mises en scene somehow connected to one another. While they appear to be 'closed systems', they nevertheless reveal a strict analogy with the structure of medieval allegories.

This kind of similarity is revealed on a deeper level than an iconographic one, although Roccasalva harbors a taste for the bizarre, mysterious and grotesque that recalls gothic imagery and crowded copulas of men, animals and mechanical extensions of the body. And it is precisely that deep level of relationship that connects his images with the texts and meanings that both inspire and predate them. It is a relationship of a substitutive and substantial nature: the images occupy a specific space and have a precise meaning within a broader system in which they exist as substantial substitute. That is the system of allegory.

Pietro Roccasalva's installations are often characterised by autonomous worlds filled with figures and presences that refer to traditions and specific iconographical, philosophical and literary mythologies, ranging from ancient rhetoric to cynical thought, from Christian mysticism to the moral doctrine underlying the development

Rabottini, Alessandro, "Pietro Roccasalva: Belief Systems." *MAP*. Number 17, Spring 2009. pp, 68-73

of the still life in Europe from the 17th century. They follow a trajectory that traces the history of western painting, from the Byzantine icon to Pierre Klossowski, identifying a mythical aura in the images. It is here that beliefs are deposited and revealed.

It is not by chance that many of Roccasalva's works are developed around original and generative myths centering on time, as in his frequent reference to the image of Zurvan, the primitive divinity that symbolises the origin of infinite time and space in the universe of Persian mythology. While in Greek mythology the god of time Cronos is driven by an insatiable cannibalistic appetite that makes him eat all his progeny: Zurvan is driven by a feeling of indifference for what is good and what is bad, placing him in the Nietzschean tradition of time as an eternal cycle.

In conceiving his work as an entire body, the parts of which are inextricably interconnected, Roccasalva adopts the image of time as cyclical and projects the spiral structure generated by this doctrine onto his working method, producing a group of works that occasionally appear like progressive germinations, like moments in a broader conceptual architecture.

In just a few years, Roccasalva has produced a series of exhibitions and installations which he defines as *situazioni d'opera* (work situations). In these, his very personal iconographic repertoire finds expression. That which is a sculpture within a specific configuration, becomes, in a following incarnation, a photographic image that will then serve as a model for a pastel or an oil painting, until the latter acts as a point of departure for the development of a tableau vivant. This system accords to the generative principal that reinforces the idea that iconographic invention is a 'consequential' process throughout which tradition is expressed by fractures and moments of continuity.



Roccasalva defines *siruzione d'opera* as a group of 'objects, furnishings, audiovisuals, actions, tableaux vivants, etc. that cohabit with other paintings and decline all the phases of painterly creation'. This is the reason why the artist, in order to exemplify his own working method.. refers to the gothic image of the cathedral as a building site where generations succeed one another in the construction of an architecture that transcends and survives them. It absorbs the centuries like a mechanism.

The 'generative' and transformational methodology at the foundation of Roccasalva's work, recalls two movements related to the dynamics of 'creation'. both within the history of art and mythology. While the architecture of gothic cathedrals is configured as a succession of formal aggregations layered one on top of the other over time. so it is that many primitive narratives and religious texts are the result of actions such as the germination or expulsion of a body by or from another. Eve, for example, was generated from one of Adam's ribs, while Cronus' tyranny begins with his castrating his father Uranus. Cannibalism and incest are also constants in Nordic and Greco-Roman cosmogony.

If we go back to our point of departure. hermetism, how can we possibly interpret this type of attitude as profoundly political, when it may easily be defined as 'hermetic' when placed in relation to a more general contemporary methodology for producing messages and meanings' Roccasalva's art appears to be a complex ritual of evoking and reintroducing images and meanings that lie just beneath the surface of history. infesting it like formal metastases and conceptual fantasies.

In particular, he appears to operate a procedure of perversion over these images through the expedient of parody. The Christian iconography of maternity. for example. is implicated in a tableau vivant entitled 'The Oval Portrait', 2005. 'A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947', is reproduced as an eponymous oil painting later that same year. Here, the motif of the divinity generated by immaculate conception which is made mundane and carnal in relation to birth. is inverted: the child. having assumed the appearance of Struwelpeter (the character, who refuses to cut his nails and hair, created by German psychiatrist and author Heinrich Hoffmann in his eponymous book, 1945) becomes a significant vector of the principal of entropy. It no longer incarnates the future salvation of humanity; on the contrary. it prefigures its end and makes it visible.

Analogously. the photographic work 'Study for Z' and the tableau vivant 'Z', both 2007, which served as models for the soft pastel 'Untitled', 2008, sees the Trinitarian image of Zurvan and his twin sons Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu (both divinities and respectively benign and malign) trivialised in the impersonation by two true twins and their biological father. all dressed in football referee uniforms. The work copied is Andrej Rublev's famous 'Holy Trinity', 1410-1470. In Roccasalva's version, the mythic image of the cosmological battle for dominion over creation has been cast as a parody represented by the referees. who are intended as symbols of an analogous form of dominion over time. lasting for the length of a match



Study for *Il Traviatore*, 2008, graphite and tempera on paper

The idea at the foundation of Pietro Roccasalva's work. that is. this history of shapes and representations coinciding with a historiography of the survival of mythologies and ideologies that these carry in a continuous alternation of incarnations that escape both rationality and secularisation, as well as the history of the modernist avant-garde, are doubly rooted.

So, on the one hand all his work is imbued with readings of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. We may also add Carmela Bene's work on tradition and the translation of the text for theatre. thus greatly indebted to postmodern theories that view the character in a text as an arena for projection and interpretations that build it in the act itself of its reception.

On the other, Roccasalva makes use of a structure conceptually close to this philosophical tradition but distant in time. Thus, ancient rhetoric, intended as a method that is able to individuate both a principal of truth and its contrary, is consequently useful for invalidating a meaning through the same complex, extreme and formal elaboration.

And it is precisely this form of scepticism towards any concept that lies at the heart of this artistic process. It is a scepticism that. in order to express itself. does not strike at the object of its examination,



'Z', 2008, tableau vivant, offset print on paper, fried rice ball, oil on canvas, neon installation view, Park Avenue Armory, New York, 2008

or the religious. philosophical. scientific or political systems that pretend to produce systems of truth. but at their own reproductive system, the iconic and visual representation. While this artist's work adopts ideological discourse as its polemic subject, it is also true that the method used to deactivate this discourse is paradoxical: it is unhinged by its own exacerbation, by a funereal baroque and hyperbolic mise en scene of its primary instrument of legitimisation which is representation.

Regarding his most recently elected medium, painting, Roccasalva adopts the same methodology used by ancient rhetoric to deconstruct meanings, starting with their own, paradoxical validation.

At this point is it possible to maintain that an experience so rooted in tradition and erudition, and that presupposes detailed knowledge of shapes and their meaning, is intimately inspired by an emancipating finality?

In his text for the first monograph on the artist, Barry Schwabsky cites Roccasalva's frequent identification with the sophist Gorgias and places his practice between 'art as illusion [and] art as truth. Or rather, as the truth

about illusion. or as an illusion that tells the truth. Mystification and demystification. lunacy and lucidity, illness and cure'. Which leads one to consider the centrality of the concept of 'simulacrum' in the entire works of this artist. understood in it's etymological sense as the origin of mimetic and pictorial representation starting with the appearance of a dead person.

This is why, upon examination of the gloomy and sceptical nature of Roccasalva's mises en scene, it can be useful to connect his practice to a tradition evoked by Gary Tinterow with regard to Bacon: 'A proponent of an existentialist reading of Bacon's work, O'Doherty wrote that Bacon's 'is the first major expression in paint of a sensibility [Sadism?] that runs from de Sade, through Rimbaud and Genet-', adding that Jean Genet is probably the best comparison since, 'Bacon is attached to a style of ceremonious presentation that allows him to extend the definition of life to include the underworld of rape, suicide and murder'. It is the ceremonious staging that occurs in the work, the luxurious or formal backdrop, that allows for the depictions of such horrors.'



*The Oval Portrait. A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947, 2005*  
Tableau vivant, soft pastel on paper on panel, installation view Vila delle Rose, Bologna, 2005



*Myrrhina*, 2008  
 floor deawing, fried rice ball, neon bijoux, pastel on paper on forex,  
 installation view, 50 Moons of Saturn, Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Rivoli

The sensitivity for a mise en scene that celebrates its own deconsecration, connects Roccasalva's method of construction not to the medieval allegories and ephemeral baroque displays which confirmed the principals they represented. but to a logic of subversion that is the anthropological structure of the carnival. and which we find again in the expressive value of derision within the writing of authors such as Antonin Artaud.

If we take the example of the many texts painted or drawn by Roccasalva. this discourse may be understood on a less obvious level with respect to that of his multimedia installations, in which all the elements are often placed in an intense relationship with the painterly aspect of the work. The motif of the head is an iconographic constant throughout his repertory and brings to mind both the frontal Quality of Byzantine painting and the enigmas in the painting of Gino De Dominicis. even if it would be more opportune in this regard to cite the memory of Brancusi's forms sellied in the painting of De Dominicis.

But the integrity that characterises the approach to form that runs from Byzantine icons all the way to Giorgio De Chirico's mannequins is. in this case, subject to a parodis-

tic decomposition and an exaggeration. a deformation of physiognomies that are hypertrophied or hypotrophied as the case may be. that look like a surgical derivation of mannerism.

And what is a story that runs from the Byzantine icon through the mannerism of the Catholic Reform if it is not an adventure of canons and corruption.doctrine and transgression?

*Alessandro Rabottini is cheif curator of GAMeC Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Bergamo.*

CASEY KAPLAN  
525 WEST 21ST STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10011  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Rosenberg, Karen, "Cheeky Hipsters in the Halls of Victorian Brigadiers," *The New York Times*, February 22, 2008

# The New York Times



A visitor examines Carl Andre's "Passport" at the Andrea Rosen booth at the Art Show.  
Suzanne De Chillo / The New York Times

By KAREN ROSENBERG

The Park Avenue Armory has been undergoing a striking makeover overseen by a dedicated conservancy. Last fall it was the backdrop for a performance involving a fleet of motorcycles by the emerging artist Aaron Young; next month it will serve as a satellite location for the Whitney Biennial. This weekend old and new coexist happily there at the Art Show, the annual fair held by the Art Dealers Association of America.

The event, now in its 20th year, offers works dating from the 19th century to the present. Yet more and more, the emphasis is on contemporary art. In addition to 18 single-artist shows spread over the 70 dealers' booths, this year's fair has a separate area devoted to video art and three site-specific installations by contemporary artists (for which no admission fee is required). The artists in that section, Spencer Finch, Lisi Raskin and Pietro Roccasalva, were selected by Tom Eccles, executive director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, and the independent curator Trevor Smith. The videos, by Joan Jonas, Mike Smith, Paper Rad and many others, were chosen by Bard graduate students from the archives of Electronic Arts Intermix.

Even with these credentials the Art Show could never be mistaken for the Armory Show, which next month will fill Pier 94 with dealers from London, Zurich, Beijing and elsewhere. In the Park Avenue fair secondary-market "classic contemporary" works drive much of the business, although the single-artist shows and thematic exhibits lend a dignified air to the dealmaking.

A large trove of early John Baldessari (from the mid-1970s) at Marian Goodman is a treat. Likewise the late Lucio Fontana's that fill Sperone Westwater's booth. A piece of punctured copper from Fontana's "New York" series of the early '60s is at once seductive and, with its jagged edges, threatening. Another memorably textured painting, from the '50s, features shards of milky glass affixed to burlap.

At the more contemporary fairs, new work often appears to have been rushed from the studio, but Amy Sillman's chromatically exuberant paintings at Sikkema Jenkins have an appealing freshness. The armory setting does not do much for Olafur Eliasson, whose touring retrospective comes to the Museum of Modern Art and P.S. 1 in Queens in April. At Bonakdar his atomlike sculptures — composed of mirrored rings and intersecting discs — look more trinketlike than transcendent.

Sculptors fare better at Andrea Rosen, with a sensuous Robert Morris felt piece, and D'Amelio Terras, where works by Cornelia Parker, Christian Holstad and others share a crafty magpie aesthetic. The continuing popularity of ceramics is suggested by Andrew Lord's lumpy vessels at Barbara Gladstone and Lynda Benglis's glaze-splashed knots at Cheim & Read.

Painting dominates, as always, but several photography dealers vie for attention. Tina Barney's colorful photographs of people in upscale surroundings line the royal-blue walls of Janet Borden's booth. Among them are "The Trustee and the Curator," which shows two distinguished gentlemen in a gallery of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The David Frankel gallery of San Francisco has a selection of photographs recently released by the estate of Richard Avedon, including his famous images of Warhol's surgery-scarred torso and a subdued Marilyn Monroe.

Those seeking a modern rather than contemporary fix might enjoy the Calder sculptures and mobiles at O'Hara's booth, the Picasso still life at Feigen or Marsden Hartley's portrait of a muscular sunbather at Babcock. Michael Werner has devoted an entire booth to visceral earthtone paintings and sculptures by the School of Paris member Jean Fautrier.

The New York School is celebrated at Ameringer & Yohe's booth, a tribute to André Emmerich, a founding member and two-time president of the Art Dealers Association of America. Works by abstract artists in Emmerich's circle, including a sculpture by Anthony Caro and canvases by Helen Frankenthaler and Hans Hoffmann, are displayed alongside archival photographs taken by the dealer.



After the congestion of the fair, the spacious site-specific installations organized by Mr. Eccles and Mr. Smith come as a relief. Spencer Finch's drawings of atmospheric conditions around his studio are swallowed up by the Armory's 19th-century interiors, but he also transforms a small room at the top of a narrow staircase with light filters that approximate the portion of the spectrum visible to bees.

The thrill of the secret chamber gets a sinister twist from Lisi Raskin's command station in the Colonel's Room of the armory. With control panels, surveillance monitors and a red emergency phone constructed from paper and paste, it's pointedly outdated cold-war child's play.

In the most ambitious installation Mr. Roccasalva, who is Italian-born and works in Madrid, has created a tableau vivant in the armory's elegantly appointed Mary Diver Room. Twin brothers and their father, all dressed as referees, stand around a soccer-ball-size "arancino" (a Sicilian rice ball) placed atop a waist-high stack of paper. Across the hall a muddy-looking monochrome painting has been inserted among the armory's portraits of uniformed brigadiers.

Mr. Roccasalva's stated references (to Giorgione, Jacques Lacan and Felix Gonzales-Torres, among others) don't quite add up. Still, this is the sort of nationally and architecturally conscious project one might expect to see in a Venice pavilion rather than on Park Avenue.

Soccer anyone? Referees with a rice ball in a tableau vivant by Pietro Roccasalva in the Mary Diver Room at the Armory.  
Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

CASEY KAPLAN  
525 WEST 21ST STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10011  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

*In Geneva No One Can Hear You Scream*, edited by  
Marc Jancou, Blondeau Fine Art Services, Geneva,  
Switzerland.

# I BELIEVE THAT THE ONLY CHANCE FOR PAINTING IS TO RECUPERATE ITS POWER OF SIMULACRUM.

PIETRO  
ROCCASALVA

YOU WORK IN A PROGRESSION, WITH EACH WORK CONCEPTUALLY REFERENCING ANOTHER. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE INDEXICAL NATURE OF YOUR WORK?

Granted that it's not a rational scheme, the work is an automatic concatenation engendered by the paintings themselves as the work site's microchips. To some extent, the situations are created by the paintings and often generate in turn other paintings. Each situation automatically becomes a set that creates new images to be painted. In this automatism I'm removed as author: the artificer as a conscious individual always arrives later. The purpose stems from the result and not vice versa.

ALL OF YOUR INSTALLATIONS ARE CENTERED AROUND, AND RELIANT ON A PAINTING. WHAT IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO PAINTING, AND HOW DO YOU SEE THE MEDIUM AS CHANGING IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT?

I believe that the only chance for painting is to recuperate its power of simulacrum. The power that painting can have is to embody the artificial intelligence but only as intelligent artifice, or-said otherwise-simulacrum: a handiwork animated by a force, able to generate a context. Painting cannot compete with the so-called logical communication of the media. What remains in painting is the more immediate and "cruel" possibility of subduing and ravishing.

YOU CREATE MISE-EN-SCENES, WHICH YOU REFER TO AS MSITUAZIONE D'OPERA (ART WORK'S SITUATION), HOW DOES THE VIEWER FACTOR INTO YOUR WORK?

A feature of this initial stage of my work is to let the work site open. The viewer is an intruder and only if he lets himself be ravished, can he enter this process. Something like those paintings of the 17th century in which the spectator-martyr -in the sense of witness- is portrayed as turned on. The oeuvre doesn't allow any interaction with the viewer unless he is able to abandon himself and be subdued. No other modes of participation exist.

YOU HAVE USED THE TERMS *natura morta* (STILL LIFE) AND *rapimento* (RAVISHMENT) TO DESCRIBE BOTH THE WORK AND THE PROCESS. CAN YOU ELABORATE?

Regarding the “ravishment,” I can add that painting is a lens through which a retrospective gaze ravishes and devours the viewer. Looking at the place from which we are seen is a sensation that attracts and coaxes us to the abandonment, beyond the pleasure principle. Concerning the term “*natura morta*” ... it’s because it was born as *parergon* and then became *ergon*; it’s because it was called *xenia*; it’s because it is a harmonic composition of rests, or rather a deposition; it’s because it is a bouquet of mistakes; it’s because it’s a rhetoric artifice without a model or scope, other than the musicality and the *vanitas*; it’s because it’s a pastime; it’s because as a minor genre painting-if animated like a simulacrum-it can degenerate the grand manner genres.

PHILOSOPHICAL REFERENCES ARE OFTEN TIED INTO YOUR WORK, WHICH FEATURES REPEATING ARCHETYPES. HOW DOES THE IDEA OF METAPHOR PLAY OUT IN THE WORK?

I’m interested in the musical excess of language and its rhetoric figures. It’s always literally “fuor di metafora” (out of metaphor). This is why all the metaphors are misleading.

DOES THE TITLE OF YOUR PIECE, *Jockey full of Bourbon*, HAVE ANY RELATION TO THE TOM WAITS’ SONG OF THE SAME NAME? WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OWL BEING DISGUISED AS A PARROT?

Yes. the title, *Jockey full of Bourbon*, has a relation with Tom Waits’ song. Concerning the owl, it doesn’t have an exact and unique meaning ... the oeuvres are like masks, their hollow fixed nature hosts different ghosts. I don’t know what ghosts and how many of them have “inhabited” it. What I can tell you are some thoughts I had after I made it ... the warriors put the makeup on before encountering the death; the mix of a philosopher and a sophist; the truth made up as fiction (and not the fiction made up as truth.)

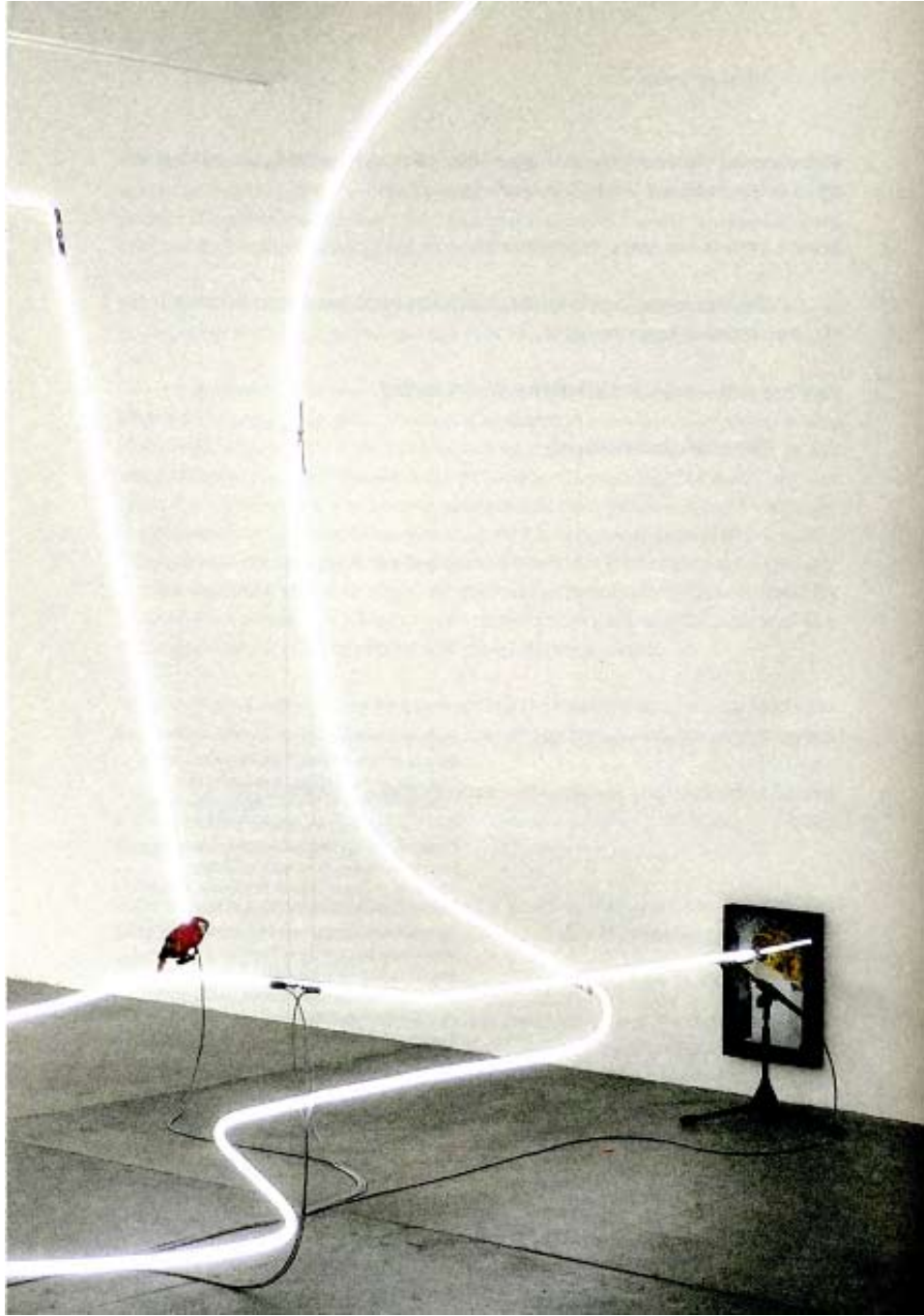
WHICH ARTISTS ARE YOU INTERESTED IN?

I’m interested in artists’ obsessions; the same one that sometimes interests me. and that I cannot name.

CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE WORK FOR THIS SHOW?

“I would prefer not to.”

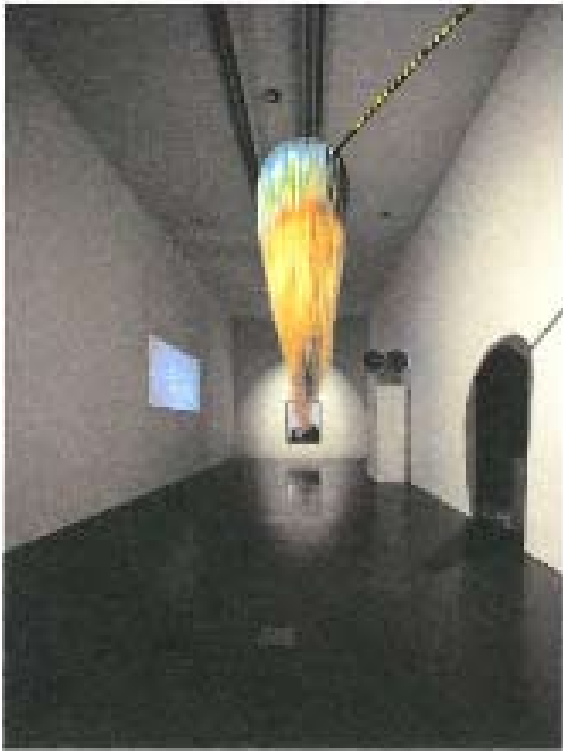
Born in 1970 In Modica, Italy. Pietro Roccasalva lives and works in Milan. Solo exhibitions include CCS Bard at Seventh Regiment Armory, New York; GAMeC. Bergamo; Art: Concept Paris: Johnen + Schottle, Cologne; Ex Tempio Metodista, Torino; Hoet Bekaert Gallery, Ghent; Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice; Galleria Zero, Milan. Group exhibitions include P.S.I Contemporary Art Center, New York; Museion. Bolzano; Prague Biennale 3. Prague; MAXXI, Rome; Galleria d’Arte Moderna/Villa della Rose, Bologna; Fondazione Davide Halevim, Milan; Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como; Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Venice; Tirana Biennale 2, Tirana; and SMAK. Ghent.





Philosophical references and complex metaphors make up the varied work of Pietro Roccasalva. Paintings drawings, and sculpture unite to create unique installations or “situations” that work in an indexical nature, each referencing a former work.

- A *Jockey full of Bourbon II*, 2006  
detail
- B *D'apres La Tempesta*, 2006



C *The Good Woman*, 2005  
D *Truka*, 2007

E *The Oval Portrait. A ventiloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947*, 2005  
Detail



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F *Untitled*, 2006  
G *Untitled*, 2007

H *The Skeleton Key II*, 2007  
I *Untitled*, 2005