

“WHAT A WONDERFUL THING TO FALL”: IN CONVERSATION WITH GUGLIELMO CASTELLI

Guglielmo Castelli interviewed by Layla Leiman
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The figures in Italian artist Guglielmo Castelli's paintings seem to float, suspended between disappearing into and emerging from the muted colours that pool around them. The paintings have the appearance of being viewed from underwater. The vaguely discernable scenes hint at stages, café booths, public spaces in which solitary figures are on display but seem desperate to melt away. There's a tension between spectacle and concealment, and an indeterminate sensuality. Working in a fluid and emotive style, Guglielmo's ghostly characters are permeable, penetrable, dissolving and disintegrating. They are defined not by their physicality, but by their surrounds. The colours that feature most often are murky and mottled; water-logged. The cast a haunting, somber tone to the work. To peer beneath the surface though, one finds a richly textured world inspired by fashion and history. With delicate brushstrokes, Guglielmo paints intricately detailed patterns resembling textiles and luxurious drapery that envelop the figures (Klimt's luscious paintings come to mind).

Guglielmo lives and works in Turin, Italy. He has had numerous solo exhibitions in Italy and Europe and been included in many national and international group shows. We spoke with Guglielmo ahead of his residency in California, USA, to find out more about what he's working on and life in general.

Layla Leiman: *Hi Guglielmo! To begin, please tell us: Why do you paint?*

Guglielmo Castelli: I have asked myself many times why I paint, I think the most appropriate answer is: because I can't do anything else. And it's the best way to tell stories.

LL: *What is your story of finding your visual language and style of painting within the figurative tradition?*

GC: My story starts from afar, from illustration for children, though fashion, theatre and cinema. I have always found it extremely interesting to try to create spaces within the pictorial figuration, which could give the viewer the opportunity to imagine different stories, add elements, remove others. In such a difficult historical moment, which speak of separations, walls relationships and interactions too fast to understand the depth, painting gives a longer time, more meditative. I studied theatrical scenography, I read about great dramas, great loves and great falls, this helped me to have a new alphabet for my painting.

LL: *At first glance your paintings appear abstract but as you look, figures and forms begin to emerge, slowly revealing whole scenes. What appeals to you. About working in this blurred space between figurations and abstraction?*

GC: Deleuze described Francis Bacons figures as mere remnants of the space around him.

I believe that this process of mapping bodies within these often claustrophobic spaces, too small to contain all those corporeal masses, is fundamental for crossing that fine boundary between figuration and abstraction. At the beginning of my painting I had monochrome backgrounds where I made my figures float, then something changed... When I injured my leg and had to give myself a medicine to dilute the blood, I asked myself: how can I use the same dilution procedure that I use on myself in my painting? and here we are...

LL: *Colour plays a big part in setting the mood and tone of your work. This year you seem to have introduced brighter colours into your paintings. Please tell us more about this and how colour functions in your art?*

GC: ... you know I'm still at sea about the colours. It is certainly an important aspect in defining the trend and temperature of the composition, but I never think about it except in the final phase of the work. The most important thing remains the composition, the blocks that will occupy the canvas, the presences and co-presences. Then I start with a colour, but the end hardly corresponds with the first idea. I love winter mornings and those nostalgic colours, but I also love the sunniest hour of the summer, reflected on the houses while the children are sleeping... I

heard the most beautiful colours this year in Cornwall... But I still have to metabolize them to try to use them. Knowing how to use colours is for brave people, I'm still learning.

LL: *The figures in your work have a very fluid, almost liquid quality to them. What does this signify?*

GC: The memories have blurred, they are hardly clear... I've never trusted anyone who has a definite opinion about things, or black or white... Things are always liquid, becoming... Zygmunt Bauman describes this condition well. So my figures appear and then disappear immediately after, more than real bodies, I like to call them more "attempts" ready to change shape. They have a deliberately wrong anatomical structure, almost without bones, almost skeletons, they fall, in free fall. What a wonderful thing to fall.

Beckett used to say: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better"

LL: *Looking at your work from over the years, it seems like a narrative unfolds between works. What are some of the main themes you're interested in and what ideas are you currently exploring in your work?*

GC: As I said before, I have always been interested in the narrative aspect, not in the totality of a cycle works, but more in the individual representations. After my residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien my interest focused on the management of spaces around human figures. Asking me what's around? What happens outside the scene? When the lights go down, and everyone is gone... Still today I try to put lights and shadows on those small spaces that tell stories. When I design a work, when I make a sketch, I ask myself: "how can I increase the feeling of isolation and loneliness? What is the best posture for the sense of abandonment to be total?" Well, that's what still interests me. Little by little I am trying to move these arguments to the pictorial act, but it will still take time. Painting silence is a difficult thing.

LL: *Should we read the descriptive yet illusive titles of your works as clues to what the pieces are about?*

GC: Literature has accompanied me since I was a teenager, the power of words that turn into images. Often the work is simply a result of a title, a phrase from a book... Other times the title, voluntarily, "moves away" from what you see... But the narrative capacity of my painting

insinuates itself as many times as in the tiles, which gives the viewer an extra note, to ask: “and now? What happens? Maybe I looked in the wrong direction.”

LL: *What piece/s are you busy at the present? Are you working through any challenges or exploring new techniques? What’s happening in your studio right now?*

GC: In the best intentions I decided to put in place my studio, which is nothing more than an old apartment in the centre of Turin, the city in which I was born and still live. It’s one of those places with old terracotta floors, large windows where a lot of light enters, even so cold because the windows are made of old wood... But I love my studio, the walls are now impregnated with the smell of solvents and incense. Incense is called “Studio de Baltus”, I had chosen it for its name and then fell in love with the smell. I am morbidly attached to memories, to the objects that describe them, and so my work unfolds between letters, wallpaper, ceramics of dubious taste and vases with white tulips. Right now I’m trying to gather energy and understand where my painting is going... I think I ‘m in a patrol phase, where I paint by trial and error. It’s funny, I dare say almost reassuring, because it puts me in a position to be able to analyse the progress of my brushes. I would like to be even more incisive, that yes, both on the content and on the technique... But at the moment I’m very different: I go from wanting to paint in a painstaking way of reflection on a silver jug, to wanting to throw a whole can on the canvas. I miss drawing, well, ‘m starting to make small drawings again. Small pieces of skill.

LL: *You generally work in oil paints and mixed media. What appeals to you about these materials and the methods of working required for each?*

GC: When I had to choose which course to attend at the academy, I knew immediately that I would never choose painting. Maybe out of presumption, but the idea of staying in a room with other painters terrified me. That by osmosis we would copy ourselves, encrypting all those errors, those sensations that had brought us up to there. I discovered painting in my room, trying to copy the great masters, with very bad results. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that I still use mixed tactics today. I wouldn’t be able to use just one, plus I’d be bored of using just one.. The compulsive and sometimes dichotomous use of various materials allows me to be better probe what I can’t say in words... Is a long process, levels on levels, dissolving, aggregations, but that gives me absolute freedom. I haven’t washed my brushes in 4 years...

LL: *When you’re not in the studio making art, what are some of the things you like to spend*

time doing?

GC: I spend a lot of time in the studio, wake up at dawn and run to the studio. I have a strong sense of responsibility for what I do... When I'm not in the studio painting, I read. I love reading, in Turin there is still a library of the old ones, with the parquet that creaks, with lots of carpets and armchairs where you can sink and consult book... I love fashion, and I still occasionally collaborate with magazines as contributor. I listen to a lot of music. Especially baroque, for a short period of my life I played the violin, but I was not at all good. So today I just listen to it.

LL: *You have a residency coming up next year in the USA. What are you looking forward to working on during this time and how do you think the change of location might influence your work?*

GC: I've always loved residencies for the power they brought to my art. The ability of places to transmit energy and daily reports on the progress of universe... Every residence I took part in gave me something...and I was able to transport it on canvas. I have never been to America for so long. Surely what I will look at in a different way will be the architecture and how it can fit into my pictorial process. And then people, people, people, motels at night, those bright signs, that certain America in the movies of the brothers Coen... Those forgotten swimming pools and those endless streets.

LL: *Do you have any projects coming up? What's next for you?*

GC: After my California residency I will spend another two weeks touring the parks...

One of the things I discovered while growing up is the nature speaks to me in a loud voice... When I return to Italy I will continue to prepare an important exhibition that will open in late April, early May at the museum Ettore Fico in Turin... And then fingers crossed for other projects... In the meantime "I paint, I paint... otherwise I'm lost".

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