

The background is a painting by Leonardo Cremonini. It features a vibrant red wall on the left. In the foreground, a chair with a green and black patterned seat and a blue bird perched on it is visible. To the right, a foot is shown resting on a white, textured pedestal. The overall style is expressive and colorful.

Leonardo Cremonini



Leonardo Cremonini
Paintings and Drawings from
The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation

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Linda Wolk-Simon

Works by Leonardo Cremonini from the
Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection,
courtesy of The William Louis-Dreyfus
Foundation Inc.

Leonardo Cremonini



Foreword

LINDA WOLK-SIMON



BALCONI D'ITALIA
1953-1955
TEMPERA AND OIL ON PANEL
51 1/2" x 69"

The Italian-born painter Leonardo Cremonini (1925-2010) attained the height of recognition and critical acclaim in the later 20th century. Though little known today, his striking, often monumental works—painstakingly executed, occasionally formed of two joined canvases and reworked over a period of years—are to be found in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Hirschhorn Museum in Washington, DC, the Musée d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and numerous other public collections across Europe and the United States. The primeval, lithic forms (human and geological), dark, untamed beasts, and over-effulgent foliage characteristic of his paintings of the 1950s, and the ethereal, distracted figures indolently frozen in train cars, bedrooms and terraces under a sultry Mediterranean light that begin to appear in the 1960s and remain present from then on are immediately recognizable. Though his stylistic idiom undergoes this profound shift, Cremonini's masterful and meticulous craftsmanship is unwavering, as is, from the 1960s on, the careful layering and scraping of paint layers, and the resulting smooth, tissue-like surfaces that belie the laborious technique. Contemplation and deliberation, rather than speed and flux, are the essence of Cremonini's technique and subject matter alike.

Among other shifts, the ascendancy of abstraction and conceptual art in the later 20th century led to the sidelining of Cremonini at the margins of modernity. But the resurgence of figurative painting and heightened appreciation of Italian modern art in recent years make this the optimal moment for a critical reappraisal. It is hoped that this catalogue, published in conjunction with an exhibition of works from the peerless holdings of The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation at the Fairfield University Art Museum—the first monographic survey devoted to Cremonini in over two decades—will be a catalyst in fostering a renewed appreciation of the artist.

Linda Wolk-Simon
Frank and Clara Meditz Director and Chief Curator
Fairfield University Art Museum



Notes from a Collector

WILLIAM LOUIS-DREYFUS



I CAVALLI CHE URLANO
1954-1955
OIL ON CANVAS
32" x 42 1/2"

In the late 50s and for two decades after that, Leonardo Cremonini was the contemporary artist most written about in Europe, not just by art critics and commentators but by modern philosophers and famous French and Italian writers. Then, as the years passed and those notable intellectuals died, so did the talk around Cremonini mostly disappear and his notice gave way to new waves of art creation explicitly distancing the complex and figurative work that typified Cremonini.

He worked slowly and sometimes on paintings of very large size whose date was stated in multiple years. He paid little attention to the trends of the times and continued to exhibit his work throughout Europe to critical if not public acclaim.

I knew Cremonini well. He was a proud man, sure of himself and sure of what makes up quality in the art world. He had occasion to submit to the superficial envelopes which the art world espouses every now and again, but nothing which might not reflect his views and imagination was acceptable. Once, early in his career, he was solicited by a famous gallery owner in New York who had noticed his work in Italy and proposed to represent him in New York. Cremonini accepted, and the two were about to sign a contract when the gallery owner asked him how many paintings he could do each year. Cremonini explained that the maximum he could get done was five or six. "That won't do at all," said the gallery owner. "I need at least double that amount to make it worthwhile entering the marketplace." Cremonini told me that story— exclaiming to the man that he should sell varieties of socks rather than art works.

I regret that Cremonini died somewhat in obscurity compared to where he had been. A well known critic and essayist wrote that it was an outrage that the death of a maestro like him was not front-page news befitting his artistic achievement.



Cremonini

WILLIAM RUBIN



DONNE FRA LE ROCCE
1954-1955
OIL ON CANVAS
43" x 56"

"I love these organic forms," said Cremonini holding some sea shells to the light, "it is because they contain within them an order which for me becomes an architectural law." A group of us had just returned to the studio from an afternoon on the isolated rock cliffs and beaches of Brittany, the car filled with mineral and vegetal specimens of every form and description soon to swell the collection covering the walls. Outside these same inscrutable shapes were writ large as the magnificently weathered cliffs of the Breton shore line, those same amorphic stones which Tanguy so loved—and which he recreated so differently. A great calm pervades the life which Cremonini and his wife lead in this isolated place, so close to the storied isle of Tristan's castle and so remote from hectic urbanism, a calm which fosters the search for a meditative order that is the sign of his classicism.

The spirit of timeless monumentality which marks every Cremonini canvas is a particularly Mediterranean trait and suggests his affinity with painters of the early Renaissance like Giotto and Piero della Francesca. Next to the present-day "action" painter he is methodologically, at least, a "re-actionary." The immediate and spontaneous gesture of a Kline or Mathieu apotheosizes the vitality of a passing moment in a world of flux. Cremonini's method, on the contrary, aims toward the continuous in experience and involves a long distillation of sentiment before the work is even begun and then an arduous process of building up the image, layer after layer, over a period of a year and often more, during which time a small group of canvases is simultaneously pressed toward completion. After the divisions of the larger plan are set down (based on carefully wrought out drawings), the varnish glazes are searchingly applied, often in as many as ten laminations. The irregular edges of these glazed areas reveal enough of the different color layers below to give the surface vibrancy and luminous depth while bearing witness to the many decisions of the process of integration. Meditation is the essence of this method, and Cremonini will often sit for hours before a canvas hardly touching it.

These values and, indeed, this method of painting derive directly from twin sources that motivate Italian art even in the most modern manifestations: classicism and craftsmanship. Born in Bologna in 1925, son of a railroad conductor who was also an amateur painter, Leonardo Cremonini began painting at the age of thirteen, remaining in his native city five years longer to study, in part, at the municipal School of Fine Arts. Emphasis there was placed on techniques and methods, training which stood him in good stead as he advanced to work in the Brera Academy of Milan. Conditions at the Brera were much freer than those in the Italian academies of the recent past, and no stylistic tastes were imposed upon the students. One could work with the neo-classicist Achille Funi, the veteran futurist Carlo Carrà, or find a teacher of almost any temperament or taste. Six months of painting in Venice was followed by a French government scholarship to study in Paris in 1950 where a year later he had his initial one-man exhibition.

It was in 1950 that Cremonini's first really personal works made their appearance, pictures in which the influences of his teachers (Minguzzi, for example) were submerged in a new and independent synthesis. The first important canvas, the *Seesaw* (Carnegie Institute Collection), established a progression. Children playing ball, riding hobbyhorses, swings

and seesaws seem strangely and poetically suspended in an eternity of the moment. How can they ever move, locked firmly as they are in a static and symmetrical geometry? The simplified forms of the children are realized in absolute profile or frontality thus stabilizing and accentuating (as in Seurat’s *Grande Jatte*) the architectural character of the image. The wit of the informal analogies (a child’s head, a ball, the moon) and the piquancy of the spotting of these gray and white forms against the darker ground save this work from its too obvious dependence on an over-all geometry.

In the landscapes of these first years, largely views of Italian hill towns and their environs, the inherent geometry of the subject is beautifully celebrated. Anyone who has seen an Italian farmer or *muratore* putting up a barn, painting or plastering a wall, understands that monumental sense of order and equilibrium, achieved by the simple setting of one form against another, which is indigenous to the Italian soil. The Italian hill town, so different from those of other countries, seems an unconscious collective recapitulation of this instinct and provided for Cremonini, as it did for Renaissance painters, a most congenial starting point. It is not in essential character, but in degree of abstraction, that *The Red Roofs* (1951) differs from the hill towns of Piero’s frescoes. More in command of his materials in this series, Cremonini allowed the brushwork to come forth with the frankness and vigor of a wall painter. The strokes, in their broad vertical and horizontal rhythms, accentuate and extend the architectural quality of the whole. Color remained muted in these landscapes, as in the figure pictures, tending toward the gray and terra-cotta ranges with occasional passages in the blues and purples. But toward the end of 1951, as Cremonini increasingly mastered the larger compositional problems, his color became freer and brighter until it has gemlike luminosity and saturation. What they lack in color the early landscapes make up in the extraordinary evocation of that pure and enigmatic white light seen only in Italy. The stillness and infinity of this light (so beautifully captured in the early work of de Chirico) gives these landscapes a sense of participation in a larger cosmic order that transcends the actuality of time and place.

At Ischia in 1952 Cremonini began a series of animal pictures, largely *abattoir* scenes, which constitute perhaps his most original assertion. The first of these, *The Slaughterhouse*, was exhibited that autumn at the Carnegie International and elicited wide comment. On the left, a side of beef is suspended, its severed head pendant from a hook in the center. On the right are visible the torso and arms of a butcher who wields a knife in preparation for a further segmentation of the animal. If the subject sounds bloody and aggressive, the work itself transcends such experience. It is true that the slaughtered animal has been an important poetic metaphor in modern painting for the violence and suffering which characterize our age. Soutine, for example, used it to communicate the material nature of suffering and distorted or twisted the animal to emphasize its agony. Soutine’s reds are directly those of blood (recall the story of his spattering the beef with fresh blood kept in a studio bucket), but Cremonini’s belong to a system of color that disengages itself from the world of material objects. By the same token, the shapes of Cremonini’s animals constitute an autonomous vocabulary of controlled and quiet forms which he discovers in all things. The impression is, then, not one of violence or anguish, but rather of the fatality of terrestrial experience.

BALCONI D’ITALIA

In the warm sunlight which suffuses an Italian back street casual moment of everyday activity is enigmatically suspended. All trace of triviality is gone, and the sparing, controlled and almost hieratic gestures argue a sense of the monumental and absolute which recalls Giotto and Masaccio.

It is a world with a spell on it, the classical spell of order and quietude. Begun in 1953 and completed in 1955, this painting resumed, in Cremonini’s most comprehensive statement thus far, the discoveries of the previous five years.

The scalloped parallelograms of the laundry, the tenuous webs of railings and the stoic figures all sounded against a background of simple architecture are here brought together for the first time.

William Rubin

Next to his house in Ischia was an open-air *abattoir* consisting of a small house and a pen in which the animals awaited their end. Their simple death took place within a grove of trees and seemed to Cremonini more like a religious sacrifice than a butchery. “It was free of mechanical character. Like a primordial ritual of man and animal.” This is what he has tried to convey in his animal series: the sense of finality – the ineluctable submission of all things to enduring cosmic order. In *The Slaughterhouse* and such canvases as the *Fallen Bull* and *Skinned Bulls* of the same year and *Famished Rams*, completed early in 1953, the color becomes richer and freer, stressing reds and greens which detach themselves with increasing determination from the neutral backgrounds held over from the earlier works. While the geometrical underpinning is still sometimes forced or obvious, there is an increasing flexibility as well as a greater interest in organic as opposed to geometrical forms. In fact, the progression from the geometric to the organic might well describe the over-all process of Cremonini’s six years of independent painting. The series came to a brilliant completion late in 1953 with *Bulls Butchered and Strung*, in which within a subdued and deeply poetic color setting Cremonini has achieved an adjustment of forms which reflects a complete mastery of the classical idiom.

There followed an increasing devotion to figure pictures – bathers, mothers and children, and fishermen – which, with a number of landscapes and some groups of living animals, constitute nearly the whole range of his subject matter. As our eye passes from one to another of these canvases, it becomes apparent that Cremonini has discovered within these different subjects forms of a common organic quality which link his world together. The crossbeams of the boat in *Two Rowers* are like the rib cage of a butchered animal, while the foreground of a landscape, as Stephen Spender observed in a short article on the painter, looks like the bones of the thigh stretched from pelvis to kneebone. Even his *Machines* reveals forms suggesting animal crania, rocks and bones. Unlike the visual forms, Cremonini loves those which may be rediscovered in differing aspects of reality. He achieves coherence and order through stressing the common denominator rather than the numerator of the visual and experimental world.

The quiet distance which seems to separate Cremonini’s scenes from immediate and spontaneous experience reflects the long period of gestation of his images. His pictures are not the counterpart of direct vision, nor even of immediate recollection, but rebirths of experiences long forgotten. “It is only when visual images are physically forgotten and are already a part of my unconscious that they are ready to be brought out again and created into a picture. Now the recollection of the lost images takes place when I lovingly search any organic object like a sea shell or a piece of wood. In and through the act of loving these objects, my images take on profile.” The process is not unlike that recommended by Leonardo da Vinci in his notebooks but whereas Leonardo insist that the picture be brought to a level of realistic finish in which the “Rorschach-like” origin of the image is totally submerged, Cremonini willfully leaves his picture hovering delicately between these two *tachiste* exercises which begin by pressing a piece of drawing paper on the palette as it happens to be covered at the end of a day’s painting. “After all,” he observes, “one makes a new picture on the palette each time one paints.” Then Cremonini sets to work on the



DONNE ADDORMENTATE ALLA LUNA
1955-1956
OIL ON CANVAS
45" x 57"



WOMAN WITH A FISH NET
1956
INK WITH GOUACHE ON PAPER
8" x 13 1/4"

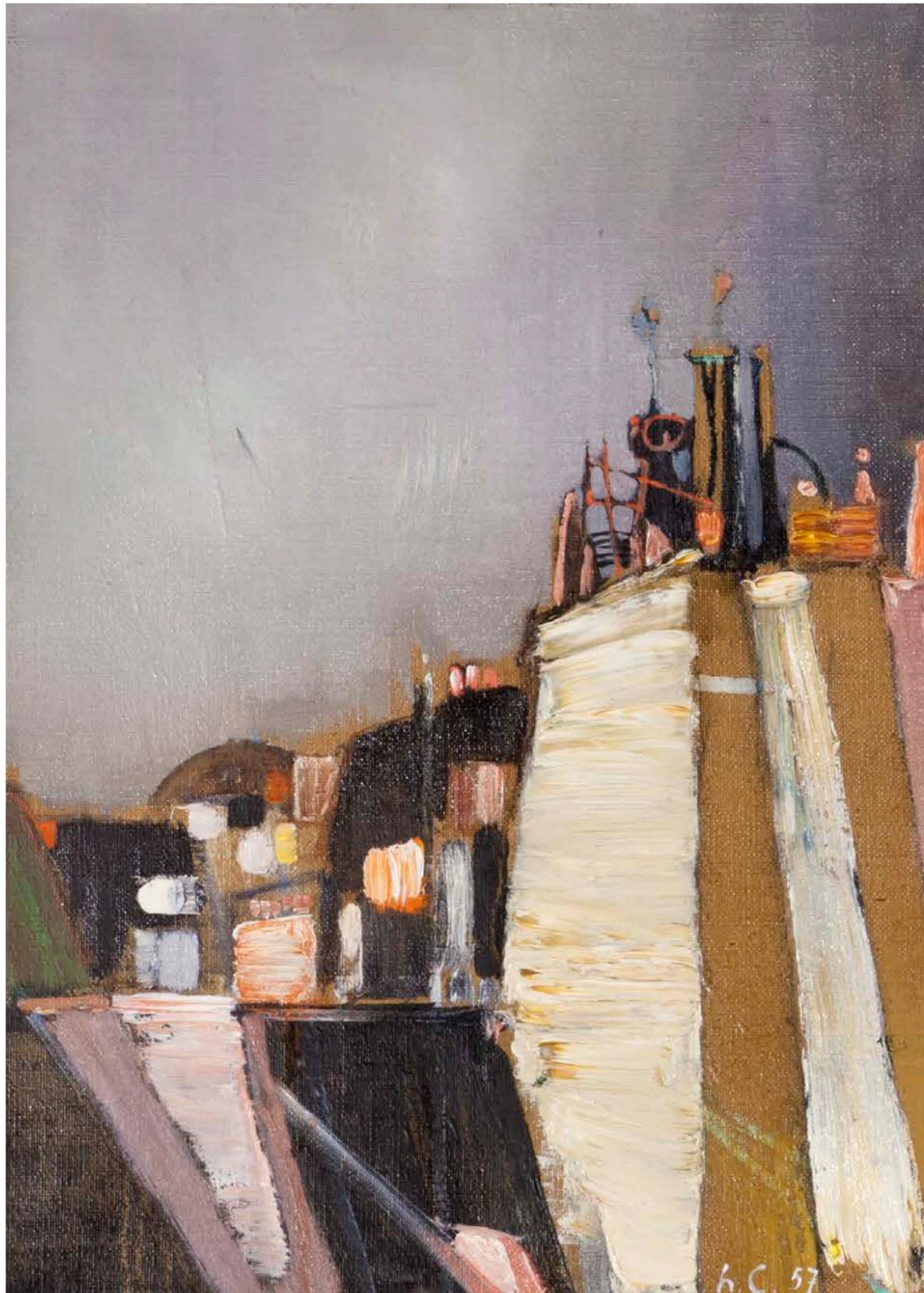
drawing paper clarifying some shapes, intensifying color areas, and impressing the image with a coherent abstract order. He never exhibits these but uses them as "keys" from which he derives suggestions as he does from various organic props of the studio.

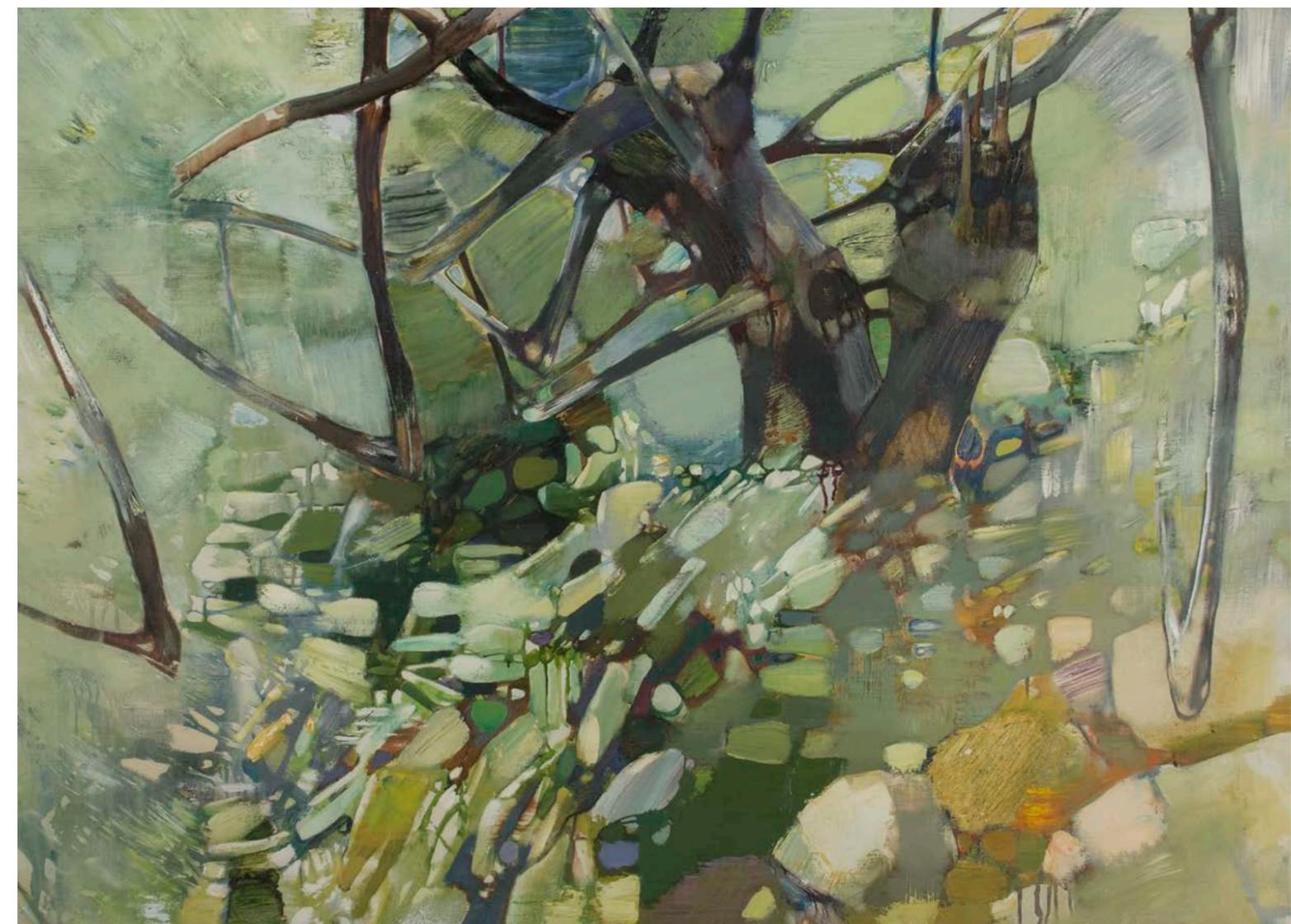
The command of formal order and the increasingly variegated vocabulary of forms which structure the best works of 1953 led Cremonini to begin that year his largest (52" by 69") and his most comprehensive statement thus far. *Balconi d'Italia* (page 4), completed in 1955, brings together many motifs developed in separate painting of the three previous years. From *Sheets in the Sun and Wind* of 1952-53 come the scalloped parallelograms of the laundry that spans the alleyway. The poses and physiognomies of the figures are linked to a series of paintings of which the stoic and monumental *Bather* of 1952 is the finest example. In *Balconi d'Italia*, and in general in works of the following few years, there is a gradual increase in the quantity of naturalistic detail. Yet paradoxically the work is freer in character. The answer to the riddle lies in Cremonini's increasing ability to handle extremely intricate compositional relationships. The marked abstraction of the earlier years was in part a way of reducing a composition to its simplest terms, of avoiding problems which the painter is now eager to face. Unlike the non-figurative artist, Cremonini must arrive at an organization of forms which are true not only to the nature of the painting as an aesthetic object, but to the experimental, if not the visual, character of objects in the outer world. In his earliest years the greater freedom possible in the abstract reorganization of forms of landscapes and butchered animals led to an emphasis on these subjects. The human figure, most complex and least maneuverable of all subjects, fared less well, and it is only in the past two years that Cremonini has re-created the human body with that controlled variety previously discovered elsewhere. Compare, for example, the stark and titanic *Woman* of 1953 with the *Mother and Child on the Beach* of 1956. The former still retains some of the "strait-jacketed" character so obvious in the first figure pictures. While the physiognomy and the arms are wholly in keeping with the detached authoritarian character of the work, the upper torso is but a well-adjusted puzzle of somewhat arbitrary forms which do not seem, as in the more recent work, to stem from an inner necessity. The structures of the recent figures, like those in *Bathers amongst the Rocks* (page 8), obey a law of absolute finality, each form satisfying simultaneously needs expressed on various esthetic and experimental levels of the picture.

Having thus matured, having liberated his sense of color and shape and yet achieving in this freedom an even greater order and coherence, Cremonini had then to face what is perhaps the most crucial problem for the modern painter. "My greatest concern," he said in 1956, "is continuity, continuity of growth and self-discovery." This problem is perhaps more acute for Italian painters than for others. The best of Italy's modern painters have fallen into two ultimately limited groups. The Futurists and de Chirico created an art of tremendous discovery and variety, but their span of vital creation was hardly more than a decade, and sometimes not even that. The less short-winded Italian painters seem to pay a price for their endurance in terms of an almost hypnotic repetition of extraordinarily limited values and iconography, sometimes (Morandi) retaining taste and integrity, at other times (Campigli) succumbing to a commercial mannerism. Leonardo Cremonini had a consciousness of this problem, a deep-seated integrity and an extraordinary talent.

CHEMINÉES
1957
OIL ON CANVAS
15" x 25 1/2"

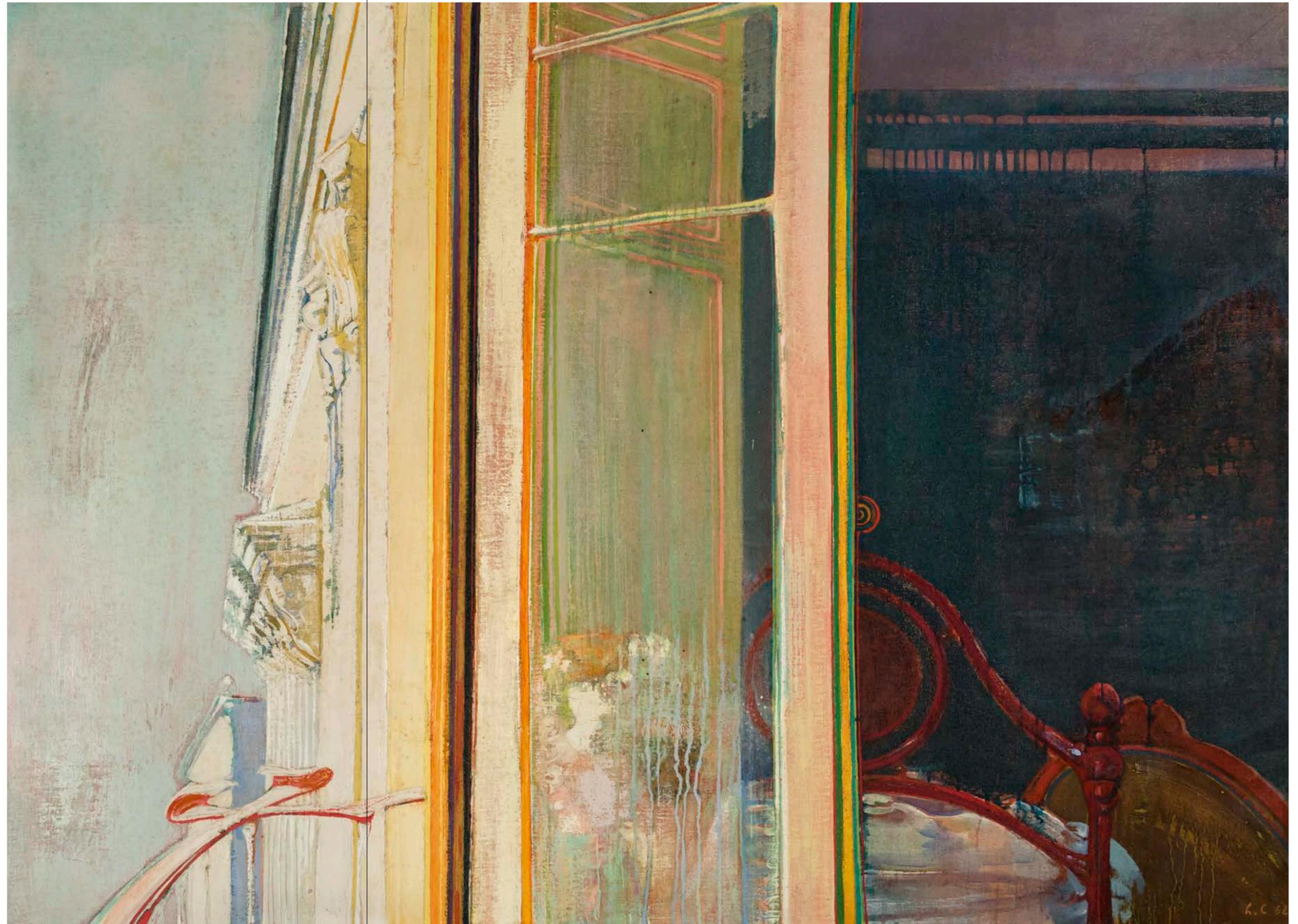
VEGETAZIONE INVADENTE
1960-1961
OIL ON CANVAS
38" x 52"
PAGE 17

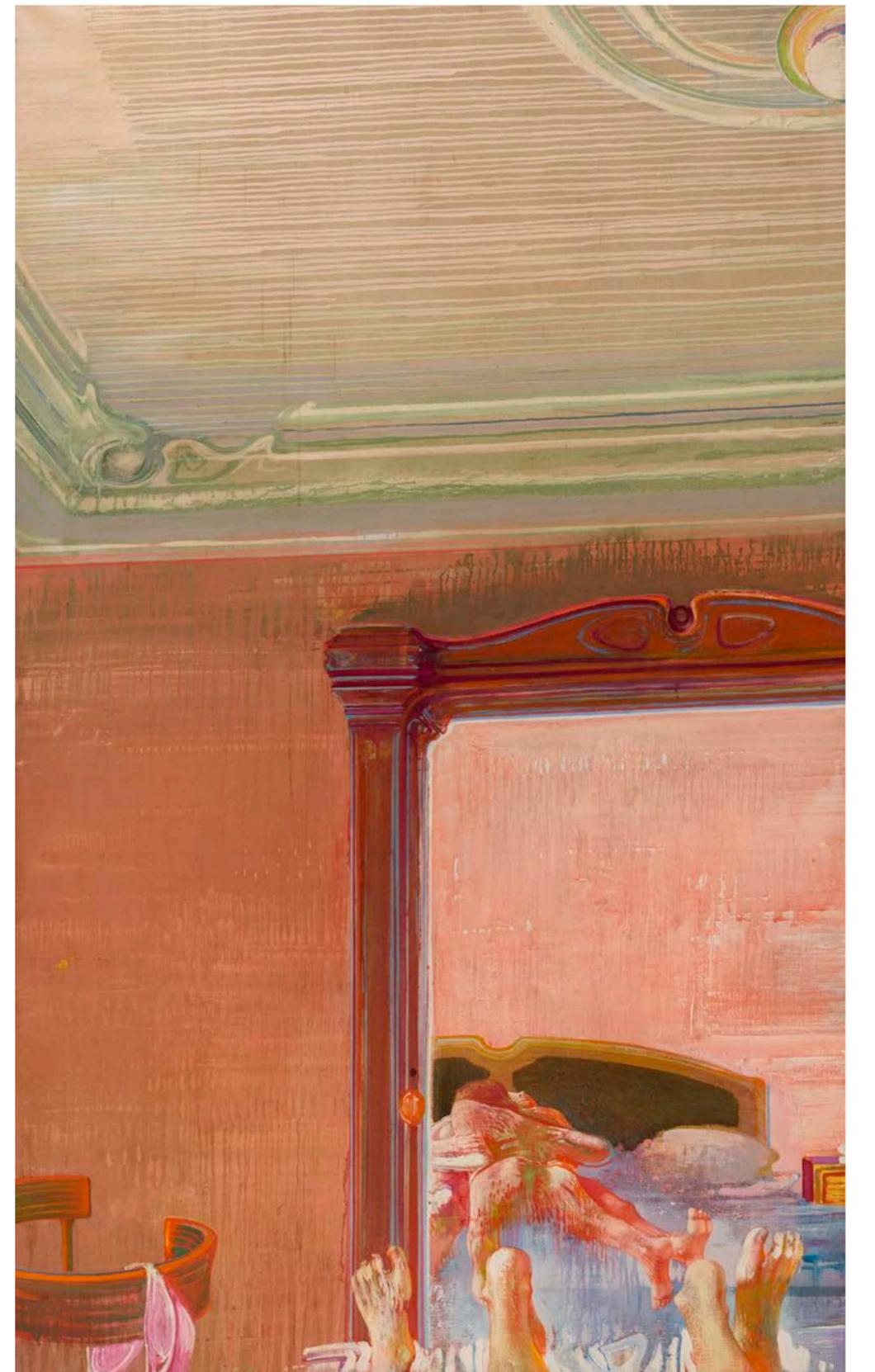




DA UNA STANZA AL BALCONE
1962
OIL ON CANVAS ON PLYWOOD
35 1/2" x 47 3/4"

VERTIGINI
1964
TEMPERA AND OIL ON CANVAS
76 3/4" x 46 1/4"
PAGE 21





GIOCHI SENZA REGOLE
1964
OIL ON CANVAS
45" x 57 1/2"



PRIMA CLASSE

1965
TEMPERA AND OIL ON CANVAS
25 1/2" x 39 1/4"

LES SENS ET LES CHOSES

1968
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
76 3/4" x 76 3/4"
PAGE 27





To Teda, and to Nostalgia
for Citara

Leonardo Cremonini La Pittura del Tempo

LORENZO CANOVA

PROLOGUE. SEASONS ON A GREEN ISLAND

Leonardo Cremonini, a young painter, lands on an island, journeying from Bologna, where he was born. He has studied painting in Milan, become fascinated by islands on Lake Como, and won a scholarship to Paris; by 1951 he has been given a one-man show there, which enables him to settle on Ischia. In those years the island is a marvelous place, virginal and poor, with beach sand bordering the cultivated fields and villages still immersed in a suspended Mediterranean life, sweet and raw.¹

Forio d'Ischia is a fascinating and lively center of culture, still awaiting release from a millennium of destitution, but governed by an almost pre-Classical beauty. Everything there seems to follow a pure, ancient measure in which Ischia—resonating with the echo of Saracens or Baroque splendors—reverts to its origins as the first colony of the Western Greeks, *Magna Graecia*, a verdant island of wine so favored by the Romans and by Renaissance popes. The white houses of Forio stand out against a vast sea with a distant, mythical strip of coast, the horizon discreetly announcing some smaller islands which resolve themselves along that thread between sea and sky like small, precious gems.

Cremonini is steeped in this luminous order, whose North African calm he would paint, in the sun that dazzles almost blindingly, obscuring the blue sky in its utter noontime light; white walls, hidden arches of alleyways and fishermen's houses articulate a geometry that gently marks the prevailing abstraction though without embracing it. Between 1951 and 1955, thanks to the counsel of the famous gallery owners Gaspero del Corso and Irene Brin, Cremonini spent long periods in Forio d'Ischia, a place dominated by that giant of 20th-century poetry, W. H. Auden. The town had already been painted by Philip Guston, and Maria Senese's Caffè Internazionale was the meeting place for musicians, writers and poets: William Walton, Igor Stravinsky, Truman Capote, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Matta, Renato Guttuso, Hans Werner Henze, Fabrizio Clerici, Leonor Fini, Philip Martin, Pavel Tchelitchew, Carlyle Brown, Eduard Bargheer, Cecil Beaton, Heinrich of Hesse and Herbert List, as well as a lively group of local artists like Luigi Coppa, Bolivar, Peperone, Aldo Pagliacci and others. Luchino Visconti had a villa built in Forio, and it is there, and at Panza, in its outskirts, that Henri Cartier-Bresson took splendid photos of peasant life in 1952. Cremonini played an active role in the colorful artistic life of Forio during its poor yet gilded age until 1955; thanks to Carlyle Brown he meets the gallery owner Catherine Viviano, who between 1952 and 1962 organized four one-man shows for him in New York. In 1955 the incipient changes in tourism alienated Cremonini from Ischia, though he periodically returned, frequenting the mysterious, magnificent fortress of the Castello Aragonese, and befriending its proprietor, the painter Gabriele Mattera, and his wife, Karin, as well as the gallery owner Massimo Ielasi.

Between 1951 and 1955-1956, Cremonini elevated his language, radically changing his style, gradually removing the "Parisian" geometry of the houses in Forio (this would return a few years later with a new, metaphysical complexity) and achieving an absolute vision of dialogue between sky and sea: a balance between the panic of nature, its Pan-like totality, and annihilation, by immersing himself in a fluid maternal element of the primeval world, in that liquid chaos from which the artist always begins as he builds his splendid, nostalgic pictorial architectures.²

LES ANIMAUX DOMESTIQUES

1967-1968
OIL ON CANVAS
46" x 35"

LA FIN DE L'ÉTÉ

1965-1971
OIL ON CANVAS
51" x 130 3/4"
PAGE 33

LES HORIZONS DU COMPTOIR

1970-2000
OIL ON CANVAS
40 3/4" x 84"
PAGE 35



The horizon darkens into a deep blue and the balustrade in front of the Pensione Nettuno. Cremonini has a profound feeling for the potent presence of the island's nature and succeeds in discovering the secret of its heart of fire and pumice. From then on he was drawn only to volcanic isles and, having left Ischia, found refuge in Panarea, the famous Sicilian island that forms part of another volcanic basin.

Heeding an insight that was to dominate his entire artistic life, Cremonini sensed the secret anatomy of Ischia, its landscape commanded by the solemn mass of Monte Epomeo, a looming presence of volcanic origin, visible down to the sea where the rocks are often chunks of lava from ancient eruptions or blocks of crystal-clear, sandy stone that dissolve in the sea. His gaze passing through the surface of things, Cremonini painted the rocks of Ischia, their skeletons yellow and reddish ochre, the surfaces dark and blueish, their structure hidden under the green of the island, penetrating the sea in a secret union of two opposite but complementary elements, the male potency of the petrified volcano entering the sea warmed like a briny, fecund womb by the underwater thermal currents.

Cremonini intuited the secret, cruel and archaic side of the island, its almost Greek bullfights, where butchered bulls become dissected meat, their bones and sinews resembling the hidden ribs of the earth of his Ischian coastline paintings, in canvases where the horses neigh in tight groups, so sculptural that they remind one of Romanesque reliefs. Nature as painted by Cremonini can be violent and ungenerous, or calm, as in the opulent, antique figures of women stretched out in the sun – an opulence reaching far back, all the way to the myths of the Mediterranean Great Mother – merging bodies and rocks and becoming one with the stone, flooded in morning sunlight.³

These mothers can go out in small wooden boats with their children, like fishermen's widows, and cast nets, or hide, modestly, in tight little groups among the sea-lapped rocks with kites creating geometry on the horizon, an image the artist would return to in a more complex mode. Many of Cremonini's works in these years represent solemn, "anti-attractive" figures, perhaps summoning the Mediterranean female archetype, and with an erotic charge that would become more potent in the years ahead. Cut out of the stone and beautified by blue dresses that harmonize with the night sky, they sleep on the seashore under the diaphanous light of the moon, sweet and solemn like Ariadnes of the rocks, or primeval Venuses emerged from the sea.

The masterpiece of these years may be *Balconi d'Italia* (page 4), painted in 1953-1955, where the little terraces overlooking a typical southern Italian alleyway – probably a recollection of old Forio, or the older section of Ischia Ponte – build a perspective that opens out onto darkness, resonating with small children and women in conversation as they hang out their laundry. This is where Cremonini announces his future work, an enigmatic dialogue between the worlds of childhood and adult life, setting his scene in the volcanic light of a Southern sunset, the sun blinding one's gaze as it goes down, almost blackening the sky and reddening the hanging sheets. The mystery of everyday life thickens in the lines of architecture, and the metaphysical dimension that many critics have noted in Cremonini's works of the 1950s emerges, a quality that would become even more evident in the geometrical forms of his subsequent years.

The island of Ischia remained etched in Cremonini's memory as he moved to Panarea. There, that memory and his vision of nature intertwine in vegetation that appears contorted, like the shadowy sinews, joints, skeletons and muscles of the woods, closing in like increasingly labyrinthine walls. Concealed within it is the inexorable Minotaur of time, to which the painter would pay reserved tribute through his entire career.⁴ A secret nostalgia for Ischia and its ancient, wild splendor is all that remained in memories hidden in his paintings.

AS IN A MIRROR

Over the years, Cremonini's painting style matures, gradually achieving a level of highly refined handling and complex density of meaning. He became a painter much favored by international

collectors such as William Louis-Dreyfus, by William Rubin, the celebrated director of MoMA, by artist friends such as Balthus and Francis Bacon, and by intellectuals and writers including Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino, Louis Althusser and Alberto Moravia, together with other important critics and art historians. Cremonini drew inspiration from the masterful sculpted forms and perspective of Masaccio and Piero della Francesca, constructing an archaic compression of bodies that blends the Italian Quattrocento with the particular modernity that Althusser refers to as the “determinate deformation” of his faces. Starting in the 60s he creates a new vision of space and figure, more articulated and based on multiple points of view.⁵

In the mature work of Cremonini, seaside bathing establishments increase their presence. Their glowing emptiness, multiple doors and corridors and reflections in glass show a different light than that shining on the beaches; children play in rooms and on terraces, repeating like echoes in a mirror. Looking at Cremonini’s painting reveals a paradoxical expansion and extension of the sense of time in which time itself appears both to stop in the stasis of summer heat, and in the same instant, to rush ahead in its swift passage toward the end of the summer with dark, storm-laden clouds coming from the sea to press damply on the windows. Through his novel, complex idea of space, Cremonini becomes a painter of time as found in the piazzas, shadows and clocks of de Chirico and of its multiple planes of perspective, recalling the reflections of Magritte, Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí.

Cremonini always (and deliberately) cited Pierre Bonnard among his favorite painters, and it was from Bonnard that he understood where intimacy becomes painting like the flow of matter that becomes memory and expanded time in inner consciousness.⁶ Cremonini created a pictorial system where the passage of children’s time is superimposed on that of adults: thus in *Giochi senza regole* (page 23), the child on the right appears to be dilated and expanded in space, running– in an echo of Balla’s *Ragazza che corre sul balcone* – as if the figure’s movement, even though actually swift, exists according to some interior time, longer and more expansive than ours. Moreover, it is hardly fortuitous that the season central to Cremonini’s oeuvre is summer, when children have the sense of living in what de Chirico called their “eternal present.” Time, in the world of Cremonini’s children, is endless, carefree and free: a time where their life is melded to that of adults in rooms that open like secret boxes, and where discoveries are made, often suddenly and involuntarily – for example that of parental sexuality, spied upon and discovered, on more than one occasion, through a play of mirrors and reflections as in *Les impertinences de l’ombre*.

These works appear to avow the function of painting as knowledge, as meditations on human perception, in its various stages from infancy to adulthood and, paradoxically, to life’s end. One might wonder, then – apart from voyeuristic element – whether the subject of reflection and the mirror contains broader references to the role and potential of our vision and to its imperfections. In what we can see of the presence of children and adults, and what they can see of us – thanks to a mirror, there might be a recollection of a celebrated passage from one of Saint Paul’s letters (1 Corinthians 13: 9-12), which Cremonini could have transposed in a personal vein: “For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.”

Children’s gazes, and those of grown-ups, are often obscured by blindfolds (as in a game of blind man’s bluff), and they cross paths in Cremonini’s mirrors and windows – a plot woven from imperfect vision and wonderment, before the reflection of the unknown and in the uncertainty of life – where everything is seen “dimly,” yet as an epiphany. Something similar happens when we look at the paintings of Cremonini where from below – as if we too were immersed in water – we see the swimmers playing in the sea, though without seeing their heads emerging from the water cut off

from the surface, their features are invisible to us. The underwater immersion that offers only a partial vision of things recalls the lines from *The Rock*, where T. S. Eliot writes of the imperfection of human vision: “Our gaze is submarine, our eyes look upward and see the light that fractures through unquiet water. We see the light but see not whence it comes [...]. In our rhythm of earthly life we tire of light. We are glad when the day ends, when the play ends; and ecstasy is too much pain. We are children quickly tired: children who are up in the night and fall asleep as the rocket is fired; and the day is long for work or play. We tire of distraction or concentration, we sleep and are glad to sleep. Controlled by the rhythm of blood and the day and the night and the seasons.”⁷ So perhaps we are the children who observe the world from under the water; the children tired of the game at the end of the day, following the rhythm of the seasons. We may ask then: Which game could help us go beyond the vague, submarine veil that shrouds our gaze? As Italo Calvino wrote of Cremonini, “This way only leads to a repetition of what you thought you’d always known, that is, nothing. Let me stop running through my memory toward something that really counts, because it’s always hidden in a dead corner, its only visible part guessed at by a shadow cast on a wall, a reflection in a glass, or a silhouette through a screen. Don’t keep pressing me with your questions: ‘But in the end what was that memory? What was it?’ Let me first arrange all the elements without which the scene could not be created: stretchers, an easel, canvases... ”⁸

So if we note the presence of canvases and painter’s tools, placed in dialogue with mirrors, we may ask whether for Cremonini painting is the instrument that clarifies our confused perception and gives substance to the shadow projected on the primeval canvas in *Au dos de l’ombre* (page 71). There, the liquid color of the canvas bears the emblematic shadow of the painter’s body, who only makes himself visible in the reflection of the mirror. Everything thus seems set in a dimension suspended between the Platonic idea of the terrestrial world made of shadows and reflections and a doubling of real shadow and bodily projection, in a play of cross-references which (apart from an obvious echo of *Las Meninas* by Velázquez) once again constructs a true maze of mirrors and representation. In paintings such as *Vertigini* (page 21), *Les sens et les choses* (page 27), *L’insolence de l’été* (page 45) *Le passe-partout du visible* (page 47) and *La sortie* (page 73), we never have a direct view of the protagonists, seeing only their reflections, and often their shadows, as if their physical presence cannot fully be recomposed their physical presence. Paraphrase occurs through the instrument of art, a metaphysical vision that becomes clearer through the Proustian dimension of memory, constantly given form and meaning through the agency of painting.⁹

THE MYSTERY OF THE METAPHYSICAL SEASIDE

As noted, Cremonini’s painting becomes more refined and complex, and his space, earlier conceived as a single point of view, now appears to multiply through a play of rooms and perspectives. Color is brighter and chromatic composition more liquid, combining allusions to earlier art, elements of Surrealism, and post-War, non-figurative tendencies such as staining and dripping. Pigment is increasingly light, malleable and luminous. The palette becomes more vivid, and the interior acoutrements seem influenced by Pop Art, in particular the original British version of Pop.¹⁰ Contemporary interior design and graphics also echo, yet all is conveyed through the fresh lens of an entirely personal style. Cremonini has enriched his baggage of technical knowledge, it remains tied to an oeuvre that has greater metaphorical density and meaning. Children, important in the works of the 50s, are unleashed from what constrained them in *Balconi d’Italia* and become Cremonini’s protagonists in dialectic with the world of adulthood. In one of the masterpieces of the mid 60s, *Giochi senza regole* (page 23), the painter superimposes two parallel spaces, a room and a stairway, constructed with two distinct perspectives, simultaneously united. It is here that he begins what was to be his research on space and time as these relate to adults, children and painting itself, each in their different perceptions but also linked by simultaneity. Children at play becomes one of the cardinal points of Cremonini’s oeuvre, a central element of his iconography and pictorial unconscious. Another aspect that deserves to be examined is the influence (recognized by Cremonini himself) of Giorgio de Chirico’s paintings, especially those of the 1910s.¹¹





Cremonini was greatly interested in elaborating the multiple perspective openings of de Chirico's piazzas, in the play of objects and spaces in his Ferrarese interiors, and in the presence of toys, canvases, rulers and triangles in his paintings. In this context, special importance can be attached to de Chirico's reflection on the return to childhood as a privileged moment for the artist and his work: play is a true awareness of reality and of the mystery it hides. Citing texts by de Chirico, Maurizio Calvesi has written illuminating words which might be applied to the painting of Cremonini, speaking of the "sensation of profound bewilderment before de Chirico's work [...] bewilderment – astonishment – for his 'stupendous' art that amazes us and raises wonder to the level of its own communicative power; bewilderment because when one's gaze moves away from the painting, the mind reprocesses its own 'deception' – unsatisfied, as if it had been fooled; vanished, yet with suspicions aroused. Is not the act of playing, then, the 'ultimate' secret of Metaphysics, indeed, betrayed by the good-natured, childish wit of the last works of de Chirico? Those unsettling oddities were playthings, and he had said so himself in one of his youthful writings: 'Living in the world as in an immense museum of oddities, of curious, multi-colored toys that change their appearance, which as children we sometimes break into pieces so we can see what they're made of inside, and discover to our disappointment that they're empty'. An enormous mechanical butterfly surfaces in the memoirs of the grande metafisico: 'from my little bed I stared at that toy, curious and fearful, as the first humans must have looked at pterodactyls'. Play – with the concrete fictions of its terrors, and the bitterness of its disappointments, even when these are swiftly remedied. And doesn't art, which has always been the great Game, which plays us and makes us play, appear to us now as a toy, which we fear might be broken forever? Art is the mending of a broken object, as psychoanalysis tells us, while we realize that art itself is a broken object, and that we can't tell whether we'll know how to repair it."¹²

Cremonini found a personal and unique way of repairing this broken object, and his work, through the gaze of the artist-child, represents the amazement of the painter before the world. The play of his painting is interwoven with children's play. Cremonini might also have been interested in the other twin of the Metaphysical movement, Alberto Savinio (de Chirico's brother), and his mysterious world of enigmatic toys and his vision of the passing times and "tragedy" of early childhood. Over the years, for example in pictures such as *La fin de l'été* (page 33), *Le passe-partout du visible* (page 47), *L'été perdu* and *Les vides à saisir*, Cremonini included stretchers, triangles, canvases and geometrical structures that evidently reflect de Chirico's Metaphysical interiors (painted in Ferrara, not far from Cremonini's native Bologna), The titles of these masterpieces, as we shall see, may have influenced our painter. This iconographical baggage also comes with the enigmatic shadows of both children and adults, apparently a specific reference to the shadow cast by the little girl playing with the hoop in de Chirico's great Metaphysical painting *Mistero e malinconia di una strada*. Moreover, Cremonini's frequent use of superimposed perspectives recollects the older artist's images of Italian piazzas, generating a short-circuit between interior and exteriors that was decisive for his unconscious.

It is important here to recall the words of Umberto Eco regarding Cremonini's moments of epiphany, understanding them as when "something reveals itself, something we had always seen but never really looked at [...]. For Cremonini it is an epiphany to see the bodies of bathers for the first time, not as they appear above the water but under it. The world as spied upon by children is epiphanic for him [...]. and Cremonini insists obsessively on their presence in his pictures."¹³

In the same vein, we should remember that it was de Chirico who maintained that the moment of "revelation" was fundamental for his work, as already theorized in the 1910s with an idea similar to Eco's, and in explicit association with Joyce, Eliot, Montale and Shklovsky. As de Chirico wrote, "A truly immortal work of art can only be born through revelation. Schopenhauer has, perhaps, best defined and also (why not) explained such a moment when in *Parerga und Paralipomena* he says: 'To have original, extraordinary, and perhaps even immortal ideas, one has but to isolate

oneself from the world for a few moments so completely that the most commonplace happenings appear to be new and unfamiliar, and in this way reveal their true essence.' If instead of the birth of *original, extraordinary, immortal ideas*, you imagine the birth of a work of art (painting or sculpture) in an artist's mind, you will have the principle of revelation in painting."¹⁴

Eco in turn wrote: "for all their alienation, [Cremonini's] mirrors are one of the instruments of epiphany, as a troubling recognition of the ambiguity concealed in the drama of normal perception; they make the canvas function 'as a doubt, as an iconography in crisis' (Cremonini). And to make the revelatory vision most efficient, instead of erasing what has already been seen, perhaps one should make the object of vision emerge from a magma of pulsations and suspicions which had first made a clean sweep of our perceptual and figurative habits."¹⁵

The affinity between Eco's words and those of de Chirico is clear. Cremonini's work thus seems one of the most interesting reflections on the oeuvre of the great Metaphysical painter made in the second half of the 20th century, expressed in entirely personal and innovative ways, while allowing an underlying anxiety to emerge. It should also be noted that in his use of perspective, of elements of geometric decoration, and in certain tonalities, Cremonini actively interacts with the painting of his friend Fabrizio Clerici, another great Italian painter, himself a friend of both Savinio and de Chirico. For his part, Clerici never concealed his interest in Metaphysical painting and his relationship with Surrealism, creating with Cremonini a significant area of Italian art (with international ramifications) that could reflect on and develop *arte metafisica*. Greater emphasis should be given to its historical importance and its exceptional capacity of once more revealing the disturbing, nostalgic mystery of the world.

Cremonini was also very attentive to Surrealism, its metaphorical cross-references and its discovery of the unconscious and of sexuality. In particular, his *Occhi di occhiali* seems to belong to the line of "artificial" representation, with the eye as symbol of the artist's most profound vision, revealing the mystery of the world hidden under the flawed perception of reality. This goes beyond the vision "as in a mirror" where we see only dimly, and follows a thread that goes from Odilon Redon to masterpieces by de Chirico such as *L'angelo ebreo* and *Il saluto dell'amico lontano*, fundamental for Surrealist works governed by the theme of the eye like Magritte's *Le faux miroir*, Man Ray's *Indestructible Object* or the celebrated scene of an eyeball being sliced in the film *Un chien andalou*, written, produced and performed by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. In Cremonini's painting our real eye meets its almost "Pop" likeness in the eyes on the sign and in the shop window; the humid evening setting thus contains a game between real perception and its representation, with the uncertainty as to which of the two can really penetrate the opaque veil that covers our vision of the world. Our gaze, which still sees dimly "as in a mirror," is itself the object of observation, beyond the transparent blanket of glass, by other eyes which perhaps see it more profoundly.

Cremonini's oeuvre seems also to have been touched somewhat by the *Italien de Paris* side of de Chirico (not so far from Cremonini himself, some years later), in the 20s and 30s, in the palette and dialectical, enigmatic game between interior and exterior. The multi-colored beach huts of his bathing establishments, decorated in zig-zags, cannot fail to recall the similar ones in the masterly *Bagni Misteriosi* of the mid-30s, which de Chirico resumed between the end of the 60s and beginning of the 70s in his playful, splendid final Neometaphysical period, when he created the fountain in Milan's Parco Sempione in 1973.¹⁶

So, in a masterpiece by Cremonini – the end-of-summer scene of *La fin de l'été* (page 33) – children play in dismantled, skeletal beach huts, entering the secret structure of a new *bagno misterioso*, in dialogue with those being created by de Chirico in the same years. Playing during the last days of summer, children metaphorically experience the enigma of the great game of painting, while beach attendants dismantle those huts, revealing the perspective of the shells that support them

like stretchers of some invisible canvas: renewed echoes of nostalgia, regret and melancholy, present (from their very titles) in de Chirico’s Ferrarese interiors. The fair-weather season (or simply “la stagione” as they say in Naples and Ischia) is about to end, and it is up to painting to mourn its loss, once again as the instrument that invests memory with structure and gives a new sense to regret for time irremediably spent.

EPILOGUE. ELEGY FOR LOST SUMMERS

Empty rooms at the end of the summer, their spaces waiting to be crossed once again, a silence interrupted by echoes of shouts and laughter, shadows of children who have played in those corridors and terraces overlooking the sea, the compressed time of many an age concentrated into a single moment of revelatory perception. Perhaps we were the children who ran and jumped in those houses, so distant in time, and we don’t know where they are now, those adults who were making love in the hottest hours, after lunch, trying not to be surprised by our indiscreet games.¹⁷

Abandoned mirrors, even before words, recall the bodies, senses and things belonging to the couples who converged in a fraction of desire and pleasure. Old blackened mirrors of summer houses, suspended in rooms occupied only by emptiness but happy to have offered more space, even if only through illusion, to our playing – when once the blindfold was removed after the game we saw those summer homes as if for the first time. On the now-deserted beach the end-of-summer sky is darkening, sweating its rainy humors onto the canvas, slowly dripping brown drops, and the wind that was warm now blows cold, swelling the deck chairs to announce autumn’s arrival.

The plate glass of the cafes and beach establishments, the big windows of the houses are peopled with ghosts, reflected presences of distant summers, when we played happily and time seemed so long, almost motionless in the afternoon hours by the sea, when you could pause, speaking for hours without the clock accelerating the time, without the weeks and summers running ever shorter. Everything rewinds and takes on life in the paintings of Cremonini, one of the greatest painters of time and memory in the second half of the 20th century. Perspectives intersect, colored corners open out onto the absolute light of the sea surrounding the islands, bathing the beaches at Forio and lighting up with volcanic warmth; for one instant, grandfather and grandson fuse their distance in age, the belvedere stops in the noonday stasis of sun-drenched silence, and the empty rooms of now uninhabited houses are enlivened thanks to the small dogs we played with when we were children, waiting loyally for the shadows of their absent owners, perennially traveling on old trains that have waited forever for their stations. Intrusive, aimless travelers leave the mark of their shadows on the ferries sailing from the islands, maybe Ischia or Panarea, at the end of a sunny day, when the sky undoes itself in the golden, violet dust of the evening.

The indiscreet sun lights up and warms houses dampened and chilled by infinite rainy winters. Doors and windows stand wide open waiting for the return of the light and the heat, parents’ clothing hangs solitary and senseless, waiting to be worn by bodies that are no longer there now, lost in the sky like the balloons that escape their children’s clutches, like kites dragged away by the sudden fury of a storm at the end of the summer season when our gaze becomes uncertain before the weight of the world, and only painting will be capable of giving meaning, weight and substance to the elusive sense of nostalgia for all the lost summers of our life.

Lorenzo Canova
Università del Molise

Panza– Forio d'Ischia, August 2016

NOTES

1. Special thanks go to William Louis-Dreyfus, Beatrice Scaccia, Linda Wolk-Simon and Frank Dabell; I am also grateful to Flavio Arensi, Giuseppe Del Monte and Bruno Macri for advice, suggestions and clarifications.

For biographical information on Cremonini, see Jacques Brosse, *Per una futura biografia di Leonardo Cremonini* (1987), reprinted in Flavio Arensi, ed., Leonardo Cremonini. *Disegni e acquarelli 1946-1996*, Turin: Allemandi, 2009, pp. 381-384. For the artistic context in Ischia and Forio in the 1950s, see Massimo Ielasi, *Un irresistibile soffio di luce. Artisti a Ischia da Böcklin agli anni del Bar Internazionale*, Ischia: Imagaenaria, 2008, second ed., Ischia 2016, pp. 76-78, where the artist recalls his years in Forio and speaks of his nostalgia for Ischia, and of his constant return to the island, in his dreams.
2. On Cremonini’s early work, see Flavio Arensi and Alberto Buffetti, eds. *Leonardo Cremonini 1945-1950. Gli anni di Brera*, exhibition catalogue (Legnano, Palazzo Leone da Perego, May-July 2008), Turin: Allemandi, 2008. For Cremonini in Forio, see Edoardo Malagoli, “Cremonini o Forio,” in *Leonardo Cremonini. Fogli Ischitani, disegni tra il 1951 e il 1957*, exhibition catalogue (Ischia Ponte, Galleria delle Stampe Antiche), Ischia, 1987.
3. On these subjects see also “Dialogo tra Régis Debray e Leonardo Cremonini,” in *Leonardo Cremonini. Elementi*, Bologna: Grafis, 1996.
4. See also Marc Le Bot, “Autre fragment d'un corps aimé,” in *Cremonini. Peintures 1975-1978*, Galerie Claude Bernard, Paris, 1979, reprinted in *Leonardo Cremonini*, Bologna: Grafis, 1979, pp. 174-184.
5. See Louis Althusser, “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, New York and London, 1971, p. 239 (first published in French in *Démocratie nouvelle* [Paris], August 1966, and reprinted in Italian in *Leonardo Cremonini*, 1979, cited in note 4, pp. 28-50); the volume also contains texts by Marco Valsecchi, Pierre Emmanuel, Giuliano Briganti, Michel Butor, Enzo Siciliano, Franco Solmi, Luigi Carluccio, Alberto Moravia, Umberto Eco, Mario De Micheli and Antonio Del Guercio.
6. See Jean Clair, “Les aventures du nerf optique,” in *Bonnard*, exhibition catalogue (Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, February-March 1984), Paris, 1984, pp.16-37.
7. T. S. Eliot, Chorus from “The Rock”, X, in *Collected Poems 1909-1935*, London: Faber & Faber, 1936.
8. Italo Calvino, “Il ricordo è bendato. Per Leonardo Cremonini,” in Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, Bruno Mantura, *Cremonini. Opere dal 1960 al 1984*, exhibition catalogue (Spoleto, Palazzo Racani-Arroni), Bologna: Grafis, 1984.
9. As Flavio Arensi states: “Marcel Proust [...] anticipated Cremonini’s method of investigating reality, discovered when the painter found a ram bone, although one might venture to say that for him, truth resides above all (or solely) in imagined experience. Exploiting the process of memory, the artist modifies spatial relationships and the nexus between space and the elements of drawing which are based on the premise of capturing the essence of a subject and its interiority” (F. Arensi, “La forma intenzionale,” in *Leonardo Cremonini. Disegni e acquarelli*, 2009, cited in note 1, p. 15).
10. See also Flaminio Gualdoni, “Per una o più letture,” in F. Gualdoni and Alberto Montrasio, eds., *Cremonini. Antologica 1953-2007*, exhibition catalogue (Milan, Museo della Permanente, 2002), Milan: De Agostini Rizzoli, Montrasio Arte, 2002, p. 15.
11. See “Eleonora Frattarolo a colloquio con Leonardo Cremonini,” in Adriano Bacchieri, Vittorio Mascacchi, eds., *Cremonini. Antologica retrospettiva 1953-2003*, exhibition catalogue (Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale, 2003), Bologna: L’Artiere, 2003, p. 179. The influences of de Chirico on Cremonini’s painting of the 1950s have been identified by *Marco Valsecchi in Leonardo Cremonini. 12 opere*, Milan: Edizioni del Milione, 1962, p. 10, and by Franco Solmi in “L’ultima estate di Leonardo Cremonini” in Franco Solmi, Louis Althusser, *Leonardo Cremonini. Mostra Antologica 1953-1969*, exhibition catalogue (Bologna, Museo Civico), Bologna: Alfa Edizioni, 1969, reprinted in *Leonardo Cremonini*, 1979, cited in note 4, pp. 76-96, especially p. 88.
12. Maurizio Calvesi, *La Metafisica schiarita. Da de Chirico a Carrà, da Morandi a Savinio*, Milan: Feltrinelli 1982, p. 11.
13. Umberto Eco, “Le epifanie di Cremonini,” *Bolaffi Arte*, March 1977, reprinted in *Leonardo Cremonini*, 1979, cited in note pp. 126-130: 130.
14. Giorgio de Chirico, “Meditations of a Painter” (1912), among the Jean Paulhan manuscripts, translated by Louise Bourgeois and Robert Goldwater in James Thrall Soby, *Giorgio de Chirico*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955, p. 251.
15. Umberto Eco, 1977, as cited in note 13, p. 130.
16. On de Chirico’s Neometaphysics, see Lorenzo Canova, ed., *Giorgio de Chirico. Gioco e gioia della Neometafisica*, exhibition catalogue (Campobasso, December 2014-April 2015), Campobasso: Regia Edizioni, 2014.
17. For this final paragraph, see also Alberto Moravia, “Le vacanze di Cremonini,” in the catalogue of the exhibition held at the Galleria Il Gabbiano, Rome, in April 1972, reprinted in *Leonardo Cremonini*, 1979, cited in note 4, pp. 114-118.

OBSTACLES, PARCOURS ET REFLETS
1975-1976
TEMPERA AND OIL ON CANVAS
76 3/4" x 103"



LES TIROIRS DE LA NUIT

1976-1978

OIL ON LINEN, DIPTYCH

46" x 64"

L'INSOLENCE DE L'ÉTÉ

1977-1978

OIL ON CANVAS, DIPTYCH

24" x 52"

PAGE 45

LES PASSE-PARTOUT DU VISIBLE

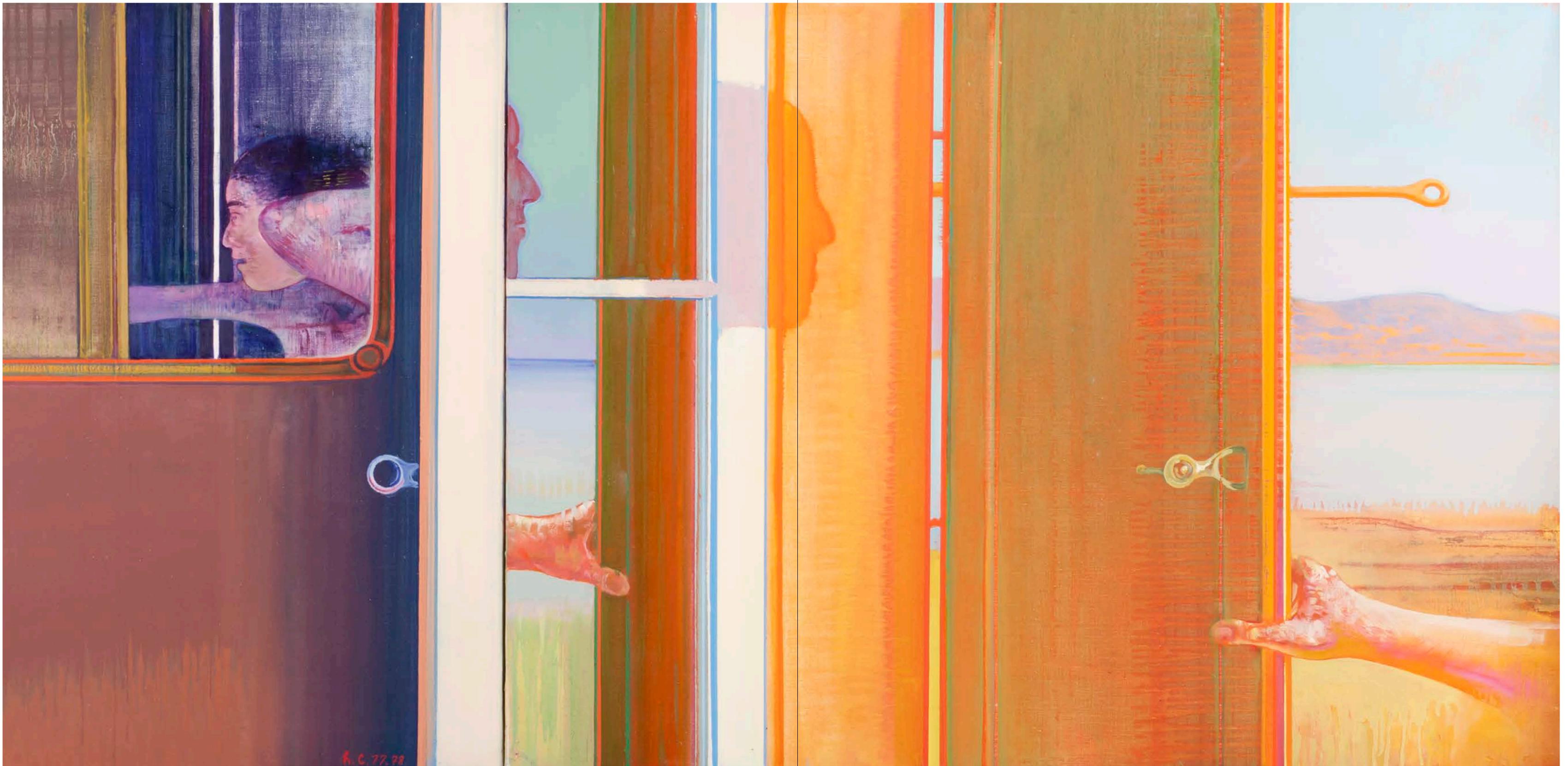
1977-1978

OIL ON LINEN, DIPTYCH

23 3/4" x 55 3/4"

PAGE 47





R.C. 77.78



LES PARENTHÈSES DU VOYAGE

1977-1978
OIL ON CANVAS
93 1/4" x 76 3/4"
DETAIL

LA MISE À NU DU PÈRE

1980-1982
OIL ON CANVAS, DIPTYCH
54" x 115"
PAGE 51





LE CAP

1981
OIL ON CARDBOARD
8" x 11 1/2"

LES GÉOMÉTRIES ÉVASIVES

1981 - 1982
TEMPERA AND OIL ON LINEN
45" x 115"
[PAGE 55](#)

LE CERF-VOLANT

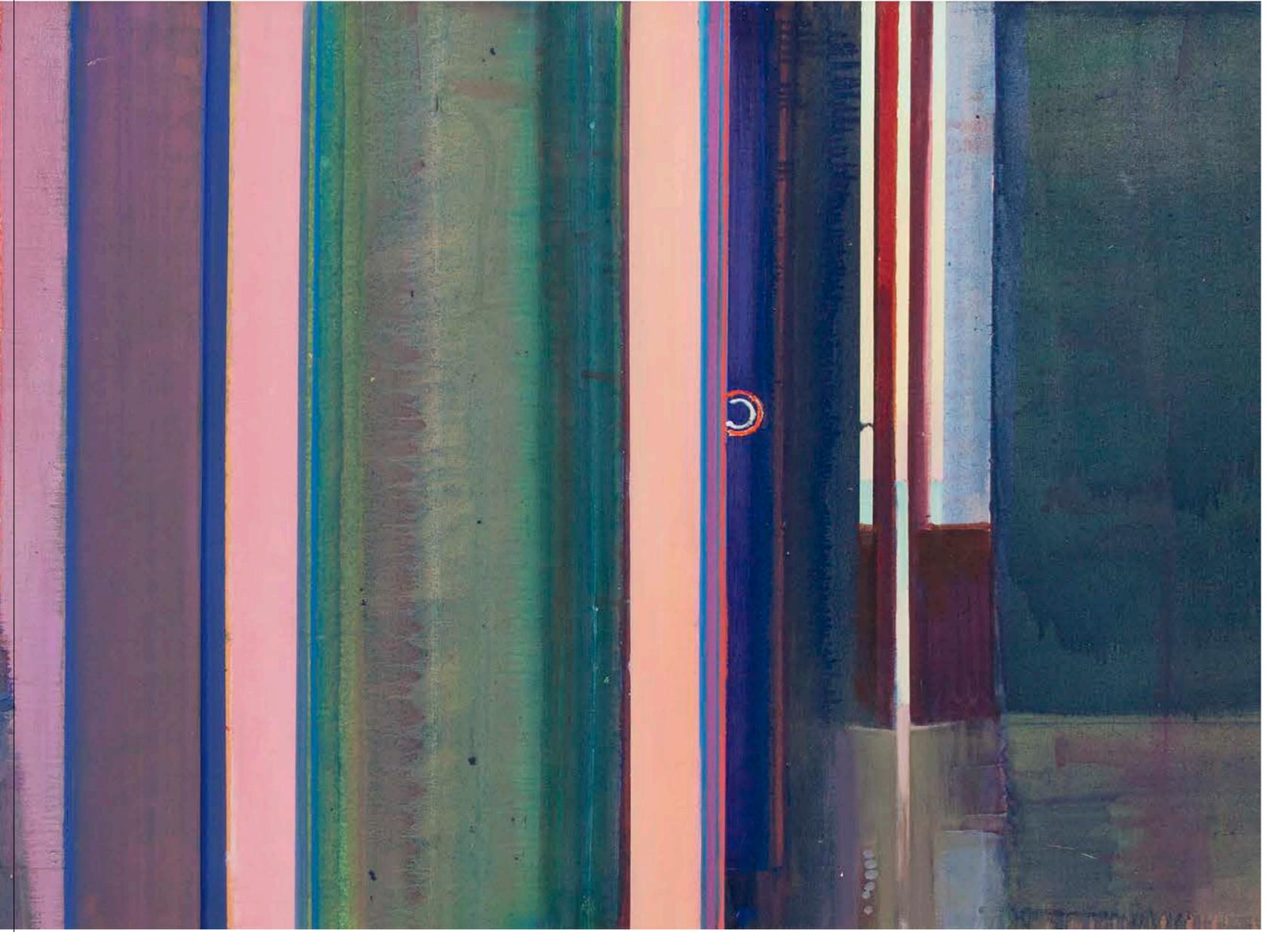
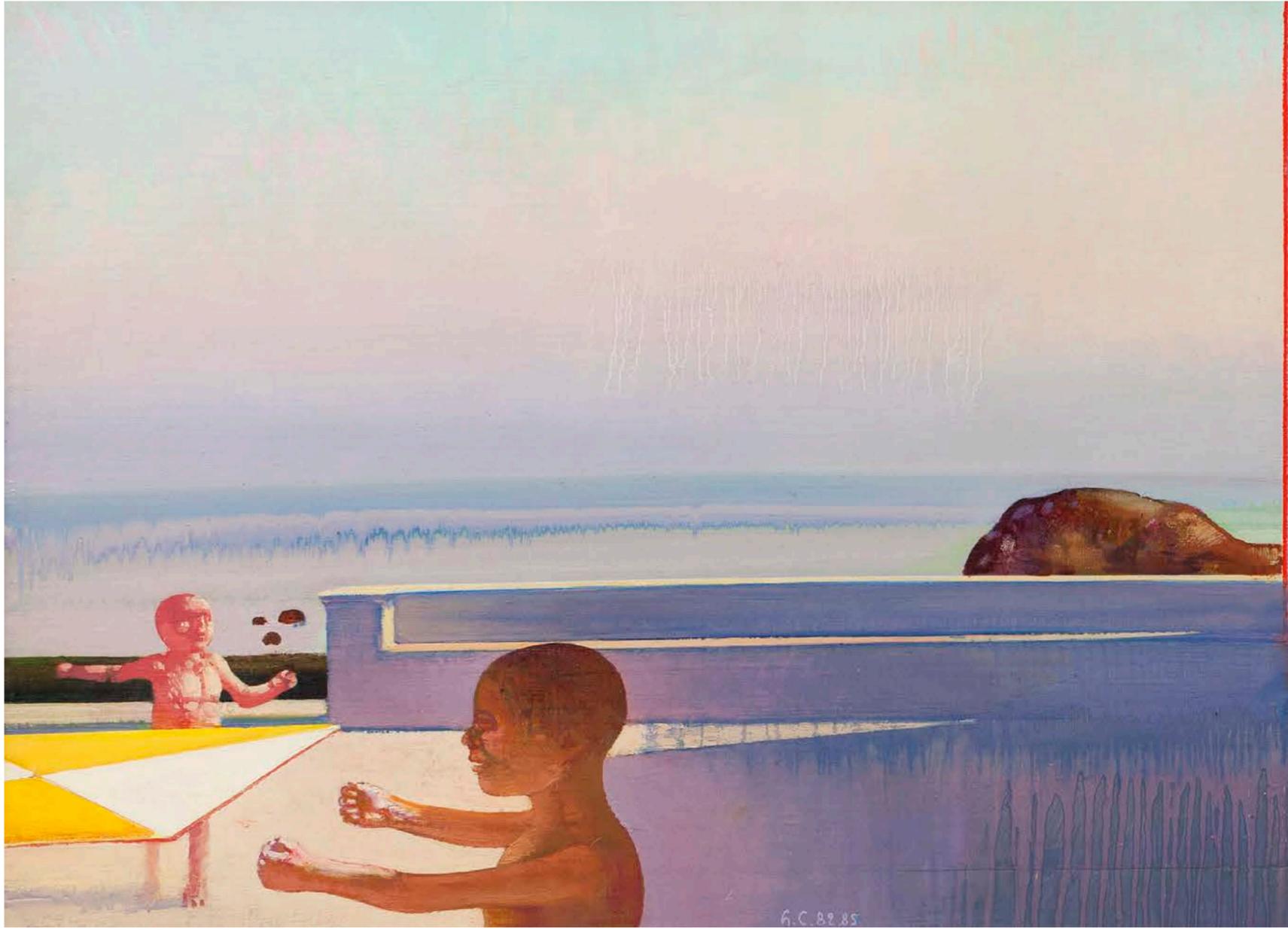
1982 - 1985
OIL ON LINEN
18 3/4" x 52"
[PAGE 57](#)

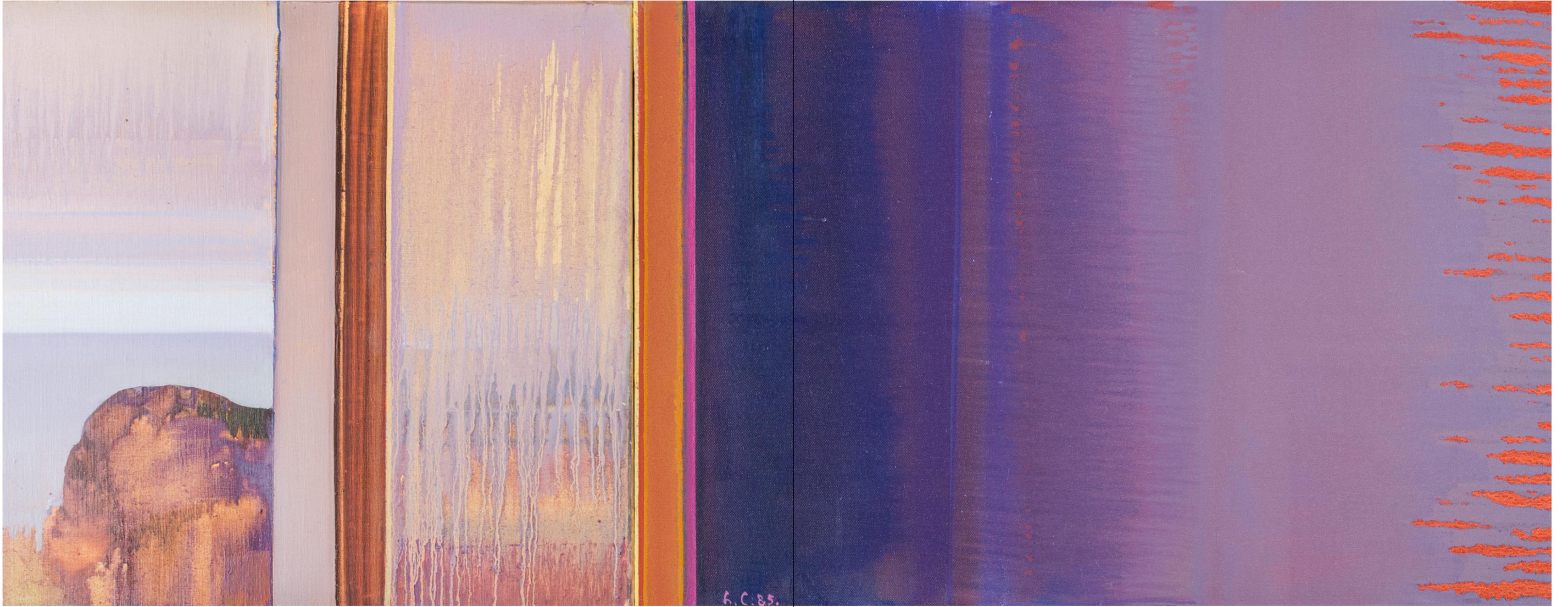
LES VIDES ET L'OMBRE

1985
TEMPERA AND OIL ON CANVAS, DIPTYCH
15" x 43"
Detail
[PAGE 59](#)









SILENCES ENSOLEILLÉS

1984-1985
OIL ON LINEN
51 1/4" x 76 3/4"

LES VIDES DE L'ÉTÉ

1986-1987
OIL ON CANVAS
45" x 92 1/2"
PAGE 63





L'HORIZON, LE SOIR

1986

WATERCOLOR ON PAPER

15" x 22 1/2"

LES BEAUX JEUX

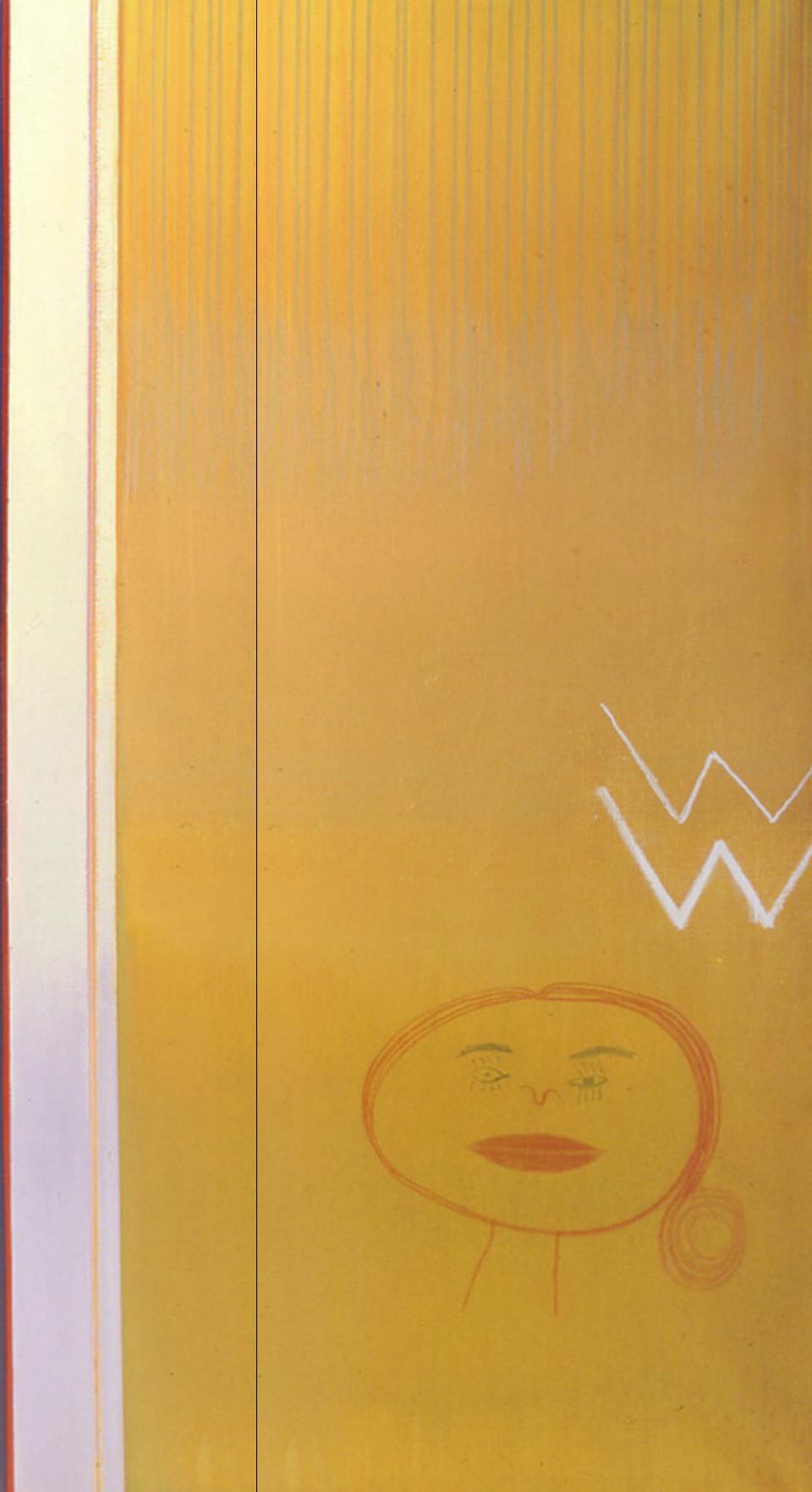
1987-1989

OIL ON LINEN

57 1/2" x 69 1/2"

PAGE 67





AUS DOS DE L'OMBRE
1988-1990
OIL ON CANVAS
45" x 57 1/2"



LA SORTIE
1989-1990
OIL ON CANVAS
57 1/2" x 85"

LA NUIT CHAUDE
1991-1992
OIL ON CANVAS
32" x 75 1/2"
PAGE 73





Cremonini, History and Modernity: Some Preliminary Observations

LINDA WOLK-SIMON



Figure 1
Giorgio Morandi
Still Life



Figure 2
Piero della Francesca
The Flagellation

Leonardo Cremonini (1925-2010) was one of the preeminent Italian artists of the later 20th century. The British painter Francis Bacon, an early and perspicacious admirer, proposed that the poet W. H. Auden be enlisted to write about his work. Italian philosophers and cultural critics Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, Alberto Moravia, and Vittorio Sgarbi, among others, authored lyrical appreciations of the artist. The latter took the form of an obituary published in 2010. Although Cremonini's renown had by that time receded, Sgarbi boldly designated him one of the great figures in the arc of Italian painting. That encomium was coupled with a reprimand to the art world establishment for having failed to accord Cremonini the recognition he was due, both in later life and in death.

Sgarbi was one of the more recent critics of note to have written about Cremonini. One of the first, writing a half century before, was William Rubin, famed director of The Museum of Modern Art in New York, who authored an essay on the artist's early work in 1957. (Republished in French in 1987, that essay is reprinted in the present volume.) One of Cremonini's first champions, Rubin had met the artist, then in his 30s, while he was teaching at Sarah Lawrence College, and the two formed an abiding friendship. For Cremonini, this was one of those seminal relationships with a respected critic and curator encountered periodically in the history of modern art that proves to be essential in establishing an artist's career. Rubin organized the first notable exhibition of Cremonini's work in America, which took place at the Catherine Viviano Gallery in New York in 1957. Some 30 years later, in May 1988, the artist inscribed a newly published monograph (still the major study on Cremonini) to Rubin: "for William Rubin, in memory an early friendship, the fragments of my recollections and my admiration," his fond words a testimonial to that meaningful early bond. Cremonini's inscription in Rubin's copy of the Italian edition of the same publication refers to their early days as "partners in crime."

Rubin, standing at the beginning of the current of art criticism devoted to Cremonini's work, articulated the fundamental idea that his canvases embody a "spirit of timeless monumentality." Sgarbi, lamenting what he considered to be the confounding demise of that critical attention, anointed him "the painter of interior light." Bracketing Cremonini's career, those acute characterizations capture the ethos of his poetic style and haunting, enigmatic imagery—his arid, light-filled, silent interiors, rendered according to careful perspectival grids; the anemic, psychologically distant and emotionally isolated, inscrutable figures; the frozen, timeless tableaux of seemingly informal yet highly staged encounters. The descriptive terminologies and critical lexicons of both Rubin and Sgarbi also allude to Cremonini's affinities with earlier Italian art, be it of past decades or past centuries. His adherence to a figurative tradition and a method of pictorial composition that ultimately extends back to Giotto (what Rubin characterized as "a Mediterranean trait") distinguishes Cremonini from the abstract avant-garde painters of his generation and from the Conceptualism of more recent decades, the period coinciding with his later activity. Although the artist worked for most of his career in Paris and therefore had an international and cosmopolitan artistic identity, and there are, moreover, occasional passages in his paintings that show him experimenting with abstraction or a color field sensibility, this history-inflected brand of modernism is distinctively (if not uniquely) Italian, seen, for instance, in the work of earlier

20th-century figurative painters like Massimo Campigli. Indeed Italian art history provides one meaningful context for elucidating elements of Cremonini's style.

In their lucid clarity and purity of form, Cremonini's compositions recall the still lifes – both paintings and etchings – of the 20th-century Italian painter Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) (figure 1). Such images must have been familiar: Morandi, like Cremonini was from Bologna, where he lived his entire life, and had studied and later taught at the Accademia di Belle Arti, where the younger artist would receive his early training a few decades later. The two artists were in fact personally acquainted, and Morandi seems to have been a helpful mentor in Cremonini's student days. The sense of frozen forms distilled to their essence, eternally caught in a timeless tableau, is an idiom common to both their works. The Surrealist impulses encountered in some of Cremonini's compositions find inspiration instead in the work of Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978), as Lorenzo Canova discusses in his essay in the present volume.

Cremonini's rigorously constructed interior spaces that adhere to the unyielding geometric rules of perspective hark back much further in the history of Italian art – to Piero della Francesca, among other painters of the early Renaissance (figure 2). Piero's enveloping, silvery pictorial light, and the meticulously observed shadows cast by columnar figures and architectural elements also find echoes more than four centuries later in Cremonini's art. And the sense of resounding silence that suffuses Piero's paintings likewise permeates Cremonini's hushed spaces. Following his early training in Bologna, Cremonini studied at the Accademia del Brera in Milan, where he would have seen Piero's great altarpiece painted for the Duke of Urbino, Federico da Montefeltro (then, surprisingly, not universally recognized as being by his hand; figure 3). The years of Cremonini's early activity in fact coincided with the rediscovery and heightened appreciation of Piero della Francesca on the part of artists and scholars alike. (This seismic awakening was charted by the Italian art historian Roberto Longhi and explored in an exhibition in Italy earlier this year which did not, however, include Cremonini.) Indeed, "timeless monumentality," Rubin's descriptive term encapsulating the essential character of much of Cremonini's art (and meant by its author precisely to convey Cremonini's affinities with early Renaissance painters like Piero della Francesca) might just as aptly have been formulated to describe Piero's compositions – those hyper-rational spaces inhabited by physically proximate but detached, inscrutable figures, at once of the ordinary world and remote from it.

A number of Cremonini's works from the 1950s and early 1960s depict butchered animals. Scenes of slaughter were commonplace near his house in Ischia, which stood next to an abattoir, but the subject is more than transcription or autobiography. Not only was it a metaphor for violence and suffering in 20th-century art, as Rubin noted in his discussion of Cremonini's slaughterhouse scenes; it also has a long history – with implicit allegorical meanings, both Christological and secular, attached to it – in European painting on both sides of the Alps. The Flemish painter Joachim Beuckelaer's *Slaughtered Pig* (figure 4) of 1653 is perhaps the earliest image of its type; the splayed, suspended carcass uncannily points the way to Cremonini by way of the slaughtered, dismembered sheep that become still life objects in the works of Goya and Picasso. Regardless of which particular works



Figure 3
Piero della Francesca
The Brera (Montefeltro) Altarpiece



Figure 4
Joachim Beuckelaer
Slaughtered Pig



Figure 5
Annibale Carracci
Butcher's Shop

he might have known first hand or through reproductions, Cremonini was surely situating himself in this long-standing pictorial tradition, which had a localized incarnation in his native Bologna beginning in the late 16th century. Great slabs of raw meat appear, for instance, in genre scenes by Bartolommeo Passerotti (1529-1592). The most celebrated image of this type is Annibale Carracci's *Butcher's Shop* (figure 5) in which descriptively rendered, flayed animal carcasses are prominently on display. (The painting, which includes a self-portrait, refers to his family's traditional trade, but the artist also intended it as a critical commentary on colliding impulses in late 16th-century Bolognese painting and a statement of his ambition to chart a revolutionary new course.) Cremonini offered an updated version of this subject, with the pieces of raw, skinned meat now neatly displayed in a butcher's case.

In contrast to Annibale Carracci or, jumping ahead some centuries, the Italian Futurists of the early 20th century, there is little to suggest that Cremonini embedded an artistic manifesto in his images. But like his earlier Bolognese compatriot, his father's profession does explicate and edify his choice of certain imagery. An amateur painter, Cremonini *père* worked for the *Ferrovie dello Stato Italian* (the Italian State Railway System). Childhood memories and recollections echo in Cremonini's many paintings of train cars and platforms. That these works carry implicit autobiographical references is a straightforward proposition. But perhaps such subject matter has further import as a signifier of Cremonini's particular strain of modernity, with its grounding in the conventions of a historical, figurative tradition. The ingrained Italian cultural adage that Mussolini made the trains run on time, though dubious as historical fact, is apposite here for its designation of trains as symbols of speed, efficiency and motion – paradigms of modernity in all its manifestations – and the view of Italy's once thriving rail system as a symbol of post-war recovery. (Originally referring to the aftermath of World War I, the Mussolini-train maxim became a nostalgic trope in the period of Cremonini's young adulthood after the Second World War, when trains' reliability was a more tenuous proposition.)

But are Cremonini's trains arriving or departing? Is he, metaphorically speaking, speeding toward modernity or fleeing from it? The parched, primeval cliffs; the expansive terraces overlooking an infinite sea; the old-fashioned, non-mechanized entertainments like kites and balloons and foosball; and the light-filled, languid Mediterranean interiors with lazing occupants, tousled bedclothes and furnishings in casual disarray suggest the latter – a retreat from the frenetic activity and ephemeral action of cities and machines. The seldom on-time Italian regional train (already a quaint mode of conveyance during Cremonini's later decades) was an appropriate vehicle for reaching the artist's pictorial Utopia, where time and motion are arrested.

Cremonini staved off the fleeting, fractured and momentary that erodes collateral passages of some of his paintings but never fully prevails, embracing instead the fixed and immutable. In so doing, he formulated an alternative modernity – a timeless monumentality that was at once historical and modern.

LES VOYAGEURS INDISCRETS

1994-1996
OIL ON CANVAS
45" x 76 3/4"

LES BALCONS

1992-1994
OIL ON CANVAS
105" x 51 1/2"
[PAGE 81](#)

WEEKEND

2003-2005
OIL ON CANVAS
91" x 46 1/2"
[PAGE 83](#)









Leonardo Cremonini

ITALIAN 1925-2010

Leonardo Cremonini was born in Bologna and moved to Calabria with his family at the age of 11. Struck by the light and landscape of Southern Italy, influences that would stay with the artist throughout his life, he began making artwork seriously in his early teens. Cremonini was awarded a scholarship to study at the Beaux Arts Academy in Bologna, which he attended for four years. In 1945, he moved to Milan to attend the Brera Accademia di Belle Arti.

Cremonini's enigmatic multi-figure indoor and outdoor scenes attracted significant critical attention and have been the subject of over 50 critical essays by leading intellectuals. He received the Prix Marzotto and the Prix du President de la Republique d'Italie. Cremonini was a Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres en France and member of the l'Academie Royale de Belgique; the Accademia di San Luca in Rome; the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno in Florence; and the Academie des Beaux-Arts a l'Institut de France.

Cremonini's work has been the subject of a number of retrospective exhibitions. His work is included in major public and private collections around the world, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Centre Pompidou; the Accademia Belle Arti Bologna; and the Galleria degli Uffizi.

Chronological Index

PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

TITLE	DATE	MEDIUM	DIMENSION	PAGE
BALCONI D'ITALIA	1953-1955	Tempera and oil on panel	51 1/2" x 69"	05
I CAVALLI CHE URLANO	1954-1955	Oil on canvas	32" x 42 1/2"	07
DONNE FRA LE ROCCE	1954-1955	Oil on canvas	43" x 56"	09
DONNE ADDORMENTATE ALLA LUNA	1955-1956	Oil on canvas	45" x 57"	13
WOMAN WITH A FISH NET	1956	Ink, gouache on paper	8" x 13 1/4"	13
CHEMINÉES	1957	Oil on canvas	15" x 25 1/2 "	15
VEGETAZIONE INVADENTE	1960-1961	Oil on canvas	38" x 52"	17
DA UNA STANZA AL BALCONE	1962	Oil on canvas on plywood	35 1/2" x 47 3/4"	19
VERTIGINI	1964	Tempera and oil on canvas	76 3/4" x 46 1/4"	21
GIOCHI SENZA REGOLE	1964	Oil on canvas	45" x 57 1/2	23
PRIMA CLASSE	1965	Tempera and oil on canvas	25 1/2" x 39 1/4"	25
LES SENS ET LES CHOSES	1968	Acrylic on canvas	76 3/4" x 76 3/4"	27
LES ANIMAUX DOMESTIQUES	1967-1968	Oil on canvas	46" x 35"	29
LA FIN DE L'ÉTÉ	1965-1971	Oil on canvas	51 x 130 3/4"	33
LES HORIZONS DU COMPTOIR	1970-2000	Oil on canvas	40 3/4" x 84"	35
OBSTACLES, PARCOURS ET REFLETS	1975-1976	Tempera and oil on canvas	76 3/4" x 103"	41
LES TIROIRS DE LA NUIT	1976-1978	Oil on linen, diptych	46" x 64"	43
L'INSOLENCE DE L'ÉTÉ	1977-1978	Oil on canvas, diptych	24" x 52"	45
LES PASSE-PARTOUT DU VISIBLE	1977-1978	Oil on canvas, diptych	23 3/4" x 53 3/4"	47
LES PARENTHÈSES DU VOYAGE	1977-1978	Oil on canvas	93 1/4" x 76 3/4"	49
LA MISE À NU DU PÈRE	1980-1982	Oil on canvas, diptych	54" x 115"	51
LE CAP	1981	Oil on cardboard	8" x 11 1/2"	53
LES GÉOMÉTRIES ÉVASIVES	1981-1982	Tempera and oil on linen	45" x 115"	55
LE CERF-VOLANT	1982-1985	Oil on linen	18 3/4" x 52"	57
LES VIDES ET L'OMBRE	1985	Tempera and oil on canvas, diptych	15" x 43"	59
SILENCES ENSOLEILLÉS	1984-1985	Oil on linen	51 1/4" x 76 3/4"	61
LES VIDES DE L'ÉTÉ	1986-1987	Oil on canvas	45" x 92 1/2 "	63
L'HORIZON, LE SOIR	1986	Watercolor on paper	15" x 22 1/2"	65
LES BEAUX JEUX	1987-1989	Oil on linen	57 1/2" x 69 1/2"	67
AUS DOS DE L'OMBRE	1988-1990	Oil on canvas	45" x 57 1/2"	69
LA SORTIE	1989-1990	Oil on canvas	57 1/2" x 85"	71
LA NUIT CHAUDE	1991-1992	Oil on canvas	32" x 75 1/2"	73
LES VOYAGEURS INDISCRETS	1994-1996	Oil on canvas	45" x 76 3/4"	79
LES BALCONS	1992-1994	Oil on canvas	105" x 51 1/2"	81
WEEKEND	2003-2005	Oil on canvas	91" x 46 1/2"	83

Cremonini by William Rubin
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Project Coordination:
Mary Anne Costello
Christina Kee
Debbie Neff

for William

