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The Man in the Middle.
A Brief Appreciation of Stefano Arienti

By Dan Cameron

Although his emergence on an international level has been very gradual, and he is still not yet known to a large public, it is quite possible that Stefano Arienti is the most significant artist working in Italy at the end of the 20th century. This unusual circumstance is made even more striking by the fact that Arienti's output during the past decade consists of a number of specific and fairly autonomous investigations, each one of which might at first be mistaken as the work of a completely separate artist. Because Arienti seems thoroughly unconcerned with presenting a stylistically consistent image of himself to his viewers, it has been particularly difficult for most commentators to come to terms with the fact that his artistic ambition is easily as great as that of most practitioners, who manage to forge a recognisable set of stylistic modes early in their career and do not subsequently stray far from those initial working parameters. In Arienti's case, the possibility that his audience might not easily grasp that he is the author of all these diverse bodies of work seems to allow him an even greater latitude in terms of pushing each series to its logical point of conclusion, then beginning another. This is not because Arienti wants to evade our attention or defeat our expectations, but rather because he is deeply committed to the principle that one's artistic persona and one's method of working are not interchangeable, despite the fact that the last twenty-five years often seems like an ongoing campaign to fuse the messenger and the news he brings into a single entity.

Having stated that premise, and without going in depth into each of his separate groups of work, it is intriguing to think about the ways in which Arienti's art does address certain overall concerns that can in turn be carried over from one distinct series to another. On the most basic level, one encounters the principle that each of these series entails developing a method of interfering with or imposing oneself between convention-based perceptions of reality and the frequently unquestioned notion that an unencumbered vista is somehow the most rewarding vantage point. By contrast, Arienti is interested in exploring the ways in which perception is heightened by being blocked or temporarily thwarted in favour of an activity that emphasises some characteristic of his materials other than the immediately visual, or which pushes visual perception into a highly

speculative sphere where it becomes difficult to separate the essential from the unimportant. Whether or nor this activity consists of intricately folding the coloured pages of newspaper comics so that they become an undulating surface of pure chroma and rhythm, or systematically scratching away at the chemical emulsion on the surface of 35mm-slides to distort the photographed image, Arienti seems to delight in allowing us to feel that perhaps he is either removing his very subject matter from beneath our noses or else dissolving it in a medium of undifferentiated perception, where the recognition of a friend's face and the tracing of ridges of pure abstract colour or texture merge slowly into the same vista.

One clue to Arienti's unusual artistic temperament can be found in the mid-century conflicts between those artists who saw abstraction as the only representative visual language of the modern age, and artists who were less identifiably modern because of the fact that they preferred to incorporate pictorial representation (usually of the human figure) into their work. Once this debate came face to face with the questioning of visual hierarchies introduced by post-modernism in the seventies, the very notion that abstraction and figuration represent two mutually exclusive poles of artistic activity began to unravel quickly. Only fifteen years ago, however, the art world appeared to take a few steps backward with the rapid rise of a generation of painters dedicated to the goal of returning painting back to its presumably unshakeable historical association with the human figure. From the perspective of artists just emerging from their studies (as Arienti was at the time), there was an undeniable feeling in the air that a great deal of innovative thinking had suddenly been redirected as a means of propping up an increasingly reactionary school of painting and sculpture, and that these ideas had to be recaptured and applied in different ways in order to make it clear that while painting the figure was certainly something artists had every right to undertake, it was not the only (or even most credible) application of post-modern thought available.

In saying this, it should also be pointed out that there are fundamental differences between Arienti's proposed application of post-modern theory to studio practice, and the kinds of formulas then being developed by artist working in the U.S. or Germany (to take the two most obvious points of comparison). For starters, the notion of critically applying photography to the dissection and reconstitution of popular culture was not as interesting to Arienti as it was to the Americans, in large part because his long-standing immersion in the history and language of painting pushed him towards solutions that re-emphasised the physical domain of his materials. On the other hand, the idea of dispensing with the handmade altogether, or forging eclectic style that would have permitted him to simultaneously pursue a number of mutually exclusive languages and techniques, was not in keeping with Arienti's interest in exploring the domain of the sensual, the accepted limits of pictorial representation, and not merely a casualty of it.

As Arienti's steady artistic growth over the past decade has gradually brought his work to the attention of audiences outside Italy, it is doubly rewarding to note the degree to which his art, which once seemed hermetic and austere, now appears positively expressive alongside comparable investigations on the part of other artists of his generation. There is also a sly humour within Arienti's work, as well as a deep commitment to exploring all the possible nuances of colour, texture and surface, which have revealed the more personable aspects to his seemingly restricted path of development, as well as its increasing proximity to more conventional definitions of painting, drawing and sculpture. More importantly, perhaps, the last few years have witnessed a renewed attempt on Arienti's part to behave like an artist of his time, with all the emphasis on subjectivity that such a position entails. His 1993—95 slide projection works, in which hundreds of the aforementioned slides were synchronised with appropriate fades and dissolves, revels in the fact that the images which Arienti has cannibalised for the occasion were mostly travel snapshots, photos of friends, or other stray moments of life captured on film and then transformed into something that aspires to both cinema and painting simultaneously.

At the present moment in art, an experiment like Arienti's brings up the question of how visual culture is contemplating its future. Caught between the studio arts tradition that still hangs over the present era and the increased interweaving of communications and media technology in the coming age, visual art has been forced to reinvent itself at increasingly frequent intervals during the past ten years, and it is no longer as clear as it once was that it is possible to sustain activity in one sphere without also engaging the other. Or it may, as Arienti's progress over this same period seems to insist, be possible to create art without also re-building one's own point of view, literally from the ground up, each time around, but faced with the choice of either experimentation or pleasure, isn't the best plan of action to choose both?