

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art Review | 'Manzoni: A Retrospective'

To Bump Off Art as He Knew It

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In photographs the Italian artist Piero Manzoni looks like a cutie, with his moon face, clowning smile and baggy Fred Mertz pants. But the art he's best known for isn't so sweet. In 1961 he canned his feces. There were 90 small containers of uniform weight, each about an ounce, and priced to sell at whatever the market value of the identical weight in gold was at the time of purchase.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Two "Achrome" pieces by Piero Manzoni at Gagolian: left, a "hairy picture"; and right, a picture made by dipping canvas in liquid clay and folding it.

What is actually in those signed and sealed cans has been a matter of debate. Opening one would destroy the art, and far as I know no one has. Manzoni — a child of Dada and a father of Conceptualism — was making a joke about values, and part of the deal is that we play along. At the same time he was doing something that art does, creating mystery. And whether you think of those little cans as intellectual puzzles or reliquaries or scams, there are surprises inside.

Manzoni's work has, in general, been a mystery in the United States: familiar, sort of, from books, but fuzzily grasped and seldom seen. Sonnabend Gallery organized a

survey in 1972. Then there was pretty much nothing until “Manzoni: A Retrospective,” now at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea. Maybe that’s why the show feels like such an amazement.

The situation is different in Italy, where Manzoni (1933-1966) is a major presence, both as a pivotal player in the country’s post-World War II avant-garde, and as a progenitor of the homegrown version of Conceptualism known as Arte Povera. The curator who gave that movement its name, Germano Celant, is responsible for the Gagosian show.

He has clearly taken it as his main task to put Manzoni in an international context. He has arranged the work by date, from 1955 to 1963, and provided a kind of timeline of information about the artist, about the immediate art world he moved in, and about global political and culture events of the day. Manzoni could easily be lost in the data, but he isn’t. He always stands out in photographs, and he makes for good copy, just as he hoped he would.

He was born into an aristocratic family; his full name was Count Meroni Manzoni de Chiosca e Poggiolo. He had an early interest in art but bowing to parental wishes ended up in law school, where he did not thrive. A switch to studying literature and philosophy helped, but not enough to keep him in school. He had prodigious energy. He couldn’t sit still. So around 1955 he turned to making art and taught himself what he needed to know.

The times were right for his adventurous disposition. Cold war Europe was a shifting, uneasy place, traumatized by the past, giddy with new prosperity. Everyone was consuming like mad by day and having nightmares about nuclear bombs at night.

Two different styles of abstract painting reflected the tense atmosphere.

Art informel, the European version of Abstract Expression, was all about that, all about the anguished ego and so on. By contrast geometric abstraction, with roots in Malevich and Mondrian, was about being above it all, about utopia. Manzoni, who was coming to

all this from outside the art establishment, had little patience for either position and tried to shake them up.

He made gestural pictures but with gooey tar instead of paint, so they're not soulful, they're gross. As for geometric abstraction, he covered canvases with coats of gesso and left them like that, primed, but that's all. They look blank, as if waiting for a real painter to show up.

He was one of many artists worldwide bent on bumping off art as they'd known it. Lucio Fontana, a hugely influential senior figure, was slashing paintings with knives. Alberto Burri, trained as a doctor, was painting with a blowtorch. In Japan, Yayoi Kusama filled canvases with obsessive dot patterns that left surfaces looking like scar tissue.

Yves Klein, from France, was more hands off. He made production-line art: same-size abstract paintings, all in one brand-name color. And in the United States, as early as 1951, Robert Rauschenberg had done all-white paintings, the only inflections being shadows accidentally cast on the surface.

Manzoni was affected by most of these artists, and Mr. Celant has rounded up representative pieces by all of them. It's quite a lineup. One significant forebear, Marcel Duchamp, is materially missing, but that makes sense. By the 1950s he had long since taken his profound skepticism to its logical extreme: he preferred to think about art rather than make it.

As committed a Duchampian as he was, Manzoni seemed to like objects, and turned out quite a few, often in series: kooky items with lots of attitude and an ambushing sort of beauty. In 1957 he made what he called "Achromes" by soaking canvas in liquid clay, then folding and pleating the cloth and letting it harden.

The crease patterns can look absurd at first sight, like fork marks in mashed potatoes. Then they start to bring other associations to mind: bedsheets feverishly disarranged,

bandages pulled too tight. And then the pieces turn abstract: Agnes Martins in high, deep relief.

He made other “Achromes” from stitched cloth, wadded cotton, even breakfast rolls, sometimes coating them in unstable phosphorescent pigments that he knew would change over time. The wildest looking “Achromes” are those he referred to as “hairy pictures,” made from clumps of baby-fine, flyaway vinyl fiber. Some resemble distressed wigs. Others are wispy and angelic. A few suggest dense mushroom clouds viewed from on high.

In the late 1950s Manzoni moved in more dematerializing directions, as if he cared less about what things looked like than about what you could do with them or say about them. In 1959 he introduced his “Corpi d’Aria” or “Bodies of Air,” basically an edition of rubber balloons. Buyers could inflate them themselves or have Manzoni do it, though there was an extra charge for his breath.

For a 1960 gallery solo he exhibited hard-boiled eggs stamped with his fingerprints. The opening night crowd ate the entire show. There were other interactive projects. In 1961 he made portable wooden bases — “magic bases” — for living sculpture: if you stood on one, and anyone could, you were instant art. Manzoni might even sign your arm.

A design for an inflatable theater — shaped like a sphere and meant to expand and contract as if breathing — was never realized. Nor was the proposal for public park sculptures that would behave like friendly animals: eat, drink, take naps, possibly even reproduce. He had many plans that he never got to. Worn out by a punishing schedule of work, travel, networking and exhibiting, he died of a heart attack in his studio in Milan at 30.

The grief over his death must have been genuine. He was more than a star, he was an art-as-life inspiration and continues to be. A short-lived star of our own day, Martin Kippenberger (1953-1997), took him as a patron saint. I bet Jeff Koons has too. And he was adorable, this chubby guy with a funny grin and a rude gesture for everyone.

His art is rude and funny too. But it's also something else, because it's about vanishing and going away. He meant his breath to leak from balloons. He meant his "Achromes" to change and fade with time. He probably meant his little cans of excrement — art right from the gut! — to attract morbid reverence, like the bones of saints. It's hilarious, really, the wisdom and comfort some people find in art. I've seen the Manzoni show three times and want to go again.