

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

REVIEWS

NEW YORK



PIERO MANZONI

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The art critic David Sylvester once described Cy Twombly's paintings as looking like bedsheets after a night of passion. In the catalogue accompanying the Piero Manzoni exhibition he curated at Gagosian, the critic Germano Celant juxtaposes Manzoni's crumpled Achromes, made of cloth dipped in glue and white plaster, with the sculpted drapery of Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Theresa* to suggest a similar eroticism. But most of the pleated canvases assembled here—a series begun in 1957, six years after Rauschenberg's white monochrome canvas and two years after his *Bed*—shocking as they may have once appeared, look curiously chaste in the cavernous gallery, like funerary shrouds.

Manzoni would stick anything to his canvases (straw, gravel, rabbit fur, even bread rolls), as long as it was or could be painted white. In 1998, Celant curated a large retrospective of Manzoni's work at the Serpentine Gallery in London, and when I visited, one Lacanian theorist with an animal phobia almost fainted at all the unruly white fur and fiberglass on show, spilling out of some of Manzoni's works like candy floss. These works were iconoclastic acts of purification determined to strip painting of all unnecessary excess. Manzoni intended them to refer to nothing but themselves. However, in the Gagosian exhibition, the largest collection of his oeuvre to have been shown in the United States, distracting wall texts feature a time line that focuses attention on the space race, almost as if to imply that Manzoni's phosphorescent creations are not really abstract at all but representations of the pockmarked lunar surface.

Manzoni died in 1963, aged 30, having suffered a heart attack on his studio steps, but he was prolific in his short life. Celant attempts to put Manzoni's work in context by placing it next to pieces by artists such as Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, and Rauschenberg, all of whom influenced Manzoni; surprisingly, Jasper Johns, whose monochromatic grids of stenciled numbers were also an inspiration, is not included.

As a group these artists explored the void opened by the avant-garde dismantling of the Kantian aesthetic. But while artists like Yves Klein thought of themselves as modern-day alchemists or shamans, transforming raw matter into gold, Manzoni always mocked this mythical idea.

Manzoni is most famous for his 90 cans of "Artist's Shit," which he sold in 1961 for the fluctuating price of gold. Manzoni's father owned a canning factory, and these tins were created, in part, as a response to his statement that his son's work was shit. The tins were not only a subversive response to the crazy commodification of art

(Manzoni also marketed boiled eggs stamped with his thumbprint and balloons of "artist's breath" sold by volume), but also a witty comment on the psychoanalytic idea of sublimation, which had all artistic creation originating in the anal drive. The French artist Bernard Bazile took a series of photographs of the proud owners of the surviving tins, and he even peeled back the lid of one—just a fraction—to reveal a wrapped object inside (Bazile considered his action an artistic intervention, and in 1989 he exhibited *Boîte de Piero Manzoni ouverte* at the Pompidou). But do these time capsules really contain what Manzoni claimed? X-rays have revealed another can within the can, and one wonders whether they harbor other private jokes.

Manzoni didn't want just to disseminate his art into the world as ironic commodities but to incorporate the whole world into his expanded concept of art. He invited people to stand on his "magical bases" so as to become living sculpture, and he signed people's bodies, thereby making them works of art. For this last project, Manzoni issued five different certificates of authenticity depending on how much his subjects paid. A red stamp meant you were a complete work of art until death; yellow meant only the signed part was art; green meant you were only art when doing certain things, such as drinking or singing; and purple meant the same as red but only upon payment of the agreed amount.

With seemingly boundless energy and ambition, Manzoni aimed to create a series of painted lines that would be deposited in cities around the world and together would equal the circumference of the earth. Only one of these was completed, on 7,200 meters (4.5 miles) of rolled newsprint, and it is exhibited here in its large lead crate. Manzoni influenced generations of conceptual artists by affirming that it was the idea rather than the action that counted. He finally managed to frame our planet, thereby transforming it into an artwork, in what I think is his most brilliant, megalomaniacal, and poetic gesture: a rusty, inverted iron plinth that he deposited in a field in Denmark in 1961 and which, like Atlas, he claimed carried the globe. —Christopher Turner

TOP: Piero Manzoni and Achrome, 1959.

BELOW: Merda d'artista, 1961. Tin can and printed paper, 17 1/2 x 22 1/2 in.

