

Müller Dominikus, 'Pietro Roccasalva'. www.frieze.com, 18 April 2014.

Pietro Roccasalva

Kölnischer Kunstverein



Pietro Roccasalva, //
Traviatore, 2013, Pastel
on paper on panel, 80 x
100 cm

F.E.S.T.A., Pietro Roccasalva's first solo show in Germany, began outside the exhibition space proper at Kölnischer Kunstverein, in a cinema accessed from the foyer screening the digital animation video *Giocondità* (2002): a slow tracking shot through and around the Church of San Francesco in the Italian town of Como; the soundtrack's deep drone soon gives way to a comic fairground brass band. The camera shifts to an elevated viewpoint and we see that instead of the usual dome, the church's roof is a huge lemon squeezer.

According to Roccasalva's own account, he received this image, like a true surrealist, as a 'vision'. This set the tone for what was to follow in the exhibition: quasi-baroque theatre; an opulent play on mirroring fact and fiction, but above all, an attempt to create a self-sufficient universe that generates its own meaning, in direct contrast to the ubiquitous referentialism and formalism of some context-obsessed contemporary art.

Out of the lemon juicer, then, Roccasalva squeezed a world of his own. The juicer recurred as a motif throughout the exhibition, for which the Kunstverein's elongated main space was partitioned almost symmetrically into smaller rooms. In a series of pastel works ranging from mere sketch to naturalistic rendering (*Il Traviatore* (2012-13)), the juicer was presented by a waiter on a shiny round serving platter with a cloche. The chrome plating of the cloche reflects, as one might expect, the main facade of the Church of San Francesco in Como.

And so it went on. Ideas and images were picked up, transformed and varied. In a seemingly cryptic game, the work grew a new head at every turn: the shiny round chrome of the serving platter recurred in the sculpture *Untitled* (2003), a kind of bottomless tub at the end of a corridor. This tub in turn echoed a bottomless red ceramic vessel that was part of the installation *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (2008). The missing bottom recurred as a red spot projected next to a painting. And finally, the installation as a whole was echoed in *You raise the blade, you make the change* (2008), an ensemble on the opposite side of the central corridor comprising paintings as well as a roll of film in an open can. The principle of displacement and the hide-and-seek staging by Roccasalva were summed up in the twisting and mirroring of a neon sign bearing the Jacques Lacan quote: *You never Look at me from the place I see you* (2013).

But in the show's last and largest room, containing ten white marble slabs engraved with the lists of artists from groups shows in which Roccasalva has featured (*Checosasono le nuvole*, 2011), one began to ask oneself: where is the artist looking at us from? In each list, his own name was conspicuously omitted, erased. Precisely in the contextualizing gesture of embedding himself in economic and personal networks, the artist emerged *ex negativo* as a pseudo-classical genius – a literally empty signifier holding together a whole universe in spite of its many formal breaks.

While we're on the subject of Lacan: you only had to invert the quote to get 'I never look at you from the place you see me'. And suddenly, the bewitched and bewildered tone, with which the show-as-puzzle presented itself irrevocably slipped into latent megalomania. Behind every illusion is an illusionist; the most successful magician is the one who can make himself disappear. In spite of a very real sense of unease with the current spate of 'critical' contextualization with its emphasis on social and systemic frameworks, one is loath to follow Roccasalva into his anti-context wonderland. The price to pay – illusionism, elaborate 'artist-as-genius' gestures – is just too high. On the way out, snatches of fairground music could be heard wafting through the foyer.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell