WIDEWALLS

Gianpietro Carlesso and Paolo Serra Unite in the Purity of an Idea at Ronchini Gallery

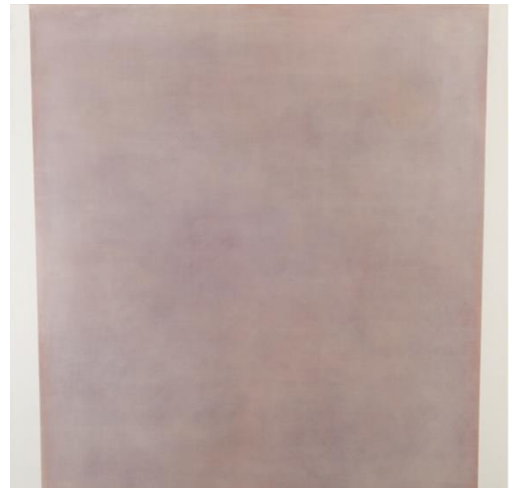
Patina Lee | February 29, 2016

Once in a while there comes a moment in which we remember how much the ideology of individualism has taken over the world. That normally happens when something unusual occurs, such as collaborative work in art. It doesn't sound very unusual at first, but honestly, when you think about it, when was the last time you heard about two artists doing an exhibition together, on purpose, not as part of a previously designed group show or art fair?

The upcoming exhibition at Ronchini Gallery is the fruit of a collaboration between the Italian artists Gianpietro Carlesso and Paolo Serra. The sculptor and the painter, respectively, explore the purity of an organic form, while reflecting on texture, luminosity and the harmony of composition, typical for works of both of these artists.

Shaping Infinity

As for the sculptor Gianpietro Carlesso, his preferred medium is marble and it is a material he is greatly interested in. Working with scientists helped him conduct a research regarding the concept of infinity, which he depicted in one of his most prominent series, named *Curvatura*. Probably the most interesting part of these works is the fact that these shapes are carved out of a single piece of marble, which coherently responds to the ideas of infinity. The sculptures that Carlesso makes with such virtue resemble eternity, both through the methodology of their creation, and the symbolic notion of their final appearance. On this occasion, another, previously unseen series will be showcased. The series is entitled *Litoforo*, and it follows the same conceptual pattern used for *Curvatura*.



Paolo Serra - Untitled, 2015. Lacquer on panel, 122 x 121.9 cm © The Artist and Ronchini Gallery

Painting the Essence

Paolo Serra is interested in the notion and nature of some of the most basic terms, such as light, space, form. This context, which reflects on minimalism, or rather essentialism, leads to linearity, as a technique used in his artistic expression, and to chromaticism. Although he uses straight geometric forms and very smooth and clear surfaces, the depth that he seeks is shown through the use of some old materials, such as oriental lacquer, which has hundreds of thin layers, and gold leaf, with the luminosity it carries as one of its most important qualities.

Gianpietro Carlesso's and Paolo Serra's Styles Meet in Abstraction

When put together, the works of two Italian artists produce a perceptual consistency. Although the mediums differ, abstraction unifies the intentions and the outcomes of both of these artists' endeavors, resulting in overwhelming harmony. Carlesso is searching for a way to depict infinity, and does it in a very material way, and on the other hand Serra begins with a subject that is, perhaps, more down-to-Earth, but he ultimately shows the infinity of color, infinity of a simple, basic form and texture. The exhibition will be on view from March 18th through May 13th 2016, at Ronchini Gallery in London.

The following conversation between Francis Naumann and Paolo Serra took place in the artist's studio in Castelleale, Italy, on November 13, 1993.

At the door of Serra's studio, there is a sign that reads: 'Looking isn't as simple as it looks, art teaches people *how to* see. *Ad Reinhardt.*' Below the sign are two diagrams of a head in profile, one showing the eyes positioned three-quarters of the way up the head, while the other shows them positioned centrally.

Francis Naumann: Let's begin by having an explanation of the sign that appears attached to the door of your studio.
Paolo Serra: A friend of mine, Sandro, gave it to me. And I thought it might be nice to attach it to my door. Basically, it reminded me of certain events in my past and how I used to go about trying to explain the more difficult aspects of understanding modern art. People really do not look at the world around them. Instead, they make false assumptions, and that's what the diagram indicates. Because they don't really look, most people believe the eyes are located three-quarters the way up the head. It is no coincidence that these *same* people usually fail to see any merit in abstract painting, whereas they might see a great deal of meaning in a badly-informed figurative painting.

Is that what you think Reinhardt meant by saying that 'Looking isn't as simple as it looks.'
Nothing comes free. If you really want to get something out of life, you must allow yourself the time to investigate things carefully, to look at them thoroughly. Otherwise, you can look all you want without really seeing anything.

Using these criteria, let's look at one of your paintings and see whether or not we can derive meaning, or at least see if through a careful examination of its physical presence, we can better understand what you were trying to do. Do you think the painting now hanging in your studio – the one consisting of four separate panels hung horizontally – stands up as a single image, isolated from the rest of your work?
Yes.

The reason I ask that question is because I know that when you paint, you often listen to classical music. No one would question the fact that a great deal of pleasure can be derived from classical music just by listening to it, but you can gain an ever greater appreciation for a given composition by recognizing the themes and variations it contains. I was wondering if you could do the same thing with your paintings, seeing this painting, for example, as a variation upon your earlier works.
I don't really know what to say to that. In this painting, for example, there were many options that I might have followed, several of which would have made it more closely resemble my previous work, or, depending on what decisions I made, less like it. Within the painting itself, however, there are certain choices that I made, which, if you like, could be compared to the harmonics of a musical composition.

Taking this picture, for example, can you tell us why it consists of four panels, rather than say, just two?
I intended to start off with just two, the two on the left. While working on these pictures, I had the idea for a title: *Inside the Outside,* and *Outside the Inside.* But I realized that the opposite could also be true: *Outside the Inside,* and *Inside the Outside,* which means that I would need four panels to illustrate the entire concept, which, I suppose, is a simple spatial concept.

Do you always know the title for a picture before you begin painting it?
No, very rarely. While knowing that titles can be important to certain artists – as with Duchamp, Magritte, and others – in

my case it is the work itself that suggests a specific image, or, if you will, a title (just as Giorgione's *Tempest* was suggested by its appearance). In the case of this particular painting, I was thinking of the square shapes within each panel as existing in an indeterminate space, something like the deepness of the universe, or at least how I see depth in space. You see, you cannot tell whether or not these internal squares are going out or coming in, projecting or receding. If you change the amount of light, whatever you thought it was doing, it will do the opposite. In the first panel, for example, the outer periphery of the composition is painted with translucent glazes of tempera, so that you can see the separate brushstrokes that comprise each separate layer; the centre, on the other hand, is painted with oil mixed into the tempera, which creates a more flat finish. I could, of course, polish the surface and make it more shiny, but I wanted to leave it as is, so as to present a subtle contrast to the outside area. Now, in the central square of the second panel I polished the surface.

How do you polish the surface?
With a cloth. I can sometimes polish the surface until it feels like skin. Incidentally, both sections of the first panel are painted in black, but two types of black: vine black – or *new vigna* – in the centre, and lamp black – or *nerofumo* – on the outer section. Vine black is produced by burning the stems of vines, and lamp black is made from soot. The entire second panel is made with ivory black, but on the outside I've applied the pigment in some thirty or forty layers of very thin, translucent glazes; on the inside, I've added oil to the tempera, which thickens it, and it only required three or four coats to cover this section completely. Then I polished it with a soft cloth.

I notice that your brushstrokes – at least where they can be seen – seem to follow the vertical and horizontal format of each panel. Do you always apply your colours in this way?
No. I notice that I've done that here, but I vary the technique, depending on the effect I'm trying to achieve. Whatever mark you make with egg tempera, you're always going to see it. In the third panel of this painting, for example, I put on a layer of red, which is covered with literally fifty layers of black, yet the red still shows through. With egg tempera, you can't totally cancel things out. Incidentally, when this painting was finished, I gave it the title: *Raccolta*.

In separating one colour from another, do you tape off each section that you're working on, or do you do everything free hand?
It depends, sometimes I tape it, sometimes not. But I don't like the mechanical feel that results from taping.

Nor, do I believe, did Mondrian.
This friend of mine once asked if I could copy a Mondrian, for he knows very little about modern art and thought that it might be easy. But Mondrian would be as hard as any great painter to copy, for his line and colour represents the product of many different decisions, a labour of love that took a great deal of time and effort. Mondrian's greys, for example, consist of many beautiful colours. His surfaces are like those in old master paintings, filled with pentimenti.

There is no question that Mondrian's paintings have changed with time. Do you expect yours will?
Well, I expect so, to a certain degree, but I hope not too much. I have an early egg tempera painting from 1972 hanging here on the wall of my studio, a work that I called *Light and Space.* Over twenty years have passed, and it hasn't changed at all. The colour of the frame – which was painted in enamel – has had to be repainted several times, but the picture has remained unchanged. In any case, I like and accept the effect of time as part of the whole.

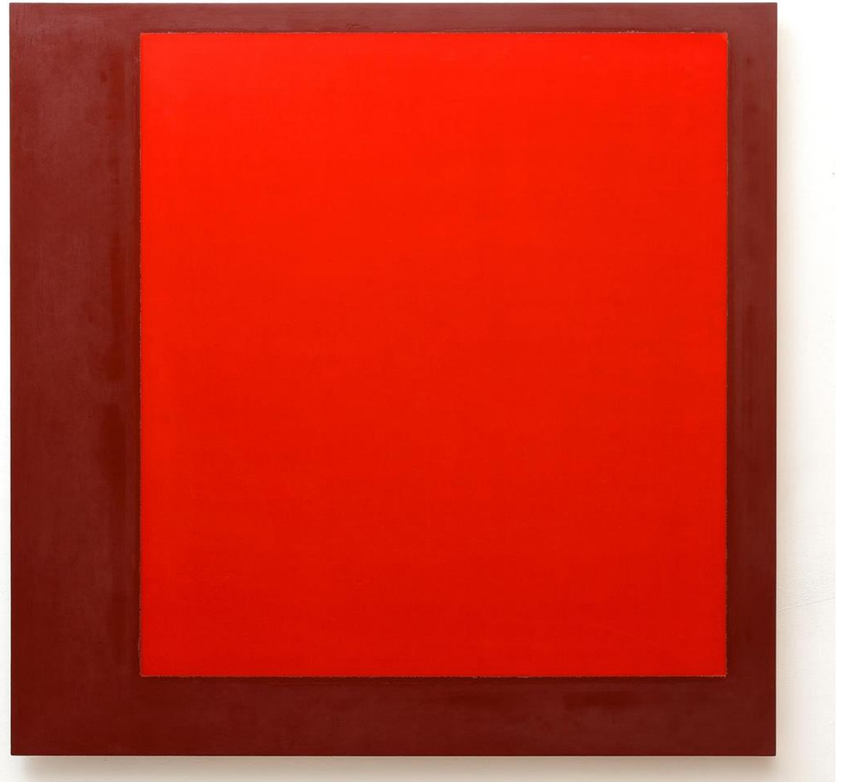
In looking at this painting, you could argue that your style has not changed discemably in twenty years. Do you keep this work up in your studio for any particular reason?
No, not really. I always liked this painting. I could have sold it many times, even when I was broke.

Is this your first abstract painting?
No, and I have to tell you that it's not really abstract. It's meant to be a seascape; that line in the centre is a horizon. The upper portion is sky, the lower portion water: *Light in space*.

Knowing that this painting – which, upon first glance, appears entirely abstract– is actually based on figurative elements, can you tell me if your current work also depends upon physical equivalents?
Yes, to a certain degree, I think so.

But how can the painting we were talking about earlier – the one you entitled Inside the Outside and Outside the Inside – be based on elements from this world? Outside and inside are purely spatial concepts, no?
Sure, they are. But space is part of our world. Even though we have been observing the universe for centuries, we seem to discover something new every year, like black holes. I don't really know what black holes are, but I know that we don't know whether we're looking at one, or whether we're part of one. In other words, we don't know whether we're inside or outside.

I see what you mean. Since spatial concepts were of such a concern when you made this picture, can you tell me exactly what determined their format. What is the relationship of the inner squares to the outer dimension of each panel?
That's easy. I used the Fibonacci Series: 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 55, 89. Each panel in this painting is 89 centimetres square, and each internal square is 21 centimetres in; they are *numeri della serie aurea*. You know, these are the numbers that were derived from the pattern of a spiral, as in a shell or snail, or like the growth of leaves on a plant. From the time of the Greeks, it was discovered that these laws in nature exist.



Is the angle of the tilt given to the inner square in your more recent paintings also determined in accordance with the Fibonacci Series?
Yes, absolutely. But I wanted the tilt effect because it makes the shape look like something else. In a small painting that I did three or four years ago, I wanted the angular shape to look like a projection of light from a little window. You could say that I wanted to paint the equivalent of light.

In the larger painting that you've just completed that contains a tilted square, was this square also meant to signify light?
No. I don't know if you've noticed, but some of these squares are tilted the other way. In one direction, the square appears to be falling away; in the other, it looks like it's falling towards you. I don't know whether or not it's the same for you.

Do you care? Do you care if your intentions, or your reading of the painting is the same as the viewer's?
No, because the effects change with differing intensities and angles of light, even for me. But I quite like these changes. It makes my work sort of kinetic. I can tell you that this tilt started off with a painting by Matisse that I've never forgotten. I saw it many years ago in London, either at Sotheby's or at Waddington Galleries. It's the only painting I've ever seen that gave me vertigo. He has painted an open window with a view of the sea, and I can only imagine that he achieved this effect by tilting the horizon, making it parallel with a road that you can just see at the base of a window. You know, a tilted horizon is not the sort of thing you expect to see, so it disorients the viewer. In my case, it caused me to experience vertigo. Ever since I first saw it, that painting has haunted me, for I am personally terrified by heights. It gets me by the balls. That's how I felt when I first saw Bamett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III.* I knew the picture from photographs, but you don't get any real sense of its visual power from a reproduction. The only word that comes to mind is religious; all I could see was the space above and below the painting, which was all red. The painting literally bathes anyone who looks at it in a brilliant, radiant red.

When you see paintings like yours – those that incorporate a tilted square – comparisons to artists like Malevič or Rodčenko immediately come to mind. Does this bother you?
I can think of worse artists to be compared to. But I can best answer your question by telling you a story. When I returned to Italy ten years ago, I visited an antique dealer whom I know. In his bourgeois house, he had lots of bourgeois things: paintings, sculptures, decorative artifacts, and the like. One of the things that he had was a modem bronze cast of a tall thin figure, and I said to myself: 'Look at that. Apparently, in Italy, they are still imitating Giacometti.' I wondered what sort of taste

he had. All I could imagine is that it was probably because you can sell anything in Italy. So I asked him:
'Who is the sculptor?' He said: 'Oh, that's just a modern museum copy of an Etruscan piece.' If Giacometti saw this sculpture, I wonder how he would have felt?

Aside from Neuman and Matisse, what other artists have influenced you? Do you feel any strong affiliations with Italian art?
Well, I love the Piero delta Francesca fresco here in the Church of San Francesco in Rimini, his *Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta*. In many ways, it's a colour field painting, in that it's a flat, two-dimensional pattern. It's all very much a painting that exists on the surface. I love how he uses perspective; everything is presented straight on, right before your eyes. The painting is very simple: a black and white dog, one circle, a pyramid, another pyramid, a sphere. I think of it as an abstract painting.

You once told me that your first exposure to modem art came through your viewing of a Picasso exhibition in London when you were only twelve years old.
Yes. Before that exhibition, I had not seen a single example of modern art. A teacher in art school said that Picasso was the greatest artist who ever lived, but that did not affect me. But when I saw the exhibition, I was overwhelmed. The thing that impressed me most about the paintings was their power. I shall never forget the tiny little painting of two girls running on a beach: pillar-like arms, pillar-like legs. He made everything appear to be heavy, monumental. His line was forever changing, once thick, then thin. Lines felt like they could cut you, like razor blades. You almost felt as though you shouldn't get too close to the paintings, in the event that you might lean forward and cut yourself. I really mean it. I also loved his painting. *The Kitchen*. It must be one of his most abstract works, yet it looked like a kitchen. At the time, I was living in a hotel, and it reminded me of the kitchen there, with lots of saucepans, handles, knives, and things like that sticking out of drawers. The painting looked like a sort of plan for the layout of a kitchen, yet it could be anything you wanted it to be. It was so flat, and it didn't look like any of his other paintings. Picasso broke all rules.

It's interesting to hear you say that, for your paintings seem to be structured in accordance with a strictly organized, self-imposed rule system.
Yes, but I'm nothing like Picasso. In comparison to him, I'm just an old spinster. I'm not an inventor. I never really invented anything. I'm just a painter, who, if anything, has only tried to apply an old craft to making new art. In the late sixties, when everyone was asking themselves if painting was dead, I decided to keep on painting. But if you're going to paint, then paint.

But you don't want the technique to be an end in itself, do you?
No. A bad work of art is a bad work of art, no matter what material you use. I am, nevertheless, fascinated in the ability I've developed over the years to recognize pigments and materials. If you paint with egg tempera, you have a tendency to use colours like a jeweler uses jewels and precious metals, for their intrinsic value. You certainly don't get that feeling when working with acrylic, nor when you're buying any type of readymade colour – oil or acrylic – that comes in tubes. If you're making the colour yourself, as I do, you can select between thirty and forty earth colours, even more. The range is infinite.

Since the Fibonacci Series was determined by laws that presumably exist in nature, is your fascination with grinding and producing your own colours based on these same concerns? In other words, do you see yourself taking these inert materials – some of which are, like lapis lazuli, crystalline structures that come from the earth – and recycling them, putting them onto the surface of your canvas in accordance with laws that determined their original growth patterns in nature?
No, not really. But that's a nice thought. Now that you've said it, I accept it, but I never really thought of it that way. I really don't know why I am doing them. I sometimes look for a reason. I sometimes ask myself, for example, if I am actually creating or destroying. When stonecutters remove a block of marble from a mountain, are they destroying the mountain, or are they producing a valuable material for making art? When Michelangelo carves something from a solid block, is he destroying the cube or making a sculpture? Similarly, when I paint, you could claim that I destroying pigment (making it impossible for it to return to its original state). Others might argue that I am making something more valuable, more worthy of attention. I used to be preoccupied with these kinds of questions. To be completely honest, I usually just make things up as I go along. Once a painting is begun, I suppose, the process manages to provide its own reason for existing.

You seem to have developed quite an expertise in different techniques, most of which were developed during the late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance. How did this interest begin for you, and can you tell us a little bit about what is involved when painting with egg tempera?

Years ago – when I was living in England during the late sixties – I read Cennino Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte,* and a shortly thereafter, I painted my first egg tempera painting. I followed Cennini's instructions literally, step by step: I selected the wooden panel and took out the knots, cleaned it with alcohol, sized it, sanded it, sized it again with a small amount of gesso, stuck patches of very well washed and rinsed herringbone pattern linen on the panel. By the way, all this sizing had to be done with parchment glue, which I had to make up myself. I coated the panel with *gesso grosso,* applying it with a wood spatula, let it dry, covered it with black ink, scraped the surface to remove all the hollows, and this meant removing all the black. By this method, you could achieve a perfectly flat surface. After this, I proceeded with the *gesso sottile,* sanded it when dry, and ended up with a flawless white gesso surface. And, of course, the next question was: 'What am I going to do with it?' I prepared the egg in accordance with Cennini's instructions. I strained the yolk from its skin, added a couple of drops of white wine, diluted it to twice its volume with water, and proceeded to temper a colour that had previously been ground very fine with a muller onto a porphyry slab. I added some of this pigment to an equal part of egg yolk emulsion. I mixed it very carefully and diluted it. This is how Cennini describes the operation. I started with an orange colour, which was made from yellow ochre and English red, and I painted a simple spiral. Then I painted over this spiral with whites and off-whites in an attempt to get the panel back to its original appearance, as if I were trying to repair the damage caused by my imperfect mark. Eventually, you could barely detect this logarithmic spiral through the many layers of white. When I say many layers, I mean several hundred layers of glaze.

But what motivated you to use such an archaic technique?

Of course, at one point I started to ask myself: 'What the hell are you doing, re-awakening a technique that had been dormant for some five hundred years. By then, Manzoni had already put *merde in scatola,* and Yves Klein had jumped out of a window. In thinking about it, I wasn't doing something that was totally unrelated; the process of working in egg tempera is so involved, that it took on the characteristics of a ritual.

Are the ritualistic aspects of your work important?

Funny you should ask that, because in the seventies, a critic wrote about my work and stressed that very point. Actually, painting in egg tempera gave me a contact with the past and gave me a sense of tradition. But I didn't want to be concerned with painting 13th Century paintings; my technique may have come from a previous period in history, but I wanted the thing that I was painting to be entirely from the present. The ritualistic aspect of art has always fascinated me. Take, for example, Jackson Pollock; his physical relationship to his own work, the fact that he performed a sort of dance while working. His painting represents the product of this ritual, even though we – as spectators – did not actually witness the ritual that took place during the painting's creation. To my mind, this causes the painting to have a life of its own, to exist very much in the present. The example of Pollock reinforced my decision to work in egg tempera; it made me realize that what I was doing had a purpose and significance.

What made you read Cennino Cennini's book in the first place? It's not normal reading material for a young artist in today's world.

Well, as I said, I read the book in 1967 or 1968, when, in England, land art and performance art were the thing of the moment. Perhaps I saw a connection between the natural materials Cennini recommended and the tendency among artists at that time to use the soil as a medium, and I might have seen the ritual of mixing egg tempera as something similar to a performance. But I loved the book. I nearly committed it to memory.

Aside from his instructions on technique, do you remember anything else about the book?
Well, I've nearly forgotten everything by now. But I found it really funny how he takes you through various processes, and tells you how to do things. 'If you're going to paint the Madonna,' he says (and here I'm paraphrasing), 'I'll tell you exactly how you're going to do it. You strike a line horizontally and vertically in the centre of the wall, and that's where you're going to put the Madonna.' He explains which colours you should use for an underpainting to get an accurate flesh colour. He tells you, for example, that there is a difference in colour between a 'town egg' and a 'farm egg.' 'If you have a town egg,' he says, 'you will use it to paint the flesh of the child, because it tends to make the colour more yellow.' And then he tells you: 'By contrast, a farm egg is more suitable for the flesh of an old man, because it is whiter.' I'm not sure this is really true. Anyway, he makes it clear that you have to know the craft before you can make the art, a thought which is quite amusing for today. He also tells you that unless you know technique, you won't be able to hold your head up to a real master.

Some of Cennini's technical instructions must have been outdated, and, therefore, difficult to comprehend. In grinding your paints and preparing your canvas, did you consult any more modern manuals?
Yes, I used a sort of recipe book by Ralph Mayer. Some of his things are quite good. He makes the information available, and explains things thoroughly. I hate artists who try to keep the knowledge of any given technique a secret.

Can you tell us a little bit more about how you prepare the colours.
I have, for example, about fifty different earth colours, each of which is intrinsically different from the other, because they are produced by different manufacturers and come from different parts of the world. The manufacture of colours like lapis lazuli or malachite is, in itself, a laborious process, which I have to perform myself, and results in producing pigments which are totally unique. Personally, I am fascinated by the distinctions that exist between these colours. The variation in tone and hue within a given colour range are the results of choices that I made during the process of making them. Once prepared, the colour I actually use is determined by a number of variant factors. When I decide to use vermillion instead of cadmium, for example, or lapis instead of cobalt, these decisions are matters of taste. We use different wines for different foods, and I select my colours – more or less – as one selects wine for a meal.

So it is primarily the subtlety in these colours that interests you?
I have a dear friend who lives nearby, in Rimini, and we often talk about art. Nearly every conversation ends with a simplistic observation that he likes to repeat: that I am limited in my ability as a painter because I am capable of handling only two colours in a single painting. This friend is a collector who, over the years, has put together a vast, sort of *bric-a-brac* museum in his family home in southern Italy, one that ranges from beautiful examples of Sumerian pottery to popular painters like Tretchikov. Somewhere in the middle are some of my works. He is quite knowledgeable. Even though he makes this claim about my painting half-jokingly, he's actually right. Three colours do give me trouble. What this friend of mine doesn't realize,

however – because of his personal way of looking at my works – is that in every colour I paint, there are many colours he will never see. Because of the variable factors involved, the different techniques of preparing colours and the different ways in applying them, my colours do not really exist anywhere else.

Is this why you put that sign on your studio about looking and not seeing?
I can answer that with the story of someone else I know. He doesn't know anything about modem art. He could look at my paintings for the rest of his life and never see anything. He will never understand, for example, that someone like Pollock had to destroy in order to create; he had to abolish our traditional conception of what something was in order to give birth to something completely new. The way I see it, all great works of art involve this sort of a process, something I call 'creative destruction.' At any rate, to a certain extant, this friend of mine is something like this opinionated, culturally blind art critic we have on TV here in Italy who has turned into a controversial political commentator. Neither of them can see essentials, therefore they cannot understand.

Would you say that the message attached to your studio door was intended for people like them? You might say that they are the types whose eyes are located three-quarters of the way up their heads, which, if you think about it, leaves little room for a brain.
Exactly.