

PESSOLI
MANAI
SENTIMENTO
ILLUMINA

ALESSANDRO PESSOLI

Sentimento illumina

Alessandro Pessoli
Piero Manai

A drawing of his stayed in my memory for a long time:
a small figure, swiftly sketched,
a painter before an easel with a lit torch in his hand,
and the handwritten words: "Illumina la Pittura."

Alessandro Pessoli

6 April—8 June 2024

P420 is delighted to present the exhibition *Sentimento illumina* in its gallery space, featuring previously unseen paintings, produced especially for the occasion, by Alessandro Pessoli (Cervia, 1963, lives and works in Los Angeles, USA), in dialogue with a selection he himself has chosen of works by Piero Manai (Bologna, 1951–1988).

By juxtaposing the works of the two artists, it becomes clear how there is a Bolognese tradition that, as Antonio Grulli writes in the critical text accompanying the exhibition, "over the centuries, it is as if painting in Bologna had evolved in a particular direction, i.e., becoming a surgical instrument of the metaphysical analysis of reality that – starting empirically from the skin and body of things – manages to reach the soul.

In the case of Piero Manai and Alessandro Pessoli (Pessoli studied at the Bologna Academy of Fine Arts during the last years of Manai's life and held his first solo show the same year Manai died), this investigation tool is turned on themselves, applying it to their own condition as human beings, to their own body to be vivisected, dismembered and pieced back together, so as to see how it works and whether it still does so once it has been taken to bits and reassembled; to find out whether the soul slips away when opening this sacred vessel made to contain desire, pleasure, fear and splendour. Or perhaps simply to find out in advance whether something survives us even after our death.

"It is Alessandro Pessoli himself who clarifies the meaning of the exhibition and the reason behind the choice of this title: "I have always thought the sense of that drawing by Piero was not really the painter's ability or desire to turn a spotlight onto painting, its language or conceptual status. Rather, it's the attempt to shed light on our interiority, our inner light, our ability to be illuminated, by passion first and foremost, then ultimately by love. This is why I chose the title *Sentimento illumina*."

Pessoli's style is colourful and at first glance cheerful. The artist imbues his canvases with a wealth of imagery, all linked by their strong emotional intensity. Going beyond the cheerfulness of the palette and style in which he blends techniques and materials in a lively manner, his works remain poised between amusement, dreaminess and the grotesque. With regard to the themes dealt with, we notice how he always falls back on the great existential – we might say biblical – issues: life, death, desire, sex, joy, sadness, hope, fear, and all the whys they entail.

Devoid of expression or psychology, almost in ruins, Piero Manai's figures and heads are neither representations nor portraits. They are perhaps more accurately self-portraits, yet they are not seen from the *outside*, but from *within*. "It is an internal work," wrote Manai himself, "it's an anatomical and psychic construction, it's painting a figure, flaying it three times, putting it to the test to reach a threshold." His pictorial language seems to be irreducible to any of the various artistic practices in force at the time, indeed, in its diversity, it seems to bring them all together, to such an extent that it is hard – perhaps futile – to find a way of classifying it.



Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT

A few years ago I had the opportunity to exhibit works by Piero Manai and Alessandro Pessoli in a group exhibition. It was in 2015 and the project involved fourteen artists, either Bolognese or closely related to Bologna, who had in various ways worked on the genre of still life in painting by reframing it. There is a lot of talk about globalization and cultural flattening, but it is interesting to note that there still remain strong specificities linked to cities and artistic communities, characteristics that vary from place to place and magically intertwine with a historical tradition. All this also happens in Bologna, a small city but one that even in the last century has managed to carve out a non-secondary role for itself as far as painting is concerned: that 2015 exhibition, titled *Objects on a Plane*, was meant to bring out the presence of a real Bolognese School, still alive today. Manai and Pessoli are not only part of this school but play a fundamental role within it.

Painting can still be so many things: an instrument of formal research capable of proposing metaphors for a new look at the world, a means of intellectual research, a weapon of political and social struggle, a generator of visions, an ascetic practice, critical speculation... (I could go on and on). Over the centuries it is as if painting in Bologna has evolved in a particular direction, namely in becoming a surgical instrument of metaphysical analysis of reality that, starting empirically from the skin and body of things, manages to reach the soul. In the case of Piero Manai and Alessandro Pessoli, this instrument of investigation is directed toward the self, toward one's own individuality endowed with a specific and peculiar history, toward one's own condition as human beings, toward one's own body to be vivisected, dismembered and reassembled, to see how it works and if it still works once it is torn to pieces; to find out if the soul is lost by opening this sacred vessel made of desire, pleasure, fear and splendor; or perhaps simply to understand in advance if something survives even after death.

We are still in Bologna, and the dead body of Christ in Nicolò dell'Arca's *Compianto* is always there, like an inevitable presence and from which perhaps everything begins, even painting.

Manai's untimely death prevented the two from meeting in person, but Pessoli, already a young student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, had had the opportunity to appreciate his works at the De Foscherari Gallery. There is a striking coincidence: Piero's last exhibition was in 1988, the same year that Alessandro began exhibiting his works in a cultural circle in Parma (while his first solo show at Neon in Bologna was in 1989). In these years of the dominance of Transavantgarde, I can imagine a young artist like him searching, more or less consciously, for references and models that could open new paths. In the works on display, the very strong dialogue between the two artists is immediately evident, despite the fact that their "temperatures" are extremely different. The link is primarily in the subjects in which bodies dominate: bodies that are vivisected, that are presented torn to pieces, amputated, but without ever conveying any idea of truculence; these bodies have the naturalness of classical statues for which it is obvious that they do not have arms, or that the heads go around



by themselves. But the parts of these bodies are still alive, active, perhaps because they have been the subject of a passage (painting itself?) that has allowed a shamanic rebirth, in other forms, the product of a Dionysian rite in which sex and death are inextricably intertwined. Bodies become still life and sometimes become monoliths and sculptures resting on the same plinths on which they were sitting until just before. Manai's heads can become stones, while from Pessoli's body parts sprout exhaust pipes, wings, flowers.

In both, painting succeeds in becoming metalanguage: in Manai not only through the use of stylized sculpture as a pictorial subject (and let us never forget his many d'après, albeit not in the exhibition), but also and especially through the recurring presence of "painting" and "sculpture" in the form of two allegorical human figures that sometimes meet on the canvas, one (the painting) composed of infinite spots while the other emerges with its plasticity and sculptural "body." In some works Pessoli directly quotes Manai's iconography, just as he takes up a masterpiece like Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, flanked in an alienating way by a donkey and a large feline. We are confronted with an overlay of a mourning and a nativity, all filtered through a Fellini-esque, circus-like, Romagnola lens, while from the body of the Christ departs a kind of thread that leads to what appear to be flowers (almost reminiscent of some of Cy Twombly's work), or perhaps pink balloons flying toward the sky, like Warhol's *Baloons* or Parreno's.

The style of the two differs strongly. As much Manai's work appears dramatic and almost expressionistic, based on a few

brown, white, grayish tones to which a dull red or blue is sometimes added, as Pessoli's is colorful and at first glance cheerful. As Alessandro himself well points out, in Piero's painting "There is an affective warmth given by the experience of painting; the painting itself, in Manai, redeems its drama"; and it is true: his expressionism is under control, we might say calm to use an oxymoron. There is a happiness in his painting, as if the latter were the life-line of an entire existence, that which is able to make sense of the existential chaos in which we will all sooner or later find ourselves living. Again in Alexander's words, "A drawing of his has remained in my memory for a long time, a small figure summarily described, a painter in front of an easel has a lighted flashlight in his hand, there is a note of his written in italics, 'Illumina la pittura.'" Again: painting as a tool for existential, ethical, metaphysical research. At the same time in Pessoli, going beyond the cheerfulness of the palette and style in which techniques and materials are mixed in a lively way, not being distracted by a vaudeville-style, circus-like staging with a Petrolinian flavor (à la Karl Kraus?), with that lightness proper to a Palazzeschi, and focusing instead on the themes dealt with, we notice how it always falls back on the great existential, we might say biblical, questions: life, death, desire, sex, joy, sadness, hope, fear, and all the implied whys.

And these same subjects are at the heart of Manai's work, the same issues that we could sum up in three words that are the basis of every human being, of any time and anywhere on the globe: *Ghenos, Eros, Thanatos*.



Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT



Alessandro Pessoli, **Sentimento Illumina**, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on canvas, 224 × 147 cm



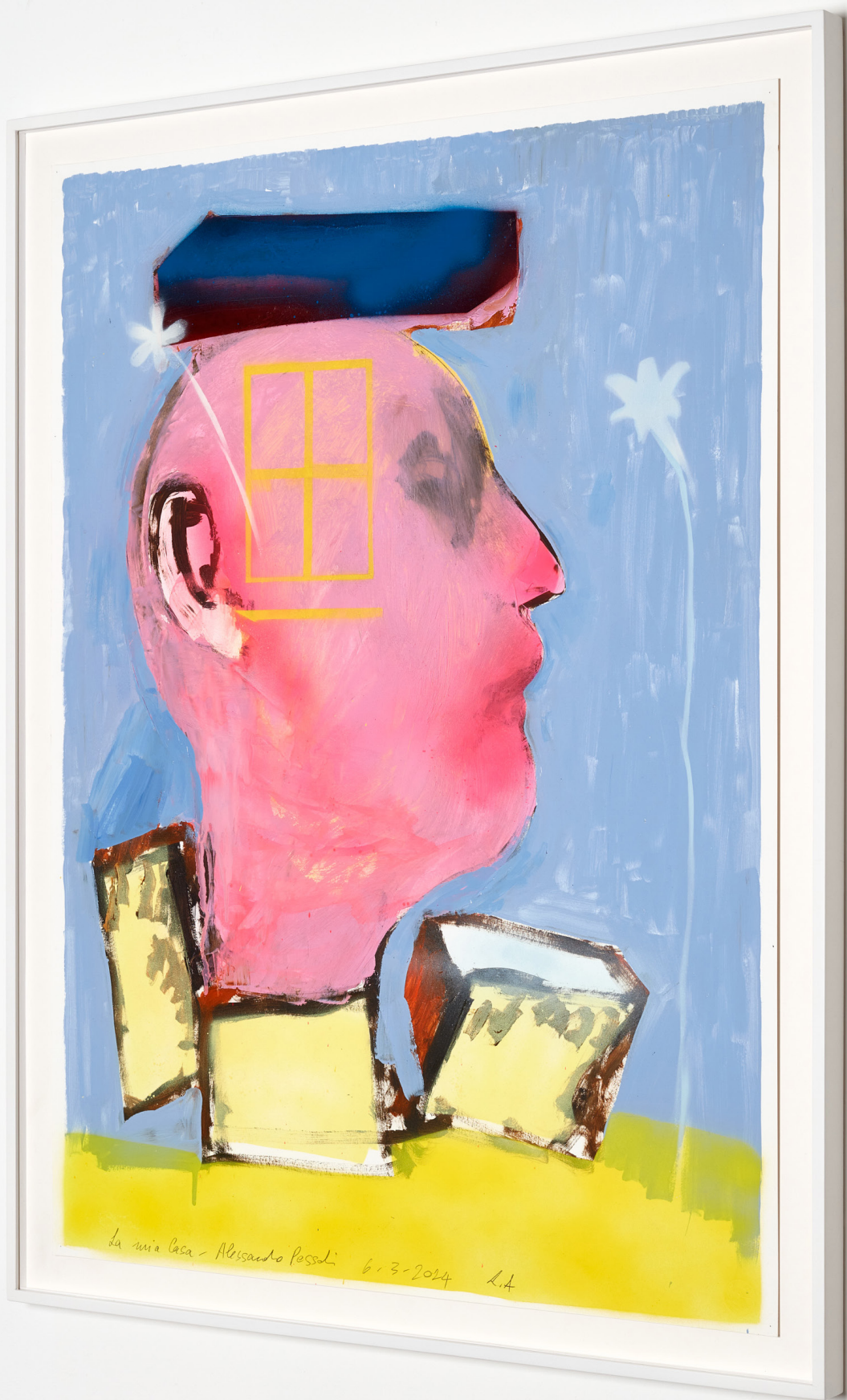
different view



Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT



Alessandro Pessoli, **La mia casa**, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint, enamel on paper, 76 x 56 cm



side view



Alessandro Pessoli, **Sentimento illumina**, 2024
colored pencils, oil pastels, spray paint, enamel on paper, 76 x 56 cm



side view



Alessandro Pessoli, **1963**, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint, enamel on paper, 76 × 56 cm



Alessandro Pessoli, **Deposizione fiorita**, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint, enamel, acrylic on paper, 76 x 56 cm



Alessandro Pessoli, **La fine dell'Inverno**, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on paper, 76 × 56 cm



detail



Alessandro Pessoli, **Testa nel campo**, 2024
colored pencils, oil pastels, oil, spray paint on paper, 76 × 56 cm



Alessandro Pessoli, **Maddalena**, 2024
colored pencils, oil pastels, oil, spray paint on paper, 76 x 56 cm



detail



Alessandro Pessoli, **14 11 1963**, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint, enamel, acrylic on paper, 76 × 56 cm



Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT





Alessandro Pessoli, **Assunzione della figura**, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on canvas, 224 × 148 cm



side view



detail



different view



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Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT



Alessandro Pessoli, **Girl long legs #1**, 2023
colored pencils, oil pastels, oil, spray paint on paper, 49,5 × 63 cm



side view



Alessandro Pessoli, **Girl long legs #3**, 2023
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on paper, 44,5 × 63,5 cm



side view



Alessandro Pessoli, **Girl long legs #6**, 2023
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on paper, 44,5 × 63,5 cm





side view



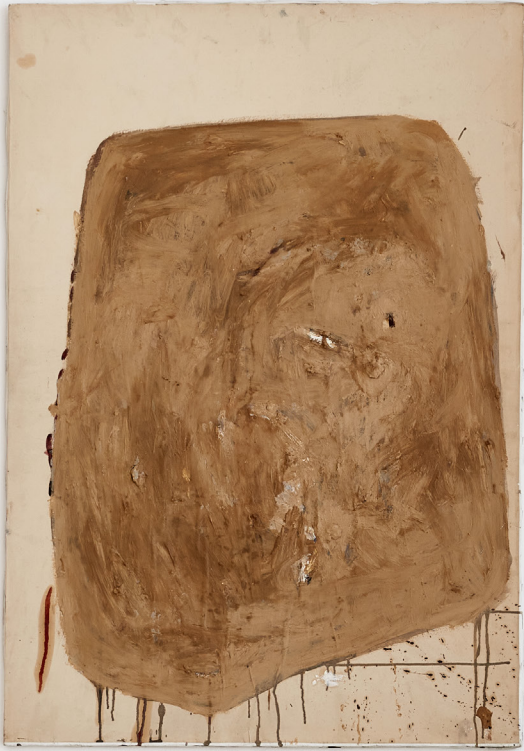
Alessandro Pessoli, **Girl long legs #2**, 2023
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on paper, 44,5 × 63,5 cm



side view



Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT





Alessandro Pessoli, **Testa fiorita**, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on canvas, 102 x 78,5 cm



detail



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Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT



Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT



Alessandro Pessoli, ***Before the dark***, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on canvas, 224 × 293,5 cm



detail



side view



different view



Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT



Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT



Alessandro Pessoli, **My House - la mia casa #1**, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on canvas, 224 x 147 cm



detail



Alessandro Pessoli, **My House - la mia casa #2**, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on canvas, 224 × 148 cm



side view





different view



Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT



Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT



Alessandro Pessoli, ***Illumina la pittura (deposizione)***, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on canvas, 224 × 290 cm



detail



side view



different view





Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT



Alessandro Pessoli, **Love and Death (dreamer)**, 2024
colored pencils, oil, spray paint on canvas, 224 × 244 cm



side view





different view



Sentimento Illumina. Alessandro Pessoli, Piero Manai, installation view, 2024, P420, Bologna, IT

Alessandro Pessoli (Cervia, 1963, lives and works in Los Angeles, US). He has exhibited in numerous solo and group exhibitions including *Italian Painting Today*, Triennale Milano, Milan, IT (2023); *Full Burn: Video from the Hammer Contemporary Collection*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA (2023); *NO, NEON, NO CRY*, MAMbo, Bologna, IT (2022); *L'esca*, MACTE, Termoli, IT (2021); *Fuori*, La Quadriennale, Rome, IT (2020); *The Neighbors*, MAN, Nuoro, IT (2016); *Alessandro Pessoli – Project Room*,

Villa Paloma, NMNM, Monaco (2015); *Alessandro Pessoli*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, USA (2012); *Ennesima*, Triennale Milano, Milan, IT (2015). His works are to be found in the collections of leading international museums: MoMA, New York, USA; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA; MOCA Museum, Los Angeles, USA; MAXXI National Museum of 21st-Century Art, Rome, IT; MIC Museo della ceramica, Faenza, IT; and Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, IT