

Ciaccia Levi

Leonardo Devito
Teatrino

Curated by Elena Lydia Scipioni

12 September - 13 October, 2024

Teatrino is an exhibition project by the Italian artist Leonardo Devito (Florence, 1997) created for his first solo show at the Galleria Ciaccia Levi in Paris.

Paintings and high-reliefs weave a narrative dedicated to the imagery of spectacle, populated by actors and characters, both real and imaginary, who stage performances balanced between a tragic sense of life, alienation, and comedy. Some of these subjects, such as Kafka's trapeze artist and hunger artist—protagonists of the writer's last stories, one realizing himself in isolation on the trapeze and the other in abstaining from food—turn their lives into a work of art, driven by a devotion to art that often remains misunderstood by the public. Other characters seem to belong to a fairy-tale world, catapulted into an ahistorical time. As we enter the exhibition, a sense of familiarity pervades our vision, as if we are recalling a gesture, a gaze, a story from the depths of memory.

In this narrative of a lost world, we encounter various iconographic references, especially in the paintings, which relate to the artist's personal imagination and a repertoire of images that form a personal "ideal museum" yet are also familiar to the public, connected to art history, literature, and graffiti. Devito's works reveal a strong connection with the research of certain 20th-century artists, such as Mario Sironi and Felice Casorati, or with art movements like Metaphysical Art. However, the other reality to which this combination of unusual elements refers is identifiable and contemporary, albeit ambiguous, estranging, and illogical. In the artist's works, the inclusion of a personal detail or a naive element, the use of irony, or an incorrect proportion lightens the severity of the composition, triggering repeated linguistic and temporal shifts. The bright colors of the hair, the relaxed poses of the young subjects, and their attire convey a sense of closeness to our time, contrasting with the drapery and folds of fabrics, the monumental yet often inharmonious hands and bodies, the defined partings, the features clearly referencing the physiognomy of sculpture, and the dark, material colors. The more or less explicit reference to other artistic productions or homage to another artist is a practice that has intrigued many throughout the centuries, including the historical avant-gardes of the 20th century. In a different manner, artists have re-presented and represented the past. Devito anchors the past to the present with a language rich in references and through a plastic structure that seems to halt the time of action, captured in its immanence and confined in a visual and mental space where the outside does not refer to anything else—even when a de Chirico-like window shows a portion of the sea (*Arrival of the Chimney-Sweep Dogs*). Our vision intercepts those elements foreign to the formal and narrative order that appear almost epiphany-like between the folds of a fabric or on a floor, such as the acrobats on horses (*Equilibrist*) or the elf-like ears of the *Puppeteer*. These elements establish an elusive relationship with the context but do not point to another reality; they plunge us into the space of imagination, where thought has not yet transformed into words, where references are untied and forms are liberated, allowing us to restart the game of associations and recognitions.

Arranged in continuity with the paintings, the high-reliefs are true miniature theaters, three-dimensional snapshots that, thanks to their semi-enclosed structure, presuppose an external observer, in addition to the audience, often present in the paintings as well, making the relationship between seeing and imagining more complex—something that theater, and later cinema, brought to its peak tension and expression.

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In these works, action is reduced to a gesture, a whisper, or a glance, to a moment of rest. The small dimensions confer intimacy but do not detract from the power of the two warrior-friends who stand firm and proud on a ship at sea (*Friends on an Adventure*) or the girl embracing her fear (*Skeleton with Girlfriend*). The subjects of the high-reliefs resemble protagonists of epic mythologies but are not heroes; they are dreamers in fairy-tale settings who seem to have dressed up to stage a new game. It is the game of imagination in this play, *Teatrino*, where the great puppeteer is the artist himself.

Elena Lydia Scipioni