

# CASTIGLIONI

## I MISTERIOSI ANNI VENTI

20.05.2025 - 28.06.2025

“Words offer no help when I try to talk about my painting”. It’s the first sentence my eyes fall upon as I randomly open a collection of writings by Italian artists of the last century: the words are Burri’s, written in 1955. Seventy years later, words don’t help me either, when I try to explain Giulio Bonfante’s painting to myself. So, I look closely at his works.

They appear to me like magnified details cut out from a shared imaginary — the cartoon world of *The Simpsons* comes to mind — until they turn into autonomous subjects: symbols. A few canvases, marked by wide, flat expanses of color, set in contrast with subjects more or less centered within the composition. But there’s something else that unites these works, and it has to do with the nature of their subjects: they are episodes of silent, perhaps inhibited communication, or solitary portraits of ordinary objects.

*Conversazione (Conversation)* is a large-scale canvas, dominated vertically by the silhouette of a lit phone immersed in darkness. Backlit, two stylized fingers barely emerge as they frame the screen. Perhaps a message has just arrived; the person holding the phone is stalling, searching for the right words to reply. Could it be a long-awaited and long-hoped-for message...?

One had better make sure: with *Accertamento (Assessment)*, you immediately slip into the shoes of a hidden, distant observer. Through a circular opening — like the scope of a telescope — you glimpse a column of smoke rising on the horizon. The title, clinical and impersonal in tone, prompts us to acknowledge that something is happening, to pay attention: the tall plume of smoke could be a sign of disaster, or a call for help. But it’s hard not to think of a *Looney Tunes* episode, with some mischievous character watching the outcome of their clumsy plan, having scattered the enemy’s path with tons of TNT. And yet I feel Giulio is inviting us to consider something beyond the narrative: namely, the state of painting itself in these mysterious Twenties.

In *Il palloncino del 2025 (The balloon of 2025)*, a solitary balloon peeks out just above the center of the canvas. Surrounded by a yellow halo, as if eclipsing the sun behind it, it seems destined to vanish beyond the top edge of the painting. But I like to think it stops there, precisely because Giulio’s painting isn’t simply about images: it is “concrete.” Images do not exist virtually beyond the picture plane, but are instead one with the canvas.

Giulio works in glazes, layering color with varying density until he achieves surfaces that are deep, yet simultaneously glossy and reflective. The contours of the figures, which may appear sharp from afar, turn out to be softly blurred up close, revealing the underlying tones from which they draw their depth and emphasis. It’s a kind of painting that reveals a very attentive and cultivated gaze; but above all, a passionate one, as shown by the enviable number of art catalogues he’s collected over the years.

Among those catalogues, one likely finds volumes dedicated to Franco Angeli — to his obelisks, which follow the same compositional scheme as these works — and to his symbols, always poised between evocation, memory, and dissolution. Or to the cut and re-applied canvases of Jannis Kounellis — think of his roses — which reflect on the nature of the painterly gesture, without renouncing either image or poetry. There’s also the work on detail, enlarged to the point of estrangement, so typical of Domenico Gnoli. And of course, one inevitably thinks of America, not only for the formal Pop references, but also for the painting of Peter Halley, whose closed, cerebral spaces Bonfante seems to invert, rendering them emotional rather than systemic.

It seems that through his work, Giulio — with a detached eye, perhaps slightly cynical — directly extracts familiar images and visual stereotypes from our visual consciousness. And yet, he does not carry out this operation “anesthetically” or out of inertia, because the impression is that the banality of the subjects stems from a personal form of discretion or reticence. On closer inspection, what emerges between the lines is an implicit self-portrait of the artist, a feeling that flows through him and slowly comes to the surface in each of his works, which become deeply personal precisely by being so emotionally charged.

One of the influences behind the painting of the balloon shown in the exhibition is the detached frescoes by Giandomenico Tiepolo, which can be seen at Ca’ Rezzonico: a parade of figures, often shown from behind, stand indifferent at the center of the composition. They are splendid, and like the balloon, rendered in light tones. Despite the carnival-like clothing and atmosphere, there is a certain melancholy that shines through these scenes; even the depicted animals seem sad.

While Giulio shows them to me on his phone screen, my eye falls on an apple core; it has been there for as long as I can remember — he even once painted it. It’s forgotten on the little shelf of a rickety cabinet, dusty and smeared with paint, where Giulio usually rests canvases that haven’t yet had the luck of being hung on the wall. Naturally, we are in his studio, where he spends much of his time by himself until late at night — as proven by the memes that flood my phone the next morning, when I get up and turn off airplane mode, and he finally goes to bed.

I imagine his night was spent on the phone, painting, or interrupted by his nightly walks. Then, maybe, a film. And it’s precisely the figure of the protagonist of a neo-noir film that reminds me of Giulio: a melancholic avenger, a solitary man with a mission incomprehensible to others. A tragic, off-key figure yet armed with irony, who carries on with unwavering faith, repeating absurd and romantic gestures in the name of a shattered ideal.

If we consider this figure as a metaphor to approach the feeling of this exhibition, then that ideal can only be painting itself, in these mysterious Twenties. A time when painting is everywhere, but perhaps also for this reason Giulio feels it may lose its meaning. The artist thus seems to claim a solitary vocation for himself, as if called to safeguard its value: a puff of smoke, then, seems sent out in the hope that somewhere, someone might catch the message.

Stefano De Paolis

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## GIULIO BONFANTE

### 1997 Milan.

Lives and works in Milan.

### Education:

2016 – 2020 – Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan.

2019 – 2020 | 2021 – 2022 – Städelschule – Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Frankfurt.

### Solo shows:

*I misteriosi anni Venti*, CASTIGLIONI, Milan, 2025.

*STAGE*, Art Fair, solo project, curated by Elise Lammer, Bregenz, Austria, 2024.

*Presente*, CASTIGLIONI, Milan, 2022.

### Group shows:

(Upcoming) *The Postcard Exhibition*, Saskia Neuman Gallery, Stockholm, 2025.

*Areoporto*, CASTIGLIONI, São Paulo, 2024.

*Miracolo! – Premio città di Treviglio*, Treviglio, 2023.

*WINDOWS OF APPEARANCE*, curated by Rita Selvaggio, Milan, 2023.

*Medium Rare* – Städelschule Graduation Show, Frankfurt, 2022.

*Grand Nizza Show*, Hotel Nizza, Frankfurt, 2022.