for the kingdom, if I can
Stefano De Paolis
Texts by Filippo Bosco and Giulio Bonfante

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Visits by appointment.
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Pop and Dust: The Visionary Ineptitude of Stefano De Paolis • Giulio Bonfante

There's a different kind of light in Stefano De Paolis's eyes when he recalls a detail from a painting by Carpaccio or from one of the wooden inlays in Lotto's choir at Santa Maria Maggiore. It's the same light that overtakes him when he timely quotes a passage from the Bible—or, with equal reverence, a scene from *Star Wars*, or even a verse from *Pet Sounds* or a panel from *The Eternaut*; I'm reasonably sure I've even caught a glimpse of it once, as he was prasing the shape of his beloved Atene biscuits. It's the moved admiration betrayed by the gaze of discreet lovers when they finally give in to speaking of their passions.

Stefano's passions can be refined, but also definitely popular (and he would rightly point out that one doesn't exclude the other), maybe that's why I instinctively think of him as a pop artist, though clearly he has his own way of being one.

Unlike the icons of 1960s pop art or many of his contemporary peers, the kind of "popular" Stefano draws from isn't necessarily the one surrounding us: first because it's not as pop as Marilyn Monroe's smile or the Coca-Cola logo—and, more importantly, because it's not contemporary. It is a historicized popular, a dusty "ex-pop", which he gathers with affection and nostalgia—not to show it as it is, but as it appears to him.

His work doesn't focus on pop culture's social or collective impact but rather on its individual one. What seems to matter most to him is the dynamic by which a pop phenomenon or artifact breaks through and becomes absorbed into someone's inner world; the chance that one person might develop a unique, evolving bond with a product designed to reach millions.

Through this exploration of his own impressions and memories of the popular, Stefano celebrates the precious relics he has preserved and confesses what makes them his. And, at the same time, what "makes him theirs," through the private narration of himself as owner/collector and the mythical tale of his alter ego, with whom he identifies thanks to a childlike imagination that never left him. The characters in his drawings—always implicit and ironic self-portraits—are pensive intergalactic pilots and rock stars, fragile heroes caught in everyday moments. I imagine them quietly meditating on legendary and impossible deeds—like De Dominicis's black silhouette in his *Attempts* or Chris Burden's aiming at a *747* like a modern Don Quixote.

Stefano shares their visionary, inept, stance, which is also hinted by the exhibition's title. You can sense it in his insistence on drawing with silverpoint, an outdated technique that is hard to find in contemporary art, and an even more counterintuitive choice given the large scale of many of his works. Or in the paradoxical idea behind some of his cabinets and pendulum clocks: exquisitely refined bas-reliefs in which paper is not just the support for drawing but becomes the very material of a three-dimensional piece.

It's no coincidence that these works—bold and resolute on one hand—are marked by an extreme delicacy, that is physical before being aesthetic. It's what makes them as elusive and vulnerable as the memories and fantasies they spring from.

Giulio Bonfante was born in Milan in 1997 and still insists on living there. A graduate in painting from the Brera Academy and in visual arts from Städelschule in Frankfurt, he continues to officially devote himself to painting on canvas, and has shared the results with the Italian, German and Austrian audiences among others.

Drawing Through the Looking Glass (and What Stefano Found There) • Filippo Bosco

In 1938, imagining painters as a "a survival, a laborer or artisan in fair way of disappearing" (while alluding to Degas), Paul Valéry envisioned a future art made in the "the painting laboratory of a man austerely dressed in white, wearing rubber gloves, obeying a precise schedule and provided with an equipment of strictly specialized instruments, each one with its own place and exact reason for use." One thinks of paintings from Germany's *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or Piet Mondrian's studio, or that of a conceptual artist like Giulio Paolini. For Valéry, this sterile, robotic post-extinction practice contradicted the idiosyncratic nature and unpredictable inspiration, rigorous only in its obsessiveness, that underpinned *Degas Danse Dessin*. Most of all, it betrayed drawing, as the French poet saw it: an expression of personality, more optic and muscular than mental, both confession and inspiration. "Up to now, chance has not been eliminated from action, mystery from procedure, rapture from timetables."

In 2025, painters are anything but extinct—but what can we imagine even further ahead, in some intergalactic future? A spaceship or mobile suit pilot drinks tea from cups and teapots—quaint despite their futuristic shapes, almost like something out of Gozzano. He reads printed books, sings into a wired microphone, answers a corded telephone, and rocks in a Thonet chair. From his vantage, they are archaeological relics: perhaps this pilot has abandoned space missions, stayed home, and grown melancholic with memory.

This layering of temporalities is only one of the filters Stefano De Paolis sets up in his drawn images. Another is the mirror, through which we observe his alter ego—the Intergalactic Pilot X—in his interiors. In a 2024 clock-drawing, the glass face reflects an entire room, furnishings and all (as if trying to reorder its anachronisms along the hours). Many of these cherished objects exist in three dimensions, first digitally designed and then 3D-printed in miniature. De Paolis collects and surrounds himself with them: emotional attachment replaces functionality in this cultured yet whimsical design (his teapots and cups echo Aldo Rossi's, but rendered in ceramic, they would easily chip). There's a curious link between personal affection for such knick-knacks and the need to transfer and translate them into images—drawn or photographed—to turn them into art. Bathed in the milky light of soft-focus photo shoots at Ondo Spazio, as if emerging from a *boîte-en-valise*, these once-real objects float back into the artist's imagination: scale becomes uncertain, details become architecture, the smallest dimensions are stretched by long shadows.

The Pilot's tea time is not the Mad Hatter's absurd hour, nor does it heed the White Rabbit's rush. And yet, the world seems to exist only when flipped in the spectral reflection of its image.

Among the aphorisms of Ingres that Degas loved to recite by heart, many treat drawing as a polished screen to be traced delicately. The gesture on paper adopts a microscopic scale—like that of a pencil tip or an insect. For instance: "One should pursue the contour like a fly crosses a sheet of paper." Or: "The pencil must have on the page the same delicacy as the fly who wanders on a pane of glass." These almost-Bataillean images likely appealed to Valéry, who echoed them when he described the experience of viewing a photograph as that of a fly that cannot pass through glass. "(Une mouche qui ne peut pas traverser une vitre)" In both photography and neoclassical drawing, the surface and its illusion are at once crystalline and opaque, expressive and obstructive. The first impression one has of De Paolis's drawings is that a sheet of tracing paper veils the view, pushing all the chiaroscuro toward a register of light tones—like transcribing a piano piece using only the highest octaves. The drawings possess a translucent or semi-transparent quality, akin to tissue paper, which gives them an original purity, a certain polish—while also making them difficult to see.

Transparency is an ambiguous term: it suggests immediacy in elements that actually stand in the way of vision, that mediate or obstruct it (see the fly's frustration at not crossing the image threshold). Perhaps we should understand transparency instead as a spectrum of opacity. Consider, for example, the chemical process used to make tissue paper: essentially bonding and breaking down paper fibers to remove as much air as possible. In 1976, Achille Bonito Oliva proposed a "transparent" definition of drawing: the most direct and least layered medium, best suited to revealing the artist's desires, drives, and ideas. De Paolis's strategy feels distant from this view—still fundamentally Vasarian and humanist—of the drawn image. His drawings require slow observation, play with reflections, and do not mistake clarity for univocality. The eye slowly adjusts to the overexposure, struggles to reconstruct forms, gets caught in vast areas where hatching is invisible (and where he now often omits the contour lines that shaped his earlier works).

Perhaps we are, after all, in the studio of the post-extinct artist—not for lab coats or rubber gloves (the Milanese bohème still leans more rock 'n roll), but for the principle of an exact boundary set by technique. Every technique defines a field of possibilities, broader or narrower—but De Paolis limits his range to challenge the conventions and perception of his work. As Valéry noted even in the 1930s, modernity also meant a "man's growing aversion to all apparently monotonous work requiring similar and long-repeated action. The machine has done away with patience." A hard pencil (H) cannot produce very dark tones but opens a rarely explored range of lights, approaching the whiteness of the paper. The image hovers on the surface of the sheet, never breaking through to virtual space. Instead, it reaffirms the solidity of the support—often shaped to resemble pieces of furniture. Even the drawings are objects, a curious counterpoint to the fact that De Paolis only draws interior scenes. Because of the drawing's delicate quality and resistance to being grasped at a glance, each sheet must be viewed on its own—making series or dense ensembles (so far) difficult.

The proximity to the surface and the time required unite the beginning and end of the image—its creation and its viewing. In the end, a careful staging guides the viewer's gaze through obstacles, flat planes, or rapid convergences, toward a sharply marked *punctum*—often the Pilot's own gaze. At the start, the image's construction passes through preliminary sketches and tracing-paper drafts, before days and hours of shading the final composition. Hatching—graphite's natural language—is softened and thickened until it vanishes into even tonal fields. De Paolis, through discipline, achieves this by holding the pencil obliquely, so the tip touches the surface sideways and always at the same angle. This etching-like sensitivity (where a burin's tilt defines the groove's width) explains his affinity with the outdated technique of silverpoint. A microscopic awareness, a lens-like closeness to the grain of paper: here lies one last—and paradoxical—filter, that of adherence. The Pilot's suit and gloves cling tightly, like second skins that erase detail and individuality, returning only the generic identity (X). And who would guess that, before photographing them, De Paolis painted his 3D models with a coat of white paint? These casings act as filters over the objects, subtly transforming them even as they emphasize their forms. Similarly, in the drawings, the shortened keyboard of hard graphite leads "adheres" to the sheet (though an HB pencil did make an appearance in the latest drawing). The image clings to the surface. All reflections return to the mirror.

Filippo Bosco (Chieri, 1994) is a post-doc fellow at ICI Berlin. He received his PhD from Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, in 2024, with a dissertation on Italian conceptual drawing in the 1970s. He has held various research positions in Germany and the United States, including fellowships at the Menil Drawing Institute, Houston, and at the Center for Italian Modern Art, New York; and a direct-exchange scholarship at the Freie Universität in Berlin. Bosco's interests and publications include 20th century Italian art and contemporary drawing. His first book (on Giuseppe Penone's early practice) has just been released (Prearo, 2025). He recently contributed to various exhibition catalogues (Fratino, Prato, 2024; Galli, Goldsmiths CCA, London, 2025) and to the 'Drawing' issue of The Burlington Contemporary (2023). He collaborated with the Civic Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, the Castello di Rivoli and the Cerruti Collection in Turin.