

The Right Mistake

Lorenzo Modica in conversation with Luca Bertolo

Luca Bertolo: I would start from the beautiful article by David Salle on Alex Katz¹ you pointed out to me. Perhaps it could help us take on that “right tone” that Stendhal said he ensured by reading a couple of pages from the Napoleonic Civil Code before beginning to write. Style of writing, style of thinking... It wouldn't be bad if in the art world the potential and the limits of writing were taken more seriously, rather than mistreating it, as usually happens, almost as if it were a neutral instrument. We will talk about your paintings: but with which words? Does it make sense to seek a rhythm in prose that echoes the rhythm of an image? And so on. What is your relationship with writing?

Lorenzo Modica: That article is a declaration of love for Alex Katz and thus a good omen. I have a relationship of healthy mistrust with the written word, at least with my own. I have the impression I am not the only one wishing to detach from language as a means of explaining. Once I came across a text in a Sigmar Polke catalogue in which some pages were nothing but a succession of *prot, stuuuuuump, rat rat, clank, claclaclanaclink*, never repetitive and with an exalted attention to rhythm. Or I think of a text by Gerhard Richter, where a controlled delirium takes on sci-fi notes, with the result of escaping the task of explaining or clarifying, rather suggesting a parallel feeling. In this case, however, Salle is writing about an artist, a genius: Alex Katz. The matter is different. Salle strives to find the most precise words. It is moving the way he lingers on the dimension of making: the density of color, the brushstroke, contrast, drawing, speed... a pragmatic way of describing the triangulation between eye, hand, and brain. My relationship with writing has improved over the years. If at first the attempt to draft a “statement” provoked a certain discomfort in me, I have learned, as happens during analysis, to accept compromises. Here, let's say that written language seems to me to presuppose a great compromise: to accept that the core of the matter will remain unaddressed.

LB: Speaking of painting, Davide Ferri recently said something interesting. Ekphrasis, he said, is not just a verbal description of a visual artwork; ekphrasis is also, and in some cases above all, a narration capable of relating the body of the work to the body of the observer. It seems to me a precious indication². *Old Masters*, the novel by Thomas Bernhard, has as protagonist a certain Reger, a Viennese man who weekly visits the Kunsthistorisches Museum. He has a single purpose: to contemplate always and only one painting, *Portrait of a Man with a White Beard* by Jacopo Tintoretto. The interesting thing is that Bernhard does not describe the painting, leaving it instead to our memory or imagination or, as is now immediate (though it wasn't in 1985 when the book came out), to the image we can find on the web. Instead of focusing

¹ David Salle, *Follow the Light*, The New York Review of Books, January 18, 2024

² Invited to speak about painting, together with myself and Antonio Grulli, on the June 30, 2025 episode of *Coxo spaziale*, curated by Stefano Pasquini, Radio Città Fujiko.

on the painting, Bernhard focuses on Reger who, like the figures seen from behind in Friedrich's paintings, becomes the vehicle of our gaze. Reger who always sits on the same bench and always observes the same painting. Reger who observes, and while observing, thinks. It is this device of vision and thought that interests the Austrian writer. Do you ever think of paintings, yours or others', in this key? I mean: considering a painting not for what it shows or tells us but for what it makes us do?

LM: In one of his texts³, the American critic David Joselit starts from a statement by Martin Kippenberger: "Simply to hang a painting on the wall and say that it's art is dreadful. The whole network is important! Even spaghetti... When you say art, then everything possible belongs to it." At that point Joselit tries to answer the question: "How does painting belong to a network?" The two issues—how painting belongs to a network of relations and how a painting acts upon us—seem to me profoundly linked. It's only in the last few years that I have begun to scratch the surface of the problem. In the past I aimed to make works that were the result of an attitude in relation to a context, whether linguistic, spatial, or material. And that was enough for me. Later I tried to make works that were the recording of my mental processes. Only then did the idea creep in that a painting could have affinities with a text, that is, could have logical properties, conventional structures, even contain typos. If you use a shared code, you can violate it, highlight its structure...

LB: I agree. The risk is that our natural desire to find analogies between different codes leads us to absolutize metaphors, associations, or synesthesias. I think of Kandinsky associating yellow with the triangle, red with the square, blue with the circle... Yet it's undeniable that visible forms communicate tactile, olfactory, sonic, even sexual sensations.

LM: It's not easy to explain why a color field obtained with a certain brushstroke, on a certain support, appears vibrant and moved, while another mark looks dull and cynical, or why a curve has to do with one's own modesty. I believe the question finds its answer in our sensitivity and our "natural" tendency to attribute value to what surrounds us. On the one hand, this is self-evident; on the other, recognizing this correspondence between signs and their effects requires great trust in the medium. It's something I try to keep in mind: a color, a precise juxtaposition, a shape, a mark have a tangible yet untranslatable force and presence. In this sense I am interested when the functioning of a painting is put *into crisis*. I am interested in there being an opening, an incongruous crack, a slippage, a mistake grasped in its precious contribution. I am interested in idiosyncrasy and the *unexpected*.

LB: Mistakes and their "precious contributions" are a very interesting theme. We just need to agree first on what we mean by mistake. A mistake presupposes a rule (that is broken), a scheme (that is evaded), or a goal to be achieved (from which one strays). On the other hand, mistake can also refer to the incongruence between a statement and a fact: we call it a mistake if the statement is made in good faith, a lie if in bad

³ David Joselit, *Painting beside Itself*, in "October," no. 130, Autumn 2009, pp.125–134, The MIT Press.

faith. In this context the opposite of mistake refers not to correctness (for example, grammatical), but nothing less than to truth. We are entering philosophy, I know, and I'd like to get out quickly. Let's consider your painting *Open Window* (2024), which depicts a reddish window against a green and blue background. I like it very much. It reminds me of some old works by Raoul De Keyser and even more of Roger Raveel. From a certain point of view your painting is entirely a sum of mistakes: the rendering of three-dimensionality is rough or nonexistent; the partial color of the window (unfinished) seems to result from chronic indecision; the handle, askew and off-center, recalls the incompetence of child's drawing; where we would expect an "opening" onto the landscape, we bump into a sort of greenish backdrop (very close to us, as the cast shadow indicates); above, a blue band concludes the playful use of representation stereotypes (green = nature, blue = sky). The point is that these "mistakes" are absolutely necessary to the painting⁴: *the painting coincides with these mistakes*. They give the rhythm; it is up to us to dance their dance. The problem—if it is a problem—is that over the past century and a half art has been dismantling so many rules and visual habits as to make aesthetic judgment a sort of mission impossible, let alone speaking of mistakes without quotation marks... When is it that, while painting, you stop and say: "oh, this is a mistake"?

LM: You name some of the artists who have had the greatest influence on my path... as with all loves, they must be declared. Raoul De Keyser represents for me an irreplaceable point of arrival and of departure. In recent years the work and the beautiful writings of Amy Sillman, the anarchy of Amelie von Wulffen, and the singular honesty of Frank Walter have been equally decisive influences. As for "mistake," here it is meant in a subjective sense: what constitutes one for me does not for you, and so on. So, including the mistake within one's working process, or even making the mistake one's constructive unit, allows—and in some cases obliges—one to shift often (you spoke of a dance), until one finds a common denominator, or accepts its impossibility. If, as you say, a mistake exists only in relation to a system, and the system is you painting, then being able to include it serves to widen the horizon. A small fracture that allows the work to be reoriented. And this puts me in tune with the process, with the various possibilities and impossibilities that hover in the room. The work becomes permeable, crossed and crossable. Noam Chomsky's phrase seems to me to hit the mark. A painting is, in the end, the sequence of the right mistakes.

LB: The Right Mistake—there's a good title for an exhibition! But let's go back for a moment to *Open Window*. Every time I look at that painting two things come to mind. Earlier I glossed over this point, I was a little ashamed. But to be ashamed in such cases is the antechamber of imbecility. When I look at the edges of the window, here's what I meant, I think of Pimpa; when I look at the green spots on green background I think of Pippi Longstocking's horse. Now, how do we put together Pimpa, Pippi, Chomsky, Tintoretto, and Joselit? But it's precisely these kinds of frictions, at times embarrassing, that make art and literature wonderful, don't you think? A territory where something can appear damn serious and at the same time damn stupid, complex and very simple, tragic and comic.

⁴ "What makes each of us unique," Noam Chomsky once said (and he knows a thing or two about grammar and syntax), "are the mistakes we make."

LM: How nice to hear Pimpa, Pippi Longstocking's green horse mentioned! There is in this painting a childlike, archetypal dimension. Yet it's as if a shadow loomed outside the visual field. But I must explain how the painting was born. As sometimes happens with my works, *Open Window* originates from another image, a photo found on the internet showing a smiling "amateur" painter holding one of her paintings depicting a red window opening onto a green garden. The painting and the scene were so... direct? that I could not resist. If you like, my painting takes as its object that woman's painting and as its subject the feeling the photo conveyed to me. Imbecility, you say... here I am. In a speech he gave at Uppsala University in 1957, Albert Camus said that there are two kinds of intelligence: intelligent intelligence and stupid intelligence⁵. It seems to me a dazzling truth. I wonder if it is possible to think of stupid stupidity and intelligent stupidity. The latter is what I appeal to when I paint. I'll give you an example. *Untitled (Table)* is a work made by instinct, calmly, without the need to struggle long. I started from a raw cotton canvas and a translucent nylon sewn together. The two fabrics absorb pigment differently, returning unequal energies. Things fell into place almost without me having to ask myself what to do. May I ask you a question? How do you know which "intellectual" tools to bring with you when painting and which it is appropriate to leave behind? I mean, one must try to disarm oneself, don't you think?

LB: I was surprised you quoted Camus, who reads him anymore? I didn't know that lecture, it's wonderful. But let me answer your question. *Disarming oneself*... It's incredible how a single word, when well chosen, can create a center of gravity for thought. The choice of this word expresses a kind of refinement and courage that I see reverberating in your works as well. When does one disarm? Usually by order of the victors, much more rarely by choice. To disarm voluntarily it is necessary to trust that some form of humanism is possible. Whoever is disarmed—this is the wager—can be disarming⁶. Stupidity can be disarming, both in a positive and a negative sense. You ask how I orient myself. I would say that in general I try to set up a dialectic between two poles: stupidity (naïveté, irresponsibility) on the one hand and intelligence (culture, responsibility) on the other. I stay there and observe what happens. From time to time fascinating moments of balance are produced. I call those moments works. "Intelligent stupidity" is a fine oxymoron. It makes me think of something my grandmother said many years ago. She wanted to describe a man who seemed charming to her even though he did not fit common aesthetic canons. I'll quote her definition in the original (Milanese dialect): "L'è brüt ma l'è bèl"⁷. ("He's ugly but he's beautiful"). This formula could define much of the best art produced in the last century and a half. I also think of your work *Simple Shapes on the Beach*, which I particularly like and which brings to mind. very different artists: certain

⁵ "I have always thought there were two kinds of intelligence—intelligent intelligence and stupid intelligence." Albert Camus, *Create Dangerously*, lecture given at Uppsala University (Sweden), December 14, 1957

⁶ This is one of the fundamental principles of the theory of nonviolence, from Gandhi to Capitini, which does not mean renouncing conflict

⁷ "Modern critics make a great fuss about the taste for ugliness, but I have never seen a true painting that seemed ugly to me." D.H. Lawrence, *Creare dei quadri*, in D.H. Lawrence, *Teatro e prose varie*, Mondadori, 1975.

engravings by James Ensor, some Raoul Dufy, Kandinsky of the early 1920s, Ben Nicholson, Max Ernst, Thomas Nozkowski... How was that painting born?

LM: I find your references extremely precise, each one a fitting piece. To these I would add a certain way of conceiving landscape in horizontal bands by Chris Martin and a way of arranging primary forms in space by Phyllida Barlow. I have the feeling that there are words, concepts, that remain dormant, lying quietly in the fine mesh of the fabric of the world. When called into question, awakened by their name, they stand up and, without clarifying themselves, become increasingly cumbersome, often for me unmanageable. Returning to intelligent stupidity, I believe it is the dimension of the ridiculous that brings me back down to earth. Remembering I have a body (limited, clumsy, embarrassing, etc.) shields me, I believe, from ever-looming heroism. That is what happens in *Simple Shapes on the Beach*. There are “primary forms,” one could say the bases of our understanding of the world: neurons that fire when we see a triangle, others that fire when we see yellow. What does a painter do? He makes the irreconcilable coexist. Sometimes with a narrative device: the sea, the beach, a triangle taking a bath, a square sunbathing. It is this friction, to take up a word you used, or intersection between irreconcilable planes of understanding the world that disarms me, animates me to paint, and excites me like a firefly.

This conversation took place in July 2025 on the occasion of Lorenzo Modica's first solo exhibition The Unfolding of Itself at Galleria Eugenia Delfini, Rome (October 1 – November 29, 2025).

Lorenzo Modica (1988, Rome) is a visual artist, with a practice centered on painting. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome and at the Slade School in London and has been teaching painting and drawing at John Cabot University in Rome since 2022. Lorenzo Modica

Luca Bertolo (1968, Milan) works as an artist, dedicating himself in particular to painting. He occasionally writes for art magazines and has been teaching painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna since 2015.



via Giulia 96, 00186 Rome
info@galleriaeugeniadelfini.it
www.galleriaeugeniadelfini.it

+39 06 976 039 46
Tuesday – Saturday
3:00 – 7:00 or by appointment