

ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2019

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

LEIDY CHURCHMAN
DOUGLAS CRIMP
THE MODERN WOMAN
AGNES DENES



\$15.00





Ellen Gallagher, *Watery Ecstatic*, 2018, watercolor, oil, pencil, varnish, and cut paper on paper, 90 1/2 x 50 1/2".

refugees washing up on the beaches of Greek islands, or teenage Iranian refugees crossing the English Channel at night in a rubber dinghy and heading desperately for the lights. The devil's favorite tool, according to Goethe, is the destruction of memory. Exiting Gallagher's exhibition, half in shock, no doubt, but half enraptured, one seemed to feel the water raging and the deck of the boat listing.

—Klea Charitou

ROME

Guglielmo Castellì

FRANCESCA ANTONINI ARTE CONTEMPORANEA

Iposcenio, or "hyposcenium," refers to the below-stage space where scenery and props are kept out of sight in the deep bowels of a theater. It was a fitting title for this exhibition of Guglielmo Castellì's paintings, all tied to introspection or, rather, to the possibility of giving form to what lies hidden in the unconscious. This young Turinese artist's idiosyncratic work contains no real narrative but offers potential plots and stories on the verge of being, or that might have been but never happened. Viewers are offered rapid glimpses into the interval between a before and an after, the time and space around an event, fractions of becoming. In this suspended dimension, Castellì stages intense, minuscule psychodramas, infusing his paintings with the raw contents of our inner lives.

Pushed by a centrifugal force, human bodies leave only a trace of their passage, trails of a presence. They often seem spirits on the

episodes of European colonial history and once included the display of Congolese people in a human zoo.

White was the color of bad luck in the eyes of the enslaved—the color of spirit demons, endless mourning, and, above all, death. Within the monochromatic realm of Gallagher's paintings, such rare colors as her palette affords are rendered especially poignant. In *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes*, 2019, we experienced viscerally the shimmer of gold leaf on canvas, always emblematic of wealth, just as beneath the surface of *Negroes Battling in a Cave* we might have discerned the swirling pools of red sienna under the layered blackness: a liminal narrative of the wound still open, the keloid scars left by the whip, and a trajectory of blood. Violence, we understand, was always the corollary of this maritime trade in human beings, its consequences generational, its reparations left unpaid. Today, we can think as well of trafficked migrants from sub-Saharan Africa lying beneath the waves

of the mare nostrum, Syrian refugees crossing the English Channel at night in a rubber dinghy and heading desperately for the lights. The devil's favorite tool, according to Goethe, is the destruction of memory. Exiting Gallagher's exhibition, half in shock, no doubt, but half enraptured, one seemed to feel the water raging and the deck of the boat listing.

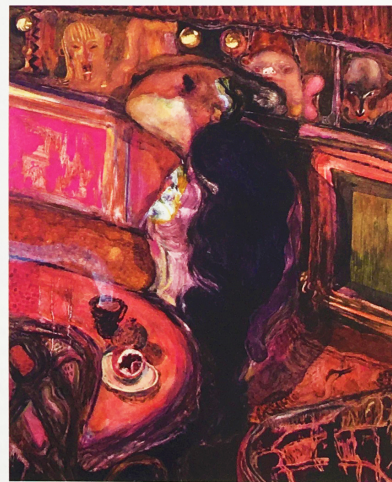
run, almost ectoplasms. Others are elastic, as if made of rubber, contortionists whose topsy-turvy positions defy gravity and push them to the brink of dismemberment. Or they are abandoned bodies that conjure Fuseli's nightmares or evoke the afternoon softness of Balthus's adolescents. These faceless characters recall the teachings of Carl Jung, who exhorted us to embrace our dark sides as inescapable passages on the path to self-knowledge. They diligently engage in dialogue with their own shadows, with a dark elsewhere, in an attempt to reunite with their chthonic parts. The figure in *Finestra di vulnerabilità metabolica* (Window of Metabolic Vulnerability) (all works cited, 2019), attracted by the mysterious depth of the black on the right side of the canvas, plunges into it as if responding to an unexpected, irresistible call. In *Discombobulate*, another figure flees, pursued by a ferocious dog: a superego always ready to bite its target's legs, like a pressing and untreatable anxiety. Such characters seem to be attempting to restore order to their dystopian reality, allowing the emergence of the unconscious material that generates the discomfort of life. Traversing the darkness, Castellì offers a sort of redemption to his characters, a second chance beyond existential pain.

In Castellì's previous works, the backgrounds were for the most part monochromatic; here, they were more carefully defined, so that the setting itself became a protagonist. Animated by dense weaves of carpets and ornate wallpaper geometries, these spaces brought to mind the tonalities of late-nineteenth-century French Symbolist and Nabi painting, in particular

the work of Édouard Vuillard. The rooms accommodating these figures are cut by screens and curtains, with bold colors and juxtapositions of acidic hues, where an ambiguous energy accumulates. The exquisite small painting *Café Müller* drags us into an early-twentieth-century scene. We find a young woman seated alone at a small bar table, like Degas's stunned absinthe drinker, though our lady's habits are apparently healthier, since she appears to be drinking a steaming cup of tea and eating a pomegranate. A symphony of warm reds, velvety purples, and extremely soft pinks envelops her in a sensual atmosphere. But she cannot escape the gaze of the masked monsters reflected in the mirrors behind her, with their frightful and predatory grimaces, and the scene becomes imbued with alarm. The unnatural torsion of her body speaks volumes about her solitude inhabited by nightmares. This was the show's most intriguing painting, whose impact was most forceful in the almost illegible deformity of the woman's face, and in the disturbing psychological space created through the interaction of setting and figure. By giving shape to the obsessions and labyrinths of the unconscious, and mixing eroticism and apprehension, Castellì has found his most courageous form of expression to date.

—Ida Panicelli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.



Guglielmo Castellì, *Café Müller*, 2019, mixed media on canvas, 19 1/2 x 15 1/2".