



## At Work With Michele Casamonti



Fate reunited Lucio Fontana and Paris. It was written - quite literally - on the back of one of Fontana's canvases. "Today is the first of October. Today, I'm going to Paris," wrote Fontana in 1964, one of over 900 phrases the Argentine Post-War artist and father of Spatialism inscribed on the back of his works.

So when Michele Casamonti, the director of Tornabuoni Art Gallery, began organizing an inaugural exhibition for his first Paris branch, it seemed only fitting to schedule the most important Fontana show to date on, you guessed it, October 1st.

"I like artists who change the language of the history of art," says Casamonti. "With a very simple gesture," sometimes the stroke of a knife or the burn of a cigarette, Fontana did just that. "He painted like a sculptor" in the way that he "realized space" beyond the standard two-dimensional limitations of the canvas, says Casamonti.

Tornabuoni Art Gallery began as a family business. Casamonti's grandfather, Ezio, started collecting art in his native Florence in the 1950s, even sponsoring Fontana as a struggling artist. When his son inherited the family's collection of Post-War avant-garde Italian art, he opened their first gallery in Florence along Via Tornabuoni in 1981.

Instead of expanding into renowned art markets like London or New York, the gallery established outposts in vacation towns like Crans-Montana, Portofino, and Forte dei Marmi, places where people can “spend time with a collector,” says Casamonti. They also opened spaces in Venice and Milan. Their Paris venture is something of an “anomaly” in that respect, admits Casamonti. However, every gallery has opened with a Fontana show.

In Paris, Casamonti chose an elegant space on Avenue Matignon where they count Sotheby’s and Christies as nearby neighbors. How did the Parisian art world receive the latest Italian import? “Franchement, fantastique,” beams a proud Casamonti. With Gaïa Donzet, the director of the Paris gallery playing the gracious role of interpreter, Casamonti continues in French: “Never could I imagine in a million years that an Italian art gallery in FIAC for eight years could have had as many visitors as we had for Fontana.”

The gallery is currently hosting “Figures, Gestes et Matières,” an exhibition featuring 25 post-war pieces by international artists like Picasso, Basquiat, Tapies, and Miró with sculptures by Pomodoro and Ceroli. Through its wide-ranging temporal and geographical juxtaposition, the exhibition hopes to explore the three themes of figure, movement, and material. The show runs through March 13th.

Tornabuoni plans to offer one such group show along with two retrospective solo shows a year. The next retrospective will feature 60 works from Alighiero Boetti, the Italian conceptual artist and founding member of the Arte Povera movement – an endeavor that Casamonti and Donzet seem very excited about.

“We’ve really invested a lot of energy” into this show, says Casamonti. Of particular interest are three of Boetti’s seminal “Mappa,” an unfinished series of embroidered world maps delineating political boundaries with flags which the artist worked on from 1972 until his death. The maps were sewn by women in Peshawar and Kabul, the latter during the Soviet invasion, and were temporarily lost amid the chaos of the war.

Through geographic space, Boetti realizes a sort of temporal calendar which chronicles the “passage de la guerre,” says Casamonti. The three featured “Mappa” will be shown without their borders for the first time in public. “It’s not rare, it’s unique,” says Casamonti. After the Paris show - which runs from March 19th to June 20th - Boetti’s work will be loaned out to some “very important” museums in Madrid, London, and New York. Casamonti declined to go into further detail.

Casamonti also took time to discuss how the art world has changed since his family’s first gallery on Via Tornabuoni nearly three decades ago. There has been a basic “restructuring of how markets work,” he says. Galleries have seen their roles change since the development of art fairs in the 90’s. It used to be a “very active scene where you met other people.” Now it seems there are more collectors but fewer galleries.

While Casamonti admits the gallery struggled to sell paintings in 2009, he seems optimistic that that “phase is finished.” He feels the crisis “helped to clean up the market” by getting rid of some weaker investors and collectors. With Alberto Giacometti’s bronze sculpture, “Walking Man I,” recently fetching 65 million pounds (104.3 million dollars) at Sotheby’s in London and setting a new world record price for a work of art in the process, it seems he may be right.

Casamonti seems content in Paris and has no immediate plans for further expansion. He takes a qualitative approach to his work at Tornabuoni, “I don’t think a gallery has to progress in numbers,” he says. If the first two shows are any indicator, Tornabuoni seems destined to become a permanent fixture along Avenue Matignon.

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