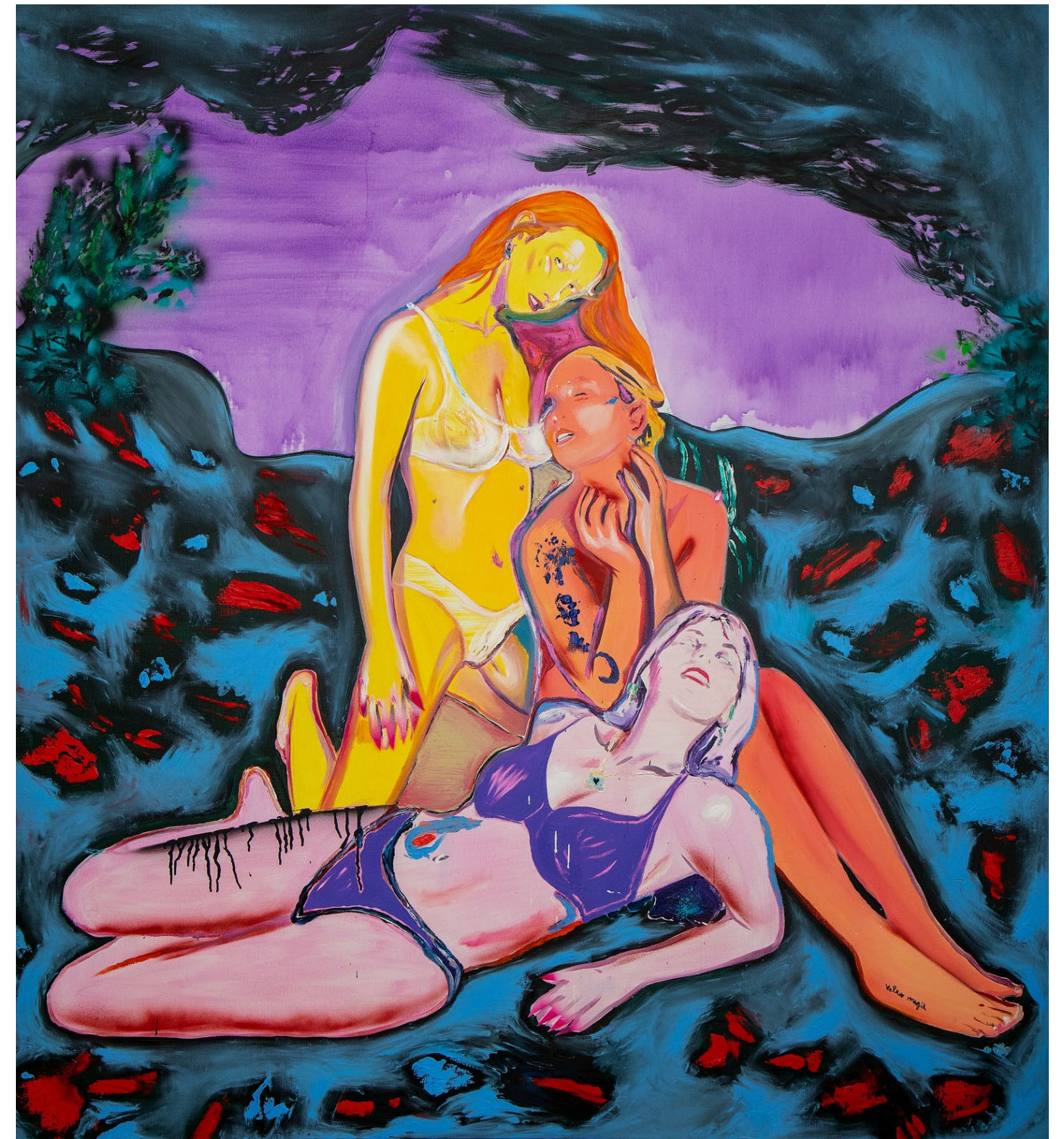


VOLEVO MAGIA

ARTIST **DAVIDE SERPETTI**

OIL, ACRYLIC AND SPRAY PAINT ON CANVAS,
180 X 200 CM, 2023



Once upon a time there was art. Once upon a time there were saints and madonnas, kings, dames and knights. Once upon a time there was an ancestral link that inextricably connected art and devotion. The depiction - in Western history - of sacred and profane subjects as unattainable icons, the highest expression of beauty and perfection. Once upon a time there was flattering portraiture, a total representation that combined realism, idealism and symbolism.

A quest for the Beautiful that has slowly crumbled to make way, in more recent times, for a kind of involution. The goal? To disrupt this lofty genre, by first working on minor themes, and then by turning to exaggeration, to the distortion of the image, beyond mere caricature, by experimenting with techniques, forms, colors. The figures of the 20th century became grotesque, serialized, elongated, somber, ironic, a mirror of a world in a constant, anguished transformation. In an age of grandeur and misery, a provocative art makes its way, antagonistic to the contradictions of present-day society.

Somewhere between the beatific beautiful and the disturbingly ugly, here we are today in a perpetual state of *taedium vitae*; bored by a world in which everything has already been seen, said, created, represented and questioned; what is left of creativity and inventiveness? Is a different art still possible?

The answer comes from a painter who, in the contemporary scene, draws from both ancient and more recent paradigms, placing himself in a tradition of *disruptive* artmaking, which brings to life androgynous forms, humanoid subjects with warped features, coming from a future halfway between the dystopian and the dreamlike. His name is **Davide Serpetti**, and we interviewed him to hear all about what's inside, behind and beyond the work he created for this issue of *Carnale: I Wanted Magic*.

ELISA: LET'S START FROM THE BEGINNING, NAMELY THIS PAINTING. WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

DAVIDE: This work began with a photo shoot in Venice, with three models in a pose that replicated Bernini's Ecstasy of Saint Theresa. Its theme is the Holy Spirit, with three female subjects illustrating how eroticism can be achieved in a more subtle way. In fact, this reference can be read from multiple perspectives, be it a Saint in adoration or a woman experiencing an orgasm. I tried to represent the dualism of the sacred and the profane in such a specific subject. On an iconographic level, I combined the triangular construction, which is a characteristic of many works from the classical period and is reminiscent of Christian imagery, with the surrounding landscape, that I painted by using my hands. It is a scenery that has been recurring in my production for about three years. The maritime pine, the surroundings of Lazio-Abruzzo, a recollection of my homeland. I've always tried to replicate a certain kind of nature, slightly sketched, just to recreate this element of home, but at the same time my subjects are projecting a specific dynamism, it's a kind of research that is difficult to place historically. And even the way these girls experience their ecstasy, it is not submissive, but rather it is empowering, for example, the girl in yellow has a direct confrontation with the viewer, which usually does not happen in sacred representation. Also, there are elements that do not belong to the human realm but are distortions, such as the girl in the center who has one eye almost effaced, and what were once tattoos are now depicted as blotches; two of the girls have some sort of claws instead of hands. They are not three sacred subjects, but by starting from that theme they have become something else. The work is called *I Wanted Magic*, which is a song by Verdena, it's about a toxic relationship, where the dynamics are inverted, and a feeling of unease is present; the base is almost metal, very aggressive. In my painting, as in the song, there is neither an erotic nor a romantic narrative, but a strong destructive component instead.

E: AMONG YOUR MOST FAMOUS WORKS IS THE SERIAL PRODUCTION ABOUT CELEBRITIES, FIRST AND FOREMOST LEONARDO DI CAPRIO. IS THIS AN IRONIC STATEMENT OR RATHER A CELEBRATION? TO YOU, ARE STARS MORE LIKE SAINTS OR MORE LIKE WHORES?

D: A bit of both, it's about the desacralization and humanization of celebrities. In my series I have portrayed Tilda Swinton, Matthew McConaughey, Joaquin Phoenix, Childish Gambino, Florence Welch, Lady Gaga. The way I treat my subjects, however, is still related to the iconographic field, to the divine, I elevate them, I paint them as if they were sacred subjects, but at the same time they are still portraits because they nevertheless have a connection to the real, although they are subsequently distorted.

E: ONE WORK THAT ESPECIALLY IMPRESSED ME AND THAT I THINK IS PARTICULARLY ILLUSTRATIVE OF THIS NARRATIVE OF YOURS IS THE PORTRAIT OF MOANA POZZI. A PERSONALITY POISED BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE.

D: Yes, Moana is a unique example in the world of international pornography, she's in a class of her own. She was perceived, like all porn stars who appear in the bourgeois or public contexts of TV - witness her appearances at the Maurizio Costanzo Show - as blasphemous, however by dying under mysterious circumstances she eventually became a saint. There are people who decades later still worship her, still revere her. She has gone away as Marilyn Monroe, and what remains is the myth of the porn actress who had a very good grasp of language, who knew how to present herself in an elegant, even profound way. She was the antithesis of what the porn star persona is, she went against everything we take for granted, the stereotype. She embodies both souls, she is both sacred and profane.

E: NEXT THERE WAS AN EVOLUTION IN YOUR WORK, YOU WENT FROM PORTRAITS TO THESE NEW FORMS, NO LONGER ENTIRELY HUMAN. WHAT KIND OF JOURNEY WAS THAT?

D: It took me years to get over my fear of subjects. My first painting exhibition was in 2013, they were real-life portraits of acquaintances and friends, unassuming works and very academic. Then in 2014 I went to Belgium and created this series on the well-known figure of Leonardo di Caprio, that was the groundwork to later being able to disrupt such a personality as well, who is so universally idolized and powerful, by bringing out so-

omething else. From there, I realized that I could move on without relying on celebrities anymore, and then until 2018 I went through a period of transition where, from the portrayal of a known figure, I ended up with fictional characters, more and more distant from reality. At that time, I focused on iconographic portraits. Humanoid, androgynous figures that initially recalled Medardo Rosso's *ecce puer*, a *modus operandi* of crystallizing the human figure and turning it into something more ambiguous, by warping its body, its face, its features. From 2019 to the present, I achieved the complete appropriation of a visual universe of figures, all shaped by me.

E: THE HERO, THE SCULPTURE AND THE BEAST. IN ONE OF YOUR PAST INTERVIEWS, YOU DEFINED YOUR ART THAT WAY: IS THAT STATEMENT STILL TRUE TODAY?

D: That sort of statement dates to 2019, but since then we had a pandemic and my work from there started to funnel into iconographic portraits, I was going to step away from performers and start making something of my own. Actually, you could say that this conception of my art is once again present in *I Wanted Magic*, in different percentages. The sculpture is the way I portrayed my subjects, and in fact they are inspired by a specific piece of sculpture, also this style of painting is very tactile, there is no depth of field, they are almost floating in a non-place and in a non-space. The portraits are the characters that come from reality, and about the animal you only have to look at the claws that two of these girls have, or that hint of spider legs of the girl in the center. Before, these features were much sharper, now I feel much less of a slave to images that don't come from me or from my imagination, from my mind, so if I have to paint a subject I don't rely on external compositions, but instead I prefer to create one myself and then think about how to paint it, rather than looking at someone else's work. My subjects today are inferior in terms of detail, however it's all about those two and three elements that are left. In my moving forward in painting, I have tried to discard what was slowing me down and what I perceived as superfluous, so that I could get something unique out of it. My work must be increasingly sharp, bold, and straight to the point.

E: HAVE YOU EVER PORTRAYED YOURSELF?

D: Years ago, on an academic level, because it's the easiest way to practice portraits. You stand in the mirror, take a picture of yourself, touch your face, there is something extremely familiar and recognizable, you can paint yourself all day long, even if you have no one around you. For all painters, the easiest subject to portray is themselves, it's a form of practice. Today I would be embarrassed to paint myself on a large work.

E: SO, YOU ARE A LITTLE LESS SELF-CENTERED THAN SOME OF YOUR FELLOW ARTISTS?

D: We are all egocentric, because if we negated our egos, we would not have the strength to pursue our art. Anyone can criticize our work, but the only thing that keeps us going and doesn't melt like snow in the sun is our ego, it gives you the jolt to get up in the morning and say, "Fuck, now I'm going to show these bastards." The artist's path forces you to deal with very complicated dynamics that require you to downgrade and rethink your idea of yourself, you go from being number one to having no money to live on.

E: DO YOU THINK YOUR WORK IS TRANSGRESSIVE? OR RATHER, DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TRANSGRESSIVE?

D: I felt transgressive the moment I accepted this collaboration with Carnale, it is an opportunity to be transgressive, but I am not actually transgressive in terms of my subjects. I have been commissioned to do some foul work, some difficult, even poisonous work. In terms of contemporary art, what is transgressive today? Painting was transgressive before it came back into fashion, now the market revolves around painting. This work for Carnale, however, is definitely transgressive: for me it is always a struggle to portray the female figure, because as a man I am less familiar with a woman's body, which is somehow perceived as sacred on an iconographic level, and I feel less free to alter it, to violate it, even if just in terms of its forms. All these mechanisms switch on in my head, that prevent me from working too strongly on distortion. In this case, having arranged a set to create photographs to be used in my paintings, it would have made little sense to modify the bodies and compositional form, so I stayed true to the photograph and later I intervened on the details, on the color level.

E: ANOTHER INTERESTING TOPIC THAT THIS ISSUE OF CARNALE COVERS IS FOLKLORE. IT IS A FASCINATING BUT AT THE SAME TIME AMBIGUOUS TERM, THAT CAN BE INTERPRETED IN DIFFERENT WAYS. TO WHAT EXTENT IS THIS FEATURE A PART OF YOUR PRODUCTION?

D: If we are discussing this work, even its title *I Wanted Magic* recalls a search for something extra-ordinary, non-stereotypical, non-provincial, something distant from standards, from common rules. Looking at these three girls and the way the landscape unfolds around them, I cannot help but notice an esoteric element; they could be three witches, but in a positive sense. Witches as people who worshipped several gods instead of professing a particular religion, and they cured themselves with medicinal herbs rather than healing themselves through praying, however, they lived in a historical context that did not allow this, and therefore they embody an attempt to escape from the norms. If we think about it, witches were the first anarchists, a counterculture of their time, as metalheads might have been twenty years ago or "gabbers" in more recent times. What differentiates them is the alchemical and metaphysical conception of what is around us: previously, people also attached a symbolic and metaphysical meaning to the usefulness of an object or an animal, the doctors of the past had a certain technical knowledge, however they also had a sacred point of view. So, I could tell you that yes, my research can be connected to folklore, I would have enjoyed living in a society where there was a resurgence of attempts to search for the soul of things.

ECSTASY OF THE ART

BY ELISA MENCARELLI
ARTIST DAVIDE SERPETTI

MAGIC DEVOTION

