

Galleria La Salita
February 1962
Toti Scialoja Exhibition

Collages '57 – '61

by Milton Gendel

Virginia snuggled into her mink coat. “I don’t know anything about painting”, she stated flatly, in the virtuous tone of those who announce that they don’t drink or smoke. “But I understand that pictures are a good investment,” she continued on a higher note, as if in response to an invisible interlocutor who had suggested that an occasional dose of mescaline gives roseate visions and a sense of well-being. “So Toti, can you tell me which of your periods is most likely to go up in value?”

Scialoja was delighted. The question proposed a barbaric quandary, like having to decide which of his children he would push off a raft to let the others live. Gabriella, who had brought Virginia to the studio, when she had expressed a desire to learn something about contemporary painting, saw that life was producing an abstraction in the face of years of concrete work. Gabriella said, “I like all his pictures but of course the latest interest me most because they are in the process of becoming.”

“Becoming what?”

“Becoming what Scialoja is, what we are and what things are. After they go through the process of becoming, then they are pictures.”

Virginia looked around distractedly at the canvases propped against the walls, and exclaimed, “Oh, I *like* that one.” Scialoja moved the painting so that it was in a better light and said, “It’s one of my older pictures. The structure is still in the cubist line, contained within the frame, and the painting shows a traditional *métier sollicitude*. See the gleam of these thick oil passages against the thin matt background. It was painted on an easel at the end of a brush.”

Gabriella realized that the window-frame space and the hourglass time of the picture were comfortably recognizable for Virginia but would not bring her abreast of the Scialoja of February 21st, 1962. She interrupted his recollections of the old days at the easel. “All the others, which will be in the show at the Salita, were done on the floor, in a different tempo.”

Scialoja, who had been looking reminiscently at the canvas in oils, turned toward a red and brown painting and said, “They start in 1957, and though this one is still centralized, it shows the beginnings of the scansion I have tried to express ever since.”

Virginia said, “But it’s made of paper, with bits of newsprint. Will it last?”

Scialoja replied, “Will we? It’s part of the rhythm, an attempt to seize the transitory or disposable between its momentary appearance and oblivion. The painted printing or the printed painting does the same. I smear a piece of newsprint with the paint - vinavil and color - and stamp it in an alternating or echoing rhythm across the surface of the picture.”

“It’s not done at brush’s length,” said Gabriella. “It’s a hand to hand engagement.”

Virginia said, "Some of these remind me of lipstick prints on paper napkins." Scialoja nodded. "Yes there's something in that, but not enough. I am not interested in random effects or in collage as a form of still life. The rhythm is continuous, and I try to catch it as it crosses my picture."

"From left to right?" Virginia asked.

"And from top to bottom and in and out," Gabriella put in. "Look at this one where the verticals scan the picture horizontally, the verticals themselves have a side to side and up and down movement in counterpoint, and the whole thing is enmeshed in the ephemeral light of the gauze and paper field."

"Gabriella, that sounds as if you were describing a group doing the Twist," said Virginia, and she started to do the bath-towel movement. "Ha capito tutto, o quasi," Scialoja exclaimed ecstatically. "I must give you a kiss." He did so. Then in a harmony of understanding, he and Gabriella twisted with Virginia for a time. A thought struck Virginia and the dance came to a stop. "Why does a Roman like you, with an established reputation, chose to paint in Paris?"

"I don't", said Scialoja. "I prefer New York, but the work I'm doing now is so huge I must go on with it."

"Those paintings in Paris, made up of units forming galaxies, are like symphonies of printed scansion," said Gabriella. "But that isn't the whole of it. He first went there to attend Merleau-Ponty's lectures."

"You mean like Proust going to hear Bergson?" said Virginia.

"Proust had an easier time of it," said Gabriella. "Who wouldn't settle for Bergsonian time now?"

Scialoja said, "I wouldn't. That's why I'm crazy about New York. I'm for my own time's time, even if I have to travel to get it."

"Then you don't believe in national kinds of painting," said Virginia.

"No, I'm classical enough to believe in the going version of the Republic of Art."

"How else are you classical?"

"Some say I carry a Mediterranean baggage with me, but if I do it's just a pinch of earth which, in fact, I can just as well find any where", said Scialoja, pointing to some patches of red ochre in one of the pictures.

Gabriella was looking reflective. "If you were interested in what Merleau-Ponty had to say, and are concerned with surface scansion, and are always reading Robbe-Grillet and company, then why do you long for the Cedar Bar, the Club and the factory-loft studios in New York?"

"Because in Paris they talk about these feelings, impulses and rhythms, which are the true beat of our time, but in New York they just happen. The paper gets in the way of Robbe-Grillet's images; in my book the paper is the image." Virginia produced a checkbook and, looking intently at a slab of cork with a series of spikes embedded in it, said: "That's in the show too, isn't it? How do those nails express a fleeting rhythm?"

Scialoja said, “Non ha capito un bel niente. I like to bend things to my will.”

“Anyway,” said Virginia, “I’d like to buy this one with the spidery red and black shapes. I think it’s very attractive. Decorative. It will go well over a lacquer cabinet in my sitting room.” Gabriella winced. Scialoja repeated, “Non ha capito un bel niente. You can arrange that with Liverani at the show. Still, it’s not to be sneezed at that you like it, and since it seems to be a habit in Rome for a painter’s admirers to write him letters which he can put in his exhibition catalogues, I will reverse the process and write you a letter.”

He picked up the picture she had singled out, turned it around and on the back, after dipping his finger into a pot of black paint, started to write: “Dear Virginia, in the words of Husserl, the authentic transcendental epoché makes ‘transcendental reduction’ possible...”