

**Art International**  
**June 1971**

## **ACHILLE PERILLI**

by Milton Gendel

Twenty-odd years ago the foreground of the Roman art scene was dominated, it seemed, by a foursome of twenty-year-olds, a sort of collective phoenix risen from the mud and ashes of Novecento Kultur. The fall of Fascism and the Liberation, a few years earlier, had put an end to Italy's provincial isolation under Mussolini's policy of material and cultural autarchy, and Italian artists and intellectuals were again thinking of themselves in terms of a European and Atlantic context. Coming of age in the new climate the four Romans - Dorazio, Guerrini, Manisco and Perilli - took on an active, ubiquitous role in the renewal of Italian painting, whose form and content had to be radically altered to suit the spirit of the times. In the few years before Guerrini defected to movie making and Manisco to journalism, the group, in various combinations and permutations with other vanguardists, extended the perspectives of their painting to Paris and the traditional European centers of modern art, and back into the past before the advent of Fascism, to Cubism and Futurism. New geometrical and biomorphic forms inspired by Kandinsky, Arp, Klee and Magnelli replaced realistic or stylized representation; depth and perspective were rejected along with the thematic content concerning Man, Woman, Agriculture, Labor, the Nation and Authority that had been popular under the regime. Ideologically, the flat, bright, angular or curvilinear icons stood for the opposite of Fascism, the Marxist Left, which was also the most Messianic element in the early coalition governments of the new Republic.

In their abhorrence of the philosophy and practice of the defunct dictatorship, the advanced artists made their position clear by a clean break, and were totally intolerant of anything that might fuzzle the new line. Hence the violence of their attack on Cagli, challenging his credibility as an abstract artist by publishing reproductions of some of his earlier work which contained Fascist iconography. And their later intransigent refusal to compromise their esthetic canons even in the interest of their political sympathies, when the Communist Party condemned abstract art and called for Social Realism.

From the beginning of their histories as artists, Perilli and his intimates saw painting as a social function and themselves as public figures. As an active member of the community, promoting the kind of painting he believed in, Perilli was a founding member in 1947 of Forma 1, the name of a group and a publication, whose manifesto stated that "...in art only the traditional and inventive reality of pure form exists". He promoted exhibitions of abstract Italian art, organized - with Dorazio and Guerrini - the Age d'Or, a gallery that became an outpost and transmission center of the international avant-garde in Rome, and traveled the vanguard circuits around Europe. Ten years later Perilli had his first one-man show at the Tartaruga and started, with Gastone Novelli, one of the periodicals that have been a constant in his activity as an artist: *L'Esperienza Moderna* "Modern Experience" in this case revolved around the works of Schwitters, Arp, Haussmann, Wols and Gorky.

The idea of pure form was from the beginning tempered by a respect for the mysterious processes of the human imagination. This was now enunciated and stressed in the magazine's program: "Humanity proceeds beneath the sign of the irrational and this continuous descending into depth, into the deepest of the deep, down into the most secret I, is an important part of contemporary research, aimed at recreating in new forms and new images the mythology of our world." Thus in Perilli's work the fundamental ideal of political collectivity is paired with the idea of a Jungian collective unconscious that can be mined for imaginative resources. This peculiarly Italian

combination of factors has consistently informed Perilli's approach to art, providing the conceptual framework for two decades of painting that in review has an exceptional orderly coherency.

In a march past of the canvases, the earliest abstractions from 1947 have the bright colors of children's crayons, and their elements are taken from Klee, Kandinsky and the Futurists. During the next four years Magnelli is the ideal reference point - as an émigré vanguardist uncompromised by Fascism - along with Kandinsky and Arp. Straight-line "constructions" anticipate the work Perilli is now doing, but biomorphic forms are also frequent. In the mid-fifties the linear elements are organized into cellular, beehive structures painted in grays, blacks and earth colors, in oil and tempera. And 1957 marks a new departure: the cells of the previous work grow in scale and open up, as if viewed through a microscope. The medium is tempera and the colors are more brilliant. Previously Perilli had often played on the ambiguity between "figure" and structure; now he plunges into surrealist imagery and dashing structural line. In fact he is most interested at this time in Gorky's nebulous and bladder shapes and Klein's sweeping "gestures". Out of this experience he comes to make common cause with Twombly, Rome-transplanted member of the second generation of the New York School, and with his close friend Novelli. The result, shown at the 1958 Biennale, is a series of white, or white-suffused-with-pink, fields carrying "written" or scribbled figures, but as these are in effect structural there is no real break with the preceding paintings.

Subsequently a division of the field suggests a horizon line, and as a consequence the graffiti or signs appear to be located in a defined space. Wide and dug deeply into the tempera, pumice and vinavil ground, the graffiti are very prominent. They are no longer just a physical fact, but are beginning to represent something. As a new and more complex organization evolves, the divisions of the field multiply, leading - around 1961 - into paintings like *The Loves of Cleopatra* and the well-known series of "Comics" (*Fumetti*).

Although they are contemporary with and refer to pop art's acquisition of the comic strip as a genre, Perilli's "Comics" belong to an older tradition of painting. There is no interest in borrowing the typographical features or the incidental technical effects of the printed originals. Instead, the canvas takes on the yielding, billowing movement of a large sheet of newsprint (*The Time of Ideograms*). The sequence of rectangular spaces of the strips makes a marching rhythm or creates a symmetrical framework. Scribbles in the separate frames refer to the characters, here seen as generalized visual clots of signs with no possible individual identity (*The Flower of Liberty*). The whole work is an icon with a contemporary reference, conserving such hallmarks of traditional easel painting as brushwork, texture, ground and figure. Even in size the canvases are kept within reasonable limits, usually not exceeding two meters by three and most of them much smaller.

A variation on the conventional canvas that recurs regularly in Perilli's work is the use of cylindrical columns or several drums on a vertical axis - as in *Georgia*. But these forms function as if the painting had been wrapped around their girths, obliging the spectator to "read" the composition sequentially as he walks around it.

The illusion of space brought in by the series of "Comics" is maintained, and around 1965 it is carried forward into new compositions that start the trend toward the present full field. In *The Apparition of Light* the field is divided vertically in three, like three frames of a landscape on a film strip. A larger field below and a smaller field above share the canvas in *The Winter of Aldebaran*. But the turning point comes with such paintings as *Light Landscape* and *Exciting Leisure*, in which the scribbles contract and form a sort of humanoid emanation. Now the flexible line typical of the "Comics", which created organic forms in space, straightens out to define prismatic ghost shapes. Often these are like starched bed-sheets crisply crumpled and rising up as phantoms - not of the night - but of the gray dawn of the painting's thick impasto ground.

As a believer in the traditions of modern art, Perilli has never been reluctant to acknowledge his debts to other artists, and often takes pleasure in “quoting” from their works. So there are many citations from Rothko and Reinhardt in the canvases of the '60's which were summarized in an exhibition at the Marlborough, Rome, called *Transformation of Space 1965-1967*. The figures with their surrealist aura, projected on neutral blue-gray-white grounds, were fully framed or banded above and below in brilliant color, the bands sometimes broadened to include a strip of rectangles distantly recalling the “Comics”. In *The Unextended is a Point*, the color fades out as if to focus attention on the elements of the new figures, which have been organized as a combination of comic-strip composition and the full, open field. And even in these closely related paintings there are, as always with Perilli, momentary returns and reminiscences: *The March of Narcissus*, for instance, brings up again the earliest references to Futurism.

At the Biennale of 1968, the room devoted to Perilli's painting included many canvases belonging to this series and a few harbingers of his present work. *The Heart of the Square* polarizes the frozen, crystalized ectoplasms, anticipating the strongly geometrical trend, as does *Vulcan Surprising Mars and Venus*, a predominantly slate-gray construction focusing on a red “eye”. The latter composition is also an instance of Perilli's consciously close association with art history, as it is a schematized version of 17th-century painting of the same subject. In this case the title of the painting describes its content, or at least the content's point of departure. But in general Perilli's titles are allusive, literary, poetic and at times provocative. In homage to the sources of the vanguard tradition they are often in French, occasionally in English. Many are surrealistically whimsical. The titles of the latest works retain all these long-established traditions. While in the paintings themselves Perilli has achieved a new summation of his own antecedents, rejecting tentative, allusive gestures in favor of a seemingly clear geometry of faceted planes and uninflected color-field grounds.

In these paintings of the last two or three years, shown recently at the Marlborough in Rome, the frequently sketchy or scabbled line of the “Comics” goes straight, and the color of the planes and fields is evenly dense and unwavering. Some of the compositions still follow the mode of the compartmentalized “Comics” or are framed in bands of color, as in *The Descent into the Cavern* and *Nouveau Lexique*, but the new development is toward an undelimited field taking up the entire canvas. Complicated geometrical figures float on the canvas or, more usually, protrude into it from outer space. Like a prismatic tree or many-headed serpent, the figure in *Le Repas et l'Amour* rears into the brilliant blue ground. Following the new technique of the series, the defining lines are painted rather than scratched into the tempera and vinavil ground. The figures - as in *A Particular Morbid Condition* and *Whale Farm* - are closely related to some experiments in sculpture (entirely different in conception from his pole or bobbin compositions) that Perilli has been working on since the 1968 Biennale. In cut and folded cardboard, lacquered wood or metal, they are clusters of apparently simple squared-off funnel shapes producing a highly intricate play of facets and planes, the equivalent of the use of perspective in the canvases. Perilli's pictorial perspective in *Buon Viaio Giorgia*, *The Carnal Albedo*, *Les Pierres sont des Nuages*, *The Specific Repressor and Rhythmic Functions* plays an elusive game with space, unexpectedly reversing itself in an in-and-out process of narrowing and dilating, plunging and surfacing. It is Perilli's social corrective to the coercions of the established mode of western representation of space, he tells us.

Along with his respect for the tradition of painting on canvas and for literary allusions in titles, Perilli carries on the avant-garde habit of issuing manifestoes. The catalogue of his last. exhibition contained the *Manifesto of the Mad Image in Imaginary Space*, which states his intentions as an individual in the challenging and sonorous phrases of collective programmatic pronouncements. In fact he uses political terms when he castigates standard perspective as “repressive” and postulates his Imaginary Space as a sphere inspired by a collective consciousness. The Mad Image, operating

within this space, condenses a “moment in the irrational collective unconscious”. And its creation depends on four “laws” revolving around an automatic structuring of movements of attraction and repulsion; a complex of, not too readily decipherable, multiple superimposed “constructions”; a labyrinthine visual path with no fixed orientation; an ambiguity multiplying the possible messages of the image, as a straight, conscious “message” is false and conditioned by the “dominant social structures”.

These laws and the concept of the Mad Image in Imaginary Space may be incantatory, and intended to evoke the old avant-garde magic. In any case, Perilli’s recent works are the most highly articulated, and at the same time the most sumptuous and masterful, of the paintings he has produced during his two decades of prominence in the vanguard of Italian art.