

STANISLAO LEPRI

OPENING

Tuesday 11.04.2023, 6 pm – 9 pm

DATES

12.04 – 24.06.2023

"His fantasy is never gratuitous: originating from his deepest self, it meets the collective unconscious of our time and reflects our anxieties back to us, sweetened by a smiling irony, a tolerant wisdom."

Constantin Jelenski

One year after the exhibition dedicated to Leonor Fini and following the presentation of a monographic booth at Independent 20th Century in New York, Galleria Tommaso Calabro presents **Stanislao Lepri**, a monographic exhibition dedicated to one of the most overlooked Surrealist Italian artists, **Stanislao Lepri (1905-1980)**.

Stanislao Lepri was born in Rome in 1905, into a family of the so-called "black nobility". As per his family tradition, Lepri followed a diplomatic career, holding the position of Italian Consul in the Principality of Monaco and in Brussels. In 1942, he met the Italian-Argentinian artist Leonor Fini, who encouraged him to pursue his passion for painting. During WWII, the two lived together in Rome, moving to Paris in 1946, where they shared an apartment in Rue Payenne. At the time, Lepri abandoned any political commitment to become a full-time painter. In 1952, after Fini met the Polish literary man Costantin Jelenski, the three of them lived together in a "ménage à trois", free from all restricting conventions. They became inseparable until the end of their lives, moving from one apartment to the other, including their last home in Rue de la Vrillière.

Throughout his lifetime, Lepri exhibited his works in galleries across Europe and in New York, working with gallerists such as Alexander Iolas and Jean Charpentier. In addition to his commitment as a painter, Lepri also worked as a theatre scenographer and illustrator.

The exhibition Stanislao Lepri includes **over forty paintings and works on paper**, which retrace Lepri's career, from the early years, when he met Fini, until the end of the 1970s. The exhibition is designed as a **journey into Lepri's oneiric universe**, whose figures speak of human emotions, inner fears, desires, and distress with a sharp, satirizing irony. Skeletons, hooded figures, gigantic cats, monstrous animals, and naked figures of Medieval and Renaissance reminiscence inhabit a Surreal world, which might belong to a fairy tale as well as to a nightmare.

As for many of the Surrealists, Lepri makes it clear that the certainties and dogmas of the past have lost their validity and universality. What is left are the invisible, governing rules of fate, which seem to determine the inevitable faith of his figures, who are helplessly doomed to their destiny. Nothing is really as it seems. His paintings are "ultramondi metafisici," where he unveils "the unbelievable, the ambiguous, the contrary, the dark metaphor, the allusion, the astute, the sophism" which pervade a labyrinthic world. Yet, in comparison to other Surrealist Post-War artists, Lepri remains rather unknown. This might be because, during his lifetime, only a selected circle of collectors, intellectuals and dealers appreciated and presented his work. Following his death, he remained known in Paris, but his work struggled to receive recognition outside of France.

STANISLAO LEPRI: PAINTING DICTATED BY DREAMS

By Hunter Braithwaite

A dwarf chasing a white horse. A tower made of naked bodies. A face cracking apart. For all the surrealism in Stanislao Lepri's paintings, most pales in comparison to the strange and wonderful story of his life. He was an aristocratic diplomat whose chance encounter with an artist changed everything. A gifted painter who eschewed manifestos and programs, choosing instead to explore childhood symbols. A latter-day bohemian, wedding celebrity and counterculture, whose paintings were on view throughout Europe and at New York's Museum of Modern Art before falling out of the public eye—until Galleria Tommaso Calabro's presentation at Independent 20th Century last September.

Lepri was born in 1905 into a pedigree of opulence as a descendent of wealthy Roman "black nobility" (the aristocrats who sided with the Pope in opposition to the unification of Italy under Garibaldi). He grew up in Rome in a sprawling apartment overlooking Bernini's fountain in Piazza Navona and spent childhood holidays on the family's country estate, exploring attics and an abandoned tower. It was a privileged existence, and one at odds with the social tumult of Italy in the early 20th century. As a young man, Lepri pursued a career in diplomacy. He dined with Europe's elite as the Italian consul to Monaco and worked to make sense of an increasingly absurd world. One evening in 1942, Lepri's life shifted. As he was leaving a theater in Monte Carlo, someone caught his eye. He turned to his friend and said: "I would like to know that woman."

That woman was Leonor Fini, and to know her was to be under her sway. Raised in Trieste, the Argentine-Italian painter charted an independent course through the 20th century, attracting admirers including the choreographer George Balanchine, the artist Max Ernst, and André Breton, the founder of Surrealism (he considered her a muse, she considered him a misogynist). Add to the list Stanislao Lepri. He engineered a meeting to buy one of Fini's paintings. They had lunch, got on well, and Lepri ended up showing her some drawings he always carried with him. She later described these drawings, which he had made at 17, as "vivid, bizarre, spiritual". She asked him why he had become a diplomat, if he so obviously had wanted to become an artist. "To escape a large but narrow-minded city."

If escape was a theme, he picked it up again then, abandoning his career in diplomacy to pursue a romance with Fini, and a life of art. From then on, "his world was that of painting", she recalled. As war convulsed around them, the couple set up a life together in Rome, then Paris and Corsica. And while Lepri was no bourgeois, Fini was without any shred of convention. In 1951, she met the Polish writer Constantin "Kot" Jelenski, and the couple welcomed him into their home (which was also shared by Fini's multitude of cats) as a *ménage à trois*.

Having only begun painting seriously in his mid-thirties, Lepri created works that drew upon childhood memories, the visual culture of his native Rome, and Biblical and classical fables—all filtered through his own subconscious. As Lepri put it: "Some of my paintings were dictated to me by real dreams." Like Fini, he sidestepped the dogmas and manifestos of Breton's Surrealism to create a world that was both intensely personal and oddly universal. Though coded through his hippocampus, the paintings contain just enough logic—and cultural references ranging from Dante to Raphael to Christian Dior—to estrange without alienating.

TOMMASO CALABRO

It has been said that childhood provides a writer with most of their creative material, and that tenet seems to hold equally true of Lepri's painting. He wrote of how the water-gods from Bernini's fountain in Rome would reappear periodically in his work. He rendered the symbol of the tower as a grotesque tangle of bodies in *Tour de force* (1965). There is the story of Babel, of course. And with that, loneliness and isolation. Feelings that Lepri felt as a boy, discovering the hiding places of his country estate, and later as a diplomat, traveling through a rapidly disintegrating Europe.

Animals, too. Lepri's compositions often tip into bestiaries, with a storm of butterflies here, a bevy of bats there, and a parade of rhinos in the impossible landscape *Finis latinorum* (1971). Again, a key lies in childhood. Lepri remembered accompanying his father, a zoologist, on many trips to Rome's Zoo, where he would give the elephants medicine wrapped up in balls of newspaper. The strange specificity of this memory, along with the zoo's location inside the Villa Borghese gardens, also home to the artistic treasures of the Galleria Borghese, offers an unexpected window into Lepri's practice. A gifted child, to whom the world was both given and withheld, he spent his early years storing up images that he would, decades later, embellish and reimagine on canvas.

By that time, the world as he knew it had been shattered by Fascism and war. Herein lies the live wire electrifying Lepri's body of work, and making it all the more relevant to our present moment of angst and unrest. He balances humor and terror in equal measure, evoking the grotesquerie of Hieronymus Bosch and the existential ennui of Giorgio de Chirico alongside the pageantry of a child's summer hours, or a socialite's ball. Lepri's painting can be seen as a game, in which the stakes are too high to matter, and to which the rules have been lost.

A quality of acceptance and grace characterizes even his most disturbing compositions. As Constantin Jelenski put it: "his fantasy is never gratuitous: originating from his deepest self, it meets the collective unconscious of our time and reflects our anxieties back to us, sweetened by a smiling irony, a tolerant wisdom." Filtered through his personal experiences of war, exile, queer community, and a life in service to art, Lepri's work ultimately helps us to navigate our new period of surreality. Perhaps, it suggests, the world doesn't have to make sense after all.

OPENING TIMES

Tuesday – Saturday / 11 am – 7 pm
Monday / by appointment

PRESS REQUESTS

Galleria Tommaso Calabro
Elena Caslini | elena@tommasocalabro.com | +39 02 49696387

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#stanislaolepri
@tommasocalabrogallery

WEBSITE

tommasocalabro.com
