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# Treasure in Milan with the Artists Vitali by Paula DiPerna

09/17/2017 04:05 pm ET

To paint. In quick bold strokes, as if the hand at work already contained the whole story about to flow to the canvas. Skinned rabbits, exquisite violets, ladies with cats on their heads, shoemakers cobbling, fish the rims of a plate, wine glasses left behind on a table but still tinkling, drinking pals, portraits finished. Portraits erased.

To paint life, to live painting. To leave nothing out.

So this energy flows to the viewer who visits the four exhibitions of the artist Gian Carlo Vitali, hosted by the city of Milan—"Time Out"—time given back through the eyes of the painter. And his son, Velasco Vitali, also a painter and sculptor, his father's curator, whose father told him long ago, "painting is not reality."

But what, then, is painting? A question with no answer.

Milan is a city of extremes for walkers, from the tightly packed ancient Piazza del Duomo, dead center, to the thinned out Ticino section that used to be loud with sawmills and industries, long lost, now newly revived, offering fabulous new age eateries like "Carlo and Camilla" where tables are communal and once indispensable buzz saws stand aside now, dead silent, but as stately as bronze horsemen.

The Vitali shows contain scores of paintings and are situated in venues across the whole city, including the main urban gallery Palazzo Reale, but still one can walk from one show to the other. The Vitali shows have become a Milan theme, the integration of their perspective, subtle and sublime, both fused and separated by their family connection. The dynamic also attracted the vision and interest of British filmmaker, Peter Greenaway, who curated one of the Vitali shows at the Casa del Manzoni, home of the great Italian writer. Cinema, vibrant oil painting, literature, deliberate sculpture and the sculptural tone of ordinary objects—together in Vitali's Milan.



The senior Vitali is a self-taught artist who has lived and worked in Bellano on Lake Como quietly for decades. The show at the Palazzo Reale is the first retrospective of his 70 year oeuvre. To visit the show is to constantly dance between what you see and leave behind as you move on, and what pulls you back. To move on from a Vitali is not so easy. Why not?

Because time moves through Vitali's work. According to the exhibition notes at the Palazzo Reale, "there are three cardinal rules of Vitali's painting: Attention to the great masters; observation of everyday life at its crudest and most ironic, and transformation of the subject into an incandescent metaphor of the human comedy."

But there are no true rules. In the painting, "Ruspanti," thin feathery faced ladies are plucking chickens, or is it the other way around? A good question, the artist himself told me. The "Farmacista" is never far away, his beard falling like whitewater. Triple portraits, "Forever Together," three brawny men, Vitali's friends, drinking and smoking, painted in one hour by the artist after they'd spent an evening together. We wish to have been there.

Velasco Vitali once asked his father at the dinner table if the painting on the wall was a pumpkin or not. "Painting is not reality" was the answer.

Velasco Vitali's "Ritrato-AutoRitratto," is a double work, a portrait of his father and a self-portrait—which to look at first?

Velasco Vitali has written of his work as a curator, "organizing this exhibition means trying to arrange and recount something that has always been before my eyes: the importance of spontaneous painting capable of telling stories but also the act itself, anarchical and isolated, in stubborn pursuit of lines, forms and reflections, patches, streaks and expanse of colour."

Once awakened by howling dogs at his home, Velasco, the sculptor, took to capturing the dogs in wax, then bronze, creating a community of hounds exhibited now throughout Italy, only one of his signature pieces. The dogs are there in Milan too, just outside the lobby of Milan's Park Hyatt Hotel, where inside are stupendous Velasco Vitali oil paintings from his series, Foresta Rossa. They bring the dogs inside at night, the hotel tells me.



Velasco's dogs turn up again at the Casa del Manzoni, this time with sound. This exhibition is more literal, more ethnographic, more like a movie. As Peter Greenaway, the curator wrote, "I am biased. I was trained as a painter and it was always what I wanted to be from the age of thirteen and had no idea at all how I could bring that ambition to any sort of fruition...Perhaps that is what I still aspire to—paintings with soundtracks—and for me the paintings do not necessarily have to move."

The Casa del Manzoni show tracks Manzoni's life with Gian Carlo Vitali's life at Bellano, and all its occupations, figs and seeds and wine, church and processions. Manzoni's lunch table is set in his dining room, surrounded by Gian Carlo's paintings of tables where the meals at Bellano had been long and lively and where, yet, everyone had left—Manzoni's is the silence of history, Vitali's the silence of people who had a marvelous time and then merely gone home to sleep.

And even a stay in the local hospital, where Gian Carlo once had to spend time, more than he wanted. The hospital room is full of blue-white light and billowing sheets in beds where the invisible once were at rest. A dream. But there, on the wall, Gian Carlo's painting of the physician making rounds, his jaunt caught in only several brush strokes as he enters the ward, joyful in his step, I felt, and no doubt to his patients. Vitali drew incessantly when he was hospitalized. His daughter, Sara, herself a bookmaster and manager of the exhibitions, brought him his materials. She joked that her father did so many portraits of the nurses and staff because he wanted them to take good care of them.

By far the most unusual exhibition is of Vitali's works on paper exhibited at the Castello Sforzesco. Velasco Vitali's concept is ingenious. A red carpet leads to the exhibition room, with long sheets of blank white parchment paper rolled along the sides—red and white pathways. The exhibition guardian told me to feel free to walk on the red, but not on the white. Visitors are given a flashlight—"you must return it at the end," said the guard.

Velasco Vitali had suspended his father's etching plates overhead at different heights, and so the visitor has to look up to discover the lines, squinting to make them out for there is just enough light, using the seeking eye of the artist himself, perhaps, illuminating success as an effort of finding the image in the metal and bringing it out. Then, the case of the actual artworks—fine lines, fossils, sea shells that could be the deep human brain, landscapes. In another room at the Castello, Gian Carlo's drawing "A Mai Madre," of his mother threading a needle, her glasses low on her nose, peer over, the fabric there and not there, seeming to be sewing time instead.

Here, Gian Carlo's work is hanging next to that of Rembrandt, Ensor, Morandi and Bartolini. The younger Vitali, Velasco watched his father catching fish—so what does it mean to be self-taught?



Real or not real? This is Velaso Vitalli's point. Somehow he has both presented and dared his father's work, tilting one of his father's iconic sunflowers, setting it on the wall horizontally, but just enough to tremble the whole. Velasco Vitall used his license to guide us and we love his father's work even more.

Gian Carlo Vitalli has been called a recluse because he has rarely ventured out of his home town, not even to attend the opening of these exhibitions. But, staying home has hardly turned him homeward. Instead his imagination became connected to his experience to the coiled up energy waiting in his quicksilver strokes of oil paint that he rarely altered.

He told me himself that "I only paint what I have touched with my hands." Raw life has never been so beautifully held. (TIME OUT: Gian Carlo Vitalli, MILAN, THROUGH 24 September 2017, [www.archivivitali/timeout](http://www.archivivitali/timeout). Locations: Palazzo Reale, Casa del Manzoni, Museo di Storia Naturale, Castello Sforzesco)