



Pietro Albetti in his studio.

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«As a gift»

Inside the works of Pietro Albetti

Text and interview: Inga Santa Maria, Art Consul for Galleria Rubin

A breath, in a room. Two canvases by Pietro Albetti set us before sleeping bodies, in the most defenceless instant there is: a man keeping watch, looking at the people he loves as if he were seeing them for the first time.

They are people he loves, though he does not say so. He has chosen not to give those figures a name: «they are not really portraits», he explains, «you sense that they are subjects close to me, but the attempt was to make them universal». This is the first movement of his gaze: to begin from what is nearest and reach anyone at all.

Why sleep, then? Because it is the one moment when our defences fall away. «Sleep is the moment when the subject loses his characterisation», Albetti says, «the moment when I realise that the people I love are other than me». And it is perhaps the purest form of love: to love someone enough to recognise that they do not belong to us. The “Circostanze” series is born right here, from the «relationship with the people who have inhabited and still inhabit my life»: to stop, to «step back and look at them as new people, as a gift». It happens rarely, «often when the subject is doing something that does not depend on me: then I pause to look at what is not mine, though it is profoundly part of my life». And he adds a line that is dizzying: «Death is the extreme awareness of this».

Look now at how these canvases are made, and you will understand why everything here begins with a room. Albetti starts from the dark: he prepares the ground with an almost black brown, Cassel earth, «the colour of the fields» of the countryside where he painted for years. On that darkness he draws with a sanguine pencil, then builds the volumes in oil, mark after mark, with a small brush and thinned colour, never «closing» the figures: «place and subject must proceed together, letting the material they are made of breathe». Black, for him, is not a void but a

promise: «Black is an empty space, a dark room that has depth». Here are his *circostanze*, circumstances that are also rooms: spaces where light, and people, surface from the depths as if from sleep.



Pietro Albetti, Circostanze #3, 2021, oil on canvas, 127 × 157 cm.

There is a reason that something alive is felt before these works. For Albetti, to paint «is not the concluding act but the generative one»: he does not know where the marks will take him, and so it is an act that «must first of all be desired. The way one desires a body». The image is born of a true relationship, «which can be struggle, disappointment, nostalgia and unexpected miracle, like every authentic relationship». And it is complete only when the work breaks away from him: «A work ends when I recognise that it has its own autonomy, when it can walk on its own». To hold it an instant too long, he confesses, is to put it out.

To understand how one arrives at two sleeping bodies, though, we must go back, all the way to matter. Albetti begins as an informal painter, «under the star of one of my masters, Burri», using materials as a means of expression. Then come the landscapes, and with them ten «heroic» years out of doors: he works en plein air, braving weather of every kind, going so far as to fix canvases almost two metres across to the car roof-rack so as to paint them out in nature, «I wanted to take plein-air painting to its limit». Nature, he says, was his teacher.

The desire for large formats leads him to the “Navigli”, canvases four metres wide in which the city is mirrored in the water. It is 2009, a year he calls «decisive»: those works enter a major Milanese exhibition, “Acqua, riflessi,

memorie”, beside the masters, even beside Caravaggio’s Narcissus. It is the theme of water, which still brings him commissions today, that leads him in 2015 to his encounter with Galleria Rubin.

But it is precisely while he is painting reflections that the body calls to him for the first time. He walks by chance into a byre: the black and white bodies of oxen are resting in the mud, and in that «warm silence» a thought about destiny reaches him, theirs and ours. The “Farm” series is born, as far as the large slaughterhouse canvases. To paint them he asks to be present at a slaughter, fearing it will scar him; and instead what stays with him is the «almost painstaking» gesture of three butchers «who seemed like surgeons, an ancient craft». The exhibition was divided into three rooms: one with the animals’ bodies, one with the slaughterhouses, and in a third singers performed folk songs. Because, he says, «I wanted death not to be the last word», so that from the body something might come «as a sign of beauty, like song».

Then life sets the same question before him, without filters. In 2012 a couple of friends are expecting a child whom a rare illness condemns to die at birth. This opens a question in him: he wonders «what sense that existence in the womb could have». With the images of that child’s ultrasound scans he builds “Factum est”, twenty-five small canvases forming a two-metre square, in which the whites «shine like stars in the dark». It is there that he understands something that will never leave him: «that child who was not to be born was already a presence, already life». That child, by a miracle, was born.

From that moment his subject is the human being. The cities come, the “Fermo-immagine” series shown at Galleria Rubin in 2016: small figures, often alone, within great architectures. It all begins one afternoon when he sees the late-afternoon light strike the upper part of a late-nineteenth-century building: «the light was so strong and warm» that he stops to capture it. It is then that, on the balcony, he notices an old man turned towards the sun. «What before was merely a place is as if it had taken on meaning»: from then on that building is no longer an illuminated wall, it is a dwelling. The presence of a single person is enough to make the world inhabited.

It is the thread that, work after work, reaches these two canvases. “Circostanze” is born of all these encounters with the human being «who has a form and a place, who lives on relationships and solitude, who has a span of life and who generates because he himself is continually generated». The sleeping bodies on view today at Galleria Rubin are the most recent chapter of a search that does not stop.



Pietro Albetti, Circostanze #5, 2025, oil on canvas, 126 × 162 cm.

Behind every step of his are the masters. He seeks them, he says, «because I need to know that I am not alone». This summer he travelled across Europe to «ask the masters to accompany» his new works, which will also take on the nude. Rembrandt struck him, «the way he looks at the body even when beauty seems to fade»: he would like to learn that gaze, «free from the deception of images», able to love «the time that makes a body ever more true, the keeper of a soul».

There is one thing, finally, on which Albetti does not give ground: art's right to tell a story. Much art, he observes, is afraid to narrate, for fear of «asserting a valid hypothesis about the destiny of man». He feels free. A thought, however just, about everyone's great themes is not enough for him; he seeks «an encounter, a face that loves you and shares your destiny». That is exactly what he asks of painting: not to explain the world, but to make us recognise that every life is unique.

And so, to close, we return to the two bodies from which we set out. The female figure holds a pose that, he recounts, was meant to hold everything a woman carries within her, «her beauty, but also her question about life»; this is why her gaze is turned towards the black that occupies the upper part of the painting, «as if a thought could be read there». It is a detail he loves in Giovanni Bellini: «it is astonishing how he manages to make thought perceptible in his figures».

These are works that do not raise their voice. They ask only to be looked at for a long time, the way one looks at a person sleeping beside us. Today the two “Circostanze” canvases are at Galleria Rubin, in Milan: whoever wishes

may go and stand before them, and remain in that silence so full of life.

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WHO IS PIETRO ALBETTI

Pietro Albetti (Magenta, 1973) lives and works in Abbiategrasso, just outside Milan. He trained at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, with a period of Fine Art study at Loughborough College, in England; since 1999 he has combined painting with teaching. He works in cycles: from the landscapes of the Bassa Milanese to the Navigli, from the slaughterhouse series to *Factum est*, through to the figures of *Città* and *Circostanze*. He has exhibited, among other places, at the Milan Triennale, has received the Combat Prize and is among the «Eccellenti Pittori» chosen by Camillo Langone. He has collaborated with Galleria Rubin since 2015.