

An abstract painting with a complex, layered composition. The background is a deep purple. In the upper center, there's a colorful, almost abstract figure or structure in shades of blue, green, and yellow. Below this, a large, textured, golden-brown shape dominates the right side. On the left, there are vertical bands of red and dark blue. The overall effect is one of depth and texture, with various colors and forms overlapping and blending together.

Valentina Puccioni

Gian Berto Vanni
Painting Itineraries



Gian Berto Vanni was born in Rome in 1927. He lived and worked in Rome, Amsterdam, Paris, and New York. His imagery developed through multiple experiences to become a complex environment of stratified worlds.

This study by Valentina Puccioni explores both the experiences that were instrumental in these developments and the progression of the artwork that resulted from them.

Gian Berto Vanni
Painting Itineraries

by Valentina Puccioni



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English translation by Margareth Shore

NOTICE

Whenever the title of an artwork is mentioned in the text, the general catalog number of Vanni's work is quoted in the side note column, unless an illustration is present on that same page. In that case the catalog number follows the caption. The preceding letter "GV" in the catalog number stands for the painting section and the letter "GVD" introduce the graphic work. The reference in the note is aligned with the text whenever possible, otherwise is countersigned by an asterisk.

to my father

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Introduction

I saw Gian Berto Vanni's work for the first time some years ago, when I was beginning my studies in art history. At the time, my attraction for the world he had created in his canvases was more instinctive than reasoned, since I still lacked the foundation for a critical and historical interpretation. Later, as my studies progressed and through direct and frequent contact with Vanni's work, I became more aware of the complex and multiform nature of those intriguing forms. This led me to research their roots, and to analyze how they had developed, as I delved into his influences from a historical and social context.

Throughout my research, Vanni was an ever-present interlocutor, willing to talk about the themes I was addressing, in all their intellectual and practical aspects. In this case, direct contact with an artist, which a study of contemporary art almost always makes possible, took on extraordinary resonance. Accessibility to information enabled me to meticulously reconstruct experiences and investigations from Vanni's past and present. Periods that, for my generation, have a historiography dimension (Vanni was born in 1927 and is nearly forty years my senior), took on an immediacy that normally would characterize a critical exercise. Moreover an extremely dynamic situation developed, where I had the opportunity to work with the artist, to re-examine materials precisely as they were being brought to light. Vanni, in turn, was able to look back on past investigations with the

benefit of experience gleaned over time. Distant events and situations thus acquired renewed value, charged with new meaning that even he had overlooked. Thus I found myself in the position of having access to extremely personal experiences that initially might seem marginal, but which proved to be crucial to the artist's creative choices.

What emerged was a complex personality who has pursued an anomalous path, both in his training and in his development as an artist. But he is above all a spirit guided by a lively curiosity, always employed to further an imaginative inventiveness that has brought to bear on the work a wide-range of influences, from music, to theater, to literature. And this is precisely where the fascination of Vanni's research lies: in his capacity for renewal through a continuous questioning of certainties and a systematic reworking of new experiences, without ever crystallizing in any one area. In fact, his artistic path has been characterized by a solitary position that has led him to articulate his own vision, independent from art movements in formation.

The historiography of contemporary art is, for the most part, presented as a linear succession of movements articulated through tendencies and currents. This approach often fails to take into account personal and independent investigations that don't fit into schemes, resulting in a consistent neglect of artistic expression represented by alternative responses to the problems raised by contemporary society. For this reason I found it particularly interesting to follow the research of an artist whose work has developed outside the set path laid down by the movements that have characterized the art scene of the past fifty years. However, while Vanni's emphasis has been on his own creative development, he has not lacked a relationship with other esthetic and conceptual propositions. If he has sometimes ignored certain manifestations he considered artificial, he has never done so out of ignorance. His expression continually reflects external forces, in terms of either his rejection of or his attraction to them. His reaction, dictated by the classical matrix of his education, is never immediate or instinctive, but

rather is determined by an intellectual mediation that weighs new approaches in relationship to pre-existing cultural notions. In this way Vanni metabolizes greatly disparate experiences, to then integrate them, even in the form of eclectic contradictions within his complex cosmogony.

This outsider's view of currents and movements does not imply an absence of dialectical encounter with other artists, but it is significant that they too have been more interested in their individual paths than in-group identity.

Getting to know many of Vanni's artist friends and listening to their thoughts and comments has greatly enriched my experience. On these occasions I have been able to observe how artists who have chosen a path of autonomous research seem to have particular respect for their diversity of solutions rather their similarities. Thus it has become clearer to me how important it is to record the experience of artists who have pursued solutions that represent alternatives to mainstream contemporary art, and to document how their creative work is more vital than it might appear. For all these reasons my research took place for the most part outside books, which served above all as a constant point of comparison, to verify how the material I was collecting might interact with the reality of that time.

This investigation utilizes a strong biographical component in order to illustrate various aspects that lie outside the strictly pictorial context, but which have played a defining role in the formation of Vanni's figurative world. First of all there is the artist's passion for experimentation, understood in the sense of a scientific investigation. This can be seen as his inheritance from his parasitologist father, a legacy that also nurtured an interest in in-depth analysis beyond superficial appearances, which in turn encouraged an interest in variety and diversity. Then there is an obvious interest in philosophy, which developed into a clear understanding of the classical, in other words a predilection for formal language as an approach for dealing with the subject. I mean this in the literary sense, to

describe a form of expression dominated by the intellect rather than by instinct. Moreover Vanni's decision to spend long periods of time in many different countries has constituted a continuous source of visual and cultural stimulation, resulting in an alternation of distinct and sometimes very different pictorial languages, until the late '60s. In reality, Vanni's path has delineated an approach that is the keystone to his poetics: an ambiguity of interpretation expressed through spatial temporal, formal and iconological contradictions. For him, these represent a reflection of real life, characterized by "... realities that are extremely different from each other and which relate to different and yet equally valid systems of logic." His canvases express this multiplicity, in their macroscopic and microscopic elements, which are plumbed, dissected and reassembled into metamorphic structures. Memory is the point of decantation, where past and present coexist and intermingle, making all sorts of formulations possible. From the lagoons of Holland to Cycladic whitewashed walls, to cells examined under the microscope, the aspects of reality that have interested and continue to interest Vanni are innumerable.

We shall see how an increasingly coherent co-mingling of different spatialities determined by different languages, within a single canvas, progressively evolves, beginning in the '70s, in a *systematic eclecticism*. For Vanni, this does not represent the result of uncertainty about his motives, but rather is the expression of a poetic dialectic that draws strength from a comparison of opposites.

My research places particular attention on pictorial technique. For Vanni this represents an essential requisite for artistic formulation. With Albers and Cagli he shares the idea that a profound awareness of techniques is fundamental for a painter and can stimulate creativity – a basic theme for his painting classes at Cooper Union in New York. For this reason I also make reference to Vanni's interests in extra-pictorial experimentation, such as photography and computers, or his collaboration on architectural projects.

But a developed formal program and technical mastery do not play leading roles in Vanni's work. Instead they must function as means, to balance the two components that are fundamental to his creativity: intellect and instinct. There are artists for whom the creation of the work of art is a physiological need, dictated by the necessity to externalize an internal impulse that can be defined as instinctive. For them, working is a necessity, even from a physical standpoint, and their expression comes about as if it were independent from reasoning. Other artists, on the contrary, arrive at the creation of the work of art as a tangible demonstration of a pre-existing concept to which the work of art gives form. In Vanni's creative process, the two aspects coexist. For him, the instinctive aspect polarizes assimilated experiences on the canvas, experiences that intellect and technique must mediate and transform, producing one or multiple syntheses. In this process he makes use of all the knowledge he has accumulated over his creative journey, expressing the complexity that characterizes and envelops the world in which we live.

(1) He himself had been born into a scientific environment; his father, Giuseppe Vanni, was a physicist who contributed to early radio research and invented, among other things, the goniometric antenna.

(2) Her father, Alberto Pericoli, owned a construction company in Paris and Switzerland. Augusto Pericoli, her brother, lived most of his life in Paris, where he was an executive for *Wagon Lits - Cook Company* and commissioned the firm advertising posters from Cassandre.

Gian Berto Vanni was born in Rome in 1927 and raised in a scientific and intellectual atmosphere that centered on the charismatic figure of his father, Vittorio Vanni, a well-known professor of parasitology at the University of Rome and a family doctor to the city's high society.¹ His mother, Marcella Pericoli Vanni, came from an old and traditional Roman family, conservative but anti-fascist, which had many contacts abroad, principally with Paris.² Vanni's father had a decisive influence on his education. He was a brilliant intellectual who kept company with the most significant figures in Rome's cultural world between the two world wars; in addition to medicine, he had a strong interest in art, music and literature.

The elder Vanni was firmly convinced that even if a child could not grasp the complex significance of certain experiences, these would remain imbedded in his mind, to return later, developing the Humanist culture that he felt represented the crucial basis for all intellectual enterprise. Vanni's early disparate experiences – from explorations of archaeological sites to visits to his grandfather's laboratory – would prove fundamental to his inquisitive curiosity. Frequent visits to the parasitology institute directed by his father unequivocally contributed to the development of his visual imagination. He spent hours observing microscopic cells and various organisms on slides, their forms sometimes colorfully brought out by

reagents. He was fascinated by this world of forms in growth or regression that seemed to be in continuous metamorphosis, constant flux. And then he would see these same fantastical forms in the large, highly detailed panels his father drew for his courses and publications. Thus it was natural for him to link discovery and drawing as a way of studying and understanding the world. Indeed these experiences that accumulated in the child's, and later the adolescent's mind would later be reconfigured as decontextualized images in the figurative world of his mature works.

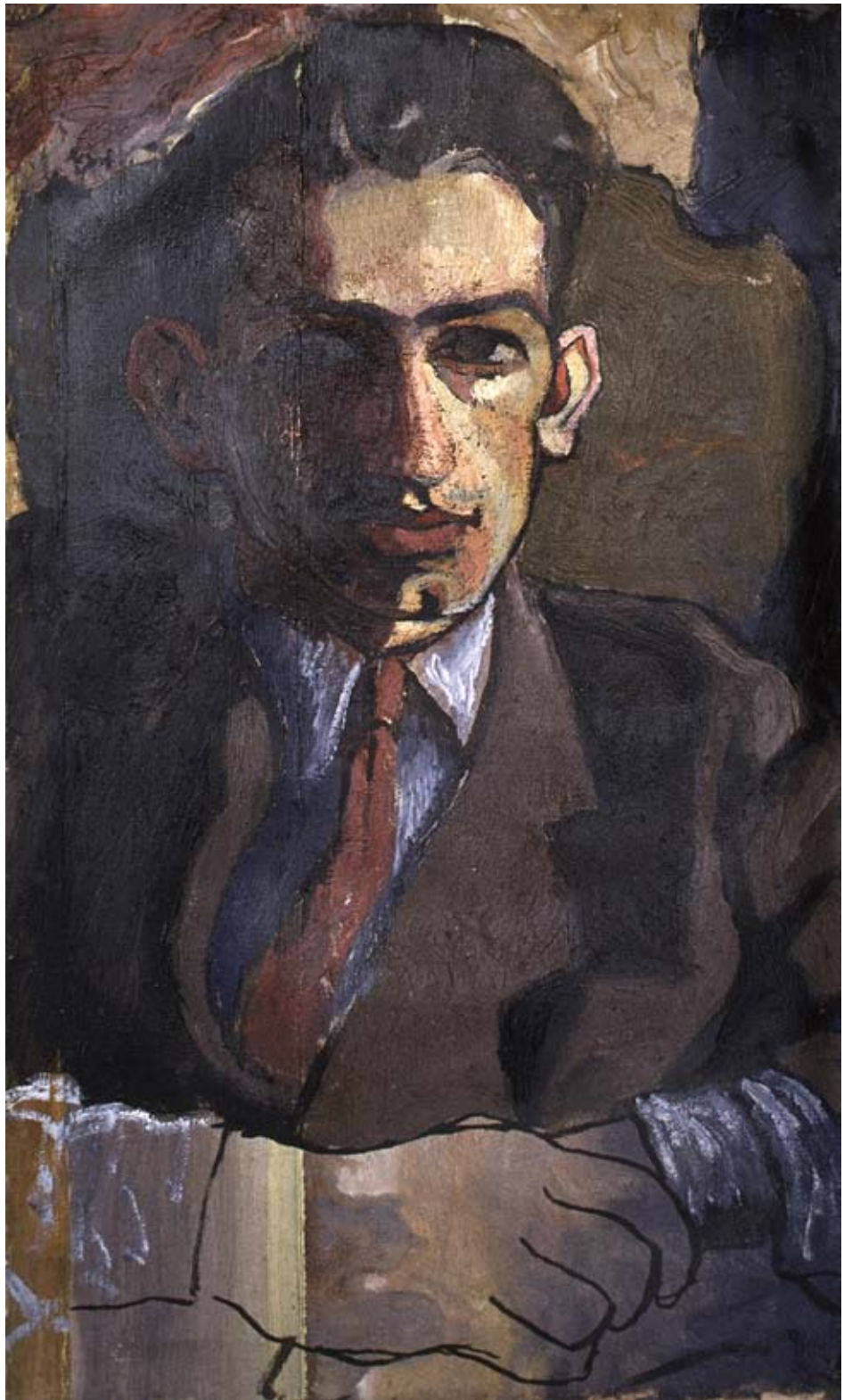
Vanni's interest in art, particularly painting, came from his father's own passion for the subject. Steeped in the classical tradition, the elder Vanni encouraged his son to copy drawings by the great Renaissance masters, working directly from originals in the Galleria Corsini. But the father's knowledge of Renaissance art was coupled with a complete lack of understanding for contemporary art, an attitude shared almost unanimously by upper class Roman society of the time. Vanni's first attempts at painting emerged in this environment, and while his early influences were conservative in comparison to contemporary developments in Europe, they fit within an academic context that constituted a valuable apprenticeship. As a result, he later would be able to undertake investigations of his own, in any direction, with significant mastery and an awareness of his own expressive capacities.

In 1943 Vanni enrolled in rigorously academic drawing and painting courses at the Villa Strohl-Fern. His technical paradigms, however, remained the Renaissance models he had been shown by his father. This led him to experiment with less commonly used techniques, such as egg tempera and oil painting in the Venetian tradition, based on the use of glazes and transparent shadows.

With the end of the war, new cultural experiences led Vanni to reconsider the traditional manner he had been pursuing. During this period he formed a friendship with Alberto Bragaglia,³ whose ideas would be decisive in his development.

(3) Born in 1896, Alberto Bragaglia was an important Futurist painter, writer, and theorist. He is the author of a treaty on abstract art titled *Policromia Spaziale Astratta*, 1916.

Il figlio di Bragaglia, oil on canvas, 19.7 x 11.8 inches, 1948, collection of the artist (GV4828).



The youngest of the Bragaglia brothers,⁴ Alberto has been one of the protagonists of the early Italian Futurism. He was a professor of philosophy at the Liceo Giulio Cesare, where Vanni had studied. Bragaglia exposed Vanni to the artistic and social movement of Futurism as well as to abstract art. They discussed at length the two strands of abstraction that Bragaglia considered most important: one rooted in nature, the other based on pure geometry. Although Vanni was only beginning to make his way as an artist, Bragaglia spoke to him as an equal, and gave Vanni first-hand experience of the developments in Futurism, explaining how certain ideas were conceived, freeing them from the inaccessible confines of history. He also advised Vanni to remain wary of labels, fashions, and pre-established loyalties, which might result in an artist's losing sight of his own creativity, and he urged him to resist "ever being assimilated into and grouped with others."⁵ The frequent meetings with Bragaglia gave Vanni an increased curiosity towards exploring other means of artistic expression.⁶

While Bragaglia was exposing him to Futurist theories, Vanni had the opportunity to admire and study, first hand, some of the major Futurist artworks at the Marinetti residence, as he was a very good friend of the writer's daughters.

Another significant influence came from the circle of musicians, painters and literary figures that he met at the house of composer Alfredo Casella, who was as well one of the few collectors of contemporary art in Rome at that time.⁷ There he found a very lively cultural atmosphere, open to other European influences, in contrast to the dominant provincial culture in Rome. He also followed the lectures on music given by composer and musicologist Roman Vlad, which gave Vanni a whole new dimension about art interpretation, and cemented an interest that will remain central to his creation.

An awareness of the logic of abstract structures in philosophy and music stimulated Vanni to search for new directions in figuration and helped him to move beyond the limitations of traditional representation. This extension of his horizons was

(4) Alberto had several brothers that were well known figures of Italian art, theater, and cinema, The most famous was Anton Giulio, a Futurist theorist, photographer, film and theater director, He founded an avant garde magazine, a theater company, and an art gallery, the Casa d'arte Bragaglia in 1918. It showed avant garde artists such as Balla, Depero, De Chirico, Boccioni, Klimt and Kandinsky.

(5) Armando Verdiglione, *Il futurismo di Alberto Bragaglia in Alberto Bragaglia. Il futurismo europeo*, ed. Fabiola Giancotti, Spirali/Vel, Milan 1997, p. 15.

(6) A couple of years later, in 1948, he designed sets for two theater productions, *Asmodée* by François Mauriac, directed by Valerio Zurlini, and *Il nostro bel castello*, written and directed by Vittorio Sermonti. The interest stimulated by Bragaglia in photography, would emerge much later, when he would exploit this means to freeze forms that, in their movement, hide other forms that were revealed by the release of the shutter.

(7) For more information about Casella and other Roman collectors, see *Gli artisti, le gallerie, le occasioni* by M. Fagiolo dell' Arco and *Avanguardia musicale e Scuola Romana* by Alessio Vlad, in *Sotto le stelle del '44*, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, December 16, 1994 – February 28, 1995, Zefiro, Follonica (GR) 1994, pp. 63-141 and 203-217.



Paesaggio - Quirinale, emulsion on panel, 13.8 x 23.2 inches, 1948, collection of the artist (GV4808).

(8) Unlike the path chosen by his friends and schoolmates Dorazio, Manisco, Perilli and Guerrini who, beginning with their time together at the Liceo Giulio Cesare, organized exhibitions together.

(9) The gallery was founded by Irene Brin and Gasparo del Corso in 1944, with the backing of Federico Valli, who became personally involved beginning in 1946, when the two founding partners opened the Galleria dell'Obelisco.

(10) *Capri II* (GV4816), *Capri III* (GV4817), *Capri IV* (GV4818), *Capri V* (GV4819).

a long and arduous intellectual process that avoided simple polemics of rejection. The search for an alternative and personal language entailed experimentation in the many different styles that interested him, and the result was a path that would remain individual and solitary, unaffiliated with any one group.⁸

He first showed an interest in the work of the practitioners of the Roman School, especially Mafai and Scipione, and he painted a series of small canvases that bear witness to the effort of his research and his uncertainty about his direction. These early works were exhibited in a solo show at the Galleria Margherita⁹ in Rome, in June 1948. An introductory essay by Valerio Mariani accompanied the exhibition. "His studies of Capri,¹⁰ rather than pushing toward the *pleasurable*, or the documentary, are concentrated on the search for a palette of a few impastos; and in his pictorial rendering in broad applications he already shows individuality and promise. Is it not perhaps symptomatic that, amid that orgy of color of the enchanted island, he had gone searching in the anfractuosities of the rocks, choosing four almost African shrubs and those large stones that seem like sea



Capri IV, oil on board, 9.8x7.5 inches, 1948, collection of the artist.

(11) Valerio Mariani, *La fiera letteraria*, June 13, 1948. This same weekly frequently published Vanni's drawings.

(12) Klee's formal work, art theory writings, as well as his preference to work in isolation from his peers, interpreting new art trends in his own way, all will have a major influence throughout Vanni's artistic career. Clearly showing in Vanni's earlier works, Klee's inventive methods and technique will stay fundamental at all times in Vanni's creativity. In fact, Vanni can be considered one of the very few artists of his generation, who actively absorbed Klee's teaching beyond a superficial formal reference.

At this exhibition he was also struck by the quality of the installation, designed by Carlo Scarpa.

monsters, drawing from them a lesson of pictorial severity?"¹¹ Despite this gratifying experience, Vanni's need to broaden his horizons became increasingly accentuated; his desire to see firsthand the paintings of the great contemporary masters became impelling after he visited the Klee exhibition at the '48 Venice Biennale.¹² He decided to abandon his architecture studies and left Rome for Paris, where he could experience, both visually and empirically, the history of art of the past fifty years. Life in Paris was in itself a discovery, with its museums filled

with modern art, the many avant-garde galleries, and simply the streets and cafes, animated by a cosmopolitan world of artists and intellectuals. The art world was dominated by the presence of the historic masters, Picasso, Braque, Léger, Matisse and Chagall, who continued to be a point of reference for new developments. Surrealism was ever present, and there was still active interest in the figurative world of Pierre Bonnard and Jacques Villon.¹³

(13) Villon would exercise a clear influence on Vanni particularly after his studies with Albers, who admired Villon's talents as a colorist.

Vanni lived each day in a state of near-rapture, noting down all his experiences in his diary: "Turning at an intersection in one direction rather than in another has all the excitement of an adventure – what wonderful things one discovers." He visited the Gischia and Singier exhibition at the Galerie Billiet-Caputo and the Mirò exhibition at the Galerie Maeght, noting: "Gischia's work is beautiful, with simple forms; Singier's work has a refined sense of materials; Mirò - paintings and ceramics – both made of particular material: stains of color and graphic solutions, frontal, two-dimensional composition."¹⁴ He met Sartre and Camus at the Café Flore, and they asked him about the situation in Italy. He reconnected with Carlo Levi, who had been introduced to him by the painter Corrado Cagli in Rome.

(14) Personal diary of Gian Berto Vanni (1948).

His notes reveal his enthusiasm and a desire to know learn and experiment. The result of this sojourn can be seen not so much in the many notebooks that he filled with drawings as in his emancipation from an exclusively *Italian* way of working. His contact with international circles in Paris, where the coexistence of artistic and cultural differences contributed to a continuous enrichment, would prove liberating. His gradual coming into possession of his own abilities confirmed to him the need to follow a path that was not necessarily based on a specific national tradition. From this point on, Vanni no longer felt tied to one particular cultural situation. In his diary he noted: "...the division of borders is the greatest obstacle to mental freedom for any artist."¹⁵ In Paris he became convinced of the futility of the concept of nationality and of the great importance for him

(15) Ibid.

to confront and exchange his own cultural baggage with that of others. He found support, particularly from Léon Gischia, for his view that his rejection of the academy was not incompatible with his interest in tradition. He admired Gischia's canvases and the way the artist "...did not need to confuse tradition and academicism. Academicism is a crystallized tradition, that is something dead, while true tradition is something living and thus in a state of perpetual becoming." Tradition consists not "in subjugation to forms that have once had their reason for being but rather in the desire to rediscover and perpetuate the spirit that inspired them."¹⁶

The group of artists that Gischia was identified with, the *Jeunes peintres de tradition française*,¹⁷ were of particular interest to Vanni. A short time before they had met with considerable success and were much more important than might be apparent today, and they seemed to offer alternatives that were as vibrant and feasible as some that later received more recognition. Vanni frequented the Galerie Billiet-Caputo and the Galerie de France,¹⁸ where he saw works by the principal *Jeunes peintres* artists who, despite the movement's dissolution in '47, individually forged ahead with their investigations. Amid an explosion of figurative possibilities that were opening up before him,¹⁹ in a Paris where the work of Surrealists, rigorous geometric abstractionists, and the first Abstract Expressionists all coexisted, Vanni recognized the intention on the part of the *Jeunes peintres* to maintain contact with tradition and nature, while clearly moving toward non-representation.

Vanni's affinity for the ideas of Gischia, Bazaine, Manessier, and Lapique is much more important than the occasional stylistic similarities that one can find in his work from this period. It is interesting to mention some concepts that these artists were proposing at the time, and which also resonated in Vanni's subsequent work. A few years later, the critic Bernard Dorival quotes Bazaine who, having been called up to fight, was spending his time studying and drawing from nature, maintaining that it was the painter's task "to capture and

(16) *Les jeunes peintres de tradition française* by Sarah Wilson, in *Paris-Paris 1937-1957*, Centre Georges Pompidou-Gallimard, Paris 1992, p. 172 (reprint of Léon Gischia, in *Les problèmes de la peinture*, Paris, Confluences, 1945, pp. 137-147.

(17) The principal members were: Bazaine, Estève, Gischia, Lapique, Pignon, and the younger artists Le Moal, Manessier, Robin, and Singier.

(18) The two galleries exhibited the same types of art and, indeed, became one gallery in '51.

(19) In addition to exhibitions at the Galerie de France and Billiet-Caputo, Vanni recalls other shows from this period: Hans Hofmann, Hartung, Schneider, Soulages, Kandinsky, Georges Mathieu, and Max Ernst.

Testa, oil on panel, 19.3 x 17.7 inches, 1949, collection of the artist (GV4916).



(20) Bernard Dorival, *Les peintres du XX siècle*, Vol. II, Editions Pierre Tisné, Paris 1957, p. 84.

(21) Marcel Brion, *Art abstrait*, Editions Albin Michel, Paris 1956, p. 253 (reprint of Jean Bazaine in *Notes sur la peinture d'aujourd'hui*, Paris 1948).

translate its secret and fundamental rhythms...to learn *the interior geometry of forms* which he admitted he was stimulated by *more than by their appearance*.”²⁰ According to Bazaine: “The object must disappear as an object to justify itself as form.”²¹ This approach freed Vanni from the problematic choice of abstraction versus figuration. While he was solidly oriented toward non-representational art, he didn’t see the elimination of figurative inspiration as an ultimate goal. In fact, even during the period where his works seem furthest removed from nature, during the second half of the ‘50s, he never abandoned nature as a structural point of reference.

Like many artists at this time, Vanni had to face the difficulties arising from the influence of the creative world of Picasso, who



Chitarra, egg tempera on canvas, 23.6 x 17.7 inches, 1949, collection of the artist (GV4922).

“...seemed to have said everything that there was to say.”²² The so-called *jeunes peintres* interested him in the way they were able to integrate Cubism and Post-impressionism. What “...seemed like an impossible opposition, Bonnard, Picasso, for example, was discovered to be complementary.”²³ The way Bonnard’s color became movement would be particularly significant for Vanni, and something to which he would return.

During the next four years, which constitute the fundamental

(22) Valentina Puccioni, Interview with Gian Berto Vanni, New York, October 2000.

(23) Bernard Dorival, *Les peintres du XX siècle*, Vol. II, Editions Pierre Tisné, Paris 1957, p. 81.



Maria Stella, egg tempera on panel,
19.7 x 19.7 inches, 1949, collection
of the artist (GV4926).

period of his development as an artist, Vanni continued to alternate theoretical study with practical experimentation. Indeed, everything he had acquired from his dialogues with other artists and from frequenting exhibitions in Paris, would be elaborated during long periods spent drawing and painting from life. This was particularly true in Holland,²⁴ where he lived from November '49 to July '50, thanks to a fellowship he received from the Dutch government, and where he would frequently return, to put to the test, once again, the investigations he was carrying out in his studio in Paris.

In Holland he met German Neo-plasticist painter Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart.²⁵ His critiques of Vanni's paintings and drawings were an important influence in his artistic development toward abstraction. Vordemberge-Gildewart insisted on the importance of using just one simple line to define the subject. This led Vanni to unexpected consequences: he executed a series of works utilizing four lines of different colors, to describe the same form in a series of drawings of horses. Despite the apparent contradiction with the master's teachings, this work did develop from his ideas, for these lines express not the uncertainty of the drawing, but variations where each line represents a different aspect of the reality portrayed.

Another important encounter was meeting Corinna Van Schendel, and establishing a friendship that continued until her demise in 1985. She was the daughter of the well-known Dutch writer, Arthur Van Schendel, and sister of the director of the Rijksmuseum. The year before the Rijksmuseum had restored Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, and Vanni was invited to see the results. He was able to add immeasurably to his pictorial knowledge, learning from the museum restorers about the techniques employed by the Dutch masters, particularly in the area of varnishes and glazes.

Studying at the Stedelijk Museum²⁶ allowed Vanni to compare his pictorial explorations with those of artists who had already addressed these issues. In particular he studied the direction

(24) In Holland Vanni had the opportunity to meet many people in the thriving art world through numerous letters of introduction given to him by Benedetta Marinetti, wife of the founder of the Futurist movement.

(25) Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart was one of the first painters to work with an abstract style throughout his career. In 1924 he formed the abstract art group Gruppe K in Hanover with Hans Nitzschke. In 1925 he became a member of De Stijl. In 1937 the Nazi regime exposed his works in the infamous Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich and he was forced to leave Germany for the Netherlands.

(26) The director of the museum, Willem Sandberg, gave Vanni the use of a room where he could bring an artwork from the museum to study it at his leisure.



Vinkeveense Plassen, oil on canvas, 13.7 x 39.4 inches, 1950, lost (GV5024).

(27) At the time the Stedelijk Museum housed all the Van Gogh artworks that later went to the Van Gogh Museum.

GV5025

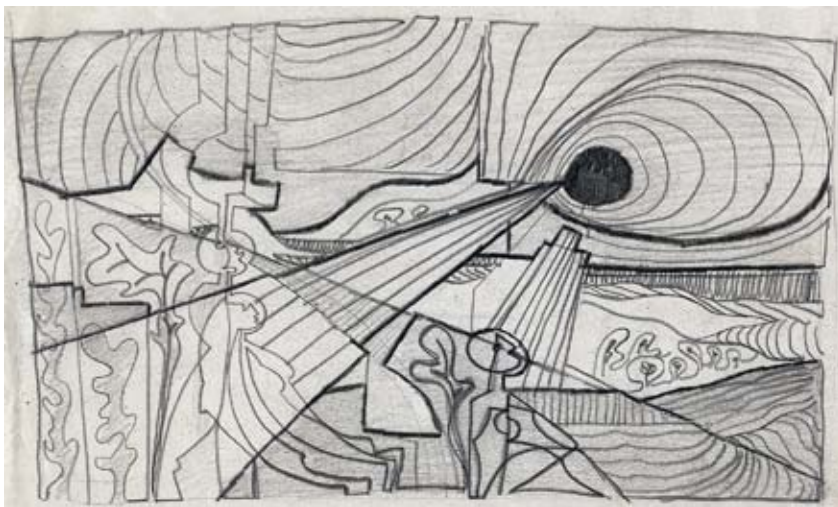
(28) Particularly Lanfranco Virgili, who later would work on the design for the Venice hospital.

of the brushstrokes in Van Gogh's landscapes,²⁷ in relationship to the orientation of the wind on the tall grasses, and the intensity of color in Odilon Redon's canvases. Through his observations of Melanesian art at the Tropische Museum, he rediscovered the work of Klee, an artist for whom he would always have a strong affinity. He was especially interested in the way Klee's attention alternates between the whole and the detail. Direct observation of the work of others was followed by experimentation in his own work. In his studies from life, executed in the Dutch countryside, particularly in Vinkeveense Plassen, Vanni achieved what he considers his first truly personal works. In *Vinkeveense Plassen* and *Vinkeveen notte* he merges his earlier experiences with the influences of his studies in Holland, resulting in a synthesis all his own.

Vanni returned to Paris, where he became close to a group of young architects in the circle of Le Corbusier.²⁸ César was the group's indefatigable center of energy; older than the others, he was then known more for his pranks in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighborhood where they all lived. His talents as a sculptor would emerge later. Vanni participated in this playful atmosphere, *la vie de bohème*, and he painted frenetically. But these also were difficult years from an economic standpoint. One typical diary passage reads: "26 December '50 – I haven't eaten and will skip it tonight as well. I have no more canvases



Study for "Eclisse" I, ink on board, 10.5 x 14.5 inches, 1951, collection of the artist (GVD5104).



Study for "Eclisse" II, pencil on paper, 6 x 10 inches, 1951, collection of the artist (GVD5105).

and I don't know how I will get some."²⁹ After another day of complete fasting, he resolved the problem: "28 December '50 – Destroyed the painting of the Dutchman and prepared to paint over it." But two days later: "Having bought gas for the stove, I am left with two hundred Francs.³⁰ I am afraid that soon I will have to buy some white, or else expel it from my palette. But then I would have to work in glazes, and I don't have any linseed oil. The stove is working! Beginning today I am cooking at home."

(29) Personal diary of Gian Berto Vanni (1950-1952).

(30) Old Francs, which after the currency conversion would be equal to two New Francs.



Eclisse III, oil on canvas, 35 x 47.5 inches, 1951, lost (GV5105).

The paintings from this period began to reveal a more personal direction, with attempts to represent space through a structuring prismatic grid. Traces of this can be seen in *Eclisse III / Eclipse III*, in his preparatory studies (*Study for "Eclipse" I*, *Study for "Eclipse" II*), and in numerous drawings from the period. Picasso's influence was still evident, and Vanni sensed the danger of this presence and worked to free himself from it. At the same time he was making strides with another theme, the canvas divided up into squares, where each element has its own structure. This initially emerged from Vanni's observation of life in the hotel across the way, where he saw the windows as illustrations of the life within the various rooms. "The entire hotel is a vertical stage divided into squares, and the

characters are unaware of the total view; it is organized into a large painting, the parts of which play discordant yet harmonic roles of a shared life."³¹

Previously he frequently had utilized the subject of the window to import external elements into a canvas, but here the theme was different: simultaneity of many different squares that, however discordant, could be joined by an external logic. Curiously he did not further develop the theme at the time, but in the mid-'60s it would become one of the fundamental themes in his work.

He continued on in Paris for another year, painting, socializing, and planning new projects. His financial problems were alleviated periodically, when he sold drawings or did illustrations for magazines. From time to time his friend Giulio Gianini,³² brought him to Italy to work as a photography assistant and color consultant for documentaries on art and architecture.³³ One on French Gothic miniatures made a particular impression on Vanni. Gianini had modified the movie camera in order to be able to enlarge the miniatures so that their most minute details could be explored. This brought Vanni back to the infinitely small world he had observed years earlier, under the microscope. But seen in an art context, this would have tremendous importance for his development as a painter. Working on this documentary led to another significant discovery. Through his acquaintance with French Gothic miniatures, Vanni became aware of the expressive possibilities of forms that were considered reductively decorative. He studied the background patterns in complementary relationship to the main figure, which was elaborated in geometric forms and whose expressive nature was assured by the non-mechanical facture. From this point on, his interest extended to all forms of pre-classical art, where ornamental geometries are executed freehand.

In May '51 Vanni returned to Holland, where he rented a cabin on a small lake in the lowland's *polder*.³⁴ The landscape,

(31) Personal diary of Gian Berto Vanni (1950-1952).

(32) Gianini, a childhood friend of Vanni's, began his film career as a cameraman, but soon specialized in making art documentaries. He is well known for his animated drawings, created with Emanuele Luzzati, which brought him two Oscar nominations, and his international achievements include grand prize at the Animation Festival in Annecy.

(33) The documentaries were directed by Valerio Zurlini, Michele Gandin, Francesco Maselli, Guido Guerrasio, and others.

(34) The polders are alluvial and lakeside lands, located beneath sea level, reclaimed through the use of dikes and embankments and then cultivated. They are interspersed by canals and small artificial lakes, creating a landscape where the aquatic element is always present.

Lacustre II, oil on canvas, 28.5 x 28.5 inches, 1951, collection of the artist (GV5119).



characterized by planted fields, reflected in areas of water, suggested geometric grids that modulate the picture plane, as seen in *Lacustre II / Lake waters II*, from 1951. The horizon line, dividing this world that half-sky and half-lake, thus entered Vanni's formal repertory and functioned as a physical and logical support for elements and their reflections. He focuses on elements that are extremely small with respect to the size of the painting, and these polarize the surrounding energy, presaging the theme of the *boundary*, which will be central to the abstractions of the next ten years. Indeed, Vanni continues to grant great expressive weight to this theme, up to his most recent canvases. *Boundary*, here, is understood as *limit*, a point of encounter, where the surrounding spaces serve to underline its importance (*Orizzonti multipli / Multiple horizons*).

The Dutch islands that dotted the lake constituted another element of the Dutch landscape that fed Vanni's imagination. These

GV5118



were made of peat that was cut into large slices by specialized machines. The result was segmented pieces of land, with space left for a series of canals. Thus the landscape was transformed, with a stratification between lake water, strips of land and their reflection in the water. All these elements alternated in parallel bands with measured but continuous rhythms. This phenomenon suggested solutions for the prismatic scansions that Vanni was developing in the spatial concepts for his paintings. (*Erba sul canale / Grass on the Canal, Riflessi II / Reflections II*).

The compositional discoveries achieved through his observations of the Dutch landscape were then transposed to a different mental space. Back in Paris, Vanni studied these same transpositions in relationship to the human figure, which entailed a backward step vis-à-vis the results

Erba sul canale, oil on canvas, 19.7 x 27.6 inches, 1951, collection of the artist (GV5116).

GV5118

GVD5205

GV5206

(35) Only some drawings remain from this period, for the entire group of oil paintings, some twenty in all, were stolen while in storage in Rome.

(36) Albers, after his experience at Black Mountain College, was invited to direct the Department of Art at Yale University. He decided to exercise firm control over the department's direction, and he personally chose the ten students who were admitted to the course each year.

he had obtained in Holland, where some of his work had reached a rigorous coherence. Vanni applied a progression of prismatic transformations to bodies and faces, using grids of parallel vertical lines that, influenced by an external force, gradually became distorted, changing the initial image (*Studio per "Trasformazioni prismatiche" I / Study for "Prismatic transformations" I, Studio per "Trasformazioni prismatiche" II / Study for "Prismatic transformations" II, Trasformazioni prismatiche / Prismatic Transformations*).³⁵

It was this group of works that came to the interest of Josef Albers, who then saw that Vanni was invited to study with him at Yale in 1952.³⁶

Vanni received the Smithmundt fellowship, in addition to a Fulbright that he had been awarded to study in America. In Albers Vanni found a true *Maestro*, whose teachings definitively marked the direction that his work would take from then on. Vanni did not immediately choose abstraction as the visual solution for certain intellectual problems, but he arrived at this point after a long period of analysis, where every stage was experienced intensely. Albers' teachings came at the right

Study for "Trasformazioni prismatiche" II, ink on paper, 7.5 x 9.3 inches, 1952, collection of the artist (GVD5206).



moment, when Vanni was ready to free his compositions from representational bonds. Albers, who felt that a work of art must be conceived as a formulation rather than as *the expression of a feeling*, understood and shared Vanni's need for his research to come forth from an intellectual process. In fact, Albers was not only the great theoretician of painting and color that one sees in his writings; he also had an exceptional capacity to thoroughly probe the potential of a canvas and to suggest the suitable path for its full expression. His courses on color interaction³⁷ and drawing, developed during his Bauhaus years, provided Vanni with new expressive means.

One of the ideas expressed by Albers would have particular impact. Criticizing a painting by a student, he had said: "A painting is like a dance, if you begin with a waltz step you must continue that way through the entire painting." Vanni pondered this phrase at length, but it stimulated him in the opposite direction. Indeed this is when he began to take an interest in changes of rhythm within a canvas, while still understanding the need for consistency expressed by Albers. But Vanni realized that contradiction and interruption, if inserted within a system aware of contradiction and interruption, themselves produce that coherent continuity to which Albers alluded.

Albers invited to his classes painters of opposite leanings, such as Ad Reinhardt, to counter-balance his own ideas, and he encouraged students to take courses in other departments, convinced of the importance of the integration of different disciplines. This was a particularly felicitous time at Yale. Louis Kahn directed the School of Architecture, where Vanni took courses taught by Frederick Kiesler and Richard Buckminster Fuller.

Vanni's friend Walfredo Toscanini, nephew of the famous conductor, also attended the School of Architecture, and every weekend Vanni was invited to the family home in Riverdale.³⁸ Here he met some of the most important figures in the music world, such as Dallapiccola, Horowitz, Horszowski and Cantelli. While Vanni could not always follow the details of

(37) Courses that Vanni would teach in turn at Cooper Union in New York, thirty years later. Despite some personal differences, he feels that even today, the system conceived by Albers for conveying a sense of color remains the best available as a teaching tool.

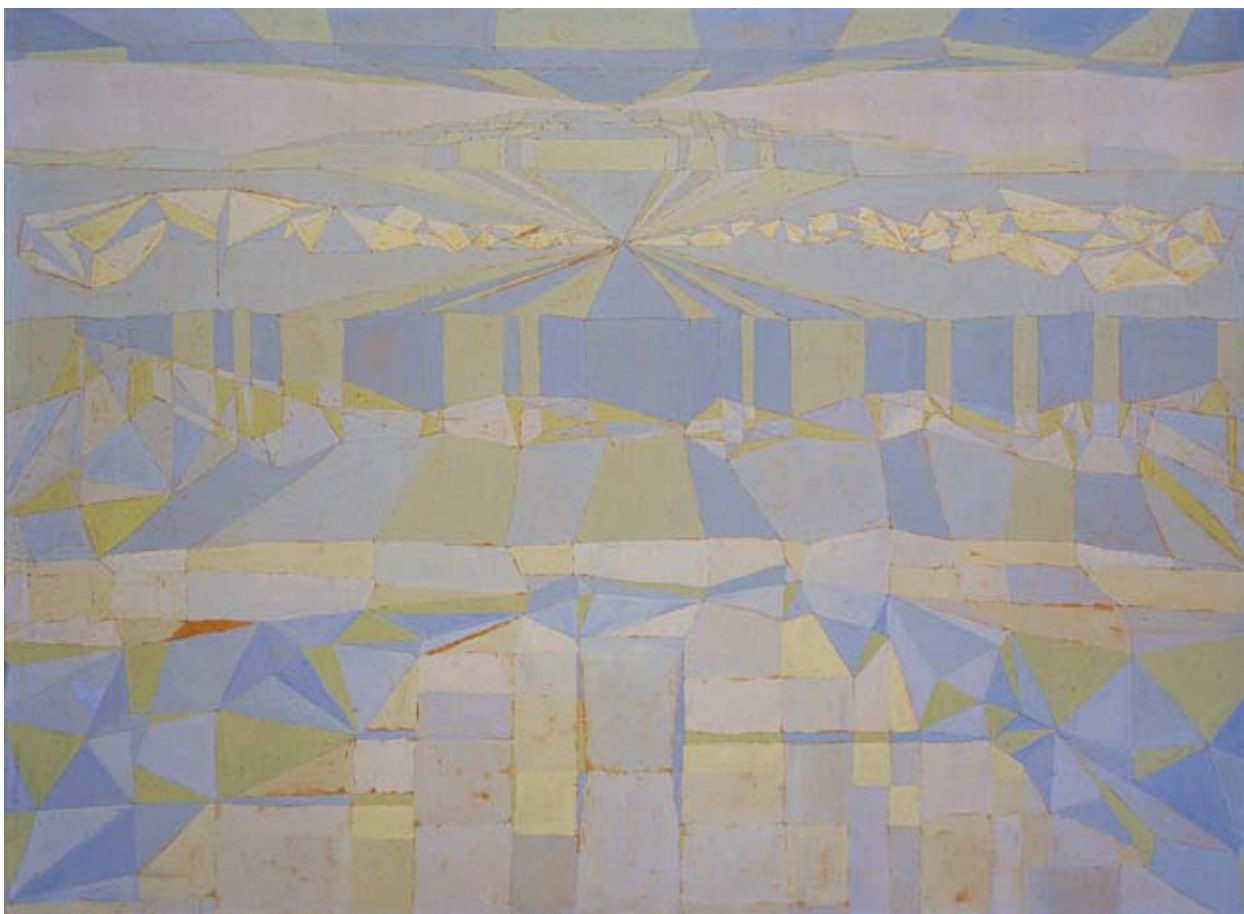
(38) Vanni's acquaintance with the Toscanini family has its roots in his group of musician friends in Rome, particularly Ippolito Pizzetti, son of the composer Ildebrando.



Tramonto, oil on canvas, 28 x 36 inches, 1953, lost (GV5211).

their conversation, some elements paralleled his own interests. Toscanini also invited Vanni to attend his orchestra rehearsals, and he explained the reasons for certain choices and the importance of singling out one instrument or another in the interpretation of a score. It was a lesson that would make a lasting impression and would return in pictorially, when he would give an original form multiple interpretations within the same canvas.

The works Vanni painted during his studies with Albers were not many in number, but each piece bears witness to either the culmination of earlier research or some new discovery. Each of these paintings in turn would become a point of reference



for a series of works developed in subsequent years.

The first canvas Vanni painted at Yale, *Tramonto / Sunset*,³⁹ revived the themes of his Dutch landscapes, in more abstract terms but with representational elements still visible. The second canvas, *Inverno / Winter*, while still a landscape, has the prismatic faceting of the human figure typical of Vanni's second period in Paris, and the tie to the original subject is quite remote. In *Muraglia cinese / Wall of China* the structure is provided by a succession of lines in a Greek key pattern, where one image is the negative of the other,⁴⁰ re-introducing the idea of a non-mechanical geometry. This was the first time that a work by Vanni emerged independently from direct representation, and not from the distortion of representational elements. *Finestra / Window* makes use of similar structures,

Inverno, oil on canvas, 31.9 x 48.8 inches, 1953, collection of the artist (GV5301).

(39) This painting would be the genesis for the *confini / boundaries* series that Vanni painted upon his return to Europe.

(40) The form was suggested by the outlines of buildings against the sky in New York.

Finestra, oil on board, 28.3 x 22.3 inches, 1953, collection of the artist (GV5304).



also introducing the idea of the interruption of rhythm. In all these paintings one senses studies the results of Vanni's study of the scansion of space and the new chromatic sensibility he was developing.

This first period in the United States was also marked by a cross-country road trip, at the end of which Vanni married Frani Gay, in Washington State. Vanni would remain forever astonished by this introduction to life in Middle America.

At the conclusion of an extremely intense year, Vanni had



Muraglia cinese, oil on masonite,
23.5 x 15.5 inches, 1953, collection
of the artist (GV5308).

acquired all the tools he needed to continue his research, now defined in its basic elements. Despite a very tempting offer from Albers to become his assistant for his summer courses in Skowhegan, Vanni decided to return to *his* Paris, to begin *his* pictorial research.

After a year at Yale, Vanni returned to Paris, in autumn '53. In Paris, more than in Rome or Amsterdam, Vanni had found his ideal working environment. His encounter with Albers laid the foundation for his future development, and from that point on his use of color relationships and interactions would be an essential element in his painting.

(1) Giulio Gianini was the director of photography, and Vanni was hired as a color consultant.

Vanni's return to Europe began with his collaboration on a film about Picasso,¹ shot in Vallauris, where Picasso was working, for the most part, on the ceramics produced at the Atelier Madoura. Vanni had the opportunity to spend extended periods of time observing the master at work, and what struck him most was the process of metamorphosis that Picasso orchestrated over the course of his creative labors. Beginning with a linear, graphically pure drawing, scratching into the black background, he transformed it into chiaroscuro. The original forms suggested other subjects or planes and were further developed and transformed: a curve might suggest a point of collision, or an eye, or a new hand. This, in turn, became the basis for the generation of other elements, which progressed again from tones to graphic delineations, until, finally, "...what had begun as a classicizing linear portrait of a beautiful woman, on the surface of a plate, ended up as a sort of pyramidal insect."²

(2) Valentina Puccioni, Interview with Gian Berto Vanni, New York, October 2000.

This was the principal lesson that Vanni took away from his contact with Picasso, and it was one he would develop in his

own painting, specifically in his search for ambiguity: "...every reality hides another one, it too equally plausible, and this another one, and this another yet again, and they all coexist, each introducing doubts about the veracity of the others and thus all true because they exist."³

In the first works executed after his return to Paris, the influence of Albers predominates. These paintings evoke a geometry of floating planes, belonging to cubes and polyhedrons, hovering in space, their intersections producing transparencies without volumetric articulations. An expansive Euclidean space is implied, in front of which the foreground elements hint at the ambiguity of the planes in space (*Spazi I / Spaces I, Spazi II / Spaces II*).

In the works that follow, the geometric figures no longer float freely, but share all sides of their perimeters with bordering figures. These paintings derive directly from and further develop the concept of prismatic space in *Inverno / Winter*, reviving certain elements from his Holland paintings,⁴ purified of the Klee - and Melanesian - inspired symbolic-figurative aspects and integrating the new perception of color acquired at Yale. A grid work of horizontals and verticals is retained from

(3) Valentina Puccioni, Interview with Gian Berto Vanni, New York, October 2000.

GV5405

GV5406

(4) *Erba sul canale / Grass Along the Canal* (GV5116), *Lacustre I / Lake Waters I* (GV5115), *Riflessi II / Reflections II* (GV5121), *Riflessi III / Reflections III* (GV5122), *Riflessi IV / Reflections IV* (GV5123).



Descrizione di una corrente, oil on canvas, 17.7 x 25.6 inches, 1954, Mondragone, private collection (GV5403).

Giuochi d'acqua, oil on canvas,
27.6 x 35.4 inches, 1954, collection
of the artist (GV5409).



GV5408

GV5410

GV5411

GV5416

(5) As in Buckminster Fuller's
geodesic structures and in Klee's
paintings.

the Holland paintings, into which rectangular or triangular elements are inserted, supported by the grid module but, subjected to its tension, modified into prismatic forms. Basically four colors are used, which undergo tonal changes as they move away from the work's epicenter (*Giardino Barocco / Baroque Garden*, *Giuochi d'acqua / Water Games*, *Nascita di una roccia / Birth of a Stone*, *Danza dei cristalli / Dance of the Crystals*). The internal force that creates these distortions is revealed in *Descrizione di una corrente / Description of a Current*, where a network of dots is superimposed upon the prismatic structure, indicating the direction of the subterranean pulsations.

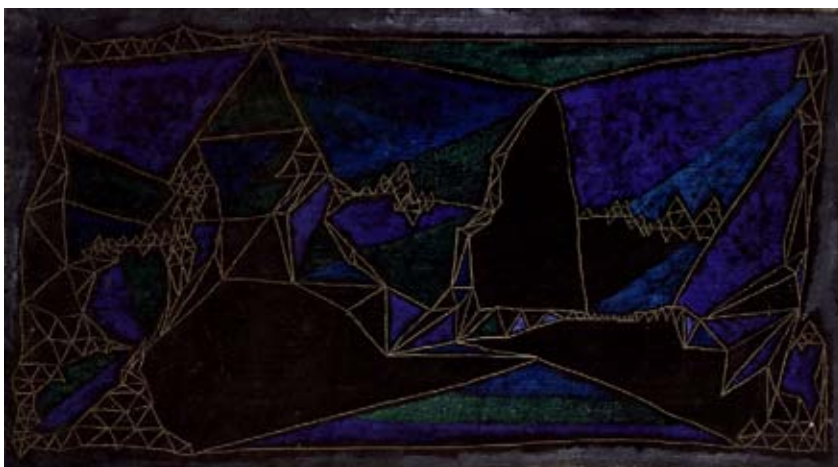
A purely graphic component is introduced with *Spiraglio sulla città / Glimpse on the City*, a painting that remains unique, where the Greek key-design seen in *Muraglia cinese* returns to modulate the surface, making solids and voids interchangeable. A rough stroke, a new element achieved by scratching white lines against the black backgrounds, is used in a new series to emphasize the lines of demarcation between planes. In this manner the planes of the prisms lose their corporeality in favor of their outlines, which become pure lines of tension.⁵



Scalinata nella prateria, oil on canvas, 27.6 x 35.4 inches, 1954, Legnano, Italy, private collection (GV5413).

The graffiti creates geometric constructions similar to those of the fields of color, and while at first the graffiti coexists with the geometric shapes, as in *Scalinata nella prateria / Stairway in the Prairie*, it comes to completely supplant them. The modulated plane no longer engages the canvas in its entirety, but fluctuates against a black background, which in its turn is separated from the frame with a gray area of trim (*Paesaggio graffiti / Graffiti Landscape, Cattedrale sommersa / Submerged Cathedral, Fuga verso due punti /*

GV5418, GV5414



Paesaggio graffiti, oil on canvas, 7 x 12.4 inches, 1954, collection of the artist (GV5417).



Confini, oil on canvas, 23.7 x 37.4 inches, 1955, London, private collection (GV5508).

GV5507*

(6) Corrado Cagli had introduced Vanni to Robert Schneider in 1954. Virgilio Guzzi, in an article about the show, compared Vanni's work to that of Cagli. "He is an *abstract*, and he shows he has thoroughly understood the teachings of Klee and Kandinsky. His taste, which is rather refined, plays with primordialism and geometricism, and it tends toward the representation of a reality of corpuscles and fragments. (...) The artist is subtle, refined. And yet there is something anxious in his sign, which for this reason is animated, musical. (...) This painter is one of those abstractionists who hold technique in the highest regard. For this reason I would group him with Corrado Cagli."

Flight Toward Two Points). The colors are still indicated in the central area of the individual prismatic faceting, in counterpoint to the graphic structures. These explorations are preparatory for the work that immediately follows, where colors return, to completely put in the background the planes proposed by the graffiti signs, and these latter are transformed into slender geometrical structures. In March '55 Vanni had a solo exhibition at the Schneider gallery⁶ in Rome, where he showed the works painted at Yale and those done after his return to Paris, some of which presage his subsequent development, such as *Nebulosa / Nebula** and *Confini / Boundaries*. These re-introduce the arrangement of the spaces of the prismatic-crystalline paintings, but the transitory checkerboard areas are eliminated, leaving only two elements: broad fields of color that represent areas of expanse, separated by the *confine* - embankments made up of a swarming of minute geometries.⁷ While the exhibition at the Schneider gallery reflected a certain stylistic discontinuity, due to the rapid evolution of Vanni's explorations, the reception was very favorable, laying the groundwork for an ongoing relationship with the gallery.

Despite the show's positive outcome, life in Paris remained very difficult from an economic viewpoint, but nonetheless it was a happy and carefree existence. Vanni lived with his wife in a tiny room (three by four meters), on the Boulevard Henri IV, on the Ile Saint Louis, and from here he could look out over the entire city. Imagination compensated for lack of space, and the bed would be transformed into a worktable, and then again into a kitchen work area and a dining table, and then back again. Each completed painting was hung from the Mansard roof, to conserve what little floor space there was. But despite economic restrictions, alleviated now and then by the sale of a work or by doing children's book illustrations, Vanni's enthusiasm dominated daily life. These illustrations were quite successful, and two years in a row they won a prize from the Club des Editeurs. The drawings were Surrealist in direction, with a use of color that harked back to Vanni's studies with Albers. Two years prior, in 1952, Vanni had shown Albers a project,⁸ and this now became the point of departure for *Love*, a book that, for its time, was innovative in terms of composition and aesthetic. The story, simple and reduced to a few lines of text, is expressed via colored pages combined with changing colors, where the narration is developed through line drawing in ink. The tale is punctuated by the relationship that emerges between the colors from page to page. The transition from one page to another doesn't take place by the reader turning the page, but through window-holes that open up in the sheets that, through their size and placement, regulate the quantity of color-subject that is introduced into the composition of the sheet that follows. In the unfolding itinerary from window to window, a secondary, marginal character becomes the principal subject that occupies the entire field. Vanni thus manages to create a spatial-temporal story that is more easily associated with film animation than a printed book. The idea, however, was so novel that when Vanni proposed the book to the same editors who had received two prizes for his illustrations, they turned him down, as they considered the project too audacious.



Above: page 29 of *Love* through which elements of page 33 (above right) appear.

(7) If the compositional structure originally derived from the segmentation of the Dutch *polder*, the boundary revives the theme of the horizon lines in Holland, where sky and lake are separated by the slight but geometrically jagged line of a village.

(8) The original project was for an abstract film where the content focused on rhythm and color rather than form.



(9) In 1965, by two art publishers, Laurent Tisnè in Paris and George Braziller in New York. Braziller would reissue the book in 1998.

(10) The *Prieur-Virgili-Sonolet* studio.

(11) During this period he read two books that were closely connected to his future explorations: Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*.

(12) It wasn't yet perceived as having ceded its position as *art capital* to New York.

Eleven years later it would be published to critical acclaim and selling out in a matter of months.⁹ *Love* represents an example of Vanni's interest in experimentation in any number of creative fields and in the central role that color plays in his solutions. This is also the attitude that informs the projects he developed in collaboration with the architectural studio of his friend Lanfranco Virgili.¹⁰ Vanni, strongly convinced of the validity of shared research between painters and architects, worked on several projects, including the development of color schemes for the façade elevations for a series of apartment buildings in Villejuif, a satellite city on the outskirts of Paris.

This was also a particularly stimulating moment in the Paris art world and a period when he experienced intellectual growth in his personal investigations outside strictly pictorial themes.¹¹ And while Paris was no longer charged with the cultural ferment that had characterized the city in the immediate postwar period, it still remained an important center of artistic life.¹² During the period Vanni had spent at Yale, the dynamic among the various artistic tendencies in the city had changed. *Art informel* clearly came to the forefront with the December '52 exhibition at the Studio Facchetti, entitled *Un Art autre* and accompanied by Michel Tapié's book by the same name. While proponents of Surrealism opposed this new direction, a lively group of geometric abstractionists still coalesced around the Galerie Denise René.

In addition to the usual sectorial loyalties and divisions, there was a more fluid situation among artists who were pursuing interesting directions that reflected a multitude of influences. Among these artists, Zao Wou-ki, Tal-Coat and Vieira da Silva stood out for a non-figurative approach that, nonetheless, was not fully abstract. Vanni followed their work carefully, analyzing their spatial solutions, for which he felt a marked affinity. He also took careful note of both the geometric abstractionists who were developing kinetic solutions and the op artists and saw in their achievements implications for the work he was doing. He also observed the poetics of *art*

informel and appreciated the sensibility he saw, but was not immediately influenced by it, as he was engaged in another direction. But he slowly assimilated various developments that were going on around him, and some years later his paintings would reflect this heterogeneity of styles.

One series of drawings (*Studi per forme galleggianti / Studies for Floating Forms*) are closely related to Vieira da Silva's work. Vanni examines the boundary line as an element in and of itself, articulated in space within a series of quadrangular and perspective elements. The initial motif of the Dutch village becomes a city floating in space, where vectors coupled with small quadrilaterals take off from a denser central body.

Transferring the graphic developments of the drawings to canvas entailed certain important visual changes, tied to the spatial concept proposed by the canvas. The vectors break out from central elements like rays of energy. They then clasp onto the background and pluck away its material, here and there, as if it were a membrane subjected to tension by cables that raise or lower it, modifying its color and texture in certain points. One such example can be seen in the upper left corner of *A mezz'aria / In Mid-Air*.

Vanni soon found this type of figuration too aligned to a naturalistic three-dimensionality, and he abandoned it in search of a purely formal dialectic between the graphic element and the surrounding field. He painted works where a field of the same color covers the entire canvas, and where slender geometric figures lie within, balanced like mobiles suspended in space. The idea of suspension is accentuated by the use of tone colors, which have a vibrating relationship to the chromatic quality of the surrounding field. The latter is sensitized by two superimposed applications of similar colors, where the second is rasped away with a spatula, revealing the underlying color and thus increasing the vibrating tension of the chromatic field. Despite the loss of any direct reference to the landscape, these are works that still use the Euclidean

A mezz'aria, oil on canvas, 25 x 20 inches, 1957, Legnano, Italy, private collection (GV5605).





Frammenti II, oil on canvas, 13.8 x 13.8 inches, 1957, New York, private collection (GV5702).

structure of space, where the chromatic field serves as a background, in front of which the forms stand out.¹³

However Vanni's continued explorations brought the two elements into a dialectic confrontation, resulting in an ambivalence of their relative spatial values. He revived the earlier theme of the boundary, which he had continued to explore in his drawings but had set aside for more than a year in his works on canvas. Thus he returned to a more personal research that, connected directly back to his earlier work, immediately translated into a series of extremely interesting canvases. The first of these still preserve, alongside uniform background colors, prismatic-crystalline segmentations (*Prateria / Prairie* and *Discendendo verso il fiume / Descending Toward the River*), which soon will disappear altogether, while still remaining fundamental to Vanni's new way of structuring space (*Giuochi di spazio / Spatial Games*).

(13) In the paintings created three years later, the small forms, now organic, that develop between two adjacent fields seem to be generated by the contact between the fields and negate the infinite depth of their surroundings.

GV5705, GV5716

GV5713
GV5714, GV5717
GV5801

These explorations continued throughout '57 as Vanni sought an interlocutory relationship between boundary and surrounding field. The fields lost their basically subordinate attribute, to become planes abstracted from any three-dimensional reference (*Frammenti in grigio / Fragments in Gray, Spazio a frammenti / Space in Fragments, Coste / Coasts*). The most significant example is *Strappo / Tear*, which summarizes all the developments of these two years and opens the way to the period that follows.

Vanni painted *Strappo* during his yearlong stay in New York in '58. Although he had yet to arrive at a definitive style all his own, this work reveals, in a nutshell, the essential themes that will characterize his production: ambiguity of planes; a multiple reading of the spaces, where the acceptance of



Giochi di spazio, oil on canvas, 27.6 x 25.6 inches, 1957, Castellanza, Italy, private collection (GV5708).

one places in doubt the reading of another; the insertion, in the lower edge of the canvas, of an element that suggest the existence of a different underlying work.

Vanni's second voyage to America was prompted by an offer of a contract from the owner of a gallery that was to open in Autumn '58 in New York, and where the work shown would be predominantly Italian painting and sculpture. Legal problems ensued, all the works stored by the gallery were seized, and the project never came to pass. This loss fortunately was offset in part by a very important encounter as Vanni was introduced to a prominent art dealer in Seattle, Otto Seligman¹⁴ that was the exclusive dealer of Mark Tobey. Seligman took an interest in Vanni's work, beginning a close collaboration that would result in a series of solo and group exhibitions at his gallery.¹⁵

During this period in New York Vanni was exposed to Action Painting, through the works of Pollock, Rothko, DeKooning and Kline. There was no immediate impact on the work that he was producing, but the experience contributed to the evolution of Vanni's painting in subsequent years. Here too, however, he paid closest attention to the work of those artists whose investigations were closest to his own, such as Clyfford Still, with his division of the canvas into complementary spaces, and Gorky and Gottlieb, with their contrast between graphic line and mass.

The works Vanni painted during this period in New York included a series of studies on the relationship between three constituent elements: vector-rays, small geometric forms and the surface of the canvas, identified with the background. There are some twenty canvases that explore the possibilities of these elements and the images that result from their mutations. The most important variations regard rays that emerged from the horizon lines with the village, now transformed into lines of tension that in turn generate microscopic satellites, similar to what happens in certain crystalline structures or in radiolarians.¹⁶

(14) Otto D. Seligman was born in Vienna in 1890 and emigrated to America in 1946. He settled in Seattle and opened an art gallery in the University District in December 1953. By the time of Seligman's death in 1966, the gallery had earned wide recognition for its representation of such artists as Paul Bonifas, Mark Tobey, Guy Anderson, Paul Horiuchi, Lisel Salzer, Wesley Wehr, Jacob Elshin, Morris Graves, Arthur Hall Smith, Herbert Siebner and Pehr Hallsten.

(15) This relationship would continue and flourish until Seligman's death.

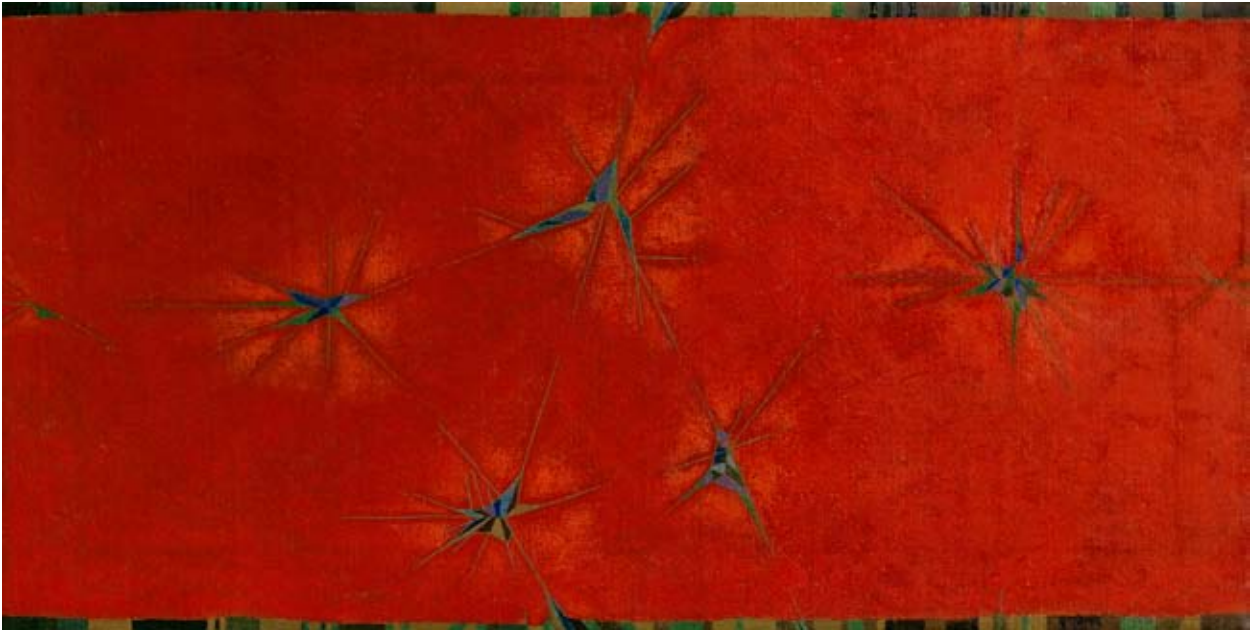
(16) These are marine protozoa with siliceous skeletons, made up of a nucleus, from which long, thin pseudo pods branch out, usually in the form of rigid rays that capture other microorganisms, which adhere to them. Haeckel, the great German biologist and scholar of radiolarians, called them miniature jewels of the abyss, due to their perfection.

Strappo, oil on canvas, 49 x 36 inches, 1958, lost (GV5801).





The Golden Wave, oil on canvas,
35 x 14 inches, 1958, Seattle Art
Museum, Seattle (GV5822, Seattle
Art Museum catalog number: 59.49).



Danza delle efemeridi, oil on canvas, 12 x 24 inches, 1958, Seattle, private collection (GV5820).

Upon his return from America, in late '58, Vanni, whose family had grown with the birth of his son Ruggero, rented a former hotel in Vélizy, on the outskirts of Paris, for nearly a year. Here, for the first time, Vanni had a large painting studio, and a period of intense work resulted in a series of canvases that would be exhibited in a solo exhibition at the Schneider gallery the following year.

Most of these works are distinguished by the presence of small yellow-turquoise triangular shapes floating in a red field. It is interesting to note how the small floating forms, and the lines that radiate out from them, are painted on fragments of canvas left blank, not covered with the background color. This contributes to the integration of the forms, rather than a sense of their being "applied on top," and it helps create gradations of passage between one element and the other. The red, in turn, is composed of three successive applications. The first, thin application of carmine red deliberately allows the weave of the canvas to show through; this is covered with a fragmentary application of a medium red that is accented with daubs of scarlet impasto around the star shapes. The

layering of colors helps to create the impression that the star shapes are developing magnetic fields that aggregate the most luminous particles of the surrounding space. The star shapes themselves are like crystals that radiate force lines out from their centers. Close examination reveals yet another element that is fundamental to Vanni's work: a small, precious, complex shape that, with the intensity of its details, holds its own with the vast surrounding field (*Danza delle efemeridi / Dance of the Mayflies*).

These works culminate the development of the themes explored with Albers, and for Vanni, they reach their limit of possibility. It was now time to strike out in new directions that, while at first seemingly quite different, would still have an inner spatial structure that would relate to the achievements of this period.

In May 1960 Vanni had a solo exhibition at the Schneider gallery. Public response was favorable and most of the paintings sold, leading Robert Schneider to offer the artist a contract. Encouraged by these events, Vanni decided to move back to Rome.

The Roman art world at the time was markedly international in outlook. "...In the '50s and '60s [Rome was] the Italian city that had the closest relationship in terms of work with North America, thanks both to the mediating role played by the movie studios at Cinecittà and the consistent presence of American artists in Rome..."¹ In addition to well-known names such as Johns, Rauschenberg, Marcarelli and Twombly, scores of others went back and forth between the United States and Rome.

Robert Schneider was American, and the Schneider gallery was able to develop special relationships with collectors in the United States. Moreover Schneider's experience as a professor at New York University gave him an advantage in his dealings with American collectors and curators passing through Rome, and he became a crucial point of reference for anyone interested in developments in contemporary art in Italy. This was particularly important for Vanni, in order to maintain the contacts he had made in the United States.²

From the time it opened in '53, the gallery's policy was to alternate shows of more well known artists (Afro, Cagli,

(1) "L'ambiente romano" by Manuela Crescentini, in AA.VV., *La pittura in Italia – Il Novecento/2*, Electa, Milan, 1993, p. 511.

(2) Schneider helped to build Vanni's reputation in the United States, through group shows of his gallery artists at various American museums.



Vestigia di una impronta, oil on canvas, 27 x 34.5 inches, 1960, collection of the artist (GV6008).

Capogrossi, Corpora, Matta, Sanfilippo, etc.) with shows of younger artists (Buggiani, Cristiano, Vanni, etc.) and a certain number of foreign artists, principally Americans (D'Almeida, Hadzi, Zajac). What these artists shared was not an underlying style, but rather a focus on the quality and facture of the work. There was a shared concern for the craft involved in making art, where the intrinsic quality of the work strengthened the formal choices.³

Vanni's May 1960 show at Schneider occurred during a period of transition from the geometrically structured works of the '50s to works with a more organic structure.⁴ In the early works, geometric shapes in the foreground remained essentially the same but the zones of color they rested against lost their uniformity and took on a more significant materiality, in an attempt to eliminate the idea of inert *background*, and have this area participate actively in what was taking place in the foreground, modulated, attracted, or repelled by it (*Tempesta d'estate / Summer Storm*). This variation is not sufficient to destabilize the *polarizing* role of the stellar agglomerations, which remain well defined. Vanni increasingly concentrates

(3) Buggiani recalls that he was said to share with the other artists "an affinity of thought, of attitude. If one want to find some affinity of *style* it should be looked for in the naturalistic provenance of their abstraction." Interview with Paolo Buggiani (November 2001).

(4) This phase, which began in '59, led him, toward the end of '66, through a series of transformations that would incorporate all the distinctive elements of his visual language.

Discesa all'Averno, oil on canvas,
31.5x39.4 inches, 1960, Los Angeles,
private collection (GV6017).



GV6015, GV6016

on a disintegration of forms and their integration with the surrounding world. The geometric micro-landscapes of the Vélizy canvases begin to fray and lose definition, almost as if the background material had a corrosive effect. They change from independent elements to the scarred tissue of a wound in space, transforming the earlier geometries into organic-material agglomerations (*Vestigia di una impronta / Vestige of an Imprint, Ricordo del nord / Memory of the North, Sedimentazione / Sedimentation*). In the same manner the background colors gradually lose their intensity, becoming almost monochromatic earth tones. The enclosed forms seem to stem from the surrounding space and be a consequence of its expansion and fracturing (*Discesa all'Averno / Descent to Avernus*). They acquire a positive-negative quality, that can be interpreted as foreground or fissure, depending on how the observer views the work overall. An ambiguity of planes results, with a possibility of interpretation on several levels.

But a definitive transformation of the work came about with the visual experiences accumulated during Vanni's first visits to the

Greek islands.⁵ He began to focus his attention on the dazzling whitewashed Cycladic houses, their surfaces punctuated by trowel marks. “The immaculate walls of the Cyclades, “Vanni states, “absorb and reflect a blinding luminosity stronger than the sky, they dematerialize into infinite space – and at the same time they hold the light, the surface asserts its own luminous materiality, they are there, plastic, tangible in all their harshness. And the dark crevices, where a caper seed brings forth an effusion of leaves, underlines the presence of the surface, halfway between abstraction and reality.”⁶

Thus the material surface makes its first appearance in Vanni’s painting. A long series of canvases, with mythological titles to stress the source of inspiration, are characterized by a white material space, now and then interrupted by fissures where organic forms of natural earth colors with black accents appear out of the darkness. The material component is strongly enriched by pumice or marble dust, giving the surface an even more parched appearance. The application of paint is rhythmic, but not mechanical. In the earlier works, the paint is applied with a brush, but in the later pieces Vanni uses a spatula, similar to those used for applying the whitewash to which the painting surface refers, creating depths that emulate a wall (*Verso la terra dei Feaci / Toward the Land of the Phaeacians*).

But the white field, which emerges from an almost literal transposition of those walls, soon also takes on the qualities of a liquid element. This leads to the other important innovation of these canvases, namely the passage from an *aerial* to a *liquid* world. Vanni himself has noted that “at the same time this pulsation of dark signs reminded me of the reflections on the surface of the sea when it is calm, where the original forms appear and disappear like infinite variations of Proteus.”⁷ If the canvases from the ‘50s obeyed a physical gravitational space that can be adapted to a rarified aerial environment, here the interaction of forms pertains to a logic that can be linked to the physical laws that govern the properties of liquids.



Early morning reflections in the Ionian Sea near the Island of Ithaca.



Cycladic plasterwork (photos by G.B. Vanni ca. 1960).

(5) Beginning in ‘59 Vanni chose to live in Greece from May to September. In ‘75 he built a house and studio on the island of Kythera. *Intonaco cicladico*.

(6) Elisabeth Reed, Interview with Gian Berto Vanni, New York, 1983.

(7) Elisabeth Reed, Interview with Gian Berto Vanni, New York, 1983.

Verso la terra dei Feaci, oil on canvas, 39.5 x 31.5 inches, 1960, Mondragone, Italy, private collection (GV6023).



It is no accident that the liquid element became part of Vanni's vocabulary, for the sea became a decisive part of his world. During this period he made detailed photographic studies of wave movements, focusing on the constant mutation of these forms. He analyzed the formal changes in the rhythm of flows, depending on the obstacles encountered. This is reflected in his canvases, where the rhythm of the brushstrokes that form the white field is influenced by the proximity of the frame or the internal shapes.

All this helped to create evocative images that have multiple associations. Thus in paintings such as *Verso la terra dei Feaci / Toward the Land of the Phaeacians* or *Ritmi del mare Egeo / Rhythms of the Aegean Sea*, the white space simultaneously takes on the value of luminous abstraction, the material presence of whitewashed walls and wave trapped within a gulf. The internal forms of the paintings can likewise be interpreted in numerous ways: fractures-wounds opened up in the white fields, reflections on the water, elements that emerge from the water itself. In both cases it is easy to imagine a temporal evolution of the forms, with the white water subsuming everything or withdrawing and disappearing. The reflection/wound might multiply, invading everything, or fragmenting into infinite parts and disappearing.

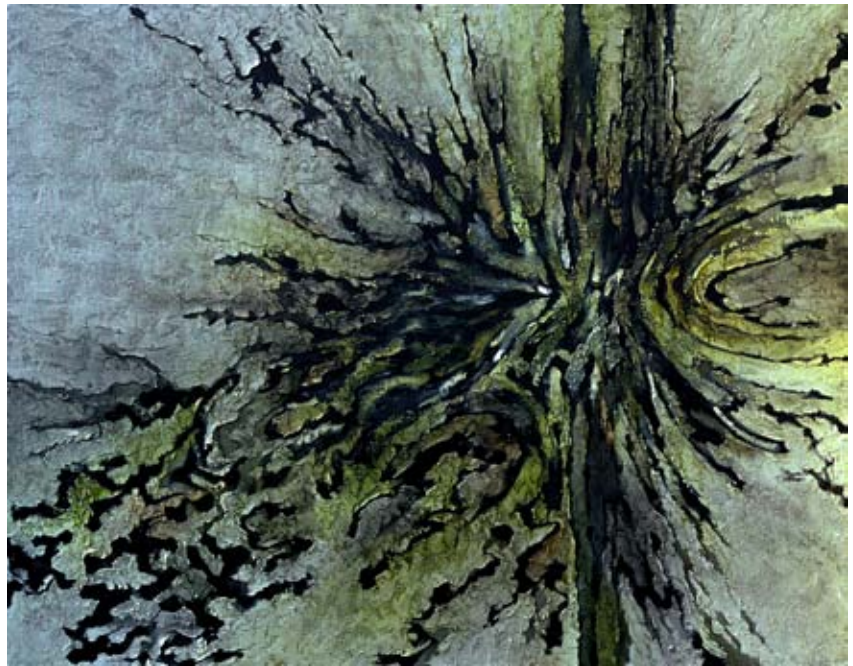
These multiple readings provide us with fundamental concepts for interpreting Vanni's work: the possibility that one part of the canvas, in a shared equilibrium, might completely gain dominance over the other part; the dark forms might be the active or passive component with regard to the surrounding field. Looking at a detail, it can be difficult to establish what is background and what is foreground, in canvases such as *L'antro della Sibilla / The Cave of the Sibyl*, where the fracture occupies half the canvas's surface and the ambivalence is particularly strong, and the surface becomes more closely linked to the darker forms. Pushing his investigations further, Vanni began to move away from contradictory dualities, veiling his whites leaving the surfaces less distinct from the darker

GV6024

L'antro della Sibilla, oil on canvas, 39.4 x 25.6 inches, 1960, collection of the artist (GV6036).



Red dot, oil on canvas, 45 x 57.5 inches, 1961, Los Angeles, private collection (GV6109).



(8) The term *Informel* was first used by French critic Michel Tapié in 1952, in *Un Art Autre*. From that time on, this term has been used to refer to pictorial and sculptural investigations that emphasize the expressive act and the expressive potential of material, namely the art object, as opposed to line and figure.

(9) "L'Informale" by Claudio Spadoni, in AA.VV. *L'arte in Italia nel secondo dopoguerra*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1979, p. 45.

forms (*Red Dot*). He then began using glazes and investigating the differences between transparent and opaque color, a procedure that has continued to the present.

The abandonment of dualism in favor of a pulsating material led Vanni to begin pictorial experiments inspired by the *Informel* poetics.⁸ It might seem paradoxical that Vanni was not drawn to this approach in France or America, but only later, in Italy. An explanation lies in the fundamentally classical underpinnings of his work, where his vision of painting is rooted in equilibrium and measure. Thus it is natural that Vanni's attraction to *Informel* poetics begins with his return to Italy, where this influence can be mediated by a "...frequent stance in Italian art, profoundly tied to its past, to certain inalienable formal values, and therefore little inclined to operations of rupture or the avant-garde *coup de main*."⁹

Vanni thus acquired certain methodologies and esthetic constants, such as a predilection for the sign, morphological ambiguity and the importance of pictorial material. He became interested above all in certain morphologies. He used the



camera like a sketchpad, shooting series of images that analyze the structure and material characteristics of natural forms, such as a tree trunk section or a rock formation. He began building an archive of materials, from which he would draw upon and then translate into his pictorial abstractions.¹⁰ He wasn't interested in their naturalistic representation, but in understanding their intrinsic structure, intuiting therein the existence of a geometry that is basic to all these forms.¹¹ Seeking a logic to attain increasingly organic morphological structures, he ended up creating a surface upon which every element, form and material, has the same hierarchical importance and for which it is possible to give a multiplicity of structural and figurative interpretations.

In an exhibition at the Schneider gallery in October '61 and in another exhibition at the Seligman gallery in Seattle in '62

Al centro della tempesta, oil on canvas, 44.9 x 64 inches, 1961, collection of the artist (GV6122).

(10) Vanni had begun compiling this archive earlier, in Paris. There, in '57, he had given a seminar on his photographs, entitled *Carnet de voyage d'un peintre abstrait*, where he was introduced by the writer André Bay. When he travels today, he still records all the images of materials that draw his attention.

(11) Much later he would find confirmation of this approach in Mandelbrot's fractal geometry.

Genesis, oil on canvas, 57.5 x 45.7 inches, 1961, Rome, private collection (GV6116).



GV6132

Vanni showed works characterized by the loss of a defined image in favor of a predominance of material, underlined by a more accentuated gesturalism. In some of the paintings there are still formal references to geomorphic structures (*La terra e il fuoco: Prometeo / Earth and Fire: Prometheus*) and phytomorphic structures (*Al centro della tempesta / At the Center of the Storm*) observed in Greece. In others these elements are fused in a new gestural dynamism, as in *Genesis*. The impression is of a centrifugal (or centripetal) force that causes the forms of the white canvases to merge in an inextricable knot with

the surrounding material, often through the use of glazes that emphasize its density. In his introduction to Vanni's '61 exhibition, Denis Schneider wrote: "In his more dramatic compositions, such as *Genesis*, vortices appear and the solid forms seem melt into the driving force of the current."¹²

But even in the canvases where the explosion of the form is most accentuated and the identity between image and material most obvious, the sign is not triggered by a gestural immediacy.¹³ For Vanni it will never be material that dictates form, but rather material that suggests a form that he seeks to understand, intellectualize and ultimately differentiate. Vanni's notes from this period are very clear in this regard: "The beginning of the painting consists of an action of aggression; the canvas is positioned, the instinct is set free, a vague, tumultuous idea follows, and one acts instinctively. Later one tries to understand this fact, and in understanding, one develops that which instinct and emotion have dictated. To understand it, extract it, the canvas first is assaulted, then caressed, helped, drawing out all those ideas by which it was inseminated at the beginning."

These are works where there is almost always a reference, even if imperceptible, to nature. There is a nature-material relationship that might bring to mind explorations developed in the early '50s by those painters that Francesco Arcangeli has called the *last naturalists*,¹⁴ as in certain paintings by Mandelli executed after '54, where "he begins to give material depth to his brushstrokes, which are *unbalanced* but restrained by a relationship with nature."¹⁵ But unlike Mandelli or the *last naturalists*, for Vanni painting is never "a way to participate directly in the becoming of things... a transference into art of an existential process..."¹⁶ Rather, his is always an extremely rational, controlled, analytical process. These are perhaps Vanni's least personal paintings, even if this experience had a stimulating influence that, as for so many artists of his generation, would prove to be fundamental and enduring.

(12) Denis Schneider, Robert Schneider's son, had studied art history in Rome and had always shown great interest in Vanni's work.

(13) "In the narrow understanding of the term, sign ... is a graphic trace that may or may not have a relationship with what it indicates; ... the gesture, instead, is the plastic concretization of an immediate and often uncontrolled physical movement." (Italo Tomassoni, *Arte dopo il 1945 – Italia*, Cappelli Editore, Bologna, 1971).

(14) Arcangeli's used this phrase in an essay published in *Paragone*, n. 9, in November 1954.

(15) Giorgio di Genova, *Storia dell'arte italiana del '900 – Generazione anni dieci*, Edizioni Bora, Bologna, 1990, p. 221.

(16) Italo Tomassoni, *Arte dopo il 1945 – Italia*, Cappelli Editore, Bologna, 1971, p. 93.

After this brief experimental excursion into the lyricism of pure material, where there are continuous fields where spatial limits do not necessarily coincide with those of the painting's frame, Vanni readjusted the direction of his research. Once again he began to question his figurative repertoire, to identify the components that would be essential for interpreting all subsequent developments in his work.

Between late '62 and early '63 two lines of research became interwoven. In the first case, the material underwent various evolutions, underscored by a rarefaction or thickening of the texture, revealed by the chromatic nature of the glazes. The structure becomes once again well defined, resulting in spatial compositions punctuated by a clear rhythm that divide up the canvas (*Pietra dedicata al mare / Stone Dedicated to the Sea, Casa del Minotauro / House of the Minotaur*). In the second case there is an impelling re-emergence of a need for formal control over the material (never completely overlooked), which becomes more explicit. The brush stroke as material sign is intellectualized with graphic marks that

GV6307



Pietra dedicata al mare, oil on canvas, 31.5 x 39.5 inches, 1963, collection of the artist (GV6305).



Quando Teti sull'acque, oil on canvas, 39.5 x 31.5 inches, 1963, Rome, private collection (GV6327).

underscore its qualities (*Primavera per Radha / Springtime for Radha*). In this case too, the glazes act to give emotional emphasis to the material itself.¹⁷ In counterpoint to forms that increasingly develop their individual character, Vanni introduces stains of impasto color. There are impressions, chromatic fragments of color, that counterbalance the brushstrokes that surround them, emphasizing the currents of energy of the surface (*Quando Teti sull'acque / When Tethys on the Waters*). While scant concern is shown for the compositional economy of the canvas, there is a sense of power at the center (*A las cinco de la tarde*).

GV6315

(17) It is interesting to compare these works with the monotypes that Vanni made during these years (*Movimento I-XI / Movement I-XI* [GVD6205-15], *Azione I-XI / Action I-XI* (GVD6216-34), *Studio I-XII / Study I-XII* (GVD6301-12)), where this research is developed without the chromatic intervention of the glazes.

GV6329

This is the first manifestation of an alien element within the painting, of something that belongs to another world, another reality, whose formal logic is contradictory in terms of the rest of the painting. With these canvases, Vanni introduces, at an embryonic level, a fundamental aspect of his figurative research, which will constitute an interpretive key for what follows: the coexistence, within the same pictorial space, of different worlds responding to opposing logic.

These works, which were exhibited in a solo exhibition in '63 at the Schneider gallery, were followed by a series of canvases that develop another component rooted in Vanni's figurative world: forms with anthropomorphic references. These are akin to totemic masks, reduced to essential values of an ancestral and prehistoric nature. Here, the value of an extraneous element is assumed by the possibility of reinterpreting part of the painting's material as a *portrait of a mask*. Thus there is a sampling of physiognomies, developed in a series of canvases that, seen in their totality, provide a complete panorama of variations on the theme (*L'abitudine dell'equilibrio / The Habit of Equilibrium, Altare propiziatorio / Propitiatory Altar, Idolo numero due / Idol Number Two*). The multiple, sometimes contradictory, representation of the same subject will become another recurring theme in Vanni's work.

Thus he acquires formal elements and compositional criteria that, in conjunction with the passage to a no longer unified world, but one centered on a dialectical and formal polymorphism, furnish the basis for the apparently very different paintings that follow.

The '60s were a crucial period of growth and research for Vanni. Rome was the embodiment of the economic miracle and the Dolce Vita. Painters and literary figures gathered at Rosati¹⁸ in Piazza del Popolo, at Cesaretto on Via della Croce and at the Trattoria Menghi on the Via Flaminia. They threw masked balls, most notably organized by Boza Kosak, Vanni's close friend, who would transform her studio into a cave or a

GV6339

GV6403, GV6406

(18) See Claudia Salaris, *La Roma delle avanguardie*, Editori Riuniti, Rome 1999, pp. 205-209.

circus, to give her parties a theme in which all her artist friends would participate. Indeed Vanni's desire to experiment in his work and meet with artist friends to discuss and compare ideas went hand in hand with a need to have fun and create without taking oneself too seriously.

For Vanni, trading ideas with other artists was a source of enrichment. During this period Vanni establishes a close relationship with Corrado Cagli,¹⁹ who showed a growing interest in Vanni's work. They shared a strong individuality, weary of movements and trends, as well as the pursue of more than one logic in art. The center of Vanni's activity was his studio, on Via del Lavatore, near the Trevi Fountain. The professional life he led during these years in Rome was consistent with the stance he had always taken with regard to the art world: to neither reject nor seek out *official* inclusion.

During these years and those that followed Vanni continued to alternate periods of work in Rome with long sojourns in Greece, on the island of Corfu. There, in '61, he had met Didi Blitz,²⁰ who was directing a Club Méditerranée resort, which at the time had an image quite different from other tourist vacation spots. For her it was very important that cultural events be integrated with the recreational activities offered by the resort. The friendship that developed between Blitz and Vanni was strengthened by her admiration for his painting. She offered him a villa in Paleokastriza, for him to use as a studio space for two years, during the summer. The villa, built in the '20s, had a terrace that overlooked the three gulfs that Homer describes in the *Odyssey* as the port of the Phaeacians. The villa, while the center of a colorful social life, was above all Vanni's summer studio, where he could compare his experiences of Northern and Mediterranean culture, resulting in new expressive formulations. He became friends with the English writer Lawrence Durrell, and their interaction was particularly stimulating. Vanni was fascinated by the narrative structure of the *Alexandria Quartet*, where the same story is told from four different viewpoints, and where the style changes

(19) Corrado Cagli was one of the most dominant and influential artistic figures of the Italian and European artistic scene of the 20th century. He was known for his multiform artistic languages, which spanned from ceramic to sculpture, from painting to theatre stage design.

(20) Judith Blitz (known as Didi), sister of the founder of Club Méditerranée, contributed significantly to that organization's signature style.

Below and above right Vanni's drawings for the pareos of the Club Méditerranée.





(21) Vanni would later transform some of these carvings into projects for monuments (GVD6201, GVD6202, GVD6203, GVD6204).

GV6503, GV6508, GV6510

GV6520

GV6513

GV6516

with the narrator's voice. Indeed a comparable logic was developing in Vanni's painting.

Didi Blitz decided to commission Vanni to create fabric designs for the pareos used at the Club, and her patronage enabled Vanni to continue painting, unencumbered with financial worries. In the first pareo designs he developed a style that, while decorative in nature, had their iconological origins in the forms he was painting in his canvases of the same period, which relate directly to an earlier interest in Melanesian painting and masks. The technique of creating the prototypes for the designs, carving into linoleum glued to a wooden support, revealed Vanni's interest in primitive techniques that by their very nature impelled him to come up with simple, primordial forms, which in turn introduced new elements into his style.²¹

The paintings from '65, exhibited at Galleria 88 in May of that year, in a show organized by Corrado Cagli, represent the first example of an imaginative universe where suggestions of different realities, linguistic contradictions and grammatical discontinuities contribute to the formulation of spatial ambiguities (*Semisecolare / Semisecular, Ladybug, L'estate degli specchi / Summer of the Mirrors*). Highly textured fields coexist with others where the emphasis is on color (*Due momenti della rosa azzurra / Two Moments of the Blue Rose*). Geometric forms exist alongside organic elements; sections allude to a view from high above, delimited by edges that evoke silhouettes of coasts seen in the mist on the horizon (*Gli sposi promessi / The Promised Spouses*). Demarcations of illusory spaces (a painting within the painting, a canvas that reveals another one) negate each other in an alternation of *disenchanted certainties* (*Pour madame de...*). Vanni describes this when he states: "...it must have been in early '64. I was in my studio when I saw out of the corner of my eye a painting that I didn't remember. I turned to then realize that it was a group of three paintings of different dimensions, leaning against each other. Each hid a part of the others; but the small portion that was visible insisted on being included in the frame of vision almost as if to confront its credibility



Gli sposi promessi, oil on canvas, 31.5 x 31.5 inches, 1965, collection of the artist (GV6513).

vis-à-vis the others and to throw off the existing balance, introducing its own rhythm and definition of space. This is when I began to be consciously interested in discontinuities, contradictions of style, quotations from my personal museum of memory, hints of the layering of different cultures that hide and coexist in our subconscious. Sometimes the intruding element is small; in other cases the two elements share an equal portion of space or multiply, becoming allusions to different worlds that are interwoven, occupying every portion of available space, to leave intact only a centimeter of quiet amidst an inextricable conflict. I also tried painting half the canvas, to then cover it over until I had forgotten what I had done there. Only then would I paint the other half, to achieve a dialogue between the two parts that would exist without any conscious intervention on my part.”²²

(22) Elisabeth Reed, Interview with Gian Berto Vanni, New York, 1983.

Addressing this same issue, Dino Buzzati wrote, on the occasion of Vanni’s show at the Galleria Rizzoli in Milan in 1968: “Just as on a single wall, paintings by different artists can, perhaps even through violent contrasts and contradictions, merge into a successful harmony, so too Vanni juxtaposes two, three, four sections in every canvas, which, considered on their own, might seem to be by different artists.” (Dino Buzzati, in *Il Corriere della Sera*, Milan, May 1, 1968).

L'estate degli specchi, oil on canvas,
39.5 x 31.5 inches, 1965, collection
of the artist (GV6510).



Some of these paintings were sent to Cologne for the exhibition *Tevere-Reno*, where Vanni won first prize. The city purchased one piece for its museum of contemporary art.

In 1966 Vanni was invited by Didi Blitz to spend a year in Morocco, where he was given a painting studio in the resort she was running in Agadir.²³ This was an ideal occasion to follow in the footsteps of artists such as Delacroix and Klee, upon whom the Mediterranean Arab world had exercised a marked influence. The southern shore of the Mediterranean clearly was not longer distant, unexplored territory, but in the '60s it was still more mysterious than any exotic place. Contact with

(23) The pretext for the invitation was for Vanni to develop a print shop.

this culture enriched Vanni's figurative universe, his *museum of memory*,²⁴ adding elements that reappear, fragmented and reworded, in his canvases.

In Morocco he discovered a culture that lived in symbiosis with the surrounding reality. In his frequent trips to the interior, he sought out direct contact with the local populations, absorbing their culture. In the desert he lived in Bedouin tents, to understand how their structure, beginning with constant elements, is always changing, depending on the shape of the terrain. Spontaneous architecture interested him as an alternative to the rigidity of the symmetries produced by the logic of our Western world. In the medinas he studied how shops were clustered along routes, growing organically to become marketplaces. These experiences were expressed in a new vocabulary, enriching the *world of contradictions* he was asserting in his work. There were also certain images whose visual impact would echo on a formal level in subsequent work: the infinite differences in colors and textures of the desert landscapes; the coexistence of refinements and roughness in Berber folk art, as in the finely worked jewels set around amorphous stones; rough cotton garments with inserts embroidered and brocaded in vividly colored silk. The color-stained urban landscape provided other important stimuli: barely dyed wool hung out to dry, yellow and red heaps of spices in the market squares, blue and green piles of minerals extracted from copper mines – all seen against the different shadings–of earth tones of the surroundings.

(24) Vanni's definition for his visual memories that surface in his canvases.

Returning to Rome in the autumn of '66 Vanni plunged into a series of paintings where he achieved a successful synthesis of his recent experience and his earlier work, seen in *Marocco, sera / Morocco, Evening, Alla soglia del deserto / At the Edge of the Desert*. Different realities are compared in a shifting counterpoint, where either can become the dominant element. Vanni described this way of working as a "...discourse on the impossibility of discourse, themes

GV6605

GV6603

Percussione, oil on canvas, 31.5 x 39.5 inches, 1967, private collection (GV6715).



(25) Elisabeth Reed, Interview with Gian Berto Vanni, New York, 1983.

that begin to develop and are interrupted by others that look for space for their own development. Even when one of the elements is organized according to its own specific rationality, the discontinuity exists, even if reduced, little by little, at least as an occupied surface."²⁵

These works were exhibited in solo shows at the Rizzoli gallery in Rome, in April '68, and in Milan, one month later. Compared to the works shown at Galleria 88 three years earlier, one immediately notes an increased density of compositional elements and a marked saturation of color. Contradictions that were barely expressed earlier are now repeatedly stressed, as seen in a comparison of two canvases, *Gli sposi promessi / The Promised Spouses*, 1965, and *Percussione / Percussion*, 1967. While in *Gli sposi promessi* the change between the drawn surface and the rest is barely articulated by a slight change in background material, in *Percussione* the section that contains the drawn form has made a qualitative leap and is structured in a different material that contains a nebula of tone-colors. In the former work the silhouettes of coasts on the horizon are



simply separations between similar fields; in the latter they become the pretext for creating a series of colored layers that have a pulsating interaction.

The work that best summarizes the complex and contradictory structure that Vanni developed during this period is *Marocco, sera* / *Morocco, Evening*. On the left are two red quadrants with different spatial situations; a central area is made up of a vertical band where the pictorial material is apparent and two quadrants of tiny forms of contrasting textures; finally on the right another vertical band recapitulates the chromatic scale of the entire work. A detailed analysis reveals the iconological origins of the various components, many of which come from his paintings from the '50s, but now enter his world once again, in somewhat reductive form. Each component sends a specific message that places in doubt the spaces of the others, providing a plausible reading for an element, and then negating it. The image that emerges from the Babel of languages and meanings

Marocco, sera, oil on canvas, 39.5 x 63 inches, 1966, Rome, private collection (GV6605).

(26) Indeed Giorgio Di Genova, writing about certain canvases by Vanni from the Eighties, wrote: "His metamorphic fantasizing is made up of cosmic moments, organic references, from the phytomorphic to the histological, sudden flashes, fluid and mysterious shadows, sensuous colors, with a strong graphic instinct and fragments of Cagli's *Sicilian* pieces" (Giorgio di Genova, "*Storia dell'arte italiana del '900 - Generazione anni venti*", Edizioni Bora, Bologna, 1991, p. 590.)

in the works from this period is a vision of the world expressed by the contemporaneity of all possible modes, revealed in all their contradictions. This explains Vanni's frequent resumption of work on paintings that he had considered finished. He adds new textures and themes, developing the concept of the palimpsest, which will continue to interest him for some time. This is the period when Vanni's work is closest to certain formal structures developed by Cagli in the 60s. There is a fascination with labyrinthine forms, both thematically and formally. Every empty space systematically overflows with signs, creating a directional disorientation. Signs are organized in concentric rings, within which the tones become indistinct, creating reliefs similar to those in topographic maps. While these elements in Vanni's work are undoubtedly tied to his childhood memories of microbiology, Cagli's work in the same vein provided him with significant interpretive parallels.²⁶ However these formal influence become less evident when, in the alternation between condensed forms and empty surfaces, so typical of Vanni's design process, the broad spaces take the

Alle tre di notte, oil on canvas,
31.5 x 39.5 inches, 1968, Milan,
private collection (GV6810).



upper hand and the swarming forms of activity are limited to the edges. Thus it seems that while formal contributions from Cagli are comparable to other visual allusions to artists such as Klee or Klimt, the older Italian master provides a much more fundamental intellectual framework for Vanni's eclecticism. These compositions also have certain allusions to the psychedelic world, and while this genre of expression might have associations with American Pop art, Vanni did not intentionally share that movement's creative hypotheses. However a period spent in London a year earlier had exposed him to some visual elements of pop culture, which he consciously introduced into his work.

In paintings such as *Jamaa el Fna* and *Alle tre di notte / At Three in the Morning*, the swarming of cellular forms completely invade the pictorial space, inverting the relationship with the material portion, which exists only here and there on the canvas, like an insert. In subsequent works he goes even further. In *Il piano è ondulato / The Plane is Wavy* the expansive force of these forms causes part of the canvas to become detached; in *Quattro per quattro / Four by Four* the divisions that earlier coexisted on the same surface now are staggered against a helical plane, revealing other painted surfaces. With these pieces, where the surface of the canvas is developed in three dimensions, Vanni temporarily abandons two-dimensional representation. Continuing in this direction, Vanni stopped painting for a few years, during which he looked to other artistic forms for the means to forge ahead with his theories.

At this same time, various new directions in art, having begun to take root in the early '60s, were now emerging in Rome. A lively climate of experimentation corresponded to a "...desire for change from the old system of art..."²⁷ Undoubtedly Vanni too was questioning the validity of traditional artistic means, and this led him to re-evaluate what he had accomplished thus far. However his reaction led him to further embellish his formal content rather than desecrate or negate its validity.

GV6809

GV6811

(27) "L'ambiente romano" by Manuela Crescentini, in AA.VV., *La pittura in Italia – Il Novecento/2*, Electa, Milan, 1993, p. 522.



Quattro per quattro, acrylic on panel,
39.5 x 39.5 inches, 1968, collection
of the artist (GV6812).



GV7003

GV7004

(28) It is no accident that this type of involvement of the viewer, who is called upon, through a visual intervention, to contribute to the completion of the work of art, has certain affinities with Op art, which has often been of interest to Vanni.

Frattura, mixed media on fiberglass, 42 x 31 x 12 inches, 1969, collection of the artist (GV6903).

He began experimenting with spatial and temporal syntheses of various categories of expression. He concentrated on the creation of bas-reliefs in fiberglass-reinforced plastic, almost like three-dimensional projections of his last paintings. He made molds from casts formed from apparently casual assemblages of disparate objects – tins, buckets, plates – that form convulsive agglomerations, like Gordian knots of waste from the modern world. The translucent skin that records their–shape becomes the support for further interventions. In the earliest bas-reliefs the surface is simply painted, creating in certain cases apertures that reveal the interior (*Frattura / Fracture*). Later these become animated by the projection of pictorial interventions filmed specifically for this purpose (*20 minuti di variazioni in poliestere / 20 Minutes of Variations in Polyester, Progetto di variazione nel tempo / Project of Variation in Time*). These represent the continuous transformation of forms and compositions and they translate into temporal terms the spatial conflict of the contradictory and discontinuous elements Vanni was working with in his paintings. Thus the *painting* becomes an object in perennial transformation in time, intensified by the interaction of the film with an extremely irregular surface that interferes with a unified perception of the image. Moreover the spectator, moving around the sculpture, increases the possibility of multiple readings.²⁸

According to this same creative dynamic, Vanni had planned to project sequences of pictorial images onto even more changeable surfaces, such as pulsating rubber membranes. Vanni also shot two feature-length films in super-8, *Due risvegli in tre tempi / Two Awakenings in Three Times*, 1969, and *Uno due tre via / One Two Three Go*, 1970. These were characterized by frenetic, syncopated montages of images and free associations, chosen for the most part casually from everyday life and nature, interrupted by shots of more pictorial subjects, such as painted bodies and fields of vibrating color. The totality of images was accompanied by music that sometimes emphasized the visual rhythm and sometimes provided a counterpoint to it.



The three-dimensional component was developed beyond the bas-relief, particularly in collaboration with architect Guglielmo Mileto.²⁹ Together they designed “temporal sculptures” that, under the impact of various factors, would change over time. One particular idea was for a fountain made from a wide variety of calcareous stones and other materials that would corrode at different rates, which would erode beneath the action of the water, assuming a changing form over time. One project that came to fruition was for the winter palace of the Shah, in Kish Island, Iran.³⁰ This consisted of fifty-six monotypes on canvas, each three by one meters, hung in the palace in front of windows, creating a transition between interior and exterior. Vanni designed forms that related to basic geometry, emphasized by the use of vibrant colors.³¹ The goal was to exploit the wind blowing in from the desert and the strong flashes of light

20 minuti di variazioni in poliesteri, polyester resin on fiberglass, 48 x 76 inches, 1970, collection of the artist.

(29) Guglielmo Mileto had just returned to Italy following a long stay in America, where he had taught at Pratt Institute and developed a series of experimental projects, including a *linear reticular city* (1967), a proposal for the renewal of the urban areas on the outskirts of New York. When Mileto returned to Rome, he joined with Herbert Rader, Riccardo Bonicatti and Barrie Dewhurst to create a studio, *Interplan*, for the development of international projects (see “Dall’America a Roma. Esperienza di un architetto italiano: Guglielmo Mileto” by Guglielmo Mileto, in *Domus*, n. 473, April 1969).

(30) Some of Vanni's paintings from '68 also were installed in the palace.

(31) In some of these he created optical illusions, utilizing studies on interrupted patterns he had experimented with at Yale, working with Albers.

(32) This same combination of color and light on forms swollen like sails in the wind is clearly seen in two models, now preserved in photographs, for two sculpture projects, conceived in collaboration with Mileto (GV6904, GV6905).

(33) Elisabeth Reed, Interview with Gian Berto Vanni, New York, 1983.

GV7312*

Four canvases for the Kish Island Palace, Kish Island, Iran.



reflected by the sand to create luminous sails, like a bas-relief in continuous movement.³²

At the conclusion of this period of extra-pictorial experimentation Vanni came to a decision to return to painting. In fact, without negating the validity of other creative hypotheses, he came to accept that he found it more interesting to create imaginary worlds through exclusively pictorial means. As Vanni would later say: "despite all but unlimited freedom, which I gave myself to be able to wander from one medium to another and to mix them all together, I realized that for me, what I was able to invent within the context of a canvas remained more fascinating and mysterious."³³ He confined himself to his studio, to concentrate on recovering the constituent elements of his language and to resume his explorations in pictorial terms. In the canvases that emerged, his figurative world is reduced to essential elements. As a reaction to his recent experiences, he turned back to simpler techniques, such as the use of acrylic paints, which he generally detested other than for particular applications. The background plane is modulated by a long gradated area of two or at most three colors, applied with a homogeneous stroke that avoids material variations. One side of the canvas is always marked by a monochrome band with a central wave shape that introduces an element of ambiguity in the space of the gradated field. In front of this float amoebae-like forms, repetitive but individualized, in the process of dividing and multiplying. They form cohesive groups in migratory swarms, tied together by a shared tension. They pull together, to then move apart, as if influenced by magnetic fields emphasized by geometric lines delimiting optical planes, modifying their density, formation or color. An overall calm dominates, in an atmosphere of space suspended in time (*Da cercare fuori dei limiti / To be Sought Beyond the Limits**). Discontinuity and contradiction are muted, in a substantial change from the intense and vibrant works in the Rizzoli show.

These paintings, which were shown at the Schneider gallery in '73, were soon seen by Vanni to be too reductive, limited by pre-established schemes. This is the only moment, within his entire body of work, where theory predominates. The paintings lack that experimental component that is present in the works from other periods, where the explorations in each canvas evolve into the next, producing a continuous enrichment of themes. For Vanni this reduction to essential elements represented a decantation, after the extra-pictorial experiences of the recent past, and it led him to a clear awareness of the path he would follow. Before long he began revive fragments of works he had made and destroyed to create images and passages for his films. He reconstructed other canvases where discontinuous elements are juxtaposed. Thus he picked up the thread of his interrupted pictorial discourse and resumed making multiple canvases, developing possibilities of multi-linguistic and eclectic readings.

Vanni's work began to be characterized by increasingly multi-faceted activity. He developed parallel themes, working on many canvases simultaneously. Each focuses on a specific aspect and at the same time has something of the others, in a mutual cross-pollination of old and new elements. From this point on it becomes impossible to subdivide Vanni's work into distinct phases, according to a precise temporal progression. While thematic groupings are possible, they are always contemporaneous with many other directions.

Museo della memoria / Museum of Memory, while not the first chronologically, is exemplary. Beyond the pictorial elaboration, whereby various phases of his development are revived, Vanni, through his choice of title, also makes a statement about the way he will utilize his system of references from then on. Memory becomes his "...personal museum (which forgets, and remembers, and undoes, and associates – at its own pleasure),"³⁴ where stimuli, forms, spaces and recent and past experiences encounter each other, like a sort of archive to be drawn upon each time a new

(34) Gian Berto Vanni, exhibition catalogue, Centre Culturel Français, Rome, May 16 – June 25, 1979.

Museo della memoria, oil on canvas, 76.8 x 51.2 inches, 1977, collection of the artist (GV7703).





work is begun. Once revived, images acquired at different times and in different places exist on the canvas in the same temporal space. Through memory, then, the coexistence of multiple and contrary elements becomes possible within a single canvas. This concept of memory has its origins in Proust, whose work Vanni knows intimately and which has served as a meaningful point of comparison for the conceptual framework of his own art.³⁵ Indeed Vanni's work can be seen as a pictorial transposition of Proust's concept, whereby only in memory can one simultaneously perceive the continuous transformations to which time subjects events, people and feelings. The ebb and flow of memory fragments, simultaneously the same and yet different because revisited from a different viewpoint, create a sense of growth in the paintings, where each work represents a development of the one that came before.

Il grande muro dei ricordi, oil on canvas, 51.2 x 76.8 inches, 1974, collection of the artist (GV7404).

(35) Two other literary influences are Ariosto and Pirandello.



Discorso a quattro voci, oil on canvas, 51.2 x 76.8 inches, 1976, Krefeld, Germany, private collection (GV7602).

(36) The anthropomorphism seen in certain works of this period is not intended to be explicitly representational. The sole exception is in *Dal Cile alla Cina / From Chile to China* (GV7501), with the insertion of a cat. It is important to stress how these sorts of insertions have value not so much for any symbolic significance, but for the way they effect a dissonant visual impact, interrupting the discourse to accentuate its contradiction.

Il grande muro dei ricordi / The Great Wall of Memories deals with the same concept. The canvas is filled with anthropomorphic tangles,³⁶ painted as if they were a preparatory synopia drawing put down at spatial intervals, recalling the great medieval fresco cycles. This allusion to a constituent phase of the work is emphasized by the presence at the upper left, on a section of raw canvas, of the sketch of one of the shapes from the lower sections. In the right portion of the painting, however, this same image is painted in completely different fashion, in polychrome, recalling the playful aspects of Vanni's paintings from '68. Thus as in the case of *Museo della memoria*, this is *the great wall of his memories of painting*.

With *Discorso a quattro voci / Discourse in Four Voices*, Vanni elaborates the concept of the painted form as an assertion of an intellectual process, according to which there is no *absolute truth*. The same form can manifest itself in many different



ways, depending on the reasoning behind it combined with the imagination of the observer. There resides in this dualism of what is and what seems to be a great wealth of imaginative possibilities. In *Discorso a quattro voci* the same form is proposed in different styles, in simultaneous confirmation and contradiction.

In *Palizzata numero 1 / Palisade Number 1* Vanni revives the use of different materials seen previously in his non-pictorial works, but here the practice acquires a predominantly pictorial value. Returning to the theme of *Il grande muro dei ricordi*, he creates a palimpsest where history and time have left their sign. The rag, the polyester, the scratched plaster and the wood planks are chosen for their pictorial qualities of color, surface and material.

Palizzata numero 1, mixed media on panel, 57.1 x 80.7 inches, 1978, collection of the artist (GV7801).

Finestre, strappi, segni, mixed media
on canvas, 61 x 61 inches, 1977,
Rome, private collection (GV7701).



GV7707

(37) These are pieces of drawings
that had been used to make the
filmstrips.

The creative presupposition that material can be chosen and used in terms of its function in a broader figurative project often leads Vanni to contradict the material's tactility, through the use of artifice. *Storie in bianco e rosso / Stories in White and Red* is exemplary. The piece is made up of two panels. In the upper panel successive layers of torn drawings³⁷ are glued one to another to obtain a dense bark with a quality more like papier-mâché than collage. The convulsed mass of this tangle was then covered in white, emphasizing the form that emerged. In the lower, larger panel, a glued down piece of cloth saturated in red paint reinterprets the upper composition through the forms created by the folds in the fabric. To emphasize the rhythm of the folds, the ridges have been inked with a roller. In *Finestre, strappi, segni / Windows, Tears, Signs*, the paint-saturated cloth acts like a film that has been creased and, in its



Storie in bianco e rosso, mixed media on panel, 98.4 x 80.7 inches, 1977, collection of the artist.

GV7917

(38) Indeed, one can date its origins to the paintings of the early '60s. From this one also can understand the interest Vanni has always had in the work of Burri and Fontana.

GV7909

GV7812

(39) Gian Berto Vanni, exhibition catalogue, Centre Culturel Français, Rome, May 16 – June 25, 1979.

GV7606

pulling back, discloses the plane below. It is a sort of disheveled theater curtain that reveals forms and materials ready to take center stage, establishing a dialectical relationship between a physical and a pictorial reality.

The technique of glazing, which favors thickenings of paint in the flat areas of the canvas, leaving out the ridges of the rags, recalls the material treatment of the canvases from '63-'64, where consistent brushstrokes were then emphasized by glazing that brought out their character. In many cases, as for example in *Pietra-Acqua / Stone-Water*, the rags are arranged like brushstrokes, losing their material identity to acquire a truly pictorial value.

The series of *stracci*, or rag pieces, clearly revives the theme of a brutal laceration that reveals an underlying reality,³⁸ central in all Vanni's mature work. Whether this dynamic occurs in more evident manner through a physical entity such as the canvas, as in *Lacerazione e intarsio / Laceration and Inlay*, or through simulation by means of a purely pictorial illusion, as in *Trachila*, for Vanni it becomes an occasion to enact the coexistence of different realities, dynamically opposed but connected by an internal logic that justifies their proximity. Writing about this process, Vanni states: "Brutal laceration that uncovers (or rediscovers? or initiates?) other forms, that transforms it into inlay, or into a swarming of cells whose movement, compressed, folds back onto itself and is immobilized."³⁹ These compositions have multiple morphological references, evident to varying degrees: the fracture in a rock from which lichens emerge; a deep wound on the skin that reveals the internal organs; often a clear reference to the female sex (*Finestra / Window*). Each composition has its own intrinsic coherence even as it incorporates different worlds. In no case, however, is there realistic figuration, and their morphology always remains ambiguous, leaving space for interpretation. This series of works, developed over a period of four years, from '75 to '79, allowed Vanni to reappropriate all the previous formal elements and themes

into an experimental progression of work, through which he would acquire other components that would help in his future investigations.

The sudden and premature death of Cagli, immediately after his show at the Carpine gallery, was a great personal loss for Vanni. This show was the first in a series of solo exhibitions of artists associated with Cagli, and while the gallery went ahead with this program, the underpinning fellowship, the motivation for the shows, was no longer there.

In May '77 the Carpine gallery opened a large-scale retrospective of seventy-nine works by Vanni from 1950 to 1977, including some thirty recent paintings.

Two years later, in May '79, he was presented in an exhibition at the Centre Culturel Français in Rome as an Italian artist who had begun his career in France. Despite the good outcome of both shows Vanni realized that the artistic life in Rome had lost for him the energy it had in the sixties. So, he moved to New York in the autumn of that year.

When Vanni went to America in '79 he was fifty-two years old. His Roman period, which had interrupted his wanderings of the '50s, had lasted twenty years. With the passage of time, however, he came to miss the stimulation derived from questioning his own creative world through direct comparison with different realities. In the '50s he had moved his studio from country to country, in pursuit of pictorial research in changing contexts. In Rome he had adopted another approach to keep his explorations alive: long sojourns in Greece and voyages from which he brought back elements from heterogeneous cultures, to be analyzed and compared with his world in Rome, which in turn was marked by intellectual ferments that mirrored his own. But Vanni had not chosen to live in Rome in order to be comfortable, working where his cultural identity corresponded to the surrounding context. On the contrary, his creativity was stimulated precisely by a dialectical comparison with different cultures, by situations of *non-belonging*. Thus he saw in his Roman routine the risk of growing sluggish and exhausting the investigations he had been carrying out in recent years. While others might have feared being uprooted from a known situation, for Vanni, the abandonment of certainty for the unknown and the need to call everything into question represented a choice of freedom. New York proved to be receptive terrain and thus an exploratory

move, without clear long-term plans, became permanent. At an age when many feel the need to establish themselves, Vanni chose to start over in a new and stimulating environment, and the decision only multiplied his energies and expressive pictorial possibilities.

In New York his creativity could develop freely for two basic reasons: a historical tabula rasa and a cultural melting pot as a point of departure for all research. A tabula rasa because choices made in this context never have to offer justification in terms of previous experiences; a melting pot because any contribution can be co-opted without being analyzed on the basis of codified cultural hierarchies. In fact, painting in New York, Vanni found an ideal situation for importing and assembling any number of elements, historical or cultural, without this being interpreted in terms of his relationship to a single predominant culture. In other words there wasn't a unilateral key for gaining access to his works, but numerous possible readings, where each had the same value and the same legitimacy. This situation provided him with the presuppositions to develop contradictions in formal and iconological terms, which he would elaborate in his canvases, and which would manifest themselves in an eclecticism that found new conceptual foundations.

If the evolution of his work accelerated strongly, from a practical viewpoint Vanni had to recreate a market, a clientele that would support him and allow him to continue to work. Becoming associated with a gallery presented difficulties. Galleries that had made a name for themselves in the '50s and '60s were involved principally with American artists from that period. More recently established galleries dealt with current trends. A third category consisted of very new galleries with small exhibition spaces, located at the low-rent margins of neighborhoods designated for art activity. This latter group concentrated for the most part on the youngest generation of artists, which was concentrating on non-pictorial research.

Independent artists who had a classical approach, autonomous of current trends and fashions found a very restricted number of dealers interested in their work. Vanni's friends and former colleagues from Yale generally fit into this category, and most of them supplemented their creative activity with academic careers.

Vanni was convinced of the need to create his own relationship with the public as an alternative to traditional channels. This was the genesis of his *Open Studios*, in the loft where he painted. Here, in the heart of Soho, which in the '80s was still a neighborhood of artists and galleries, he exhibited his work directly, without using a dealer as a middleman. He installed these shows together with a painter friend, Bernard Aptekar, who had the studio next door and who had been a pioneer of this type of alternative exhibition, beginning in the '60, when he organized *10 Downtown*.¹ This allowed him to reconnect with his American collectors and to get in touch with a growing public that saw the *Open Studios* as a way to become acquainted with the activity of artists who were developing their work independent from the commercial circuit. In this way Vanni continued to exhibit twice a year, establishing an ongoing relationship with some hundred collectors, who in turn allowed him to continue his work as an artist.

Establishing a communication channel with the public, reviving relationships with artist friends, and having contact with students through his teaching at Cooper Union were all important factors in Vanni's continued development. His new studio, the largest he had ever had, once again became a laboratory for new discoveries and explorations.

His activity in New York began with a series of works that, while maintaining a certain continuity with themes from the mid-'70s, soon introduced new elements and a changed stance. This is the period where the influence of New York's multi-culturalism is most evident. The paintings exhibit strong contrasts and discontinuities, reflecting the cultural multiplicity through a formal eclecticism that is explored to

(1) Therese Schwartz, *The Politicization of the Avant-Garde*, in *Art in America*, November-December 1971, p. 104.

extremes, and which will continue along these lines until the late '80s. Alternating themes are developed, to then reappear independently in new series of works. The constant element is a medley of disparate languages and iconologies that refer to earlier investigations, to his empirical experience of the outside world, and to his intellectual experience with the history of art. Certain influences and parallels generally remain hidden in his canvases, such as the language of the media, evoked in the multiple framings that exist simultaneously in a single work. And it is important to remember Vanni's deep admiration for Ariosto, particularly the ingenious construction of *Orlando furioso*, where parallel episodes occur at the same time. It is similar to music, where, in the central portion of a fugue, when various staggered themes meet up at one point, to then take off again, in counterpoint to each other. In the same manner, Vanni arranges his visual itineraries that guide "...the viewer to move within the canvas itself, where the painter has worked out the details of the voyage, the velocities of displacements, the obstacles, the rhythms, the illusory penetrations into depths as transparent as crystals or as dense as clouds; all meticulously orchestrated, but leaving the observer the freedom to interpret according to the associations of ideas dictated by his own experience, culture, and familiarity with language. And the painter acts as a guide along the visual pathways that he has prepared: shortcuts, detours, labyrinths, chutes, clearings where one can rest.² Thus the painting manipulates time as well as space."³

With the temporal dimension, perception is conditioned by another factor that is similar to music, namely how an element is influenced by what comes before and how it in turn influences what comes after. In music, a *forte* that follows a *piano* is perceived differently from one that follows a *fortissimo*. An *andante* that occurs between a *grave* and a *largo* assumes a different meaning from one that comes between two *allegro* passages. Likewise a perceptual stimulus and its relative duration condition the perception of what follows. Using

(2) Vanni illustrated his concept of a temporal reading of his works in a filmstrip he created in 1983, where long tracking shots are executed within individual paintings, and works are shown in their entirety only at the end.

(3) Gian Berto Vanni, *Quadri d'America*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria Schneider, Rome, March 16 – April 10, 1989.



From Night into Day, oil on canvas, 58 x 102 inches, 1980, collection of the artist (GV8005).

(4) In America Vanni has for the most part given his works titles in English, which allows him to capitalize the first letters of all the nouns. The various words thus become an equal number of subjects to which the title grants equal importance, emphasizing the multiple interpretations to which Vanni alludes in his compositions.

pictorial means, Vanni recreates a similar situation, whether contrasting material fields of consistent rhythms with areas modulated by intricate lines, or with optical illusions created from simultaneous color contrasts.

The painting that best represents these concepts is perhaps also the most important piece from his early years in New York: *From Night into Day*.⁴ This is a work of substantial size, where possible interpretations intersect through ambiguities that are pictorial, material, figurative, spatial and conceptual. *From Night into Day* revives a working method that, from this point on, will be a constant element in Vanni's creative process: the relationship between a spontaneous form and a rationalized intervention. The canvas is invaded by an energetic flow of very liquid paint, which runs through the painting, overrunning it with a freedom of movement that evokes an unleashed, primordial force of nature, like a volcanic eruption or an ocean wave. The technique employed clearly reveals the logic that presides of this and many subsequent creations, following a dynamic that

was already apparent in paintings of a more material nature from the '60s. The initial flow of paint represents the irrational, chaotic, formless element that spreads out while Vanni allows it to develop in natural fashion, intervening only marginally, tipping the stretcher frame or adding secondary flows of paint, always with the intention of *creating like nature*.⁵ This is followed by a long phase during which this initial tumult is subjected to a rationalization dictated by a careful and meditated analysis that detects suggestions that might "give form to those ideas that appear in embryonic form."⁶ Thus a coherent dialogue is created between material and intellect. In certain cases the material suggests, hints at possibilities that, like Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, are searching for a synthesis and a conscious activity. From this point on, the material – intellect dialogue will characterize the way Vanni's paintings are made, strengthening possibilities of multiple interpretations and the metamorphic and ambiguous quality he is looking for. And so edges, outlines, limitations, deviations appear, which weave paths that guide the observer through the work, temporally extending the visual experience. Within the principal articulations, paintings are created within a painting. Each one, apparently independent from the others, has its own figuration, which enters into conflict with those that are nearby. While in certain cases forms are articulated that suggest a three-dimensional space, in others the application of paint negate any sense of depth. Some recall Moreau's mythological landscapes, where the subject is barely hinted at graphically, through the free spreading out of watery colors. Others bring to mind the graphic mark and backgrounds of Kandinsky's geometric work; still others recall the shadowy depths of Rembrandt. But if each of these figurative elements has its own identity and coherence, this is constantly questioned by the spreading out of one into the other, in a shared contamination of forms, in contradiction of the differences that were heretofore stressed. And in fact, Vanni had meant for this composition to be akin to the

(5) This revives Klee's ideas about identifying oneself, through the creative act, with the generating force of nature, in order to be able to more fully represent that force (see Richard Verdi, *Klee and nature*, Rizzoli, New York, 1985).

(6) Gian Berto Vanni, *Quadri d'America*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria Schneider, Rome, March 16 – April 10, 1989.

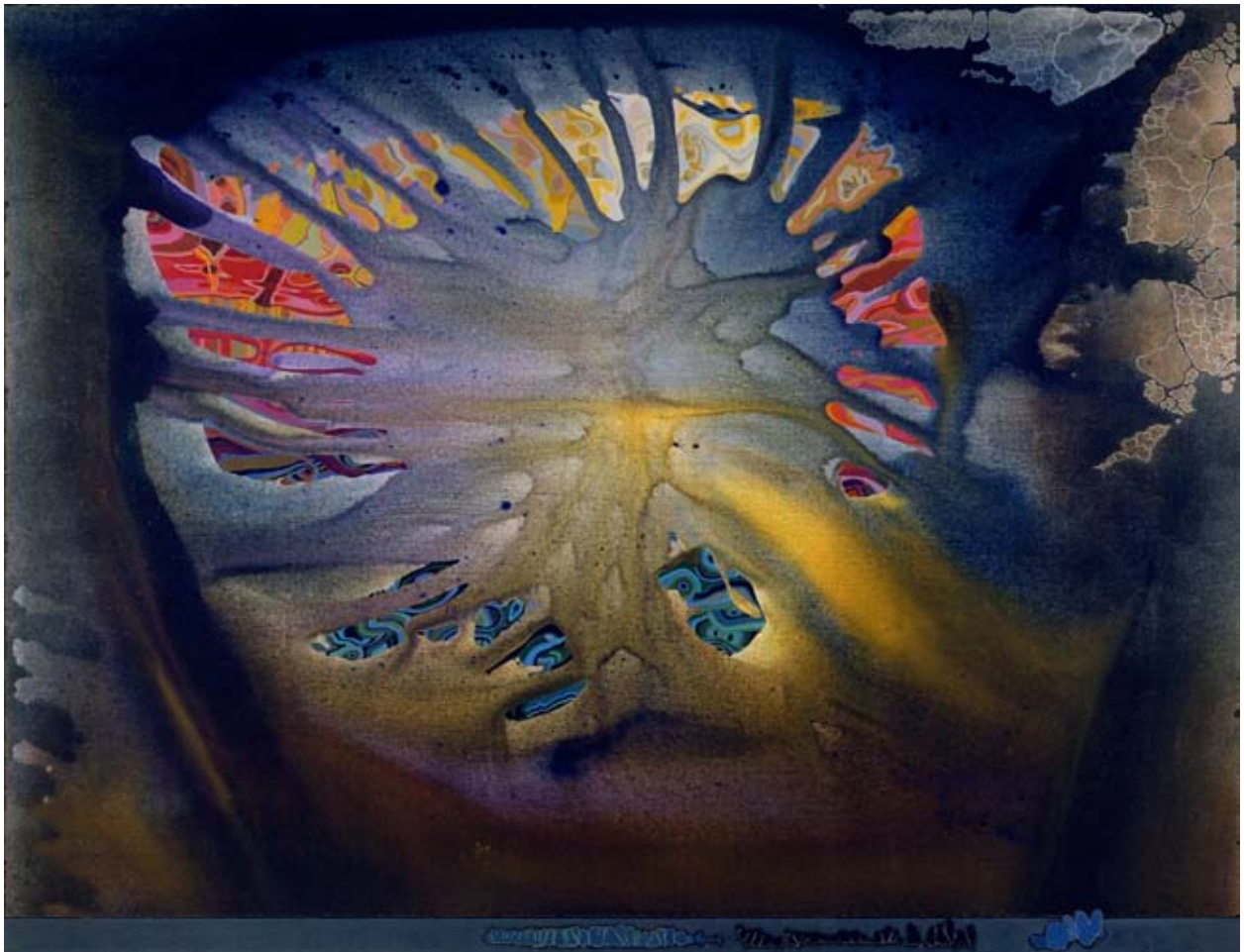
(7) Gian Berto Vanni, *Quadri d'America*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria Schneider, Rome, March 16 – April 10, 1989.

Sunstone and its Image, oil on canvas, 37 x 23 inches, 1981, New York, private collection (GV8113).



passage of a river that, along its path, traverses various places, landscapes with different identities, yet tied by the inevitable influence that one exercises upon the other over time, transforms into new and equally coherent syntheses. The places traversed are those of the tangible world, but also those of memory, those that Vanni calls the *landscapes of the mind*, composed of "...different elements that surface from distant experiences..."⁷ and which time conditions and transforms, through the sedimentation of new experiences. The formal differences that coexist in Vanni's paintings always allude to different, possible, realities, internal or external, or rather to a combination of the two, since external reality is always the result, conscious or unconscious of the inner reality. Each is equally true, credible, and thus intrinsically contradictory and susceptible to different readings, indeed as in Pirandello, where one does not know which is more real, the man or the mask, the person seen from within or the one seen from without.

The paintings that immediately follow explore, in one form or another, the compositional and formal elements developed in *From Night into Day*. Three directions of research emerge that will hold equal importance in the work of the next three years. The first is an emphasis on spatial and stylistic scansions, in the dialogue-comparison among the various canvases within a canvas, and in the points of passage or boundary between one reality and another. Here, Vanni revives a subject that was present earlier, in his *portraits of masks* of '63-64 and that will appear often in subsequent years: reflectivity with variation. He executes a series of small-scale, vertical works where the space is subdivided into two squares. A heavily creased piece of fabric is glued to the upper square, and its mirror image, graphically rendered, appears in the lower quadrant. Thus the rhythms and pathways of the upper square are reinterpreted in another language in the lower portion. A light colored glaze over the entire painting creates a subtle transitional tie between the two interpretations. But just when the eye believes it has



Sun dial, oil on canvas, 60 x 77 inches, 1982, New York, private collection (GV8207).

found a unifying logic to the whole, the deepest creases of the fabric give forth forms that are different from all the others, vividly colored, suggesting another reading, another reality, another painting ready to reveal itself.

These might be defined as bio-geomorphic forms, given their similarity to the world of cells and shells, but the agate and stone shapes are also directly related to the works exhibited at Rizzoli in '68. Here Vanni takes a critical second look at his past, reworking memories of microbiology and parasitology from his adolescence. He rediscovers Haeckel,⁸ as well as the studies of Oscar Forel.⁹ These forms are not meant to suggest surrealist readings, but, rather, spatial, temporal, and cultural interferences.

(8) In fact, the German biologist's drawings, which the young Vanni had admired in the original 1904 edition, had been republished a few years earlier, by Dover. (Ernst Haeckel, *Art forms in nature*, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1974.)



Homage to Andrea, oil on canvas, 50 x 75 inches, 1986, Rome, private collection (GV8601).

(9) Oscar Forel, a well-known Swiss psychiatrist and naturalist, published a study on tree barks, which he photographed throughout the world. (Oscar Forel, *Secrets des écorces – Synchronies*, Edita-Denoel, Lausanne, 1972.)

The second direction during these years is an investigation of bio-geomorphism, emphasized through a dualistic confrontation with the raw material. There are only a few works executed in this vein, but they are all significant, including for future developments. While it might seem that Vanni is giving free play to pure material expression in these works, it then becomes clear how any manifestation of *material exuberance* in fact serves to make the opposing analytical intervention even more evident. In *Sun dial* the lava flow becomes an explosion that radiates changing transparencies. But if an explosion normally is synonymous with immediacy and loss of control, here it is knowingly invoked in all its power to underscore the force of the corollary of bio-geomorphic forms inserted or extrapolated from the deflagration, determining its containment. The initial impetus thus is transformed into stagnant material. The strong expressionism of the explosive center serves to emphasize the

logical coldness of the crystalline incrustations that exist in counterpoint to it. The same process is repeated in paintings such as *Moments of a Transformation* or *Beginning*, from a few years later. With *Homage to Andrea*, a painting inspired by the double focal point of the Andrea Pozzo's great fresco on the ceiling of the church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome, important new elements are introduced.¹⁰ The double deflagration, for which we do not see the external repercussions, but rather only the internal suffering, creates the rectangular distribution of forms. This moves beyond the ray-like layout of *Sun dial*, and ties the geometric forms to the perimetral structure, rather than to the central fulcrum. This shift structurally recalls the architectures of the *Apotheosis of Sant'Ignazio*, also in the interruption of the continuity of the perimetral forms, presaging the idea of the shattered frame that Vanni will later develop. From the beginning, he attempted to avoid the use of the force of gravity in his work's composition. Many of the shapes in his paintings seem to levitate in space. Often the canvas laying flat when it is worked on, and it is only at the

GV8508, GV8509

(10) The reference to Andrea Pozzo's fresco is only compositional and is not meant to have symbolical meanings. This is an example of Vanni's theory that the same type of visual impact can be obtained using totally different methods.



From Kythira to Oruro, oil on canvas, 32 x 39 inches, 1982, Rome, private collection (GV8201).

End of Day, oil on canvas, 32 x 39 inches, 1983, New York, private collection (GV8308).



end that a small detail determines the orientation. Probably this preference has distant origins in his early observations at the microscope, where there is no top or bottom. Some of his paintings are signed on two sides, and the way one positions the piece determines a different interpretation, with different meanings. With *Homage to Andrea*, Vanni goes further, placing the canvas on the ceiling, so that the orientation is determined, as in the church of Sant'Ignazio, by the position of the viewer, thus changing the gravitational perception of the elements represented, and anticipating the cosmic works from the '90s and the series of ceiling pieces.

GV8120*

(11) The title of the painting emphasizes the intersecting references to Kythira, the Greek island where Vanni has his house and studio where he painted this work, and Oruro, the city in the Bolivian Andes where he had gone shortly before to photograph the local Mardi Gras festival (in its turn a product of Spanish contamination of an Incan rite).

The third direction of research, closest of all to the synthesis of *From Night into Day*, is developed in a series of works that explore the possibilities of synthesis and eclecticism. Works such as *A Stream of Thoughts** or *From Kythira to Oruro*¹¹ display an attenuation of the evidence of the dynamic aspects of the initial material. This does not mean that these canvases are static, but that the material is presented in its process of development, eliminating references to both its origins and



Stone Cocoons and Windy Shores, oil on canvas, 32 x 39 inches, 1982, collection of the artist (GV8203).

its destination. Here he rediscovers Kandinsky's observations about painting forms in their *becoming* rather than in their *being*. Many of these ideas came from in the observation of nature, particularly the sea.¹² For example the treatment of the painted edges¹³ in the works from this period evokes the effect of the sea along the rocky coast: jagged edges of rock and algae juxtaposed to the fluid edges of the sea and its undertow. In various works, however, the naturalistic elements go beyond the formal suggestion, to enter more obviously into the figuration. Sometimes they allude to landscape, as in *Life growing through Water and Earth* or *End of Day*. Others, as in *Stone Cocoons and Windy Shores*, allude to animal camouflage,¹⁴ where Vanni investigates the metamorphic elements that allow the subject to elude being recognized. Still others allude to still life, or more accurately to its Dutch definition, *stilleren*, immobile nature, a word that infers the possibility of an evolution beyond the moment that is represented, as in *Fossils grow under the Moon and the Sea*. In all these paintings, the naturalism is not intended to cross over into the figurative.

(12) Indeed, while living in New York, he spends four months every year on the Mediterranean, on a boat or in his house in Greece.

(13) Which recalls the theme of the *boundary* from the '50s.

GV8202, GV8308

(14) This subject had interested Vanni since he was young and he had delved into the subject through the studies of Roger Caillois.

GV8204



Remembering Venice, oil on canvas, 34 x 43 inches, 1982, Boulder, Colorado, private collection (GV8206).

This latter group also includes a piece, *Remembering Venice*, where Vanni explores paradox, negating the rule he has just enunciated, with the insertion of a figurative element into the painting. This new contradiction is meant to introduce another formal variable that multiplies the interpretive possibilities of his language, stressing its eclectic nature. In this work there is a female nude, a subject that Vanni had not painted for over thirty years, inserted into a compositional structure similar to that of other paintings from the period, making its detection more difficult. At first view the eye does not immediately recognize the presence of a body, and interprets it as a hill (this occurs when one observes the work itself, while in reproductions, with the reduction in scale, it is not obvious). Vanni also sought this double significance in order to

allude to the classical idea of the earth as a female entity. In a compositional solution that is typical of Vanni, the form of the body as a whole is reversed in a specular red image in the upper portion, which recalls the association between red and sky in his paintings from '58. The void created by the mirroring of the shapes is occupied by cellular forms, structured like agates, the concentric rings of which express various possibilities of chromatic transition between the colors in the lower and upper portions of the canvas. Their extremely tight texture recalls the Art Nouveau theme of *decoration as content*,¹⁵ demonstrated in all its expressive potential in the work of Klimt, an artist with whom Vanni has always felt great affinities. The goal of the compositional structure is to demonstrate how the represented subject is secondary to the manner in which it is represented, an open challenge to work being done at this time. To emphasize his distance from another attitude that was widely held at the time, namely the pillaging of past repertoires to turn them into iconological subjects of broad consumption, Vanni inserts homage to artists from the past through sibylline citations. These are similar in intention to those of the Renaissance masters to ancient art, suggesting through this device the idea that within a painting there must always still be something to discover. The title, *Remembering Venice*, refers to Ruskin's concept of the added cultural value of the find as a function of the stratification of the time to which it bears witness, and this gives some indication of the motivation for Vanni's use of formal citations in this canvas. The pose chosen is the classical Renaissance one of the outstretched Venus and alludes, with the accentuated torsion of the pelvis, to Titian's interpretation that "...celebrates the goddess as a divinity of animal beauty and sensual love."¹⁶ This is one of the few exceptions where Vanni admits into his pictorial work so obvious a reference to his passion for the female body, which he has never ceased to study through photography.

This work, so rich in intersecting references used programmatically to demonstrate how, in his eclectic world,

(15) Alessandra Comini, *Gustav Klimt*, Seuil, Paris 1975, p. 18.

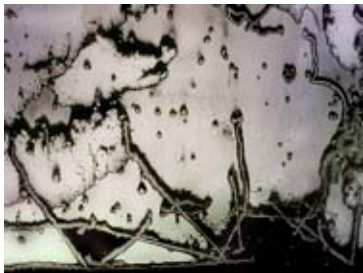
(16) Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, Harper & Row, New York, 1972, p. 160.

Images of Earth IV, 1983, etching and other techniques, 8 x 10 inches (GVD8308).



(17) At the Hosun and Juda galleries in Tokyo, the Nishida gallery in Nara, the M gallery in Obama, the Seijo gallery in Sendai and the Chikugo gallery in Kurume.

Elaboration of a photograph of ice crystals used in *Images of Earth IV*.



any form and any style could be utilized to enrich it, will remain an exception rather than the rule. However the basic approach can be seen in an entire group of paintings where a great variety of different styles coexist on the same canvas, as an intellectual provocation, where he continues to disconnect the formal coherence from a stylistic coherence.

Some works from Vanni's early years in New York were exhibited in a series of six solo exhibitions in Japan, held in the spring of '83.¹⁷ The crux of these exhibitions was an edition of etchings that Vanni executed for the occasion. He printed a photographic image of his work, using high contrast film, and then scraped away all the elements that were not of interest to him and drew in other elements, transforming the original image. He then transferred this matrix onto a plate through a photo-etching process. He then used acid to excavate areas he had left dark, creating physical borders, which in turn would hold the ink during the printing process. He further intervened during a second stage, etching into the empty spaces with

graphic signs that entered into conflict with the surrounding material. The finished plate was inked with various colors, resulting in an effect similar to the use of glazes in his works on canvas.

Vanni spent more than a month in Japan, a period that would end up being as significant as his first trip to Paris, in '48. He was particularly struck by the relationship of Japanese culture to nature, expressed through garden design that obeys "...an artificiality that must not remove anything or add anything to the richness and expressiveness of nature, but which must represent it, this nature itself, after having interpreted it and exposed its most significant aspects, as if the *macrocosm* had to be rediscovered and recognized in the *microcosm*."¹⁸ In this art, every stone shape has a name and a particular symbology. Vanni also was fascinated by the transposition of plastic and visual properties into linguistic contexts that might seem naturally extraneous, such as the *Kare san-sui*, gardens where the gravel is combed to obtain the effect of running water. The stone undergoes a visual transformation that transposes its natural message of solidity into one of liquidity fixed in eternity. The expressiveness of these gardens was further emphasized by their relationship with the pared-down, geometric architecture. Interior spaces opening onto gardens are regulated by black and white *shoji* screens. Nothing is entrusted to chance; every opening, every path, is designed to guide the observer through defined experiences. Vanni found profound affinities in this art, which studies nature in its most intimate details, to recreate something like it and to go beyond. He was fascinated by the process of intellectualizing that allowed these transpositions and the development of parallel meanings. He rediscovered themes he had addressed from a completely different direction, and his experience in Japan was all the more enriched, as he came away with new suggestions for his work.

Upon his return to New York Vanni continued to work in the direction he had begun earlier, with *Veins of the Earth*, a large canvas painted before his trip to Japan. In the work from this

(18) Pietro Porcinai – Attilio Mordini, *Giardini d'occidente e d'oriente*, Fratelli Fabbri Editori, Milan, 1966, p. 134.



Veins of the Earth, oil on canvas,
78 x 104 inches, 1982, New York,
private collection (GV8215).

period, the geomorphic structure loses its crystalline origin, in favor of a layering, where water becomes tone or stone becomes liquid. The earlier flows of paint disappear, making way for a new technique, where Vanni revives one of the constants in his work: hiding, or making just vaguely discernible, the fundamental process. The canvas is begun with the creation of multiple streams of paint that run along the canvas, segmenting it into irregular bands and triangles, creating a scansion that distantly recalls the prismatic divisions of his earlier work, but without the previous mechanisms, now replaced by a sort of organic geometry. The areas of canvas left over from the signs drawn by the streams of paint are filled in with fields of color that thicken along the edges, assuming the morphology



Japan I, oil on canvas, 34 x 46 inches, 1984, New York, private collection (GV8404).

of blocks of sandstone eroded by the elements. Vanni would cover up all the streams of color that were not significant for the overall composition. He then covered the entire work in a glaze, emphasizing the expressive potential of the underlying material and enriching the chromatic intensity of the streams of paint or brightening up certain areas of dense color. As a result of this process, material becomes sign and sign becomes material. The formal coherence of the work is then refuted by the presence of certain relatively small elements that convey other logics. In *Veins of the Earth* this is a long dark form that suggests a breach, a wound that raises doubts about the geomorphic mass, transforming it into a film that, lacerated, reveals an underlying reality. To amplify the work's interpretive possibilities he adds a diaphanous layer that passes in front of certain planes and behind other, implying an aerial placement of these forms that further negates the geomorphic substance of the work and reintroduces spatial ambiguities. With this development, and as a direct consequence of his trip to Japan, Vanni begins a period where stylistic eclecticism become less provocative but no less significant, in perfect assonance with Japanese culture, which values "what is suggested rather than what is stated."¹⁹

(19) Langdon Warner, *The enduring art of Japan*, Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1978, p. 100.

Calcareous sedimentations in Pamukkale, Turkey (Photo by G.B. Vanni, 1982).



Japan II, oil on canvas, 34 x 43 inches, 1984, collection of the artist (GV8405).



(20) There is an evident connection between the freely flowing colors of *Japan I* with a natural phenomenon that he observed in Turkey at the site of Pamukkale where natural ponds of water are totally coated with a calcareous sedimentation due to the calcium rich waters.

GV8406

The full development of this approach can be seen the following year, when Vanni produces two paintings that indicate the two principal directions his work will take: *Japan I*²⁰ and *Japan II*. The first direction opens the way to the theme of the vertical flow, presaging a widespread fluidity seen in the most significant work of this period, *Metamorphosis*. The second direction revives, in a new context, the theme of ocean reflections, seen in the work from the early '60s. The physical laws that determine these compositional structures are inspired by the properties of fluids.

In *Metamorphosis*, a rarified material merges with the field below, in the presence of small biological forms that lie outside the ethereal-watery atmosphere of the rest of the work. Their more precise facture might suggest primary cells, parasitically related to the flow, but also, and contrarily, they might be the last remains of a pre-existing world that have escaped from the collapse brought on by the invasive flow. The coexistence of these two components tied by an evolving and ambiguous relationship creates a metamorphic environment, where agates become amoebas, which merge

in an aquatic veil, destined to crack like parched earth. Or there might occur an opposite, generative process, whereby cells are created, like knots in wood, from accidents of the flow, and multiply and absorb the surrounding material. The cascade-flow itself is refuted by the presence of a frame dense with graphic inflections that allude to stony cracking, negating its aquatic origins. This element is meant to represent the idea of the *frame* (expressed in earlier works, but which from this point on will always be present) that separates the internal space of the painting from the external space. After having established its limit with a boundary line, Vanni exceeds this boundary with certain elements that pertain to the internal space of the canvas, negating the frame's function and overturning its meaning, transforming it into a means to express the ambiguity of the painting's physical limits. This intervention recapitulates earlier contradictions through a logical-visual expedient that, staggering planes had established a reciprocal logic in the internal situation, bring into question the compositional order of the work, creating a situation of uncertainty for a spatial coherence that suddenly seems lacking. Through this, there opens up the Pirandellian problem of the end of the work imagined and the beginning of tangible reality, with all the interpretive implications that this implies. One can perceive here Vanni's intention to shift the problem from a formal to a philosophical field.

An analysis of *Metamorphosis* reveals a work where the various components are intimately tied to each other, moving away from earlier incongruities and eclecticism. Vanni thus creates a situation where it is impossible to complete any logical path, through the emergence of the work's true intrinsic subject: doubt, understood as the existential, regenerating force of any and every intellectual process. This subject, heretofore latent in his work, becomes a key element in this work, where even the title, *Metamorphosis*, implies a non-acceptance of reality as it appears.



Metamorphosis, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches, 1984, collection of the artist (GV8406).

It is worth noting that the titles Vanni gives to his works are almost never tied to aspects internal to the paintings, but represent an outside observation, generally made later, that provides a suggestion for interpretation. These are allegorical expressions with apparently distant ties, to set the observer on the path of associations of ideas. References to Greek mythology

should be interpreted in this sense. Vanni had utilized such references earlier, in the form of a counterpoint to the accentuated material nature of the works of the early '60s. Here, however, the references return as a suggestion of the metamorphic relationship that, for Vanni, becomes a form of re-actualization of myth. Myth here is intended as the allegorical-philosophical expression of our cultural roots. For Vanni, reactualizing myth does not mean carrying out a nostalgic, folkloric operation. Rather it means charging the formal layouts of his paintings with an evocative potential that has a great number of ties rooted in a common imagination that merges with philosophical concepts. In fact, his preferred interpretation of mythology resides in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, where there seems to be no boundary between reality, myth, and concept. For Vanni, these evocations are an ever-current reference for considerations of our existence in relationship to the forces that agitate us internally or by which we are conditioned in the tangible world.

The image of the flow of pictorial material from the top downward, central to the imagery of *Metamorphosis*, is also present in the work of other painters working at the same time, such as Larry Poons or Gerard Richter. But in the works of these artists, the expression of the material is the subject, representing itself as the pertinent event, in real scale in terms of the canvas that contains it, underscored by the plastic treatment of the mass of color and the pictorial surface. In Vanni's work from this same period, however, the physical, tangible aspect of the material remains secondary. The emphasis is on the transmutations evoked by an iconology that, alluding to various constituent aspects of natural forms, suggests the transformation of one material into another. Moreover for Vanni, it is always important to present material both as mass (not only solid, but also liquid or aerial) and as film. And it is in the latter condition that the material can be lacerated or treated as a transparent veil. The canvases where the flows of paint dissolve into almost watercolor-like transparencies, Olitski's work or Morris Louis' veils might come to mind. But in their work, the expression resides in the



Variations on the Past Tense, oil on canvas, 78 x 137 inches, 1985, Morristown, ITT Corporate Collection (GV8505).

GV8506

(21) In the construction of this work, Vanni had in mind the morning car trips through the pinewoods of Ravenna, along the sea, and D'Annunzio's *La pioggia nel pineto*. This was more or less the same period when, still an adolescent, he was making anatomical drawings of insects and terrariums.

transparency itself, while for Vanni, the transparent handling of paint becomes a means to establish a diaphanous veil in space that allows one to intuit something that lies beneath.

All the themes confronted, from *Veins of the Earth* on can be found in the most ambitious painting of this period, *Embrace*, which is more than twenty-four feet long and six and a half feet high. In this work, the two bands of horizontal rivulets of the side panels come together into the central panel, in a large vertical flow. The work as a whole evokes the passage before a coastline at dawn, where the veiled sky creates a mother-of-pearl atmosphere and slender shrubs punctuate the space,²¹ squeezing the observer in an embrace that projects him toward the central opening, a portal of vital and sensual energy, to the final red spasm that constitutes the work's core. In a different reading, the horizontal textures have a direct association with the structure of the wings of trestles that seem to come from a prehistoric world, now calcified. The transparency of the lighter parts keep alive the tension between properties of mass and veil, and

the delicacy of the articulations suggests the permanence of a possibility of flight. The central flow, very close to *Metamorphosis*, in this context can be associated to the insect's head. Along its central axis it contains a colony of small forms that suggest a labyrinthine internal anatomy, revealed through the views of the body it contains.²² This image of a body that is at the same time calcified and pulsating creates an ambiguous monument that suggests a terrifying vision of reality, despite its esthetic beauty. The idea of the fossil body is further expressed in an even more explicit painting the following year, *Divertissement sur le thème de Daphne**, with the presence of a human figure.²³ It is one of the works where the dialogue between material and intellect becomes tightest. In fact it is no accident that, as in Cagli's work, he creates that same strange relationship between material and image so that "...through artifice, the material has the consistency of an image, and, correlatively, the image has the consistency of material."²⁴

Vanni's long, complex investigations of the '80s absorbed New York's multi-cultural life and the experience in Japan, mediated by a view of the entire history of art, revisited through teaching. The work of this period, in addition to being shown at Vanni's open studios, was exhibited in his final show at the Schneider gallery in Rome, in the spring of '89 and at Galerie 88 in Luxembourg, in the autumn of that year. On this occasion, *Quadri d'America* is published, which reproduces the principal works from this decade and in which Vanni expounds the ideas that support his work.

Vanni's work as a teacher has made a significant and stimulating contribution to his explorations as a painter. After various experiences in other New York colleges,²⁵ in '84 he was offered a position teaching two courses at Cooper Union, the most prestigious art school in New York. From this point on his activity as a painter would develop in tandem with his work as an instructor. At Cooper Union he found an environment that was intellectually familiar, as other former students of



(22) In this regard, also see *Woman of Time* (GV8612), *Ouranos-Gea* (GV8612), *Phoenix* (GV9036), and *Ventiseiesimo canto / Twenty-sixth canto* (GV8927).

(23) Parallel to these themes, the painting repropose a discourse similar to *Remembering Venice*. In fact, in addition to the provocative use of the portrait, it contains a precise reference to Bronzino's *Allegory of the Triumph of Venus*, where one can easily recognize Venus in the overturned outline of the figure represented. GV8613*

(24) Enrico Crispolti, *I percorsi di Cagli*, exhibition catalogue, Castel dell'Ovo, Naples, 1982, p. 40.

(25) Vanni had also taught at York College and at Hunter College.



Embrace, oil on canvas, 78 x 291 inches, 1985, collection of the artist (GV8506). On the left a detail of the central section of the painting.

(26) Irwin Rubin and Robert Slutzky both artists that were in his class at Yale University.

(27) The class had been previously taught for many years by sculptor Reuben Kadish that recommended Vanni as a successor in the appointment.

Albers were also teaching there,²⁶ continuing the tradition of integrating empirical experience and theoretical knowledge.

One of the two courses taught by Vanni, *Color Perception*, is part of the curriculum that all students must follow in order to take painting courses. With certain variations, it is equivalent to the course created by Albers at the Bauhaus and further developed during his years at Black Mountain College, and later at Yale. Through empirical experiments, students learn about color relationships and interactions. Vanni's contribution to this field of study has been to have the students first execute projects using colored paper collages, then later rework their initial project, using colors mixed on a palette, facilitating a progression from the theoretical to the practical. Following his students' work and observing their reactions to the discovery of color, Vanni was moved to experiment with new relationships in his own paintings.

The other course he has taught, *Art Survey*, comes out of an established Cooper Union tradition, whereby art history courses are accompanied by a course taught from the subjective viewpoint of an artist.²⁷ Various lessons were devoted to examining works created by different cultures, comparing them to point out stylistic differences or affinities in the treatment of great existential themes. Other lessons focused on the ways that different cultures, through historical, economic, and social circumstances, express their particular view of art. Still other lessons dealt with the ways in which materials influence representation. The themes for his classes also were

a pretext for showing quantities of images to illustrate ideas and stimulate the students' visual perception.

The need to have the right images to visually demonstrate his ideas led Vanni to amass his own photo archive of images of sculpture, painting and architecture, made up of images he had shot during his many trips. Seminars developed around the images he created to support his ideas began, in their turn, to influence his own iconological choices, leading him to reconsider art from the past in relationship to his own painting.

In the late '80s the Art Survey class was replaced by a course in methods and techniques of the ancient masters, and Vanni integrated the previous experiences with more technically oriented new ones. This gave him an opportunity to resume his experimentation with classical techniques on panels and walls, delving into painting methods such as egg tempera and fresco. He began reviving the use of egg tempera in his own small panel pieces, and unburdened by the demands of larger scale work, he became freer in his stylistic solutions and extremely prolific.

Up until this point Vanni had found it difficult to work on small-scale pieces, finding they could not accommodate the contrasts and relationships that most interested him. A small work could no longer act as a panoramic opening onto an external world to be explored, but, rather, seemed like a small window with a view onto a single subject, tied to a single viewpoint. He understood that in order to express the meanings he was interested in he had to change the nature of the painting itself, so it might have another kind of relationship with the viewer. The way he achieved the solution to this problem was an almost literal demonstration of the Bauhaus idea, so important to Albers, of the development of artistic language through continuous technical experimentation. During the lessons where he initiated the students into the uses of egg tempera, Vanni worked along with them, preparing panels that he would lean over while working, as if at a desk. He replaced broad applications of paint with background made up of extremely minute brushstrokes,

Byzantine Memory, egg tempera and gold on panel, 10 x 8 inches, 1989, New York, private collection (GV8904).



characteristics of tempera technique, in a sort of writing of the painted surface. He found himself in the same position as a painter of miniatures, particularly in terms of the intimist relationship with painted work and a consequent loss of awareness of the surrounding world. Reviving this traditional technique, he succeeded in eliminating any trace of the real scale of the material in the finished work.

The contradictions that were inherent in the multiple meanings of his larger compositions are now explored through episodes of contrasting pairs. He also moves beyond the themes developed in the larger works, with a revival of stylistic and cultural



Mycenean Suite II, egg tempera and gold on panel, 8 x 10 inches, 1990, Rome, private collection (GV9019).

elements from experiences long past. The various themes are dealt with in a sequence where the solution expressed by the first tempera provokes new problems that are explored in the second, the third, and so on, resulting in groups of works developed in parallel to each other.

The first groups emerged from Vanni's observations on the gold grounds on Trecento Senese painting, where the gold, here and there eroded, reveals the underlying red earth ground. This series (*Herculanum, Ravenna – the Barbarians – the Gold, Secondo Palinsesto / Second Palimpsest*) evokes—the idea of the archeological find, where decay and preciousness coexist. The red base, evolved into a vivid vermilion that is scraped and ruined, enters into competition with the gold for its chromatic intensity. The relationship creates an interesting color interaction, taking advantage of the reflective qualities of the metal, depending on the incidence of light. This effect is broadly used in Byzantine icons, where the portion covered with gold is the first form that one sees in the darkness of a church, to then recede into the background in relationship to the painted figures, when

GV8901, GV8902

GV8907

The Oracle I, egg tempera on panel,
10 x 8 inches, 1990, collection of the
artist (GV9007).



the angle of the light changes. In these tempera works, Vanni reveals the appeal that the anti-classical approach of Byzantine painting had always held for him. It suggested valuable indications for his own investigation of formulations located outside a spatial-temporal situation, which appear to the eye of the observer as a moment suspended in time. This is seen in his tempera works where backgrounds of colors consumed by abrasions suspend in space forms that are treated like draperies, expressing a co-mingling of elegance and solemnity. In *Byzantine Memory*, suspended elements are wedged into the



Struggle of Land and Sea, egg tempera on panel, 7 x 10 inches, 1994, New York, private collection (GV9405).

surrounding color-space, which, unlike the canvases, does not allude to other aerial or aquatic elements, but only to its own atmosphere. In *The Oracle I*, the subject, represented by five brushstrokes freely linked by two elements of small polychrome forms, is placed at the center of the composition. The mark of the brush is thus solemnized in a fixed, atemporal space, stripping the form of any possible playful reading.

The principal themes developed in the tempera works include a series of small, refined landscapes, such as *Affabulazione* or *Les Adieux*, where in the foreground, agglomerations of rectangular forms are quite similar to the figurations Klee uses to represent Tunisian buildings. Indeed Klee's creative process seems particularly relevant to Vanni's tempera pieces. There is the intimist relationship with the work and a working process whereby many pieces are produced simultaneously, often one derived from the other. But Klee and Albers are not the only artists Vanni draws upon in these works. The allusion to Cranach can be seen in *Hommage to the Met*, or Bosch in *From the Paste Tense*, or Burri in the gold fissures in *Village of the Golden Desert*. In a more general sense, there

GV8932

GV8933

GV9102

GV9420

GV9429

Unstable Stability, egg tempera and gold on panel, 32 x 39 inches, 1995, New York, private collection (GV9535).



GV9720

GV9731

GV9146, GV9147, GV9148

Hellenistic Gymnasium, Termessos, Turkey (photo by G.B. Vanni, 1986).



are Baroque arabesques in *Struggle of Land and Sea* and the non-mechanical geometries of Gothic miniatures in *Byzantine Frontispiece* or *Byzantine Variation #12*. Some influences simply name themselves, as in *Etruscan Places* or *Blois*, or in *Birth of a Stone*, where one sees the cracklings that Vanni loves to use to characterize geomorphic materials.

Sometimes the sequences form polyptychs, where individual panels have been assembled on a larger panel, creating the *Unstable Stability* that gives its name to the first of these works. The theme of *discontinuity* is introduced, as the interruption of a structure where the observer intuits and then reconstitutes an underlying order. This idea comes from Vanni's experiences in Turkey, in the city of Termessos, where he saw a Hellenistic façade that had been violently shaken by an earthquake, and where his eye read the continuity of the design, despite the dislocation of the stones.

Vanni's attention to a technique as ancient as egg tempera is also an indication of how he enjoys engaging in a polemic, pursuing an inverse path to the multi-media spectacle of

current artistic production. But this is not a reactionary or conservative rejection of modernity, and he keeps pace with experimentations in graphics and color, using a computer. Both his life and his work are characterized by a marked curiosity and passion. This openness led him to purchase a computer in the early '80s, as he saw this new tool as a fascinating means for further exploring reality. He has continued to use the computer, experimenting with its creative possibilities. His research often leads him to explore the progressive loss of recognizability of photographic images in successive transformations, where he remains more interested in recording the evolutionary process rather than a print of any definitive results. Sometimes, in a strictly experimental context, he has tried making digital images of his works, to see new directions where he might push his creativity. The computer continues to be a means for experimentation, for exploring reality and discovering its aspects that had otherwise eluded him, attempting to "extract the meaning of images and not only information."²⁸

At the same time that Vanni has worked on his tempera pieces he has continued to paint larger works that show the influence of his activities as a teacher, and teaching also has led him to write down some of his reflections on art. The paintings from the early '90s reveal his desire to show his artistic choices as ideological positions. It is not that his earlier works lacked such an intellectual approach, but this is the first time where it is so obvious, seen, for example, in *Power of the Center* and *Spirits of War*. All Vanni's subsequent explorations are influenced by these two works, which are firmly anchored in a conceptual and philosophical approach.

Power of the Center expresses this stance even in its title, which underscores not only the compositional content, but even more an homage to Arnheim, whose analytical views have always been valued by Vanni. This is one of the extremely rare exceptions where Vanni gives the title a programmatic and explicative function, abandoning his usual evocative approach. In *Power of the Center* the theme of the explosion

(28) Valentina Puccioni, Interview with Gian Berto Vanni, New York, October 2000.

GV9103

Power of the Center, oil on canvas, 114 x 75 inches, 1990, collection of the artist (GV9038).



as creative force and iconological reference is replaced by a microscopic disorder made up of material that does not create forms, but expresses a rarified space. According to the principle of entropy outlined by Arnheim, this new space might succeed the destructive order of an explosion's radial force.²⁹ This space, which occupies the central portion of the painting, is surrounded by forms anchored to the frame, which is articulated symmetrically along two Cartesian axes. The order expressed by the geometry of these symmetries enters into conflict with the disorder of the central space, creating a tension and, through this, the expectation that something will happen there. The lateral forms have lost their bio-geomorphic definability and are structured in Baroque arabesques, with a helicoidal structure taken from shells, which gives them a particular position in the progression in a space dense with energy. Vanni placed this work on the ceiling, as he had done with *Homage to Andrea*, to disconnect the internal relationships from gravitational ties and to create an equal relationship among all the sides, in contrast to the central thrust.

In *Spirits of War*, the ordered and harmonious cosmic relationships of *Power of the Center* are expressed through a violent laceration. The perimetral forms have lost their roundish volutes, to acquire a spiked appearance, with contorted roots that assault the surrounding space, coagulating toward the center and expanding toward the periphery. The central space is pervaded by a light green, almost metallic, luminescence – a dematerialization of the olive branches that, shaken by the wind, expose the underside of the leaves.³⁰ The lightness at the center of the painting is opposed to the tragic nature of the perimetral forms, reminiscent of olive roots transforming into dried out bats, seen by Vanni in the market of La Paz in Bolivia, hung in festoons on the carts of the layqua Quechua healers who use them to prepare potions.³¹ Their appearance also brings to mind rodents that, in their destructive voracity, are about to devour the aerial central form and reduce it to shreds.³²

The conflict-ridden relationship between a rarified center and

(29) Rudolf Arnheim, *Entropy and Art, An Essay on Order and Disorder* 1983.

(30) The olive leaves are also a reference to the landscape of the Greek islands, often buffeted by violent winds.

(31) Vanni was struck by this image during a trip to Bolivia in the spring of '82.

(32) Vanni's association of rats with war comes from Camus's *The Plague*, a book he has always admired, and which the French writer had just completed when Vanni met him in Paris, in 1948.

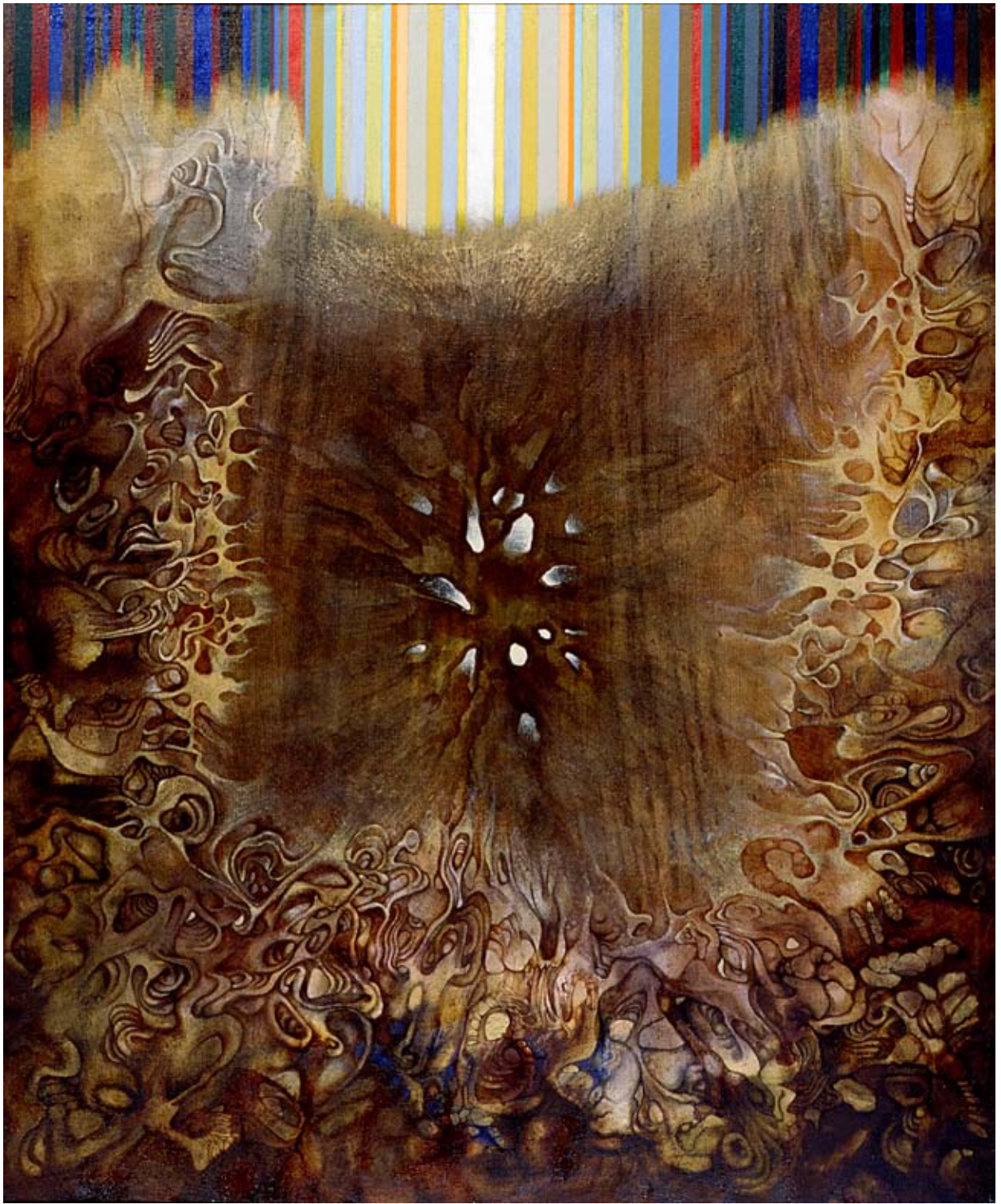


Spirits of War, oil on canvas, 50 x 62 inches, 1991, collection of the artist.

GV9104

GV9228

an extremely active and worked over peripheral structure is explored in a series of large canvases painted in the years that follow. *Rebirth* exhibits a possible evolution of this space, in a Baroque convulsion that anticipates the resurrection of the dried forms of *Spirits of War* in a painting from the following year, *Apocalypse*. The vital exuberance of the perimetral forms in *Apocalypse* is also expressed in the center, in the vitality of an organic body that emerges from the material and articulates it in muscular forms. The element of conflict is seen in a series of colored bands that occupy the upper edge of the work, in a chromatic spectrum that seems to be the expression of a revelatory force.



GV9436

GV9437

Apocalypse is both conclusive and transitional as a work, and it prepares the way for a re-emergence of compositions that are solidly anchored to a gravitational base. This is seen in two extremely similar works painted two years later: *Spirits of the Air – Yellow* and *Spirits of the Air – Blue*. The compositional layout is closely tied to the landscape, with an earthlike base overhung by an aerial space. The lower portion relates back to the geomorphic structure of *Veins of the Earth*, with stratified elements with openings that reveal biomorphic inlays. The central depression alludes to a valley, filled by the outline of a reflective body of water that establishes the horizon line. The upper aerial space is painted with a rarified texture and charged with potential energy, seen earlier, beginning with *Power of the Center*. Applying an ideological reading, Vanni re-proposes, through painting supported by a refined formalism, a mythical representation of contemporary reality, which correlates with his travels in India.

GV9505

The same compositional structure is seen in a large work from the following year, *Earth made of Air*. The material field that invades the entire canvas does not express an identifiable form, but is characterized by a hot, central luminescence. Against this, the outline of a valley stands out, expressed by a subtle graphic line, interrupted by three bio-geomorphic, vertical forms that are transformed into fluid lines, forming a flow that, as in *Metamorphosis*, traverses the frame. Here, long views of the work as a whole alternate with zoom-like views of details. In the montage of images that form in the mind of the observer, the two elements acquire equal importance, eliminating their relative dimensional difference. This inverts the rule of pre-Renaissance painting, whereby the principal subject is enlarged at the expense of other subjects. Here, attention is drawn precisely to the minutiae of forms that support the dialectical counterpoint with the material mass. This scale of values is confirmed by a figurative reading of the work, interpreting the lower portion as a female pelvis and the three central forms as its creative life-giving force.

Apocalypse, oil on canvas, 68 x 56 inches, 1992, collection of the artist.

The reference to a *goddess-mother-earth* concept does not represent a shift toward a figurative representation, but rather the appropriation of another interpretive significance of the work. In the same manner Vanni exploits distortions of the perspective space, staggering the lower frame from the upper one, to suggest two frames, thus emphasizing the unity of the material field. This ambiguity is further complicated by the horizon line created by a band of small forms in the upper part of the painting, which stands out in negative from the material, floating above it like oil on water. It seems to allude to a possible underlying work, below an upper layer that might be lifted like a veil or like a layer of fresco. This painting represents the most concise expression of all the spatial, interpretive and stylistic ambiguities that have characterized Vanni's mature work.

Vanni's more recent work revives his explorations of pictorial language, integrating larger-scale works with the poetics developed in the tempera pieces. In this regard his interest in the esthetics of ruins is revealed to be extremely important. Developing the Romantic approach expressed by Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*, Vanni began wondering if his appreciation of the ruins stemmed from the continued existence of the original formulation of the work or from the effects of time on it or, more precisely, the synthesis of both. Examining a surviving column at Ephesus, was he searching for an ideal reconstruction of the temple of Artemis or was he struck by the intensity of the void and the frame of the swampland from which marble fragments emerged amid aquatic plants? Or, standing before a crumbling, 17th-century fresco, glimpsing a 14th-century fresco below, was he really enjoying the combination of the two and the mold that covered them? This led him to consider the compositional and emotional effect that might result from the insertion of these elements into a totally different context, consciously reproducing the effects of time or chance.

But this cross-pollination between the work of man and that of time has another aspect, examined by Vanni after



Earth made of Air, oil on canvas,
77 x 96 inches, 1995, New York,
collection of the artist.

a visit to the large altars and gigantic statues of Nemrut Dag in Turkey: “fortunately no one was there, neither guides nor tourists. Only the wind. I was overcome by a great sense of sadness. I found myself in a grandiose Baroque field of death. Here some king, no one of any great importance, thought he had found immortality through the grandiosity of the work. The enormous heads, fallen to earth, look at you with desperate, increasingly spent eyes. The essence of the stone gains the upper hand ... over the work of man. It is still recognizable – that hand – but for how much longer? What with erosion, lichen, will the crevices make ever more intense incursions into that face,



until the rocky form dominates? And I thought of another process of nature, inverse to this; when a stain, a cloud, a vortex of a stream or the crevice of a stone suggest a face, a body that, for a moment, is more intense, *more realized*, more constructed in its making, than these sculptures in their disintegration due to the same forces; and surely there is a meeting point..."

Akhenaton, Bacchus and the Bacchantes, oil on canvas, 68 x 72 inches, 1997, Rome, private collection (GV9743).

GV9919, GV0004, GV0033
GV0003
GV0028
GV0102

These thoughts contain explanations to certain anthropomorphic images in Vanni's work. Undoubtedly this is the motive behind the face of Akhenaton in *Akhenaton*, *Bacchus and the Bacchantes* and the white spaces that recreate the illusion, in the lower portion of legs of people and horses in the battle scenes of Paolo Uccello. Thus in various other recent canvases that are inspired by mythology, the bodies seem to be created by forces in motion, where, for a moment, like clouds, like water, they create, almost by chance, the illusion of a new form. In his most recent works Vanni continues to develop this dialectic between preciousness and decay, which become preciousness anew, as in *Layers of Memories*, *Love Song of the Multiple Reds* or *Labyrinth in a Microcosm*. In some works, such as *They don't know what is Happening Behind the Stage*, *Voyage through Lacquers and Jades* or *Across Mountains and Valleys* he explores new compositional structures. One can intuit the investigation of new elements, to be developed in some later cycle of works, where the intersecting meanings of his expressive labyrinths will multiply.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, Vanni's pictorial work is marked by an extremely personal vision, far from the currents and movements that characterized the second half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless his research does not lie outside that of his contemporaries and nor does it shrink from commenting upon the surrounding historic and artistic reality.

The issues he confronts are profoundly contemporary, and it is interesting to observe here, briefly, how they have evolved parallel to the historical phases through which he has passed.

After an initial phase, where he was interested principally in European art and the investigations undertaken by the historical avant-garde movements, Vanni began to integrate increasingly diverse and distant realities. These developed over the course of the years, in a parallel cosmogony, where metaphorical structures assume multiple meanings, tied by contradictory relationships. With these *complex structures*, he has been able to express his experience of a contemporary world that finds its most significant characterization in the globalization of languages and contents.

Vanni's formulations are not meant to be a critique of this condition, but rather a growing awareness that it is accepted as a given. But his work also expresses his world's unresolved contradictions: for example, how the complexity of the

communications network does not necessarily correspond to a generalized comprehension; or how the simultaneity of languages is resolved in the multiplication of contradictions and misunderstandings; or how a proliferation of information hides the substance of contents.

Vanni has chosen to express this phenomenology with his own pictorial means, which he attempts to devise with continually renewed formal solutions. Parallel to the evolution of reality, in only a few decades, from a Eurocentric and Cartesian structure to a global structure, Vanni's paintings have grown into increasingly complex and rich compositions.

As we have seen, since 1965 Vanni has been successfully formulating his pictorial syntax, in a dialectic based on syncretism. His earlier work consists principally of a progressive acquisition of all its constituent languages. In the period immediately following this early work, he explores the consequences of his research, coming up with solutions that move beyond the painting in space and time. This was an obligatory stage, which provided him with temporal discontinuity, a fundamental element for his approach. If spatial-stylistic ambiguity is immediately evident and already present in his works of '65, temporal ambiguity comes into play ten years later. The simultaneous presentation, on the same canvas, of various moments of the pictorial process, in fact, represents a rupture of the unity of time, now added to the previously abandoned unity of space. In this way Vanni expresses his synthesis of the two movements that had most influenced him in his early years as a painter: Futurism and Cubism. His language thus becomes enriched by all the elements needed for the development of his poetics.

This is articulated in spatial contradictions created by conflicting elements, superimposed on various levels, affirming their own existence through the negation of presupposed systems of logic that support other alternative readings. To achieve these complex structures, Vanni also refers to grammars taken from

literature, such as a Pirandellian interpretation of reality, or the delicate balances dictated by counterpoint in music.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the images that take form are expressive of a synthesis of disparate experiences. In this way he arrives at a *systematic eclecticism*, to express the increasingly manifest superimposition of heterogeneous linguistic references, through the use of extremely diverse formal components. The choice of a syncretistic structuring of language finds legitimacy, not only in the interpretation of everyday reality, but also in the importance that Vanni places on a dialectical comparison between the contemporary artist and any moment of artistic research in the past, released from chronological hierarchies. This confrontation, while liberated from the concept of evolution in terms of the history of art, underlines a need to keep alive, in the present, ties with figurative situations that have come before. However Vanni does not want this influx to be confused with anecdotal quotations, with which he finds himself in open contention. If anything, he intends to confirm, through the insertion of these elements, the actual coexistence of esthetic stimuli freed from their spatial-temporal placements. In this way a museum can end up being as stimulating as a contemporary art exhibit. And in a further expansion of the concept, this is how, today, one can be subjected to equally diversified visual and linguistic experiences, in a continuous succession that juxtaposes the most disparate images. Indeed, the microscopic detail of cellular life can coexist with a satellite image of areas of desertification on the earth. Vanni uses these references in his complex architecture, aggregating them with references from the psychical realm of his memories. In this *museum of memory* of his own making, space and time merge in a myriad of perceptions that are multiform and in a state of constant transformation. It becomes clear that this is not a simple operation of assemblage. Rather it is a process of bringing to the canvas the infinite interpenetrations that take place in memory, between experiences accumulated over the years and the all-encompassing dimension of the contemporary. And these then

combine, both within the same canvas and through series of paintings: Byzantine fragments and primitive scratches, with the structure of a coastline or the cellular organism observed under a microscope. In a continuous multiplication, external references combine in turn with other, internal ones: elements of earlier paintings, a fundamental part of the visual legacy from which he draws, re-emerge within new structures, modifying their significance. The result is a complex world where formal episodes and compositional structures present multiple interpretive possibilities, revealing an existential doubt about the true significance of things, and the equal importance of different truths, despite contradictory appearances.

If ambiguity, metamorphism, and multiplicity are the terms that best characterize Vanni's work, it is no accident that he has chosen New York as an observation point from which to operate. In fact, this is where all the contradictions of the contemporary world coincide, creating a constant urban metamorphism in the simultaneity of opposite realities, also underlined by the eighty or so different languages that are spoken. In counterpoint to this fluid and mutable reality, Vanni interposes long periods in his studio in Greece, where he can compare these stimuli with the essential elements of nature and sea, in the light of Mediterranean culture.

His research develops from these presuppositions and evolves according to a principle of formal eclecticism, in a tangible manifestation of conceptual syncretism. In fact the artist is in constant pursuit of the expression of a single theme: the small, fragmented element of a reality corresponding to a system of diverse signs, in conflict with natural elements, governed by a fascination with chaotic irrationality. The result provides confirmation of Vanni's intention to resolve, through formal solutions, the philosophical and existential issues that the artist is called upon to face.

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