

*D'APRÈS GIORGIO\**  
GIORGIO DE CHIRICO HOUSE-MUSEUM, 2012-2013

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Located on the top floor of a 17<sup>th</sup> century building, at 31 Piazza di Spagna, is the apartment that for many years – from 1948 to 1978 – was inhabited by one of the most influential artists in the history of modern art: Giorgio de Chirico. “They say that Rome is at the centre of the world and that Piazza di Spagna is in the centre of Rome, therefore, my wife and I, would indeed be living in the centre of the centre of the world, which would be the apex of centrality, and the apogee of anti-eccentricity” he wrote in his *Memoirs*, referring to the apartment. Today, the home he shared with his second wife, Isabella Far, lives on as a house-museum. Characteristically for Rome, it is a hidden treasure. Compared to similar spaces, such as the house-museums of Mario Praz, Sir John Soane, Gustave Moreau, Victor Hugo or Luis Barragán, de Chirico’s is the richest in formal layers and the most hermeneutically complex. It is a house situated somewhere between tradition and avant-gardism that stands as a perfect tool for penetrating its owner’s imaginary: a magnificent portrait rich with hints and suggestions, in which the artist’s public and private lives coincide. Indeed, the distance between public and private collapses. Laid out over two floors, with a terrace giving onto a breathtaking view of the Spanish Steps, the house is decorated in a typical 1950s bourgeois style, and is furnished in the style of that period. It is at once home, workspace and showroom.

It is here that the exhibition project *D’après Giorgio* opened on January 27, 2012, closing exactly one year later on January 27, 2013. It was the first ever contemporary art project to be realized at the de Chirico house-museum. Twenty-eight artists were invited to interact with the space, and to conceive works specifically for the occasion.<sup>1</sup> No rules, either thematic or formal, were imposed, save the suggestion to opt for subtle interventions that would allow the show and the house to be perceived as a unity, a single object open to various modes of interpretation. The artists invited differed in terms of interest, background, geographical and linguistic provenance. The show’s temporal duration was purposely dilated so as to allow it to be altered *in fieri* – like a novel that, once written, published and distributed, nonetheless leaves its plot open to modification.

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\* *D’après Giorgio*, curated by L. Lo Pinto, Giorgio de Chirico House-museum, 31 Piazza di Spagna, Rome, 27 January 2012-27 January 2013. Over the course of the year, prominent art critics, curators and professors such as L. Cherubini, S. Chioldi, E. Coen, C. Perrella and B. Pietromarchi, gave lectures at the House-museum on occasion of the installation of a new work. The catalogue, *A Metaphysical Interior*, edited by I. Sheshivari and L. Lo Pinto is forthcoming.

<sup>1</sup> Alek O., Darren Bader, Nina Beier, Carola Bonfili, Benny Chirco, Patrizio Di Massimo, Giulio Frigo, Martino Gamper, Paul Armand Gette, Nicholas Hartfull, Isola&Norzi, Tobias Madison & Kaspar Müller, Marcello Maloberti, Momus, Olaf Nicolai, Henrik Olesen, Luigi Ontani, Nicola Pecoraro, Emilio Prini, Dan Rees, Izet Sheshivari, Alexandre Singh, John Stezaker, Luca Trevisani, Luca Vitone and Raphaël Zarka.



fig. 1 *D'après Giorgio*, Giorgio de Chirico House-museum, 27 January 2012-27 January 2013

In this sense, *D'après Giorgio* stands as a vast narrative – composed of multiple narrations, all distinguished by different rhythms – which mutates as it progresses and which offers visitors the possibility of exploring the house in a new way. Though the show opened with a specific group of works, others were added over the course of the year, giving life to a gradual stratification that continued through to the project's conclusion.

To contend with Giorgio de Chirico, more or less directly, is an ambitious challenge for both artist and curator: the richness and complexity of his art easily warrants a lifetime of study (fig. 1). It is precisely for this reason that the exhibition format was structured to leave room for modifications, through the involvement of other artists and the formulation of further hermeneutic keys fostered by new studies, encounters, suggestions and confrontations.

But now the time has come to set off on our journey.

Waiting to welcome us is an employee of the Foundation who will be our guide. As soon as we step into the entrance hall, we see a first work by the English artist Nicholas Hatfull. Resting on a small table alongside the guestbook is a brass plaque awarding the museum three Michelin stars. Next to the plaque, a postcard reproduces an imaginary page from the Japanese edition of the popular French guide, designating the Mysterious Baths as vacation resorts.

In the same room, we notice several photographs of de Chirico. The images – selected from the Foundation's archives – immortalize intimate moments of the life of the artist and his wife. As a curatorial choice, they are intended to emphasize the house-museum's particularity as an intimate and private space, as well as to open it to other levels of interpretation by means of an associative process.

The guide tells us “the curator didn't want to print a press release for the show, because he wanted the project to be perceived not as a forced intervention, but as one that blended with the space. Above all, he wanted to leave visitors free to interpret what they saw without influencing them. His intention was not to exploit this place as something “exotic”, to show art in an extra-ordinary context, as is so often the case today: *D'après Giorgio* can exist only inside this space, because all of the works were conceived in dialogue with it”. “The show's curator – the guide continues – didn't want to alter the function of the house-museum. It is, in fact, common for people to book a visit and be guided on a tour around the house, which includes descriptions of the works and some background on their maker. We do the same for the exhibition. De Chirico's works are described in the same way as those of the contemporary artists, which annuls the distance between the exhibition space and its contents.” In this sense, the narrative element becomes particularly relevant. By dint of

retelling the same story every day, the narrator's mind unconsciously conceives new versions of it. Orality thus plays an important role in the show's installation. The guides were instructed on the contents of the single works so as to convey enough information for the visitors to be able to interpret the works autonomously. The captions are not written, but spoken; the works described, not explained.

The choice to have the show experienced through a guided visit further relates to the very specific and intimate identity of the de Chirico House-museum, which, though open to the public, is nonetheless a private residence. Is this not what we do when we receive people into our home for the first time? We welcome them, show them the various rooms, the furnishings, and proudly illustrate the objects and artworks we possess. In the context of the show, this approach is intentionally anti-conventional and



fig. 2 Patrizio di Massimo, *Ritratto di Alfredo Casella* 1924, 2012, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 cm

contrasts with the majority of contemporary art exhibitions, dominated as they are by the dogma of silence and non-linearity. But is that not, in the end, just as true of de Chirico? His modernity is an anti-modernity.

The entrance hall behind us, we enter the home proper. It is a space ostentatiously furnished with sofas, tables and chairs whose shared characteristic is their ordinariness. We are surrounded by paintings as different in style as they are similar in subject matter. Many of them depict de Chirico's wife, Isabella, in a kind of imaginary journey through the history of art. They go from his early Renoiresque phase to the more realistic style of the mid-1930s, to the later neo-Baroque. We see Isabella in a leopard-print coat; as an ancient Venus, in homage to Ingres' odalisque; as a bather; in a metaphysical interior. Despite belonging to the same artist, these paintings give us the impression of attending a group show. "The most surprising painter of the young generation" as Apollinaire defined him, was not fond of keeping other people's work in his house. The absence of other artists should not, therefore, surprise us; rather, it confirms the extent of de Chirico's investment in self-representation. Ultimately, the house itself is like a self-portrait executed on a monumental scale. Visiting it, we gain access to an imaginary distinguished by continuous paradoxes: an imaginary that negates the avant-garde in favour of rewriting a tradition that thus transmutes into an avant-garde of the avant-garde.

The view of a modern television set, placed above a radiator, catapults us back into the present. Word has it that de Chirico watched this television with the sound off. Patrizio di Massimo has used it as an ideal pedestal for his contribution – a painting based on de Chirico's own famous 1914 portrait of Alfredo Casella, currently conserved at Villa Necchi. Di Massimo has fearlessly entered into

dialogue with the artist, intervening in the latter's own domain: that of painting. If Giorgio dresses his figures in modern clothes only to insert them in a Venetian panorama, Patrizio has Casella wear a Missoni-style suit and lipstick (fig. 2).

Turning our gaze to the wall opposite, we notice another peculiar presence. It is a large aluminium print in a white frame. The image appears undefined: the edges are blurred, the background purplish. Nonetheless, we can make out the subject, a series of riding accessories such as reins and harnesses. The artist, Luca Trevisani, has placed the print on the ground, leaning against a wall. The display choice is decidedly in keeping with his generation, but the work itself is, above all, in dialogue with the many variations on the Horse on the Seashore theme, whose first examples date back to de Chirico's Parisian period of the 1920s. As in a game of Chinese whispers, the horses on the seashore reappear just a few steps further in the work of Benny Chirco. Playing on the idea of the perfect forgery and of backdating, the Sicilian artist has created a faithful copy of a de Chirico original in order to display it decomposed into its single parts (canvas, frame, passepartout), as though preparing to examine its authenticity.

The house bears no traces of the years that made de Chirico *de Chirico*, namely, the early metaphysical period. Present are only works dating from the 1930s to his final, unfinished, painting (*Tondo Doni da Michelangelo*). This is the artist's dark side, his most complex and still today most unfairly under-appreciated period. Here is the de Chirico who returns to his history, repaints in his early metaphysical manner, backdates his works, changes style continuously, erases all coordinates, reinvents painting, and rewrites the history of past masters, as evident in the many *pastiche*s. This work is, to our eyes, as post-modern as it is conceptual. Ahead of everyone, de Chirico is aware of the failure of the avant-garde, being himself one of its protagonists. He is aware that the war with art can be waged only within its own confines. It is only within the limits of art as a constitutive and regulatory structure of conventions that an act of renewal can take place. Thus he chooses to deliberately produce and reproduce the same image in an attempt to grasp the essence of things. A repetition that should be understood, in a Heideggerian sense, as a production of difference rather than a mere reproduction. It is a kind of painting that aims to reveal not the way in which things are manifested, but what they communicate; a deconstruction of the image that does not move away from its originary form.

We should not let our attention be distracted by appearances. It is the little details that give value to everything. Like the *pastiche* of Canaletto painted in 1955. A canonical view of Venice and the Palazzo Ducale, so ordinary that it appears like a pure exercise in technique. All the same, the painting's meaning lies elsewhere. The figures grouped together on the quay are dressed in a forcedly contemporary fashion, as evidenced, for example, by the wind jacket painted in a bright, almost fluorescent yellow. The distancing effect is obtained not by altering the perspective or inserting extraordinary objects, but through a subtle intervention on the verge of invisibility for distracted observer.

De Chirico himself affirms: "that every thing has two aspects; a normal one which we almost always see and is seen by other people in general; the other, the spectral or metaphysical which can be seen only by rare individuals in moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical abstraction, just as certain bodies that exist within matter which cannot be penetrated by the sun's rays appear only under the power of artificial light under X-ray for example". This is the logic that Isola&Norzi have



fig. 3 e 4 Giulio Frigo, *Il discreto insistere di una testa all'interno di un campo visivo*, 2012, mixed technique on canvas, 30 x 20 cm

applied to one of the artist's works, examining it with x-rays and discovering new figurative presences beneath the layers of paint. The piece is a radiograph printed on canvas that bears traces of the rethinking that punctuates the artist's creative process. The original subject – a large tower – is superimposed by a *vanitas*, creating a still life with symbolic elements that allude to life's transience.

Nearby we find a work conceived for the show by Giulio Frigo. It is displayed on a small wooden dresser, next to a wall interrupted by a series of tall windows (figs. 3-4). Frigo has enacted the advice of de Chirico, who said, "the one cause of the decadence in painting today is the total loss of skill, of *technique*"<sup>2</sup> and, quoting Delacroix, "Nature cannot teach us how to achieve a masterpiece"<sup>3</sup>. What can teach us to paint well, to draw well and to progress continuously, are the works of the great masters". Giulio studied the 1928 *Piccolo Trattato di Tecnica Pittorica* (Small treatise on painting technique) passage by passage, and used it to paint a traditional portrait of de Chirico as if he was his imaginary assistant. It just so happens that, above the likeness painted by Frigo, there hangs one of the artist's own self-portraits, which thus sees itself through the eyes of another.

The guide invites us to take a couple of steps forward through the hallway and enter the room where Isabella and Giorgio habitually dined. Its walls are adorned with paintings that, for the most part, depict "silent lifes". The dining table is set. Luca Vitone has staged an imaginary lunch, made up of the dishes de Chirico is said to have liked (fig. 5). The work is a still life, insofar as the food is as fake as that which inspired de Chirico's paintings. Indeed, the latter painted his still lifes not by looking at nature, but by looking at a reality filtered by objects, and thus producing meta-representations.

In the same room, a small black and white photograph depicts a hand touching the bulb of a flower, in an obvious sexual allegory. It is a work by Paul Armand Gette. Keeping it company, just a few inch-

<sup>2</sup> G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen Limited, London 1971, p. 231

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 197.



fig. 5 Luca Vitone, *Natura morta con Punt & mes*, 2012, installation (plastic food)

es away, is a small, slightly frayed oil on canvas painted by Alek O. in his adolescence – a profoundly metaphysical work, despite the fact that its maker, at the time, was hardly familiar with the concept.

Somewhat hesitantly, the guide indicates a strange costume-object hanging above the arch of the living room door. “I’m supposed to wear it” she says. “It was handmade by Julia Frommel, and it is intended to be worn by the person who guides the tour. I don’t always do it because it embarrasses me a little”. Before entering the living room, our attention is caught by the view of a window whose glass is covered with dry leaves. This is Dan Rees’ intervention, a symbolic replica of the leaves of the laurel crown that adorned the tomb of Alberto Savinio, who died in 1952. After a shared childhood, adolescence and Parisian period, the relationship between the two brothers was not always idyllic. They were gradually reconciled only a short while before Alberto’s death, an event that pained Giorgio deeply. He wrote: “Great men almost never get all that they deserve, but they almost always get at least some of what they deserve. My worthy brother did not get even a hundredth part of what he deserved”.

The living room is the largest space in the house: a pompous interior with curtains, dressers, sofas, armchairs, silverware, a fireplace, a large bronze sculpture. The sound we hear is the only audio piece in the show. It is the voice of Momus, angelically reading an extract from *Hebdomeros*, the metaphysical masterpiece that replaces images with words.

We get a map to help us in identifying the various works. Next to the window is an installation by Henrik Olesen, composed of a photographic portrait of de Chirico and a manifesto-text typewritten by the artist. We continue to move around the space. On a low marble side-table, an object that initially appears like a decorative accessory belonging to the home turns out to be a drawing by Emilio Prini. It is a portrait of Luigi Ontani – another artist present in the show – sketched rapidly on a sheet of paper that had already been doodled on by others. The face, a sign among others, seems to vanish, as does the work itself, which partially dissolves into the furnishings. Nearby on a raised step

stands a footrest made by Martino Gamper, the most “artist” among designers and the most “craftsman” among artists. The colours seem to pick up those of the ball depicted in the *Mysterious Baths* that tower over it. Not far from the footrest, there is a book lying open on a desk. Over the course of several months, Nicola Pecoraro re-illustrated a book of African masks, to then display it opened onto a double page. Deprived of its functionality, the book becomes sculpture.

The guide is trying to direct our attention toward a white space on the wall. “A painting by de Chirico that usually hangs here is absent. This is a work by Darren Bader, titled *Missing de Chirico Painting*.”

Just as we are about to turn back toward the entrance, we notice a second work by Giulio Frigo. Another contemporary painting done in a classical style. Once again, the subject is de Chirico, but this time he is shown performing four different actions inside a domestic interior. The painting, housed inside a box-frame, is displayed on a horizontal plane, imposing a high-angle view on the visitor (figs. 1, 11).

“I don’t want to rush you, but there’s still the top floor.”

We rewind the an imaginary tape and return to the entrance hall. A carpeted staircase leads to the floor above. It is only now that we realize that the coloured stones placed in front of many of the doors are part of the show. It is an intervention by two Swiss artists, Tobias Madison and Kaspar Müller. They have arranged, throughout the house, a series of stones covered with different images, thus tracing an ideal itinerary within the itinerary itself (fig. 6).

The second floor contrasts with the first in every way. It is bare, modest, and free of any nods to the baroque. Having reached the top of the stairs, we find, on our right, a small, almost monastic bedroom. Though it seems hardly possible, it is here that de Chirico slept. The husband and wife had decided to occupy separate bedrooms. There are two posters on the wall, a shelf with some books, a few drawings and a photograph. Nothing else. A little study space has been carved out at the foot of the bed. Here Olaf Nicolai has placed an old Olivetti Lettera 22, inviting visitors to write a letter on a piece of paper illustrated by the artist and to send it to the addressee in an envelope customized with an imaginary logo. The bedroom, usually empty, is filled with interventions by the artists invited to the show. Marcello Maloberti has exhibited a photograph that shows him sleeping in de Chirico’s bed like a child rocked to sleep by a lullaby. On one of the shelves, John Stezaker



fig. 6 Tobias Madison and Kaspar Müller, *Hospitality (Doorstopper)*, 2012, installation (printed paper pasted on stones)



fig. 7 Nina Beier, *Dead Drop*, 2012, fabric, 115 x 15 cm



fig. 8 Luigi Ontani, *Senil Seminodo*, 2012, photographic print and frame with carved motifs, 59 x 74 cm

has placed one of his few sculptures. Of modest proportions, it reproduces a mannequin's hand, with the index finger pointing. On the same shelf is the preparatory sketch for the *Alek O.* painting displayed in the dining room on the floor below. Having exited Giorgio's room, we make our way toward Isabella's, which is twice as large. A double bed takes up most of the space, and there is also a dressing table. Nina Baier is the only artist who intervened in this room. A leopard-print scarf lies on the bed, as though abandoned there in an everyday domestic gesture (fig. 7).

"Now the time has come to visit the real gem of the house: the studio!" Our guide pronounces this sentence with such emphasis that our curiosity rises to stellar heights. We've arrived. A dusky glow, seeping in through the skylight, suffuses the space. Our eye is distracted by many, too many stimuli. It is a journey inside the artist's mind: a three-dimensional autobiography. The bookshelf is stuffed with monographs on past masters (Rubens, Böcklin, Guido Reni, Fragonard, Velázquez, Delacroix, Courbet, Renoir), alternating with various editions of de Chirico's own written work.

Among the many volumes, one stands out and captures our attention. The title reads *50 ans de peinture*. With his proverbial and perfidious irony, de Chirico has completed it by pencilling in the word *bonteuse*. It is a characteristic joke, at once serious and facetious, of the sort already cited in his *Memoirs*. "In America, this modern art is also called 'art in progress' and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, whose horrors exceed even our own Museum of Horrors in Valle Giulia, has published a volume dedicated to the works in its collection. This volume is titled *Art in Progress* and a few years ago the director of the museum had the exquisite politeness to send me it. I, however, who cultivate a sacred abhorrence of everything that does not correspond to truth, pasted over the



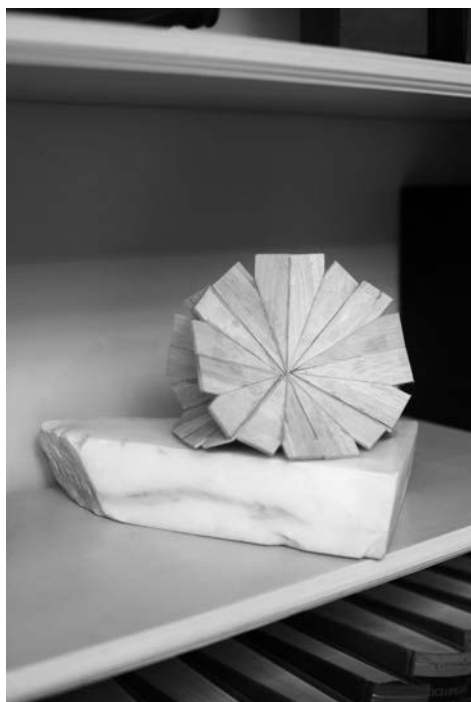


fig. 9 Raphaël Zarka, *Forme à clé*, 2006, wood sculpture, 16 cm (diameter)



fig. 10 Carola Bonfili, *Monkey Turned King*, 2012, charcoal drawing on paper, 54,7 x 41,7 cm, depth 16 mm

title *Art in Progress* a piece of paper on which I wrote *Art in Progressive Putrefaction*, since it seems clear that, in matters of putrefaction, such pseudo-painting progresses daily”.

In front of the bookshelf is a real work space. Brushes, paints, pastels, canvases. Resting on an easel is the last painting on which de Chirico worked, a *pastiche* of Michelangelo. Another, slightly smaller, easel holds a photograph. It is a self-portrait by Luigi Ontani, inspired by de Chirico's own well-known *Nude self-portrait* of 1945, currently held at the Galleria Nazionale d'art Moderna in Rome (fig. 8). Ontani has retraced his own history, making a *pastiche* of his own *pastiche* of 1978. In a gesture typical of de Chirico, he has replicated himself.

Books, personal affects and kitschy toys are grouped together on another shelf. Here Raphaël Zarka has chosen to display an object dear to him, made with the wooden bolts used to fix the edges of a canvas to a frame. He has placed it on a piece of marble, which thus serves as an ideal plinth (fig.9). Leaning against the adjoining wall is a cabinet containing a series of small sculptures by de Chirico. Among them is the only work on show by an artist who is no longer living: a chalk capital by Carlo Mollino. It is hung upside down, a choice motivated by the desire to create a symbolic encounter between the two artists, who, in real life, never met.

Under the cabinet lies a pile of still unused canvases and frames. Inserted in one of the frames is a second work by Luca Trevisani. The technique used is analogous to that of the first painting, but there is a variation in the subject. Depicted this time is a bunch of chili peppers, analogous to that

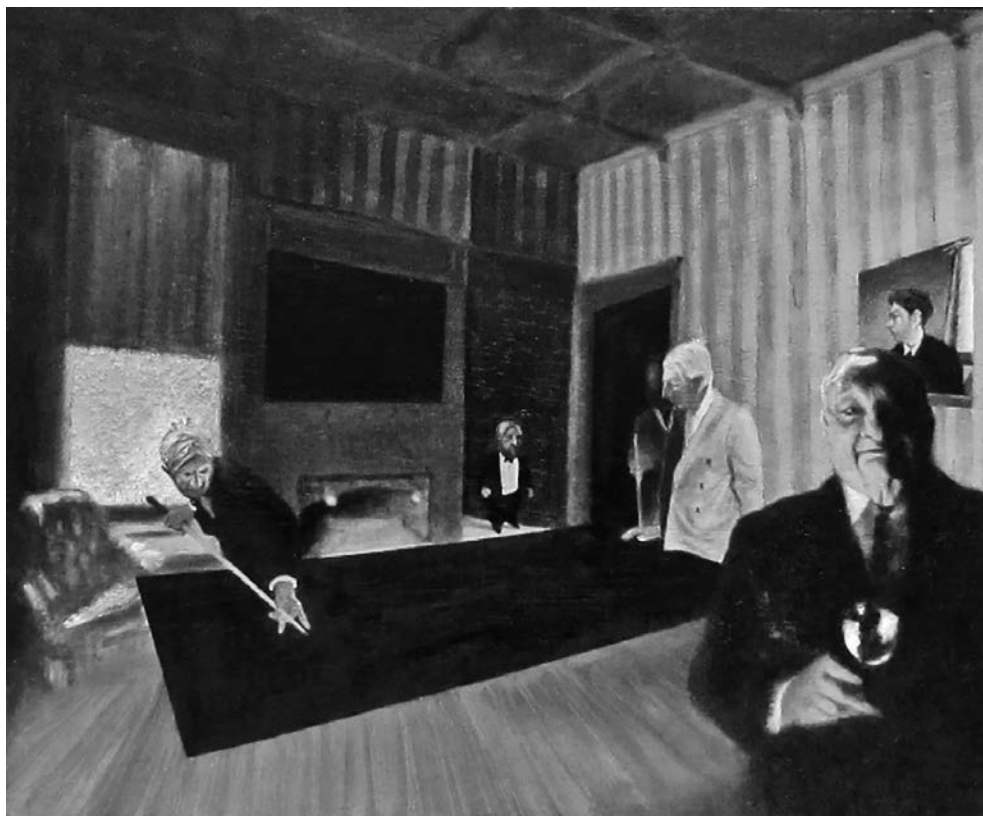


fig. 11 Giulio Frigo, *Soliloquio in un interno metafisico*, 2012, mixed technique on canvas, 30 x 21 cm

which de Chirico superstitiously kept behind a large easel in his studio. With a 360 degree turn, in a merry-go-round of revelations, we take in the last interventions present in the room.

Carola Bonfili has exhibited a drawing poised somewhere between the animalesque and the anthropomorphic, with a plexiglas bubble protecting the “strange” sign that protrudes from the paper (fig. 10).

Finally, standing on the ground next to the desk where de Chirico kept various memorabilia, is the last piece, added to the show just a month before the closing. Made by Alexander Singh, it is a bronze cast of a coffee-maker called *Non Senseo*, which also doubles as the work's title.

The journey through the show ends here. An adventurous journey, on a beautiful vessel, through the relics of a man who incarnates an art that, in going forward, returns to the past to look at the future. An ephemeral history written on the body of he who destroyed that history in order to reconstruct it in a short-circuit of tautologies, paradoxes, negations and additions.

*Translated by Tijana Mamula*