

Giulio Paolini | *Disegno Geometrico* | 1960

For Giulio Paolini, painting is not about surface as an image of painterly application as for Ryman, nor about the labor indicated by the brushmark as for Toroni, nor about the re-evaluation of form as it is for Palermo. Instead, Paolini's major concern has been to engage painting as a vehicle for the contemplation of its own condition. To this end, he has made the material, authorial, contextual, and historical prerequisites of painting the principal theme of his work. His painting comments on itself as a convention and on the factors that enable it to materialize as art within the parameters of this convention.

Early in the 1960s, Paolini formulated his approach to the fundamental practice of creating an image on the canvas surface. His first paintings exhibit within their own frame the preliminary methods or particular materials that precede the traditional construction of a finished image. *Disegno Geometrico* (1960), a tempera on canvas, turns the initial preparation, associated with the composing of an image, into the image itself. Bisecting diagonal lines,

drawn in ink from the four corners of the picture plane, and bisecting vertical and horizontal lines from all four canvas edges, meet in the center of the rectangle. This work resulted from 'the decision to copy onto canvas, in the correct proportion, the preliminary design of *any* design, that is, the geometric squaring off of the surface.'⁴⁴

Paolini further explained that he 'was trying to free the picture from its function as a vehicle for images' insofar as 'the picture is none other than the very elements which go to make it up.'⁴⁵ *Untitled* (1961) displays an actual paint can behind a sheet of transparent plastic stretched on a supporting wooden frame. The can of paint is, therefore, not a representation *on* a canvas surface, but a presentation of an object containing the material – paint – necessary to produce an image. As a substitute for the usually opaque canvas surface, the transparent plastic allows the viewing of something real in lieu of a fiction.

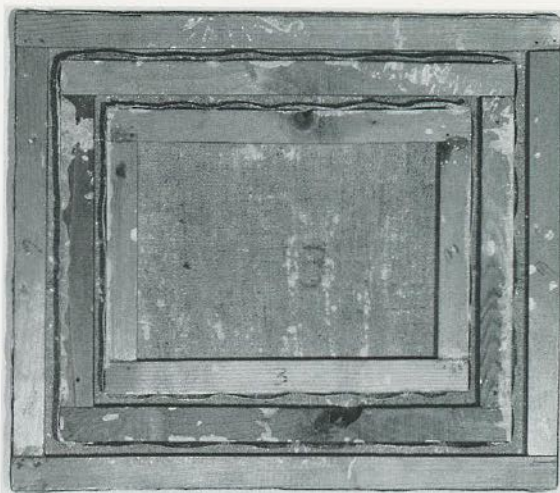
At the Galleria La Salita, Rome in 1964, Paolini took another step toward freeing his painting from being a

receptacle for illusionistic imagery and toward revealing aspects of the work's support. For this exhibition, he hung a group of imageless, plywood panels in the gallery while setting others against its walls. By withholding depiction of imagery, the 'panel paintings' called attention to the walls on which they were hung as well as to the surrounding space on which they depended.

Although it reintroduced an image, *174* (1965, see ill. p. 36) deliberately forfeited overt acknowledgment of original authorial invention. This work enlarges page 174 from a book entitled *Capire l'Arte Moderna* (How to Understand Modern Art). The contents of the page supply the painting with its compositional content and imagery: a chart of twentieth-century art movements and dates in the form of a centralized, linear diagram. Terms for specific movements such as Dada, Surrealism, or Abstract Expressionism accompany parallel lines of varying length that designate time periods between 1900 and 1970. The painting may thus be described as a literal delineation of an outline of historical time frames assigned to developments in art. Because of its direct appropriation of an already existing art-related, yet non-art, image, the work portrays the awareness of its own position within history.

From the mid-1960s on, paintings by Paolini have proposed an aesthetic agenda in which the canvas surface provides a forum for painting to examine itself in terms of its existence as an image-bearing, rectangular object that, having issued from the mind of a creator, takes its place in the historical continuum on the walls of exhibition spaces. Aiming to give credence to the authorial role of the artist while declaring that his work is not about the artist's own subjectivity, Paolini demonstrates how he is a part of the process of implementation – a mere conduit for engendering representation.

In a work such as *Delfo* (1965) the artist 'figures' as an image within the painting. By introducing his image into the work, Paolini paradoxically removes himself as a subjective (and normally unseen) presence from it. He thereby illustrates the distinction between an artist's individual persona and the role the artist plays in the creation of a work. Represented by a life-sized photographic reproduction, Paolini, wearing sunglasses as if to hide his identity, appears behind stretcher bars with his arms folded, feet apart. His visage is covered by the vertical stretcher bar so that portraiture is indicated



Giulio Paolini | Senza Titolo (Untitled) | 1962



Giulio Paolini | Senza Titolo (Untitled) | 1961



Ciullo Paolini *Delfo* 1965

on the one hand, while being virtually ruled out on the other. The photographic image of the artist indicates the fact of authorship at the same time that the stretcher bar, the basic element of the canvas support, superimposes itself on the artist's features. Specifically, the stretcher bar does not permit a view beyond or behind the pictorial image that here excludes its own author, whose guarded inclusion suggests that the work's creator has been subordinated to his own creation.⁴⁶ Or, as Paolini has put it, the author, who is essentially just another spectator, simply 'intervenes to unmask [the work], and functions as 'someone who raises the curtain on a scene which awaits revelation.'⁴⁷

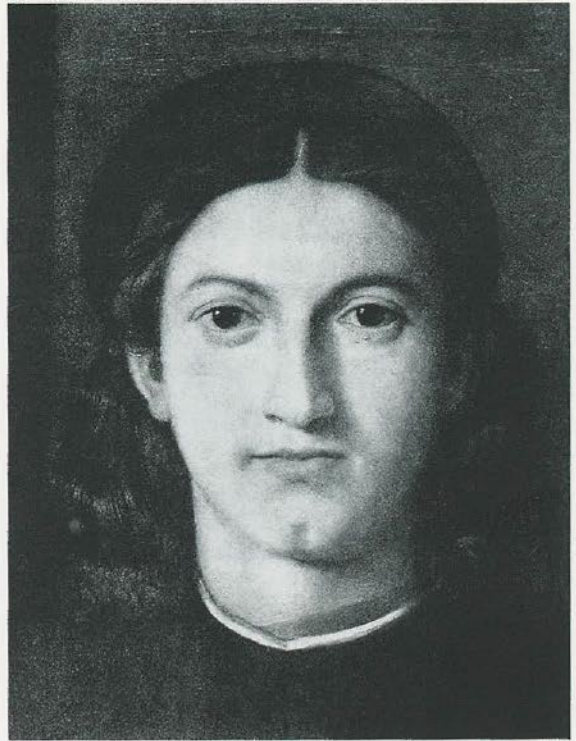
Subsequent works by Paolini expand upon his search for ways to have painting speak for and about itself and for images to reflect on being images. Through the use of photography as a means of duplication, given the camera's ability to 'take' a picture, he has created a variety of works that embody within his paintings the images of Old Masters. *Giovane che guarda Lorenzo Lotto* (Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Lotto, 1967), turns the act of viewing painting upon itself by reproducing to scale in black and white a portrait of a youth by the sixteenth-century Italian artist Lorenzo Lotto (1480?–1556). Because the frontality of the youth's face, which is a two-dimensional photographic reproduction, merges with the frontality of the canvas, the face-as-portrait casts its glance toward an implied spectator. The painting, in reverse, looks inward to address its own presence as an independent, rectangular object.

The photographic re-creation of historical paintings, or details from them, has enabled Paolini to make a case for his works as already existing images rather than as newly invented ones. Identifying himself with authors belonging to much earlier historical periods, the artist hides his identity in order to suppress evidence of his authorial in(ter)vention and to detach the painted image from associations outside its own history. *L'Ultimo quadro di Velázquez* (The Last Painting of Velázquez, 1968), enlarges a telling detail from *Las Meninas* (The Maids of Honour, 1656), by Diego Velázquez (1599–1660): the faint heads of the observers who are the artist himself and a woman, both of whom are outside the picture being painted (by Velázquez), but whom Velázquez has represented as reflections in the mirror. As the only figures in Paolini's painting, they are no longer painted reflections, since Paolini has wrested

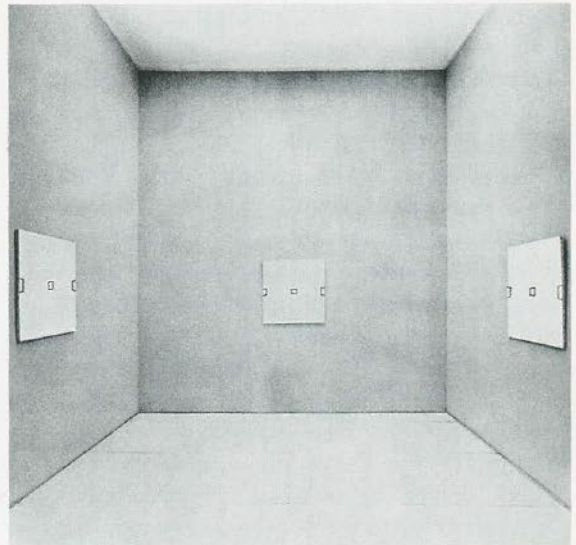
them from the context of the Velázquez. In isolation and fading into the canvas weave, the two personages appear in Paolini's painting like ghosts from earlier modes of painted illusion and as haunting presences that are confined to the physical reality of their flat, painted surface.

In the years following 1968, Paolini broadened his inquiry into painting, continuing to present the painted surface as a forum for self-investigative debate. *2121969* (1968-69), a photographic work on canvas whose title specifies the date as 12 February, 1969 – the opening day of the exhibition of the painting – represents an image of the gallery interior where the painting was shown. The painting's place of exhibition, in this case, supplied the painting's image. A slightly later work, *Quattro Immagini Uguali* (Four Equal Images, 1969), reinforces the idea that the thematic content of Paolini's painting revolves around the desire to exhibit painting as a factual, material entity rather than as an image of something other than itself. Four identical square canvases placed on four separate walls of a rectangular room might, as it appears, have originated one from the other. A small square drawn on canvas occupies the center of each of the four paintings, while half of a square, in line with the central square, is cut off by the canvas edge on either side of all four paintings. Each painting mimics both the one opposite and the one adjacent. If the four separate canvases were abutted so as to produce a row of evenly spaced, small squares across joined surfaces, an open, half square at the left and right edges of the abutted canvases would nonetheless remain. They signal the possibility of an open-ended image that could generate itself indefinitely, as if of its own accord without an author.

Paolini's *Apoteosi di Omero* (Apotheosis of Homer, 1970-71) is an homage to authorship in general as opposed to a paean to any one individual. It is an installation consisting of thirty-three music stands, each presenting a photograph of a living actor except for one with text. Modeled in concept on the nineteenth-century painting *Apotheosis of Homer* (1827) by J. A. D. Ingres (1780-1867), the photographed actors represent historical figures including Socrates and Jesus Christ as well as the French Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud and Queen Elizabeth I, for example. A key that identifies actor with personage is shown on one of the music stands. Like the figures in Ingres's painting whose names belong to history, all have had a major impact on



Giulio Paolini | Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Lotto | 1967



Giulio Paolini | Quattro Immagini Uguali (Four Equal Images) | 1969



Giulio Paolini *Apotheosi di Omero (Apotheosis of Homer)* 1970–71

their culture. Paolini's actors pay homage to Homer as an 'emblem of classical inspiration, according to the artist, who further has noted that the 'spectator can feel himself reflected in each of the actors, and thus in each of the historical characters....'⁴⁸ The viewer is given the chance to assume the role of one or many characters through identification with the actors. The artist himself, however, in an act of self-banishment, has vanished from the scene for which he is the impresario. After having set the stage for ushering in a panoply of historical figures, he leaves behind clues concerning the work of art's greater historical context.

Works by Paolini from the mid- and late 1970s reinforce his essential concern with promoting the reality of a painting over its traditional role as a conveyor of illusionistic images, or as a sign of an authorial presence. *Chimera II* (1975), comparable with Roy Lichtenstein's *Stretcher Bar* series (1968), displays two blank canvases that are set within the surrounds of twin canvas versos. The two canvases are contained within an illusionistic box indicated by perspectival pencil lines drawn on the 'front' of the canvas, which displays its back. The work as a whole turns traditional perspectival illusion around in a literal manner insofar as the two, smaller frontal canvases are foregrounded on the versos of two larger joined canvases. The lines of perspective, in sum, here participate in the subject

matter of the painting rather than in fostering illusion.

As a work such as *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1976) clearly emphasizes, painting in Paolini's oeuvre affords an occasion for representing the process of questioning as part of the process of viewing. On the right-hand panel of a two-part work, *Oedipus*, as seen in the eponymous painting by Ingres and who has been photographically reproduced in black and white, is attentive to the riddle-asking Sphinx. On the left-hand panel of Paolini's work, a penciled outline of Ingres's painting repeats and mirrors Ingres's original image. Avoiding the creation of his own image, Paolini conveys the idea that painting functions to question itself.

The images to be found in early works by Paolini are those that address their own formation or their exhibition context. Later images take cognizance of painting's existence within an ever-widening framework of historical time. In Paolini's words, 'the image [the artist] must discover is not his own but everyone's.... Despite appearances, destiny imposes on the artist an absence from the world stage.'⁴⁹ In self-evident meditation on their place and presence within the open-ended narrative of history, the paintings of Paolini look squarely at themselves as historical objects whose flat frontality is imbued with powers of self-interrogation.

While Toroni, Richter, Kawara, and Palermo have approached their art from different perspectives, they, too, have endeavored to look at painting as a vehicle for self-criticism. Showing painting to be about its own brushwork, Toroni has broadened its background support to include the bare wall. Endowed with wide possibilities for application on any number of planar surfaces, the imprints interact with any and all aspects of an existing architectural situation. As the artist has suggested, the supporting surface is not dominated by the imprints covering it, but shares equal responsibility with them for defining the totality of the work: '*La peinture ne cachait plus le support, ce qu'elle avait toujours fait. Le support ne primait pas non plus*' (Painting does not hide its support as before, nor does the support take over).⁵⁰ By means of the evenly spaced series of uniform imprints, which he applies to prime, distinctive, or focal flat areas instead of to a framed or stretched canvas, Toroni engenders a reciprocal interchange between paint, surface, and architecture.

Richter's work delivers its message through the subtraction of narrative or expressive content, which

accentuates (the) painting as an objectified, concrete presence. Because it has the ability to remain silent without forfeiting thematic signification, 'art, Richter believes, 'is the highest form of hope.'⁶¹ Without questioning or seeking the overthrow of painting, he addresses the idea of ongoing evolution that – dependent on cycles of rebirth and death observed in nature and society – may be incurred by the efforts of the impartial but impassioned artist. Insofar as his oeuvre is concerned, all types of subject matter from the pastoral to the pornographic are subsumed by the painted field, wherein everything is shown to be nothing more than the reality of painted illusion.

The date paintings of Kawara rely on the components of written communication to make their particular visual statement. With their stark and striking presentation of the date on which each was created, they mark the moment of their genesis and thus demarcate their own place within the span of a lifetime and of history. If a date, on one level, is mute as a pictorial image, on another level it stands for the infinite number of events, from the most personal to the most universal, that occur on specific days. Like temporal signposts, the date paintings punctuate their environment whether they are inserted into the midst of other works of art or isolated on a wall. Telling of nothing but themselves, they direct the viewer toward a consideration of the ongoing continuum of past, present, and future.

In Palermo's Wall Drawings and Paintings, form is freed from enclosure within the boundaries of rectilinearity and/or a canvas surface. Form is contiguous instead with selected features of architectural reality, or else takes this reality directly into account. Having liberated form from participation within a greater, contrived compositional whole or from association with representational imagery, Palermo proposed alternative methods for the derivation of form

and alternatives to the painted ground of painting in order to redraw the conventional line between real and painted space. The Objects imbue painted form with an independent existence in three-dimensional space. Although flat, the Stoffbilder endow the very form of painting with material actuality. Finally, the forms brought to view in the Wall Drawings and Paintings converge with the forms found in the reality that prescribed how the work 'took shape.'

The methods and goals of Toroni, Richter, Kawara, Palermo, and Paolini along with those of their approximate contemporaries such as Mangold, Baer, Marden, and Ryman, coincide with those of artists who, like Stella and Manzoni, for example, in the late 1950s, had initiated a re-examination of the fundamental principles of painting. Stella or Manzoni's desire to suppress signs of authorship – as displayed by painterly virtuosity, technical skill, or inventiveness – in favor of highlighting the self-reflective aspect of painting carried over to the work of these artists. This slightly later generation similarly rejected subjectivity, compositional invention, and referential illusion. Without forfeiting the gains of self-reflexivity, they further expanded the previous scope of painted content. Richter accomplished this, in large degree, with the aid of photography, and Kawara by his reliance on the representational capacity of language. Through direct affiliation with architecture, the work of Palermo and Toroni extended painting beyond the canvas edge, whereas the work of Paolini has taken a close look at the contextual and historical factors that give rise to a painting while making authorial subservience the main subject of his work. Commonly expressing fundamental aspects of painting's being, works by artists who elected to comply with – while broadening – its terms, set their sights on banishing illusion without losing touch with the world.