
Leonardo Cremonini (1925-2010) – Timeless Monumentality: Paintings from The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation - Ephemera

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Timeless Monumentality Intro Panel

Fairfield University Art Museum

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LEONARDO CREMONINI (1925-2010): TIMELESS MONUMENTALITY

Paintings from The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation

Though little known today, the Italian-born painter Leonardo Cremonini (1925-2010) achieved great critical acclaim during his lifetime. His distinctive idiom is immediately recognizable in the primeval, lithic forms (both human and geological), dark, untamed beasts, and over-effulgent foliage that dominate his work from the 1950s, and the ethereal, anemic, and psychologically detached figures indolently frozen in train cars, bedrooms, and terraces under a sultry, blanching Mediterranean light that begin to appear in the 1960s and remain present from then on. Echoes of earlier Italian painting—from the immutable still lifes of the 20th-century artist Giorgio Morandi, to the Renaissance master Piero della Francesca's perspectively complex, hushed spaces and inscrutable protagonists—resonate in his work. A spirit of timeless monumentality (a descriptive formulation articulated by William Rubin, renowned director of the Museum of Modern Art, and appropriated as the subtitle of this exhibition)—links Cremonini to these artistic forebears and is the essence of his style.

Over time, Cremonini's technique became increasingly painstaking. His laborious practice involved a slow and careful application, scraping away, and reapplication of paint layers, which paradoxically resulted in the smooth, flat and tissue-like surfaces of his canvases: lacking texture or impasto, with little evidence of the build-up of paint layers, they belie the methodical process. Often, a finished work would later be joined to a second canvas to create an enlarged composition, the original then repainted in order to create a unified whole with its extension. This additive transformation occurred after some passage of time, be it months or even years. Long periods of scrutiny, unaccompanied by any movement of the brush, were also part of Cremonini's approach. Contemplation and permanence, rather than speed and flux, are central to his technique and subject matter alike.

The trajectory of Cremonini's critical fortune from renown to near obscurity is by no means unique in the history of art. The ascendancy of abstraction and Conceptual art is one explanation for his eclipsed reputation and the sidelining of Cremonini at the margins of modernity. But the resurgence of figurative painting and heightened appreciation of 20th-century Italian art in recent years make this the optimal moment for reappraisal and rehabilitation. Featuring 35 works from the peerless holdings of the William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation—the largest concentration of paintings by the artist, assembled over several decades—this exhibition is the first monographic survey devoted to Cremonini in over two decades, and will serve to foster a renewed awareness and appreciation of his art.

William Louis-Dreyfus, whose admiration for Cremonini was instinctive and infectious and who enthusiastically supported this project in every conceivable way, passed away on September 16, 2016. The exhibition is dedicated to his memory.