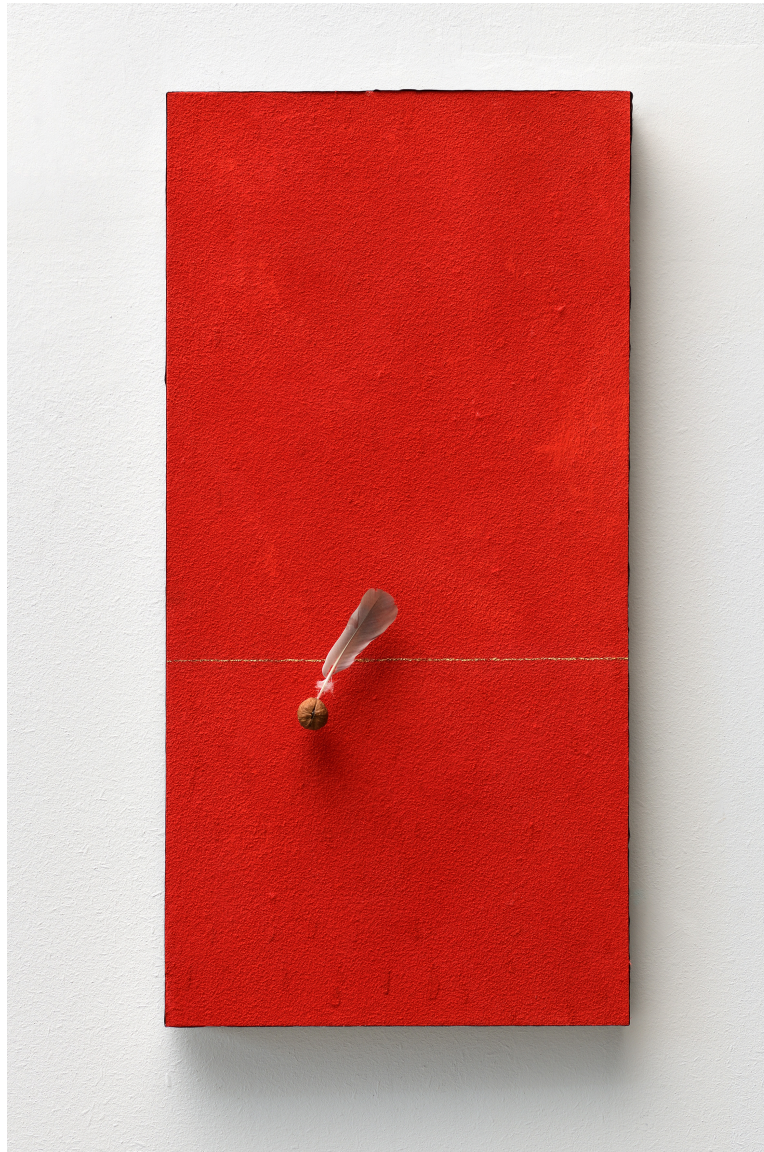


ARTFORUM



Pier Paolo Calzolari, *Untitled*, 2021, salt, pigment, oil pastel, gold leaf, walnut, feather, steel, and lead on wood, 39 3/8 × 19 3/4 × 4 3/4 inches

Pier Paolo Calzolari

By: Donald Kuspit
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All thirty of the works in “Painting as a Butterfly”—an exhibition by Italian artist Pier Paolo Calzolari—were abstractions. Some were geometric or nearly monochromatic, while several others, such as *Rideau V*, 1984, a landscape-like picture suffused by a midnight blue, were gestural and full of luscious, flourishing, sensual colors. Running across the top of *Rideau V* is a fringe of variegated gold and crimson, from which a series of thin vertical lines descend, like delicate rain. Little blossoms of red scale these marks as an uneven band of dark yellow pierces the center of the canvas lengthwise, calling to mind a dusky horizon.

Apart from that piece, all the other works in this presentation featured wood as their primary supports while incorporating a whole host of different media, including paper, flannel, cardboard, and lead. A handful of pictures, such as *Untitled*, 2021, in which a lone feather seemingly grows out of a walnut shell, both of which hover over a bright-red ground, incorporated objects jutting out from flatly colored surfaces—a kind of modernist tweak on trompe l’oeil. Perhaps the feather is all that remains of the wing of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and fell to his death in the sea. Calzolari, who was raised in Venice, was born only two years before the end of World War II, so one wonders if paintings such as *Senza titolo (Luna)* (Untitled [Moon]), 1979, and *Pantano grande* (Great Quagmire), 2019—gloomy, midnight compositions overwhelmed by creeping dark blues—are actually meditations on finitude, mortality. The artist was a founding member of Arte Povera, a movement known for employing discarded or “dead” materials, and the works here were filled with such items, as well as salt, the stuff of life that is also used, contrarily, to preserve meat—another form of deceased matter.

The title of Calzolari’s exhibition here called to mind Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi’s famous dream of being a fluttering, carefree butterfly. “Tao” is the name for the kinetic generative energies of the universe, and Zhuangzi’s lightsome insect seems emblematic of what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi famously called a “flow state.” Thus, painting as a butterfly, the artist is caught up in a “process of becoming, a creative advance into novelty,” to use philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s words. Indeed, Calzolari is happily making whatever he wants, producing artworks with no preconceptions and utilizing materials he’s likely all too familiar with in fresh, strange, and vivifying ways. So one might believe that now, in his late seventies, the artist is having a kind of second childhood—a form of self-defense brought on by the steady and relentless approach of death. Drawing the nectar out of color and distilling his flat surfaces into Platonic purity, he has created a unique and lyrical art—reminding one of Wassily Kandinsky’s idea that idiosyncrasy is the sign of authenticity. A haiku always involves a reference to nature, and Calzolari’s painted haikus show his longing to return to the natural world, which abstraction eschews. His romance with nature was evident in many of these expressionistic works, while in the more purely abstract images it was merely an afterthought. The artist crafts a tension between poetic expressionism and the nonobjective; this rich space gives his works an extra emotional edge—a kind of efflorescence of spirit just before the end.