ENZO CUCCHI
Mostra Coagula

March 13 - May 22, 2025

Vito Schnabel Gallery
455 West 19th Street
New York, NY

VITO SCHNABEL

Enzo Cucchi (b. 1949, Morro d'Alba, Italy) is one of the central figures of the Transavanguardia movement in Italy in the 1980s– a resurgence of Neo-Expressionism, along with Francesco Clemente and Sandro Chia. At the age of 36, Cucchi was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, spanning the entire rotunda. His interest in the interaction between different arts and disciplines has led him to work in diverse fields, from the visual arts to architecture, design, and fashion, and to grasp the importance of the relationship between these areas.

In recent years, he has specifically designed permanent works for different cities: the mosaic for the Museum of Art in Tel Aviv; the monumental ceramic for the Ala Mazzoniana of Termini Station in Rome; two ceramic works for the Stazione Salvator Rosa designed by Mendini in the Naples subway; paintings for the Chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli in the Tamaro Mount; and iconography for the Church of San Giacomo Apostolo in Ferrara. He designed "Ideal Fountains," one in Toronto, one in the Louisiana Museum in Copenhagen, one in Catanzaro, and a new one is now installed in Ancona. These works show that a language based on the relationship between the narrative force of sign and the formal manipulation of the signifier can relate to the complexity of urban space and individual cultural contexts within which it operates.

Enzo Cucchi has presented numerous solo exhibitions and taken part in group shows at renowned international museums such as the Kunsthalle Basel; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Tate Gallery, London; the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; the Castello di Rivoli, Turin; the Palazzo Reale, Milan; the Sezon Museum of Art, Tokyo; the Academy of France, Villa Medici, Rome; and the Musée d'Art Moderne of Saint-Étienne Métropole. He has also participated in the most important contemporary art exhibitions internationally, including the Venice Biennale, documenta in Kassel, and the Quadriennale d'Arte in Rome. His works are in the world's major museum collections and many prestigious private collections.

The following conversation between Enzo Cucchi and Bartolomeo Pietromarchi took place in Cucchi's studio in Rome on February 9, 2025.

Bartolomeo Pietromarchi: I noticed here in the studio that you've selected a large number of small paintings with ceramics. You also told me you'd be bringing the marble sculptures, the ones that were displayed at the entrance of the exhibition at MAXXI, along with other ceramics that will be set up in Gavin Brown's space. Do you bring all the elements for the exhibition directly on-site, letting yourself be guided by the space and context? A sort of improvisation? As you were saying, the works themselves will reveal the space of their exhibition...

Enzo Cucchi: Yes, the exhibition is made up of a series of works I've created over time, and the question I ask myself is how to build an exhibition starting from the works that already exist. The show will come together on-site—nobody knows exactly what I'm bringing because otherwise, we risk ending up with what's been happening for the last 20 or 30 years: exhibitions are no longer made by artists. But exhibitions must be made by artists, otherwise they become instruments for something else.

It's not just a matter of galleries or gallerists, and not even of the market, but of a certain "window-dressing" that has spread everywhere—museums, institutions, everything. It's not a critique, it's simply a fact. This approach has flattened everything. Like it or not, that's how it is.

Once upon a time, in places of art, there was a certain awareness of what it meant to put together an exhibition. When artists stopped being at the center of this process, things changed, and over time, a certain quality was lost. I'm not even saying whether that's good or bad, but it's undeniable—the difficulties are plain for everyone to see.

Sure, you can sit down and analyze everything, but in the end, what's the point? The reality is that things are no longer as we imagined them years ago. And at the end of the day, I'm not a sociologist—I'm an artist.

BP: It seems to me that you did something similar for your solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1986. I came across the *Artforum* review of the show by Ida Panicelli, where she praised the fact that, "The Guggenheim and Cucchi took risks with this exhibition, giving the artist the freedom to make the decisions that would shape its form." She went on to say, "Curator Diane Waldman did not simply organize an exhibition but rather allowed an event to take place, a creative interaction between the artist and the environment. Instead of treating the artwork as an isolated object to be classified, cataloged, and placed within history, it was allowed to be recognized as part of a larger whole, subverting the traditional *modus operandi* of museum exhibitions while expanding the possibility of a new work of art: the exhibition itself."

EC: Yes, that was a positive review, but there were others—starting with *The New York Times*—that were very critical. Every artist knows this, especially those inside that world. And in a way, they had every reason to tear me apart! But I had no provocative intentions, I wasn't trying to challenge anything or anyone. I simply put together my exhibition the way I imagined it.

It's just that even back then, certain mechanisms were in place—what they call the interests that support the museum. Essentially, they wanted me to exhibit works from the private collections of those funding the museum. But what's the point of that? If I do a show in a museum, I do it my way. Just like we did together at the MAXXI.

For them, this was unacceptable. And on a human level, I understand—it was, and still is, their world. But for me, it wasn't doable. The thing is, I was naïve—I wasn't yet aware of those dynamics. To me, it was simply about putting on an exhibition, the way it had always been done. And instead, I found myself at the center of a ferocious attack.

A little young nobody shaking the backbone of the biggest museum in the world—wonderful, isn't it? But you see, a lot of artists from that time, even friends, didn't say a word. Then, twenty years later, some of them came to me and said, "You know, Enzo, none of us ever forgot your exhibition."

So why didn't they tell me back then? Why didn't they stand up—not for me, but for an idea, for an approach?

BP: Continuing to read Panicelli's article, she described the exhibition as being composed mainly of drawings, saying, "Their small dimensions in no way diminish the power that Cucchi's large paintings have taught us to associate with his art, and the choice to present his repertoire of signs primarily through these works did not limit the exhibition in any way. At times isolated, at times grouped into compact formations, at times scattered across the walls, the drawings unfold like cloud formations, arranged according to thematic rather than chronological criteria. Iconographically, they embraced the entire intellectual universe of Cucchi."

EC: Yes, the exhibition was entirely built around a large group of drawings. There was only one room with a few paintings, which I had titled *The Room of Paganini's Arm*—the third arm, right? The devil's arm. You know, back then, people used to say that Paganini had a superhuman, almost diabolical talent.

I asked myself: why not use that absurd space and expand everything vertically? So we went up and I built the exhibition in my own way, with an enormous number of drawings! It was conceived that way, inspired by exemplary exhibitions I had seen in the past—beautiful ones.

The Guggenheim is perhaps the most difficult museum in the world, but also the most beautiful. And do you know why? Because it creates selection. You can't improvise there. I saw the most extraordinary sculpture exhibition of my life there.

And I'm not just talking about beauty in an aesthetic sense. I still remember that show of Calder and Picasso together. If you think about it, imagining them inside such a complex space seems almost impossible. Yet, for me, it was perhaps the greatest sculpture exhibition I've ever seen.

How do you explain that? Probably because Calder and Picasso were artists who always made their own exhibitions, not just showcases. And that is fundamental. The world today is full of showcases—more than ever. It's an invasion. This "late-pop" aesthetic has taken over everything. We could list endless examples, and you know it well. The art world is full of what I call "super-luxury idiots."

BP: Let's go back to today's exhibition.

EC: The exhibition is this, if you think about it. It's all about this.

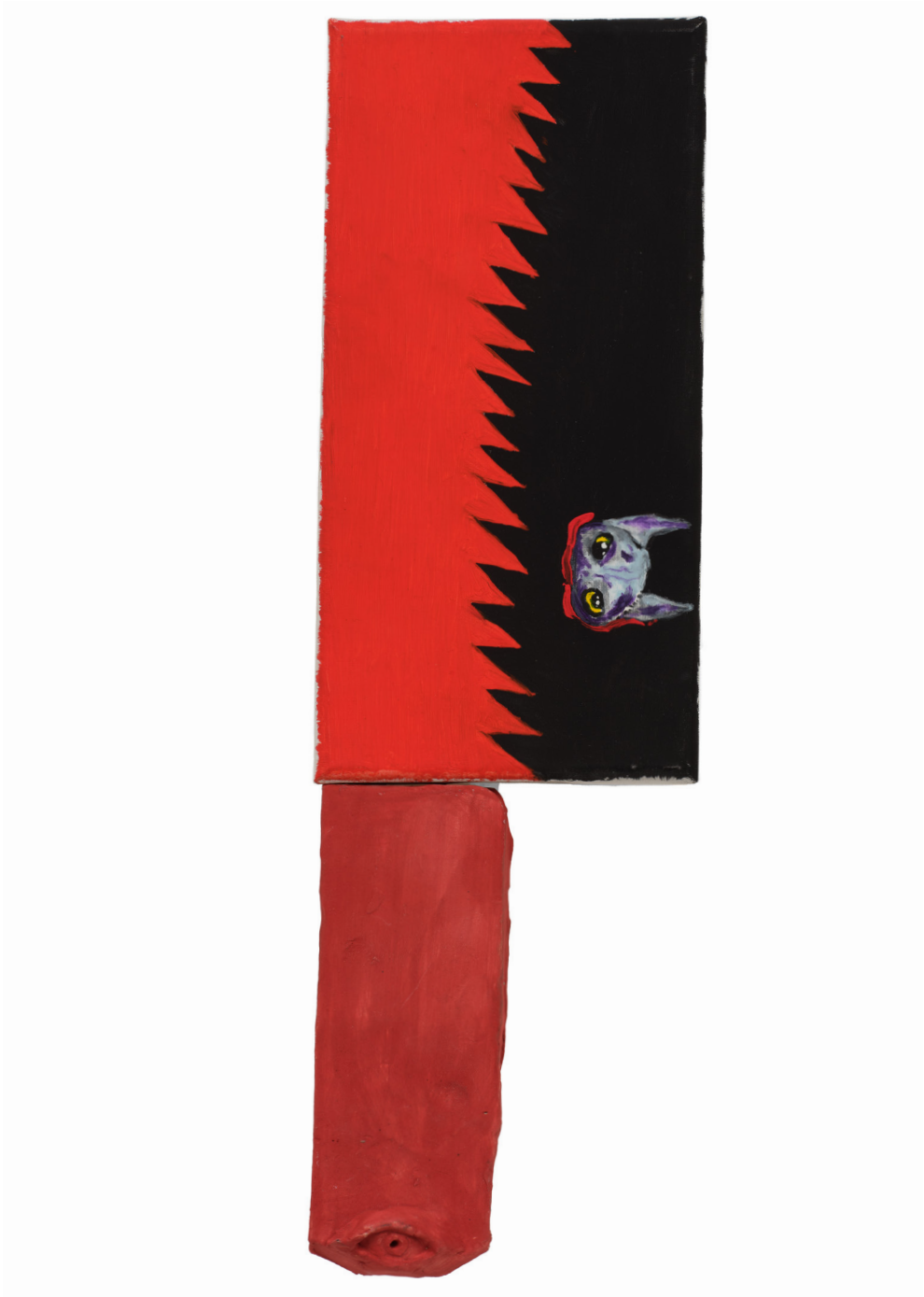
BP: Yes, that's true. It feels like the same attitude... like back then, you're reacting to a space and a context.

EC: Yes, but you see, even today, just like then, it's not like I planned the exhibition in advance. I've never thought in terms of reaction or ideological opposition. Even at the time of the Guggenheim exhibition, ideology was still very much in the air. We—poor souls—came from the so-called Arte Povera, which carried the same frustrations with it.

That vision still needed to impose itself, while in America, that process had already happened. But in Europe, I guess it was still useful as an echo chamber. So there was all of that going on, which, honestly, didn't even concern me. I didn't know much about it, but you pick up on certain things right away.

In the end, the context is always cultural—it goes beyond tactics, strategies, or ideologies. For me, it has always been, and will always be, a formal matter.

An artist must always support another artist, you understand? The body of an artist passes through the body of other artists. And this whole process can be full of blood and ferocity—but thank God! Because that's exactly where the selection of truth happens.



And that's how it should be. That's the beauty of art, its greatness. It's something necessary. Without it, it becomes something else. It turns into spectacle, into a circus, into Disneyland. And that's not a judgment—it's just a fact.

Think about the great season of American art. If you asked artists back then, they would tell you that everything happened inside the gallery, in those places. And when the exhibition arrived, that was the moment of greatest tension and emotion for everyone.

BP: And what do you think is happening today?

EC: When it comes to art, the only country in the world—along with ours, if you don't mind—is America. And there's nothing wrong with saying it. It doesn't mean we're better or worse. That's not the point.

Italy—particularly central Italy—is the only country that has been able to afford not one, but seven, eight, ten periods of decadence. And the only other country in the world that can afford a magnificent decadence is America.

Why? Because it had the opportunity to build a truly great artistic season. Like it or not, that was a great period—the truest one. And precisely for that reason, today it can afford this decadence.

That's also why, after so many years, I keep going there. Because I don't see other possibilities, with all due respect to the rest of the world.

But do you realize how complicated this is?

We can love Eastern art—Chinese art, Asian art in general. It's wonderful. From a decorative perspective, they have an incredible culture, with 2,000 more years of history than we do.

But what does Piero della Francesca have to do with Asia? Be patient. How can you read Piero della Francesca in Asia? It's not possible.

Our history can only be understood within its own context. And that's where you find the meaning of everything, including these magnificent periods of decadence.

And what's wrong with that? Everything is constantly changing. It's not me saying it—it was already Heraclitus.

BP: Let's go back to painting. In fact, despite all attempts—and today, even with new technologies—it seems we've never truly been able to abandon it... if anything, it feels more alive than ever.

EC: You see, the problem isn't just with painting. As Heraclitus said, things constantly transform.

Today it's one way, tomorrow it will already be different. But that difference is born from what was there before—it transforms.

It's not that if something is made of a certain material, you can't imagine it in a different material. That too is another kind of matter, another form of expression. Do you get what I mean?

Techniques and technologies are beautiful, of course, but they are a different language. They have an incredible decorative power, but they have nothing to do with the history of painting. Because painting—real painting—begins with Giotto. Period.

Like it or not. Sure, there have been technically superior artists to Giotto. But they didn't have his intuition: to tell stories through painting. Think about the frescoes of Saint Francis—they're not just images; they're history inside painting. And not just painted stories.

And that's where something new is born. Before, there was decoration—beautiful, refined, but still decoration. The Gothic, the Byzantines? Extraordinary, but still decoration. With Giotto, a different path begins.

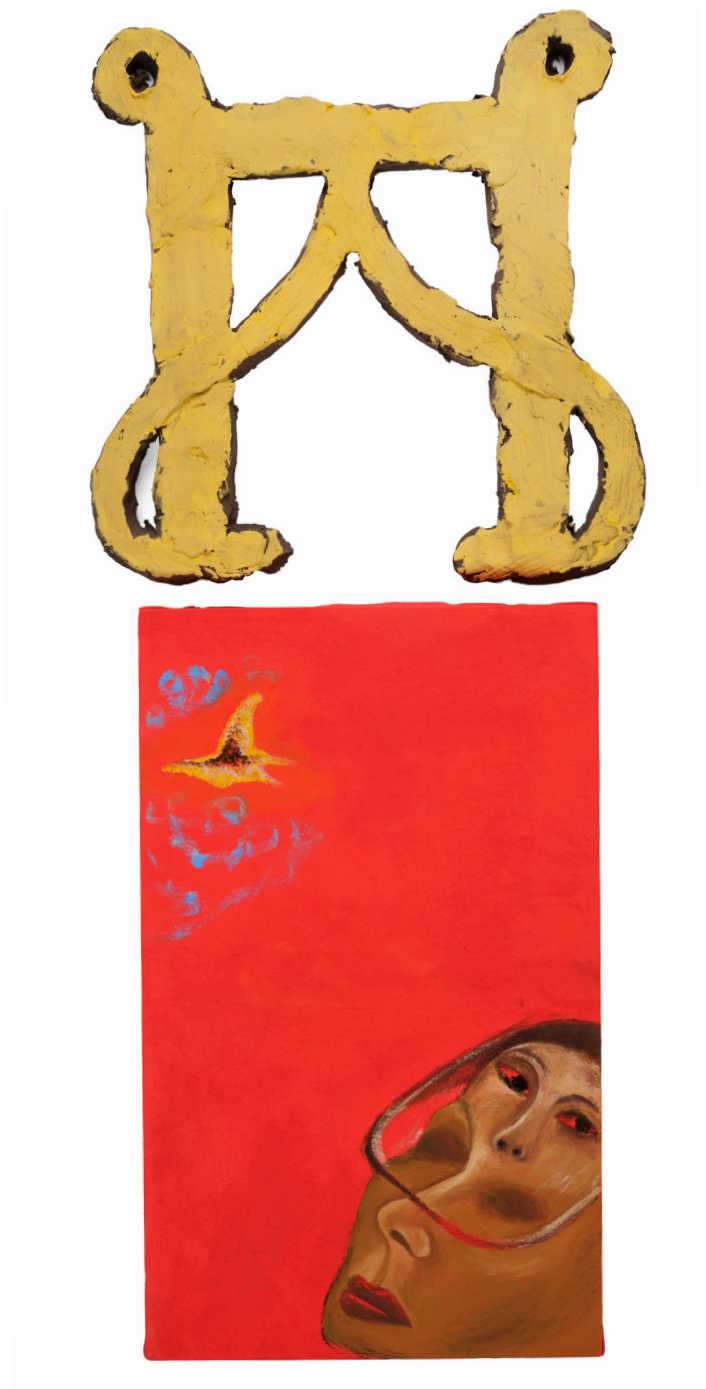
And coming back to the point: America is watching us. Oh, they are watching us. And they understand us.

Because their art comes from Europe. But it's not about who's better or who has the primacy. It's simply the way things are.

If we want to talk about it, then let's really talk about it.

BP: Let's go back to images—the meaning that images have for you today. Their ecology in today's world. Once, you told me that for an image to have its status as such, it must always be authorized by those who, by excellence, are the creators of images—artists...

EC: That's a great question. Who can truly authorize an image?



Look at everything around us. It's not a matter of omnipotence or absolute right. The point is: who, if not an artist, can authorize an image? Only art can do that.

Think about certain terrible, raw images. If you witness horror, a violent scene, what do you do? Do you show it as it is? Can you just display a severed head, for example? No, you can't. Only Caravaggio can. And he does. Go to Malta, look at *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, and you'll understand.

A newspaper, any media outlet, can't afford to do that. You can't just throw a severed head in front of people's eyes. It doesn't work like that. Why? Because it lacks deep authorization, a level of awareness, a justification that only art can provide.

You can talk about certain images, but showing them is another matter. So what now? Who decides? On what basis? Spiritual? Moral? If you don't know what something means, if you don't understand that reality, at the very least, you need to have the respect to acknowledge that. You have to be careful.

Now, imagine a figure like Caravaggio. Impressive, right? Sure, he was protected—also because he had quite a… let's say, edgy temperament. But protected or not, who truly authorized his works? The commissioner or himself?

It's impossible to think it wasn't him. Because when you look at a Caravaggio, his power collapses onto you. It leaves you breathless—with that madness, that absolute radicality.

Take *The Burial of Saint Lucy*. If someone tried to paint a work like that today, they'd be arrested. The Church would sue for blasphemy. Not only would it not be exhibited, but the artist would be in serious trouble.

And yet, he painted it. And who authorized it? He did—and in the end, the Church had to follow. That painting is still inside a church today.

If you think about it, it's incredible. And it still is today.

BP: So is this still valid today? Does the artist still have the power to authorize an image?

EC: What I'm trying to create in this exhibition is precisely this discourse around the image—not a linear narrative. When you enter and leave the space, you shouldn't feel like you've witnessed a traditional story or a mere aesthetic exercise. It's not just about exhibiting your work for the sake of it. It's not self-referentiality or that 'showcasing' we were talking about earlier.

Unfortunately, in recent years, we're seeing more and more exhibitions that are just sterile repetition—a closed system. But that's something entirely different from the irony and intelligence of an artist like De Chirico.

He, for example, repainted his famous metaphysical squares multiple times. But why? For play, for irony, maybe even to make some money and enjoy life—to eat a good plate of pasta on Via Condotti.

But the point is something else: first and foremost, De Chirico painted something that was missing—something that didn't exist yet. He created images that changed the history of art. And that's what truly matters.

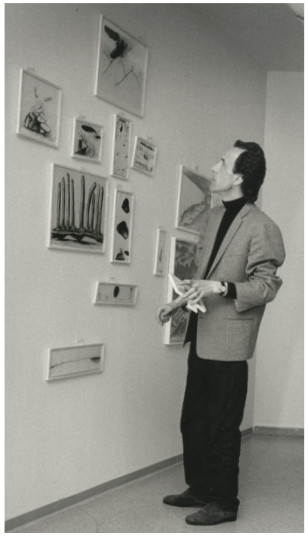
Everything else—what he did later—who cares? That's not the point. It's too easy to judge an artist by his repetitions, by his late works. The real question is: What did he bring new into the world?

Understanding this makes all the difference.

Bartolomeo Pietromarchi is a contemporary art curator and museum director. He has held several prominent positions, including the directorship of public museums such as the MACRO, Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome (2011-2014), the Italian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013), and the MAXXI, the National Museum of 21st Century Arts, in Rome (2016-2023) as well as private institutions such as Fondazione Adriano Olivetti and Fondazione Ratti in Como.

Pietromarchi has also authored several publications on contemporary art and has curated numerous exhibitions both in Italy and internationally such as *Low Form*: *Imaginaries and Visions in the Era of Artificial Intelligence*, *On the Spiritual Matter of Art*; major retrospectives of prominent contemporary artists such as Enzo Cucchi, Francesco Clemente, Giulio Paolini, Mario and Marisa Merz, Gelitin, Alfredo Jaar, and Shilpa Gupta; and group shows featuring William Kentridge, Shirin Neshat, Rebecca Horn, Jenny Holzer, Carsten Holler, Tomás Saraceno. He is currently professor at IULM University in Milan, visiting professor at GAFA Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in China, and guest curator at Palazzo delle Esposizioni Roma.

Installation views, *Enzo Cucchi*
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, 1986



Installation views, *Enzo Cucchi: The Poet and the Magician*
MAXXI, National Museum of 21st Century Arts, Rome, Italy, 2023

Excerpt from Bartolomeo Pietromarchi's essay *The Weight of Images*, published on the occasion of *Enzo Cucchi: The Poet and the Magician*, curated by Luigia Lonardelli and Bartolomeo Pietromarchi, MAXXI, Rome, 2023

[...] And that "all is vanity" is the feeling that winds through all of Cucchi's images, a *memento mori* that in lights, shadows, skulls, skeletons, fountains, cherubs, and arabesques creates the marvelous panorama of Enzo's songs that, in a combination of word, painting, sculpture and drawing, restores weight to the image, and its metachronic depth and spatial dimension with the force of ineffectuality and inactuality. And thus we are greeted at the entrance to the exhibition by a series of sculptures of the mischievous putti that play with the metamorphosis of form and matter where, as in the unconstrained world of childhood, hidden images appear and disappear, transforming faces into skulls on the threshold between birth and death. Putti that "shit and piss" to remind us of their secular existence, that turn into faces of old men with long beards and suddenly call to mind the face of Ezra Pound, "another modernist opposed to modernism," or that hide their faces so as "not to look" into the shame of a time and place that is our own. Sculptures molded in the noble materials of pink white and black marbles, bronze, stones, terracottas and ceramics, through which light is allowed to pass, with holes that turn the viewpoint upside down like a peephole through which to glimpse what we are not allowed to look at. Submerged and surrounded, trapped and hostage to a parallel world, Cucchi's power of imagination looms over us in a daring journey back in time and simultaneously projected into the future to demolish any remaining certainty we might have regarding the coordinates on which we base our knowledge and beliefs, and our moral, ethical and aesthetic rules. This is a necessary exhibition in today's world, which, to conclude with the words of Stefano Chiodi, ". . . in the constant underlying tension between the present and past [. . . instates] a short-circuit in which each element is assembled, in a visual and conceptual sense, with its opposite. There is no pause, caesura or contemplation possible. Rather, there is spasm, stabbing pain, convulsion, the moment we understand that that landscape, that interweaving of high and low, of lyrical and grotesque, of fatuous and noble, that broken and heterogeneous reality, are precisely what makes, then as now, our contemporaneity." "A painting," to close with one of the sentences Enzo wished to write on the exhibition wall, "that amasses the weight of things."

Enzo Cucchi: The Poet and the Magician, curated by Luigia Lonardelli and Bartolomeo Pietromarchi, Rome / Turin: MAXXI Museum, Five Continents, 2023, pages 60-62

Published on the occasion of *Enzo Cucchi: Mostra Coagula*
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Artworks:

Cover
Detail, *Untitled*, 2024, oil on canvas, 72 3/4 x 76 5/8 x 1 1/4 inches (184.8 x 194.6 x 3.2 cm)

Page 2
Untitled, 2024, oil on burlap, 14 5/8 x 61 1/4 inches (37.1 x 155.6 cm), 16 3/8 x 63 x 1 3/4 inches (41.6 x 160 x 4.4 cm) framed

Page 3
(left) *Untitled*, 2024, oil and ceramic on burlap, 19 3/4 x 9 7/8 x 1 5/8 inches (50 x 25 x 4 cm)
(right) *Untitled*, 2024, oil and ceramic on burlap, 19 3/4 x 9 7/8 x 2 3/4 inches (50 x 25 x 7 cm)

Page 4
Untitled, 2024, oil and ceramic on burlap and canvas, 19 3/4 x 9 7/8 x 2 3/8 inches (50 x 25 x 6 cm)

Page 6
Untitled, 2025, oil and ceramic on canvas, 7 7/8 x 16 1/8 x 2 1/4 inches (20 x 41 x 5.7 cm)

Page 7
Maschio (Male), 2024, oil on canvas and ceramic, 19 3/4 x 5 7/8 inches (50 x 15 cm)

Page 8
Untitled, 2024, oil on canvas, 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches (16.5 x 21.6 cm), 8 x 10 x 2 inches (20.3 x 25.4 x 5.1 cm) framed

Pages 9-10
Bambola (Doll), 2024, oil and ceramic on burlap, 9 x 61 inches, (23 x 155 cm)

Page 11
Untitled, 2025, oil on canvas and ceramic, 28 1/2 x 12 1/4 inches (72.4 x 31.1 cm)

Page 17
Two views, *PISCIA, CACA, MUORI (Piss, Shit, Die)*, 2022, gray Bardiglio marble, 8 1/2 x 21 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches (21.6 x 54.6 x 31.8 cm)

Images:

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