Gian Maria Tosatti
NOw/here

Pirelli HangarBicocca
Over the past two decades the work of Gian Maria Tosatti (b. Rome, 1980) has focused on the concepts of identity, collectivity, and memory in their historical, political, and spiritual connotations. His artistic practice consists of creating cycles of works like chapters or acts of a visual narrative that unfolds over several years. By means of structured, in-depth research and drawing freely on the language of visual arts, performance, and architecture, Tosatti conceives sculptural works and large site-specific installations designed for entire buildings or urban areas and intended to last for long periods of time. With the intent of rereading the history of the Western world, with its political and climatic crises, and its individual and collective traumas, the artist devises timeless landscapes and interventions in immersive architectures—domestic and industrial buildings, often abandoned—with the aim of exploring an existential dimension shared with the observer. Investigating memory through radical projects which take place in settings with strong social meaning and identity has been a constant method of his research since the beginning of his career. As Tosatti points out, «places are often complex objects in which a veritable stratigraphy of life has been deposited. Choosing them as a compositional element means using reality as a pictorial medium.»

The artist realizes his works starting from an analysis of the space and its socio-political context in order to reflect on the fractures and tensions inherent in each situation. Like a contemporary archaeologist, he transforms
and reactivates places through processes of subtraction and manipulation, sometimes changing their original function by shaping settings and atmospheres that overturn their perception. At the same time, he explores the temporal dimension, activating short circuits between past and present, and placing the visitor’s experience at the center of his reflection, often suggesting individual, solitary fruition of his work. The viewer is thus immersed in spaces and architectures, becoming an active element through her or his passage and presence.

Tosatti trained in the field of the performing arts, graduating in directing from the Centro per la Sperimentazione e la Ricerca Teatrale in Pontedera, Tuscany, one of Italy’s leading centers of theater research that, over the years, has been associated with some of the foremost exponents of avant-garde theater, including Eugenio Barba’s Odin Teatret and subsequently Jerzy Grotowski’s Workcenter (1933–1999). In 2005, he returned to his hometown, Rome, to embark upon an artistic journey through local architecture and visual arts, creating large site-specific installations in abandoned and peripheral locations and at the same time working as a theater and dance critic for newspapers and specialist magazines. From 2008 to 2018 he lived in New York, conducting his investigation on liminal areas of the city before resettling in Europe. During that time Tosatti drew on the language of the theater as a research tool and a methodological approach to the artistic experience, where the use of certain key elements such as light, narration, and temporality give rise to sceneries that inhabit and shape the places in which the artist intervenes.

Tosatti’s works reset the viewer’s space-time coordinates by becoming, as defined by the curator Eugenio Viola, “complex intermedial devices,” in which the mingling of visual arts, theater, and performance gives shape—outlining an introspective and expressive collective quest—to a series of “mirrors” in which visitors are invited to project themselves. The artist’s imagery cites the ruins, relics, and traces of the passage of humans throughout history. Rooms and corridors populated with furniture evoking lives lived, rubble and dust, fragments of objects, rust and charcoal, broken glass and gold coating are just some of the presences that manifest themselves in works charged with meaning and symbolism. Tosatti decontextualizes places and objects, creating new presences rooted in the past and offering critical and transdisciplinary readings of the contemporary world. His work draws on a multitude of historical, artistic, philosophical, political, literary, and theatrical references, ranging from classical authors like the Greek tragedians and Dante (1265–1321) to twentieth-century writers such as Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894–1961) and Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), who are central figures for his art. Other fundamental references are the films of certain avant-garde directors including Andrei Tarkovsky (1932–1986) and Roberto Rossellini (1906–1977), whose dramaturgy interpreted the human condition through apocalyptic and dystopian scenarios.
The first cycle of works developed by the artist was *Devozioni* ([D e v o t i o n s](#)) (2005–11): ten interventions on various buildings in Rome, including the water tower of the San Camillo hospital, the dewatering pump of the Centrale Montemartini power station, and a bunker in Via Panisperna. The project highlighted some fundamental elements inherent to the archetype of modern Western man, starting with the figure of Christ. Subsequently, Tosatti's research focused on another international work entitled *Fondamenta* ([Foundations](#)) (2010–14). Realized in New York in collaboration with organizations such as the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, and the National Park Service, it explored the sense of loneliness characteristic of the contemporary metropolis by creating three environmental installations where a few traces of the personal experiences of hypothetical inhabitants resonated with the visitor's presence in the rooms. According to the artist, «the space is a kind of labyrinth in which each room seems identical to the last and each exit is another entrance into the same obsession.»

Through his practice, Tosatti often involves the communities connected with the places in which he intervenes, for example, in *Sette Stagioni dello Spirito* ([Seven Seasons of the Spirit](#)) (2013–16), a titanic seven-stage project inspired by *The Interior Castle*, the mystical text by St Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)—a journey of the soul through seven inner chambers, but also by fundamental texts such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The intervention involved seven abandoned buildings emblematic of the city of Naples, including the former military hospital, the archives of the Neapolitan registry office (the first to be established in Italy), and the former port warehouses. For the last stage, the artist conceived a route with different rooms inside the private church of the former monastery of the Santissima Trinità delle Monache, ending in an ideal paradise bathed in natural light. He covered the floor with sand, planting citrus trees inhabited by numerous canaries that flew and sang freely within the space. *Sette Stagioni dello Spirito* exemplifies the use of color and light in Tosatti's oeuvre: the colored plumage of the flying birds, illuminated by the shimmering sunlight filtering through the windows, creates a continual pictorial performance in the white space of an imaginary cathedral. Referring to this project, the artist explains, «it is not an exhibition, but a coming-of-age story that has so far engaged over 20,000 visitors. Ultimately, this journey into the realms of the spirit is really about staying in the same place, the human soul, finding the earth beneath the sky.» Along with the environmental vocabulary recalling the theater tradition, Tosatti adopts key elements of the visual arts, such as perspectival composition, the chromatic dimension, and the use of materials such as charcoal and rust, strongly identified with the Arte Povera movement. Furthermore, working on the urban fabric, he expands the parameters of the environmental installation, evoking the experimental language of the 1970s and 1980s. On the one hand, he recalls the practice of artists like Gregor Schneider,
whose reproduction of alienating rooms in which traces of human presence can still be seen, produces a bewildering and disorienting state in the visitor, and Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, pioneers in the creation of strongly symbolic domestic environments in which the Soviet framework is the medium for narrating universal themes. On the other, like several figures of his generation, including Giorgio Andreotta Calò and Margherita Moscardini, he expands the boundaries of installation itself, placing it in dialogue with a collective and urban context.

More recently, with *Il mio cuore è vuoto come uno specchio* [My heart is a void, the void is a mirror]—an ongoing project in several chapters commenced in 2018—Tosatti has embarked upon a journey through areas that have been influenced by Europe over the centuries. In addition to Catania (Italy), they include the cities of Riga (Latvia), Cape Town (South Africa), Odesa (Ukraine), and Istanbul (Turkey), where the artist investigates the conditions of the crisis of democracy and the evolution of human civilization from different perspectives. Architecture, sounds, everyday objects, and desolate landscapes tell the future by resorting to an imagery that evokes the cyclical nature of history, as in *Episodio di Odesa* [Episode of Odesa] (2020), in which Tosatti dotted the horizon of the leaden landscape of Kuyalnik lake in Ukraine with eight lampposts installed in the shifting sands of the estuary. Precarious, volatile, almost invisible traces bring to mind a past consisting of memories and ghostly presences, as in the monumental installation presented in the Italian Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, made from the remains of factories that went bankrupt during the COVID pandemic, testimonies to the rise and fall of Italy’s post-war industrial “dream.”

**The Exhibition**

For his solo exhibition “NOW/here,” Tosatti has created a new intervention in the Shed space, engaging with the pictorial dimension for the first time. The exhibition narrative brings together two cycles of new paintings, *Portraits* (2022) and *NOW/here* (2023), encapsulating concepts that have pervaded his research over the last twenty years and are presented for the first time at Pirelli HangarBicocca. According to Tosatti, this body of works is a portrait of the spirit of the times, its fragilities and tensions, but also a snapshot of the ideas that have characterized several artists of his own generation, offering a reflection on the current stage of human civilization and its future prospects.

The exhibition flanks the two series of large-format paintings displayed in close relation with the architecture of Pirelli HangarBicocca, generating moments of dialogue and contrasting situations. *Portraits* consists of four paintings in gold and rust on iron panels assembled and installed on jointed pipe structures, while *NOW/here* takes the form of ten large compositions of graphite and white charcoal on canvas suspended from the ceiling. The works form a landscape of stratified images in which light—a central element of Tosatti’s practice—crosses the material dimension, revealing its nuances. The artist conceives the paintings as “mirrors”
with a dual function: on the one hand they are devices for revealing reality, while on the other they raise open questions that directly challenge the visitor, triggering a comparison between the inner world and the surrounding world. They also trigger a space-time short circuit, as evoked by the title of the exhibition, which can be understood in the sense of the individual terms “now” and “here”, or the sequential “nowhere”.

For the artist this new body of work, which draws on elements of the art-historical tradition, specifically abstraction, becomes a representation of topical issues such as the crisis of democracy, bringing them together in a reflection on the human condition at this complex time, in which society is poised between catastrophe and evolution. This project continues to pursue the long journey on environmental installation that characterizes Tosatti’s artistic practice and finds its origins in other artworks, from Testamento – devozioni X [Testament – devotions X] (2011) to more recent ones like Episodio di Odessa (2020) and Storia della Notte e Destino delle Comete [History of the Night and Destiny of Comets] (2022), tracing an ideal line that transforms the act of looking in a space where distant imageries meet.

**Portraits, 2022**

Part of a series of works made of gold and rust commenced in 2020, these large-format paintings are conceived on iron panels. Tosatti’s intention is to depict the contradictions of the contemporary human condition, giving shape to «portraits of communities, moments, and a collective idea»: a concept that in this new cycle is expressed through the juxtaposition of conflicting elements in material and symbolic terms. By mixing gold and rust—on structures that reproduce large advertising billboards—, the artist creates an impossible fusion that exemplifies how the paradox of values on which consumer society is based has ended up corrupting every kind of human relationship.

In this series Tosatti paints with “matter” or, in other words, using the processes of corrosion and oxidation of metal, physically depicting the dimension of the passage of time. His use of gold draws on the Western pictorial tradition, from Byzantine mosaics, via the gold backgrounds of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century panel paintings, to the more recent experimental work of 1970s Italian artists like Jannis Kounellis (1936–2017), Gino De Dominicis (1947–1998), and Luciano Fabro (1936–2007). Indeed, gold is a recurring motif in Tosatti’s poetics, for example in Sette Stagioni dello Spirito (2013–16), where the properties of the metal (precious and ductile) became one of the elements of transformation in the uninhabited buildings on which the artist intervened, covering entire rooms with gold leaf in several stages of the
project. Or in Histoire et Destin – New Men’s Land [History and Destiny – New Men’s Land] (2016), in which gold leaf applied to rocks and the remains of fortifications in northern France exalted the ruins on the edge of the “Calais Jungle,” one of the largest refugee camps in the heart of Europe between 2015 and 2016.

The paintings, installed on jointed pipe structures and positioned along the space of the Shed, act as mirrors radiating light and introduce a timeless feature, stimulating deep and intimate reflection in the visitor. With Portraits, Tosatti dematerializes the two-dimensional nature of the plain to create an emblematic elsewhere, conceiving, as he explains, «a surface that separates the realm of things from that of the soul.»

**NOW/HERE, 2023**

Similarly to Portraits, the series of ten works in graphite and charcoal on canvas entitled NOW/HERE represents a further reflection on central themes of the artist’s oeuvre, such as the relationship between humans and nature and references to the history of Western thought. Suspended from the ceiling of the Shed, the canvases depict blurred visions of abstract landscapes, in a pictorial representation of existence. Using graphite, with its many gradations, as a large-scale painting technique, Tosatti switches from the real to the imaginative dimension, resulting in representations of horizons studded with enigmatic white spheres. Like radiant points, they recall the idea of light, a recurring metaphor in his art. An example is the recent intervention Storia della Notte e Destino delle Comete (2022) presented at the Venice Biennale, where the artist conceived a path culminating in a nocturnal aquatic landscape inside the Italian Pavilion, dotted with luminous presences evoking fireflies. In keeping with his visual imagery, NOW/HERE can be linked to Tosatti’s experience in crisis areas, such as the environmental intervention Episodio di Odessa (2020), belonging to the series Il mio cuore è vuoto come uno specchio (2018), a project that dialogued with the desolate landscape of Kuyalnik lake, Ukraine, eliciting a sense of the end of the world. This sensation is also present in Testamento [Testament] (2011) — part of the Devozioni [Devotions] intervention (2005–11) in Rome—which was created in the hospital of San Camillo and culminated at the top of the water tower, where everything appeared as if crystallized, suspended in a dimension of existential precariousness.

In Pirelli HangarBicocca, the exhibition narrative follows the growing tension between the architecture of the gallery spaces and the intimate aspect of the works, which recount a collective inner turmoil, understood through the experience of each visitor. In the artist’s words, «my lights, my horizons, my landscapes, can be one thing and another, they can be different realities, all pointing to a single radical truth.»
Exhibited works

Portrait #001, 2022
Gold leaf and rust on iron
Without structure: 150 x 300 x 2.2 cm
With structure: 240 x 300 x 180 cm

Portrait #002, 2022
Gold leaf and rust on iron
Without structure: 150 x 300 x 2.2 cm
With structure: 240 x 300 x 180 cm

Portrait #003, 2022
Gold leaf and rust on iron
Without structure: 150 x 300 x 2.2 cm
With structure: 240 x 300 x 180 cm

Portrait #004, 2022
Gold leaf and rust on iron
Without structure: 300 x 600 x 2.2 cm
With structure: 390 x 600 x 340 cm

NOw/here #001, 2023
Graphite and white charcoal on canvas
180 x 400 x 8 cm

NOw/here #002, 2023
Graphite and white charcoal on canvas
180 x 400 x 8 cm

NOw/here #003, 2023
Graphite and white charcoal on canvas
180 x 400 x 8 cm

NOw/here #004, 2023
Graphite and white charcoal on canvas
180 x 400 x 8 cm

NOw/here #005, 2023
Graphite and white charcoal on canvas
180 x 400 x 8 cm

NOw/here #006, 2023
Graphite and white charcoal on canvas
180 x 400 x 8 cm

NOw/here #007, 2023
Graphite and white charcoal on canvas
180 x 400 x 8 cm

NOw/here #008, 2023
Graphite and white charcoal on canvas
180 x 400 x 8 cm

NOw/here #009, 2023
Graphite and white charcoal on canvas
180 x 400 x 8 cm

NOw/here #010, 2023
Graphite and white charcoal on canvas
180 x 400 x 8 cm

For all works: Courtesy the artist. Produced by Pirelli HangarBicocca
Selected Exhibitions

Many international institutions have presented works and site-specific installations by Gian Maria Tosatti, including: Tarlabası district, Istanbul (2021); Kuyalnik lake, Odesa (2020); A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town (2019); Palazzo Biscari, Catania (2018); Museo Madre, Naples (2016); Castel Sant’Elmo, Naples, Museo Archeologico, Salerno, CCS Bard – Hessel Museum, New York (2014). In 2022, the artist represented Italy at the 59th Venice Biennale. He participated in important exhibitions such as Manifesta 12, Palermo (2018) and group shows like those at the Italian Cultural Institute, New York (2019); Galleria Nazionale, Rome, Petah Tikva Museum of Art, Israel (2017); Fondazione Rivoli 2, Milan (2015); Fabbrica del Vapore, Milan, Museo Osvaldo Licini, Ascoli Piceno (2014); Mole Vanvitelliana, Ancona (2013); Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York (2011). The artist was awarded the Frescobaldi prize (2020), the New York prize (2017), the Fondazione Ettore Fico prize (2016) and the Terna prize (2008).

Gian Maria Tosatti is also a writer and journalist: he collaborates with several newspapers and has published a number of essays, including Esperienza e realtà (2021) and New Men’s Land: Storia e Destino della Jungle di Calais (2017). He is the artistic director of the Rome Quadrennial during 2021–2024.

This publication accompanies the exhibition “NOw/here” by Gian Maria Tosatti

Lenders
Studio Tosatti

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Portrait #004, 2022 (detail)
Gold leaf and rust on iron
150 x 300 x 2.2 cm
Courtesy the artist

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Pirelli HangarBicocca is a non-profit foundation, established in 2004, which has converted a former industrial plant in Milan into an institution for producing and promoting contemporary art.

This dynamic center for experimentation and research covers 15,000 square meters, making it one of the largest contiguous exhibition spaces in Europe. It presents major solo shows every year by Italian and international artists, with each project conceived to work in close relation to the architecture of the complex, and explored in depth through a calendar of parallel events. Admission to the space and the shows is completely free of charge, and cultural mediators are on hand to help the public connect with the art. Since 2012, Vicente Todolí has been the foundation's Artistic Director.

The complex, which once housed a locomotive factory, includes an area for public services and educational activities, and three exhibition spaces whose original twentieth-century architectural features have been left clearly visible: Shed, Navate, and Cubo.

As well as its exhibitions program and cultural events, Pirelli HangarBicocca also permanently houses one of Anselm Kiefer’s most important site-specific works, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004-2015*, commissioned for the opening of Pirelli HangarBicocca, while the exterior area hosts *La Sequenza* (1971–81) by Fausto Melotti.
TO KNOW BEFORE YOU ENTER

- It is forbidden to touch the artworks.
- Children are welcome but must be held by hand by an adult during the visit.
- Dogs are not allowed to enter the exhibition.
- Umbrellas are not allowed in the exhibition space.
- Backpacks and large bags must be carried by hand.

#ArtToThePeople

Find out more about all our exhibition guides on pirellihangarbicocca.org

FREE ADMISSION