

tornabuoniArt
LONDON



Afro, Untitled, 1955

PRESS RELEASE

22 August 2018

AFRO

**Gesture, Line and Colour:
The makings of an
Abstract Expressionist**

TORNABUONI ART LONDON

2 OCTOBER - 1 DECEMBER 2018

Private View

Monday 1 October, 6 - 8 pm

Panel Discussion and Press View

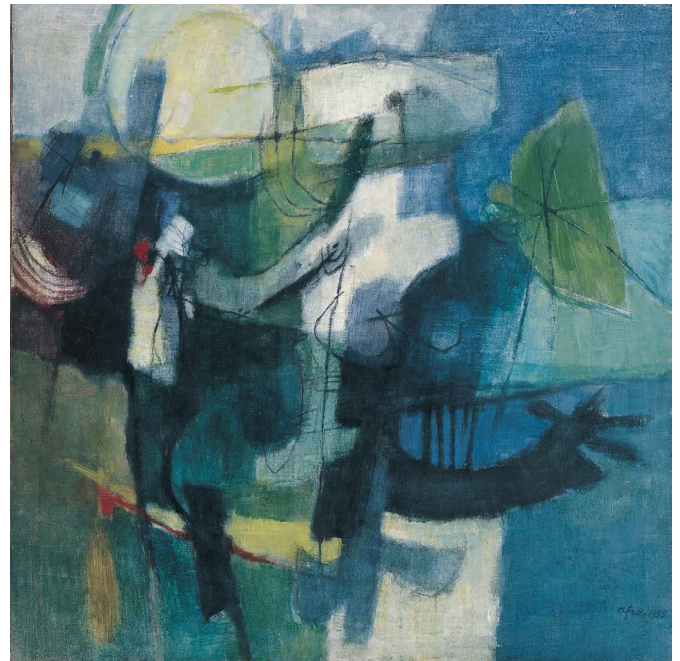
Tuesday 2 October, 10 - 11 am

with Philip Rylands, Marco Mattioli and Barbara Drudi, hosted by Farah Nayeri

Can a pictorial form also have value as an apparition? Can the rigorously formal organism of a painting contain the lightness, the living breath of an evocation, the leap or shudder of memory? This, for me, is the problem; this is the reason for the constant disquiet that makes me paint. The picture should be an enclosed world; within its limits the drama unfolds; this chessboard spells victory or defeat.

Afro, *New Decade*, 1955

Tornabuoni Art London is proud to announce an exhibition of the paintings of Afro Libio Basaldella (1912-1976), better known as Afro. The accompanying exhibition catalogue is edited by Philip Rylands, Director Emeritus of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, who has also written an original essay for the catalogue. This show aims to encourage the British public to learn more about the only Italian Abstract Expressionist, whose work has rarely been exhibited in the UK.



Afro, *Summer in the Orchard*, 1955

Earlier this year, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the artist's monumental fresco, *The Garden of Hope* (1958) created for the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, Tornabuoni Art Paris held an unprecedented exhibition dedicated to Afro, at its gallery in the heart of the Marais. Highlights of this show will go on display at Tornabuoni Art London in October 2018.

Born in Udine in 1912, to a family of artists and interior designers, Afro's unusual name was given to him by his patriotic parents in honour of Italy's recent colonisation of the North African coast of Libya. After studying art in Venice, Afro quickly emerged — in the 1930s — as a significant member of the School of Rome, a group of tonalist painters whose expressionist style contrasted with the prevalent neoclassical 'return to order' of the day. From the 1950s, he travelled to the United States and developed an abstract art that combined American influences with, as Philip Rylands discusses in his catalogue essay, the great Italian artistic traditions of colour and line.

Along with Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana, Afro is today considered an important exponent of Italian Abstraction. Initially he explored abstraction in formal terms – focusing on shape, colour and composition. However, he later came to believe that the painting itself should embody the emotion, not just represent it. Afro's works are often autobiographical, drawing on past memories conjured up some time after the event in order to allow the instant to be recalled through the senses rather than as mental images. Through time, the memory of the moment becomes colour and feeling for him. This is most keenly felt in works such as *Estate nell'Orto* (Summer in the Orchard), 1955, where the colour and movement of the painting engage the viewer's senses and evoke the feeling of a past experience imbued with nostalgia.

This exhibition, produced in collaboration with the Fondazione Archivio Afro, will present around twenty artworks from the 1950s to the 1970s. Highlights of the exhibition include major works, such as *Racconti di Guascogna* (Tales from Gascony), 1951, and *Ragazzo col Tacchino* (Boy with Turkey), 1955, which show how Afro's more symbolic representation of objects and figures shifted to become a purely expressive and emotional form of abstraction.

Philip Rylands considers Afro to be Italy's answer to Abstract Expressionism and an example of the fertile artistic dialogues between Italy and the US in the post-war period. In his catalogue preface, he writes:

Afro was one of the leading Italian painters of the very talented and numerous generation of artists that flourished in the decades following World War II. He was as successful internationally, above all in the United States, as he was in Italy. Afro's career and work provide an interesting case study of the relative values of new European and American art in that period.

The exhibition catalogue also features a study of UNESCO's fresco and its preparatory drawings by Anne Montfort, curator at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, an analysis of the artist's work and his close relationship with the American Abstract Expressionism movement by Barbara Drudi Professor at the Accademia di Firenze and a text by Davide Colombo, History of Art Professor at the University of Parma. The publication is rich with original documents, including some of the artist's correspondence, as well as a selected critical anthology, much

NOTES TO EDITORS

ABOUT THE ARTIST: AFRO BASALDELLA (1912, Udine - 1976, Zürich)



Afro in his studio in the Castello di Prampero, near Udine, 1963. Photo: Italo Zannier.

Afro Libio Basaldella, known as Afro, was born in Udine, Italy, on 4 March 1912. With his brothers Dino and Mirko, aged only 16, he exhibited paintings at the *Mostra della Scuola Friulana d'Avanguardia* (1928). In 1930, he was awarded a scholarship by the Marangoni Art Foundation of Udine, which enabled him to move to Rome with his brother Dino, and engage the art scene there, specifically that of the Scuola di via Cavour and the Scuola Romana. From 1931, he took part in various *Mostre Sindacali* and in 1933 exhibited at the Galleria Il Milione in Milan with fellow Friulan artists, Bosisio, Pittino and Taiuti. Later, Afro moved permanently to Rome.

In 1935 his work was shown at the 2nd Rome Quadriennale, and in 1936 at the Venice Biennale, to which he was invited again in 1940 and 1942. Following his experience with the Scuola Romana, he painted several large murals. He passed the war years in Venice. In the late 1940s he developed his distinctive version of abstraction from a combination of neo-Cubism and the metaphysical painting of de Chirico.

In 1950, Afro travelled to the United States and began his almost twenty-year collaboration with the Catherine Viviano Gallery, New York. The different cultural climate in the USA and the American avant-garde of the period made a strong impact on Afro. This

influence, however, appeared only later in his work, and was expressed in a personal manner. In 1952, Afro was part of the Gruppo degli Otto, whose members exhibited at the XXVI Biennale. In 1955, he was invited to exhibit in the first Documenta in Kassel, in the Rome Quadriennale, and in a traveling exhibition in the USA, *The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors*. By this time, Afro had achieved international fame and recognition. In 1956, he was awarded the prize for best Italian painter at the Venice Biennale. In 1958, together with Appel, Arp, Calder, Matta, Miró, Moore, Picasso and Tamayo, he was selected to decorate the new UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. His contribution was a mural entitled *The Garden of Hope*.

Afro continued his international career in 1959-60: he exhibited at the second Documenta in Kassel, and won the Carnegie Prize in Pittsburgh, as well as the Italian prize of the Guggenheim International at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. In 1961, James Johnson Sweeney, former director of the Guggenheim Museum, New York, wrote an essay for a monograph on Afro's work. During this period, Afro held solo exhibitions

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in Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1960), the Galerie de France in Paris, and the Galleria Blu in Milan (1961). In 1964-65, he was given a series of European exhibitions: at the Galerie im Erker in St. Gallen, the Räber in Lucerne, the Günter Franke in Munich, and in 1969-70, a large retrospective exhibition curated by Bernd Krimmel at the Kunsthalle in Darmstadt, the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, and later, at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara.

Following the death of his brother Mirko in 1969, Afro suffered various periods of ill-health.

During the 1970s, Afro focused mainly on printmaking, concentrating less on painting. He participated in fewer exhibitions. Afro died in Zürich, 24 July 1976. A monograph edited by Cesare Brandi was published the following year. In 1978, the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome paid homage to Afro with a large retrospective exhibition, curated by Bruno Mantura.

Numerous solo and collective exhibitions were held in the years that followed, and extensive research by art historians and critics consolidated Afro's renown, contributing to the ongoing diffusion of his work, in Italy and abroad. Awareness of Afro's art grew and continues to grow over time, thanks also to the revival of interest in the various historical contexts, more than half a century ago, in which he played a role, as an Italian painter of international renown.

ABOUT TORNABUONI

Founded in Florence in 1981 by Roberto Casamonti, in the street that gave the gallery its name, Tornabuoni opened other exhibition spaces in Crans-Montana in 1993, Milan in 1995, Forte Dei Marmi in 2004, Paris in 2009 and London in 2015. Specialising in Post-War Italian art, the gallery presents the work of artists such as Fontana, Burri, Castellani, Bonalumi, Boetti, Scheggi and Manzoni.

Tornabuoni also has a permanent collection of significant works by major Italian artists of the Novecento, such as de Chirico, Morandi, Balla and Severini, as well as international 20th-century avant-garde masters, such as Picasso, Mirò, Kandinsky, Hartung, Poliakoff, Dubuffet, Lam, Matta, Christo, Wesselmann, Warhol and Basquiat. Complementing its focus on Italian art, the Tornabuoni collection also features the work of young contemporary artists such as the Italian artist Francesca Pasquali and the Italy-based Armenian artist Mikayel Ohanjanyan, who won the Golden Lion at the 2015 Venice Biennale and whose work is on show at Yorkshire Sculpture Park since 2017.

Tornabuoni participates in major international art fairs such as the FIAC in Paris, TEFAF in Maastricht, Art Basel, Art Basel Miami Beach, Art Basel Hong Kong, Artefiera in Bologna, Miart in Milan, Frieze Masters in London, Artgeneve in Geneva and Artmonte-carlo in Monaco.

The gallery also works closely with museums and institutions. With its experience and knowledge of the work of the artists it represents, the gallery has also established itself as an advisor for both private and public collections.

Press contact

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Images: Afro, *Untitled*, 1955, mixed oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm. Courtesy Tornabuoni Art
Afro, *Summer in the Orchard*, 1955, mixed media on canvas, 110 x 110 cm. ©Fondazione Archivio Afro
Afro in his studio in the Castello di Prampero, near Udine, 1963. ©Italo Zannier

For more information on the gallery and its activities, please visit www.tornabuoniart.com

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