

Constructing chaos

In the paintings of Guido de Costanzo, organic materials meld with synthetic resins, and precious and base metals collide. Structure, control and order mutate into an alchemy of chance, randomness and chaos.

Each painting is created by coating stretched canvas with multiple layers of white gesso and then sanding back this surface to a velvety smooth ground for the application of coloured pigments and a gilded layer of gold or silver leaf. With a single painting consisting of up to nine separate canvases, this first painstaking stage can take several months to complete.

These perfect and precious structures are then set aside, awaiting one final, performative act. This climax – a sort of conscious re-staging of the ‘heroic’ action painting myth of the abstract expressionists – can be performed only when the artist is ready, when his mind-set is right. From a height, “in a few seconds of nervous anticipation”, he drops or pours liquid material onto the shimmering surface below, at once despoiling and yet creating anew. Molten metal, or a mixture of glass and resin, spew onto and into the surface – heat burns through the composite of precious metal, colour and gesso; resin and broken glass attach themselves. This is a performance that no one will ever see – a performance made evident by the splatter of congealing liquid that encapsulates both time and gravity in its wake.

de Costanzo speaks of this despoiling as being equivalent to an ‘act of nature’, a random event outside of our control that comes along to disrupt the path on which we are set. And the resulting burst of energy, exploding out from the centre of a golden ground, suggests a cosmological event – the birth of a universe in the celestial glow of the heavens. Yet equally there is something of the everyday about the splat, an accidental spillage that disrupts the normal order of things.

As he becomes more experienced at engineering this drop, each becomes more within the realms of probability yet never wholly predictable, a reminder that, whilst we grapple to control the unexpected, some things will always remain beyond our command – some acts of nature will never be tamed.

As an adjunct to his paintings, de Costanzo is currently working on a series of sculptures that feature vandalised brick-wall like structures, each mounted on a highly designed trolley base. One such sculpture, built from transparent resin bricks with a gaping hole punched through its corner, is reminiscent of the miniature, ruined walls that grant defensive cover to toy soldiers on the model battlefields of war game reconstructions. The addition of wheels suggests portability, a mobile armament then designed to offer protection any time, any place, anywhere. But by way of a paradox, as a protective structure it is rendered redundant (any would be assailant could see through its transparent sides!) and this cartoon-like metaphor for our need to protect ourselves from the world outside reminds us that ultimately there is nowhere to run to, no place to hide.

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First published: www.guidodecostanzo.co.uk