

THE ART OF COLLECTING: FIAC

An Italian Artist's Perspectives on What Lies Beyond

By Roderick Conway Morris

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ROME — Marco Tirelli lived the life of an artist from an early age. He grew up surrounded by the children of visiting scholars and artists at the Swiss Institute in Rome, where his father was the manager. The family lived in an apartment in the Institute's grand 19th-century Villa Maraini and, in view of his precocious talents as a draftsman, the aspiring artist was assigned a studio of his own there at the age of 15.

Now 56, Mr. Tirelli said that living in the villa with its surrounding gardens was like being brought up in a time warp, in an oasis of old-world tranquillity near the Via Veneto, the epicenter in the early 1960s of the flamboyant and rackets lifestyle depicted in Federico Fellini's film "La Dolce Vita."

"So I'm a rather strange Roman," he said. "I grew up here, but I never felt entirely part of it. And this has had a big effect on my work because I've always sensed a tension between places, real places, and what lies unseen beyond."



"Untitled, 2012," one of the works in Marco Tirelli's solo show at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma's Testaccio space in Rome this year. Giorgio Benni/Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma



Mr. Tirelli's "Untitled, 2009," which was on display at the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice from 2010 to 2011. Jean-Pierre Gabriel



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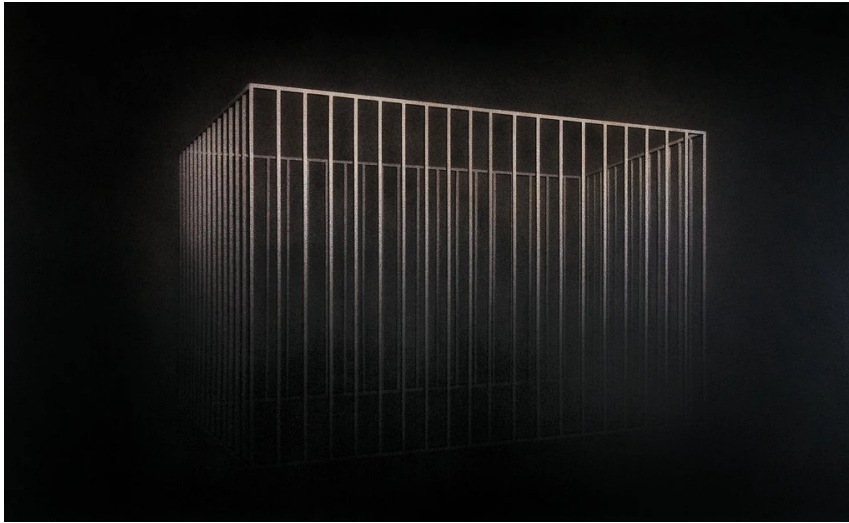
The utter darkness of the night when he looked out of the window of his house there, far from artificial light sources, had a profound influence on his artistic vision, he said.

“You knew that there were mountains and woods and a world out there yet you could not see them in the almost total blackness,” he said. “And by shining a torch out into the darkness, you could see the complete division of light and darkness. The church fathers described God as light, but I began to conceive of an all-enveloping God not as light, but as darkness.”

Interestingly, Mr. Tirelli studied not painting but set design at the Fine Arts Academy in Rome, and he is an admirer of the Swiss theatrical designer Adolphe Appia, echoes of whose style can perhaps be found in the geometry and dramatic illusionistic lighting of Mr. Tirelli's own works.

“I was in many ways more interested in the ideas behind designing scenes, rather than in pursuing a career in the theater,” he said. “Ideas are very important to me and I think that technique should derive from those ideas as the method of representing them. In stage design the construction of the scene should be the clearest possible expression of the essence of the drama. And

that is what I am trying constantly to do in my paintings: to concentrate, to reduce, to distill every element down to its vital essence.”



The artist Marco Tirelli in his studio in Rome. Marco Anelli

The starting point for his large canvases is a small drawing. The amazingly nuanced “sfumato,” or vaporous blurring of contours, that give his final painted objects such an arresting three-dimensional appearance are based, he said, on years of practice, particularly with gradations of shading in charcoal on paper.

The completed drawing is then scaled up to make stencils to divide the main fields of the final painting. He then creates the image using a pointillist technique, using principally airbrushes rather than paintbrushes — except when applying highly diluted, transparent layers of color.

As with pointillist paintings, Mr. Tirelli’s images are constructed of tens of thousands of small dots, but thanks to the use of the airbrush, these are minuscule, far smaller than those of conventional pointillist paintings. And, despite their apparent monochrome appearance from a distance, Mr. Tirelli’s images are in fact composed not only of white and black paints, but also yellows, ochres, greens, blues and other colors, which reveal themselves only on very close inspection.

To purify the paints and prevent the airbrushes from becoming clogged, the artist first filters his colors through pieces of tulle, bought from a bridal dress supplier and inserted in glass cones that lend his studio the appearance of a chemical laboratory. He then dilutes the paints to achieve different levels of viscosity before spraying them with painstaking precision onto the surface of the canvas, the size of the dots being decided by minute variations in the pressure of the airbrush.

Each canvas probably represents up to a month’s work, but Mr. Tirelli said he worked on several canvases at a time, switching from subject to subject, to keep his vision clear during this process. “And also to stop me from going mad,” he said.

One challenge presented by the artist’s idiosyncratic painting method is that it is extremely difficult to correct errors, which makes the immaculately crafted and consistently even finish of these large canvases all the more remarkable.