

NICOLA VILLA

Walking in the city



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in copertina:  
open minded  
watercolor on paper  
cm 120x80

# NICOLA VILLA

*by Francesca Gavin*

They say every picture tells a story. The history of art is littered with depictions of stories from religion, history, mythology and literature. Yet 20th modernism shied away from narrative. With some exceptions, the past century championed abstraction and concept rather than work that hinted at a story. Italian artist Nicola Villa's work makes an interesting contrast. Innately modern, his paintings are also about narrative and character. As the artist notes, "Every person is a story. I attempt to narrate the story I see inside other people."

Initially, Villa's self-taught practice grew out of a frustration with studying architecture. He became frustrated with contemporary architecture's focus on the celebration of the architect and profit. There was no contact with actual materials. "I spent more and more time painting until I finished my studies and I decided I found what I was looking for - manual work where you have to think about what you are doing. Where you can dirty your hands. Where you can feel like a bit of a craftsman. Where you 'speak' about people and with other people. Where you can control the scale of your work."

Although he abandoned architecture, there is still an influence on his work. Villa's work is all about urban space and its influence on society. According to Vincent Kaufmann in 'The Poetics of the Derive' (2001), the cities entered the artistic conscious when they became dehumanised in the 1950s and 1960s. "They became places of separation and solitude. They were bathed in hygiene and light, the last empty and clandestine lots disappeared, and with them the dangerous classes. Fast cars, clean bodies. Everything is functionalised, identified, monitored..." Villa's work manifests that tension between human emotions and that sense of loss in urban space.

The artist lives in Genoa, on the coast of northern Italy. It's a surprisingly historical place considering the very modern urbanity of the graphic characters in Villa's work. "I love the history that you can smell in the unique historical centre where I have my studio. Medieval houses and narrow passages with stones confronting the passing of time. It's one of the most important and old harbour of the Mediterranean sea, where immigration and emigration is an historical fact."

The city that features most strongly in his work, however, is New York. In particular the neighbourhood of Harlem inspires his work. "I was really fascinated by the people that were living there. They represent their own identity, from the oldest to the youngest, in a really conscious way. I have a picture in my mobile taken from a wall of an elementary school. It's a painting made by kids representing the podium of the 200m competition at the Olympic games in Mexico City in 1968. Above they wrote in big coloured letters, 'THE RIGHT TO TAKE A STAND'. You could feel this in the style, in the language, in the shops, in the air... they are fierce."

Villa came to the New York to take part in a residency program in the city - the Harlem Studio Fellowship. Created for international artists, the program invites three young artists to stay in Harlem for three months. Providing them with housing and studio space in the area, at the end of the period the artists create a group show of work created during their stay. Villa worked alongside artists Marco Perroni and Andreas Huyskens. "We were the first three artists invited. The studio and the residency program were totally new. It was a really awesome experience that gave me a lot of reasons to think about my work and a lot of sprint in doing that."

Harlem has a fascinating history as an inspiration for art. The area to the north of Central Park in Manhattan in New York City, became a largely Black area from around 1904 on the wake of real estate crashes and anti-Black riots in the city. Lack of investment, corruption and high population density meant the area was increasingly a slum as the century progressed. The area has been linked strongly to culture as the civil rights. The Harlem Renaissance, which happened roughly from 1920 to 1940, saw Black writers, musicians, artists and actors push the boundaries of mainstream society. As Richard J Powell wrote in 'Re/Birthd' of a Nation', "Harlem was no so much a place as a state of mind, the cultural metaphor for black America itself."

The art that grew out of Harlem at this time reflected the times. People like Aaron Douglas and Archibald J Motley made paintings that were stylised, graphic, with art deco touches and African motifs. There are hints of Harlem's cultural heritage in Nicola Villa's work – but squeezed through the sieve of stencil art, pop graphics, the legacy of photography.

Villa is emphatic about the importance of reflecting of social awareness in his work. "Even if I admire a lot of artists, the ones that are essential for my work are Giuseppe Guerreschi, Bepi Romagnoni and Gianfranco Ferroni. They were part of the Italian artistic movement called 'Realismo Esistenziale'." This group began in Milan in the late 1950s. A small group of artists including Giuseppe Guerreschi and Bepi Romagnoni met while taking lessons from painter Aldo Carpi. They were later joined by self taught artist Gianfranco Ferroni in 1955. They were part of generation that had grown up in the poverty and deprivation of Italy in World War II. However, they were too young to be involved with the political resistance to it. They rejected the neo-realism that was dominant in Italy at the time, which had focused on political change and a kitchen-sink grittiness. This younger group sought to create an art that reflected a more existential experience of violence, destruction and war. Ferroni's work in particular was bloody, dark, reflecting the aftermath of violence. The artist made paintings that were still about society but not necessarily ideological or political agitation. "They are not known internationally but for me with their works they really faced the reality of the Italian society, and how to translate it into art. It was a way of painting of the 20th century that I feel was really innovative for the period."

Nicola Villa's work, though less violent, shares a similar desire to reflect the emotional experience of urban life. The titles for his paintings – "you-must-smile" or "pressure" play with the discomfort and darkness behind the social mask of modern life. "Sometimes I start from a sensation, not from a really defined idea, and while working I focus the idea and I give a title that could be a trace for the observer to watch my work."

Some of the titles of the paintings play with ideas around stress or loneliness, sensations Villa is consciously exploring. "I was working on my computer on some picture with people caught in a big plaza in sequence. A man was walking watching around himself and he was looking like he was saying "oh, I'm so f\*cking lonely..." In the middle of a big plaza with hundreds of people he looked lonely. This happened to me often when I was making those last works." Villa describes. "Stress is a sensation that I feel is growing more and more in contemporary life pushed by a job-related way to see life. And often with stress comes a subtle violence made of words, signs, attitudes that becomes the normal expression of a part of society."

There is a sense of violence under the façade of business-like organisation, something wrong under the suit. Beneath the urban focus and drive, the characters often feel lost. The paintings question the definition of masculinity in particular. Men are depicted sitting on benches looking despondent, pointing

at each other with acrid smiles. Suits are piled on top of each or wander the streets in anonymous gang like groups. "I think the male character is more tragic as I think it has less identity than the female character. I feel that the man character helps me in give a sense of something indefinite to the situations I paint."

Most of the men are wearing in suits. Their faces are unclear. They have become defined by their social mask. There is something soulless about them. "The suit for me it's a kind of uniform you can see in the streets of every urban place of the world. I think people dress suit to distinguish themselves but at the end they all look the same, some kind of standard or stereotype."

Villa surrounds these characters with blank space. The characters emerge from acres of white paper. The urban context is hinted at but unclear. People seem to stand in nothingness. "I think this reflect my idea of a synthetic world growing around us. Behind all the colours I see on the streets sometimes I feel the sensation of a blank space of places without identity. Blank space gives me also the opportunity to focus on the people." Villa explains.

In the Harlem images, the blankness takes on another layer for the artist. "It's like the strong identity of Harlem characters was able to fill the blank but in these last work characters does not have a strong identity. Blank space appears in a stronger way. Blank space it's a sort of amplifier for the story of my characters."

That use of a stylised kind of chiaroscuro comes out of Villa's methods. The artist's process of creation reflects the legacy of the psychogeographic experiments of Guy Debord. The French theorist's concept of 'derives' involved a systematic process of wandering around the city. Adding a touch of poetry to urban experience, he conceived a way of drifting around the city that was outside rational movement. Villa's work begins with that urban movement. He collects images from the street with a digital camera. "Sometimes I already know what I'm looking for because I have the idea in my mind, some other times I just collect pictures and the idea comes after when I go back to my studio," he notes. Villa works on the images in his computer, creating stencil-like shapes, trying to extract characters and context. He places these images in an archive, reworking them into paintings and compositions. Once he's chosen the composition he manually redraws the subject and paints in with watercolour.

The washes of paint make an interesting contrast to the hardness of the subject. Watercolour somehow emphasises the city's ephemerality. The paintings use a limited colour palette – largely monochrome with occasional tiny highlights of colour. The paintings like the city itself are grey. There is a stylised edge to the results. Something graphic. The stylised characters are often in silhouette. "That comes from my love of some magazines, pictures and graphics of the 60s and 70s through pop to street art. I feel that it is a fresh, fast and communicative way to represent my characters."

Villa's work plays into the contemporary artistic fascination with the everyday. These are not paintings of epic history or drama, but images that seek to delve into the experience of daily life. The blank space between events. This is art about the poetry of the quotidian. Maurice Blanchot wrote in 1962, "The everyday escapes. This makes its strangeness – the familiar showing itself (but already dispersing) in the guise of the astonishing..." Nicola Villa's images of the city and urban society try to capture what Blanchot describes as "the soft human murmuring in us and around us." The everyday here is something that holds the key to what makes us tick and who we really are.

# THE SECRET STORY OF THE WHALE IN THE THAMES

*by Marco Mancassola*

A whale swam against the tide, alone apparently confused and the people watching around the river bank overcame with emotion started clapping. When it reached the city center it sprayed the crowds with a fountain of tears.

It was the beginning of 2006, the rent of my minuscule basement flat in Caledonian Rd had become unsustainable. I had very few Italian students and the Italian press had no more interest in my articles. I was spending most of my nights out in pubs drinking cider if not I was at the same Sainsbury store shopping for the same monotonous things. During the day on the other hand I was trying to work on a romance novel testing myself with the complexity of the plot. Despite not knowing where I would go I had given up on my rent contract and just continued accumulating debts.

The winter air was stagnant and cold yet maintained a vivid light; the days were merging into melancholic evenings. The people would walk around in turmoil, shivering all in union as if the city was one single organism; each cell hearing and feeling a lonely breath coming from a far. The media had made an interesting encounter, a whale; a lost whale that swam to the shores of the Thames. For one whole day the London media stopped reporting on teenage crimes and political scandals and focused on this big mammal which had somehow lost its Barings. The press was writing articles on this creature and it had attracted masses of curious people. It had also grabbed my attention, but within hours information was out that the whale was dead. I went about my day engrossed in my own problems. The city went back to its usual frenetic rhythm, its numbing speed, chaotic traffic and screeching Construction sites with noise heard everywhere. London in its entirety seemed to be running somewhere while I felt I was dragging, slowly through foggy days.

It was by accident that one night I met Winston in a pub. He was happy to see me and offered me a pint. He loosened his tie and somehow gave me the impression that he wanted to share some information with me. Old Winston who could never withstand alcohol starting shaking in his stool hoping I would insist on the news he was so eager to speak about. His comments assured me that the news was about the whale in the Thames. This information did not interest me since I was saddened by the fact that the whale was dead.

Winston seemed to know some unusual news about the whale; intrigued I started asking him questions. The financial company in the city where he worked was in panic as the whale had revealed its true intentions. "What are you talking about?" Winston was very drunk and insisted that the whale was still alive. I have to admit after having a few pints myself he somehow sounded convincing. The whale was taking refuge in a bend in the river close to Docklands where authorities were cautiously approaching it.

I was told the authorities preferred to say that the whale was dead to mislead the public. The whale had not gotten lost and had not approached the river bank with peaceful intentions. The whale had misled the authorities initially and now told what his true intentions were. The frightened people heard the whales menacing tone. The whale admitted that it was full of tritoluene and was ready to explode if its demands where not fulfilled. "And what is your request?" the worried authorities asked.

"I want a hostage; a businessman from the city. I will take anyone, any financial employee.

The only important thing is that he is someone who works in the city."

"What would you do with this hostage?"

"I will take him with me, it does not concern you."

You could imagine ones reaction when I heard this absurd story, humorous but hard to believe. The same night after having helped Winston gets a taxi and wishing him a goodnight, I walked home with an intangible smile on my face.

In the morning a white light arose upon the city; I was trembling as if I saw a ghost. I had breakfast at my usual coffee shop, hoping that the coffee would help me clear my thoughts. I still had two weeks before having to leave my flat and my money was rapidly diminishing. I was very close to having an embarrassing financial situation. It was time to seriously reconsider my situation but this bloody whale was stuck in my thoughts. My throughout were dominated by the whale for the following days to come and I did not understand why.....

Weather drinking coffee or taking a shower, lying in bed or trying to work on my controversial romance novel; I was obsessing over this whale. I found myself hanging around Borders bookstore staring at the covers of the books which I could no longer afford. I had to get in touch with Wilson it was my only hope to find out more and put my thought in order.

Wilson at first looked at me with bewilderment and would not admit to telling me anything.

He claimed he was drunk the night he told me about the whale. After much convincing he finally broke down and told me the whole story. The whale's quest had stirred panic upon the city.

The information was quickly distributed to the masses in hopes of finding someone who would volunteer as a hostage. Everyone was in agreement that it was important to save the city of London but nobody was offering himself as a volunteer. It was hard to imagine anyone would accept such a fate. Where would the poor victim go and how would he survive? Was the whale looking for a private banker? Maybe the whale had an underwater zoo and needed a businessman from the city. Bizarre and cynical ideas where spreading fast. People went to great means to avoid having to volunteer this dramatic experience. It was Suggested that a homeless and unemployed immigrant be used, not realizing that the whale had asked for a specific description of a person. "Yes, but how would the whale know if a man was chosen and dressed as a businessman in disguise" I asked?

Financial transactions were neglected in the city. The whale was getting impatient. He wanted his business man.

I was getting more involved with the situation. I even thought to include the whale in the plot of my new novel. I was sure I would probably never get the novel done.

Lying in bed at night I listened to the drunken people at the nearby bus stop shouting. I wondered if we would all be dead soon.

The whale growing impatient had given an ultimatum. I was fearful it could be the end for London. The big animal was hiding under the bridge close to the Docklands with her stomach full of triton.

I will skip ahead to the last morning before the deadline set by the whale. It was the morning when I took action. I left very early that morning, took two buses and then started my adventure. When I reached the riverbanks, the sun lit up the spot where the whale rested. It was quite easy to find her and I was surprised that no one else had spotted her. I approached her slowly. The whale was floating half immersed in water, probably sleeping. As I slowly and quietly moved towards the whale I started thinking of all the policemen and snipers that were hiding in the trees and rooftops. I am sure they were wondering who I was and what I wanted. Where they about to take action and shot? Would the startled whale blow up in retaliation? After all I had come to save the city and did not want to causes its annihilation...

When the whale opened its eyes and saw me, it gave me a suspicious look. I claimed to be the hostage and opened my arms to show I had peaceful intentions. I was ready to go with the whale. I was wearing an elegant suit pretending to be a businessman. The whale did not seem convinced. A fountain of water exploded from the spout on the top of her head. Skeptic of my profession it asked me business related questions. I made up a financial summery of certain stocks, and as I went along I realized neither of us where experts in finance.

Fortunately the bunch of rubbish I told her convinced her I was a true businessman. As the whale looked at me for another minute and I looked into her eyes, I didn't see hatred but a deep, solemn sadness. Before I could say anything, she moved a bit, and opened her big mouth in front of me. I jumped into her mouth and I was ready to go. Inside it was humid, alive and like a cave. I have to say that I felt immediately at home. I did not see any trace of trinitrotoluene, but at this point I no longer cared about this. I realized she was swimming, we were moving away from London.

The whale was trying to go back to the ocean. She had a human hostage in her stomach.

All of London was relieved and rejoicing. The financial market was euphoric. I am convinced that Winston made a lot of money that very day.

This is what happened in January 2006. When I will come back to London, if ever I will, you all have to thank me, please.

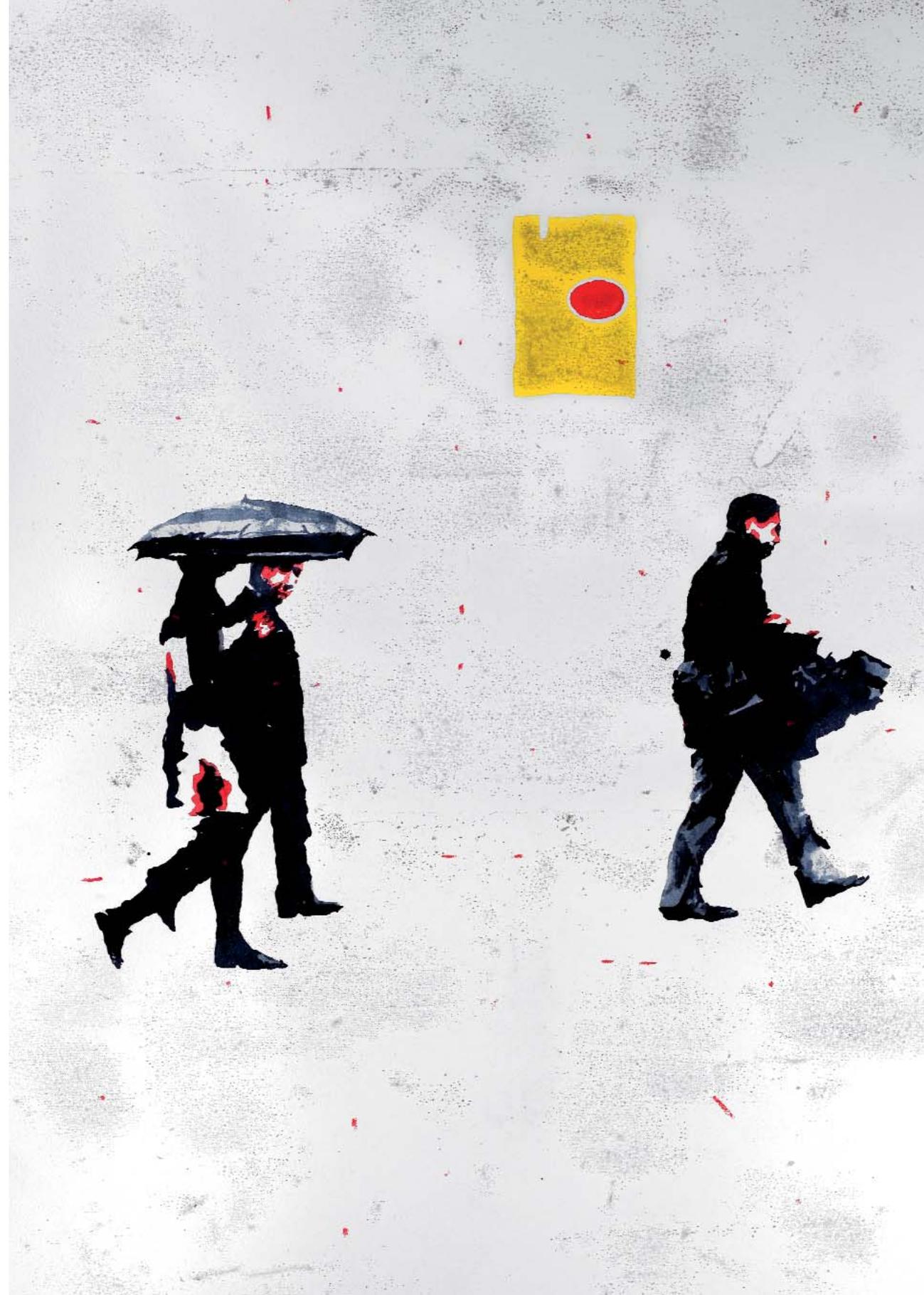


Works

pressure 2008 watercolor on paper cm 120x80



where is the sun 2008 watercolor on paper cm 120x80



break. 2008 watercolor on paper cm 120x80



so f\*cking lonely 2008 watercolor on paper cm 120x80



divergence 2008 watercolor on paper cm 120x80



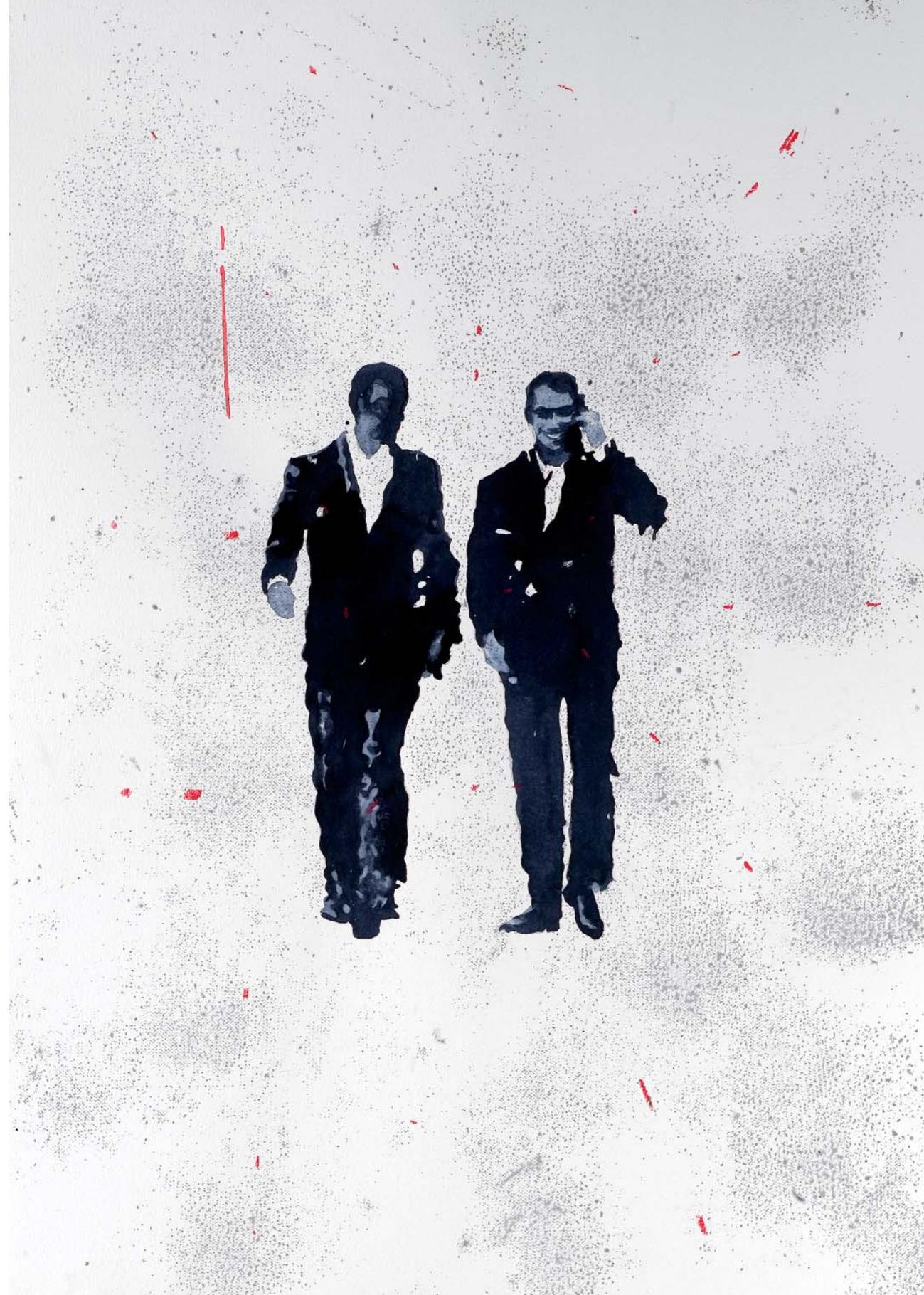
company 2008 watercolor on paper cm 120x80



Drunk 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



businessman and shadow 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



businessmen and shadows 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



so f\*cking lonely 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



pressure 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



so f\*cking lonely 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



so what 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



walking 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



shit (happens) 2008 watercolor on paper cm 120x80



so f\*cking lonely 2008 watercolor on paper cm 120x80



walking 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



all these crazy people 2008 watercolor on paper cm 120x80



break 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



open minded 2008 watercolor on paper cm 120x80



so f\*cking lonely 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



youngs enough 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



you must smile 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50



diplomatic immunity 2008 watercolor on paper cm 70x50





Born in Lecco 19/12/1976; lives in Genoa

*Education:*

2004 Politecnico di Milano: Laurea in Architettura. Thesis: Piano urbanistico ed architettonico della Fortezza del Priamar Relator: Marco Albini.

*Personal exhibitions:*

2001 Nicola Villa; Galleria Mosaico; Chiasso

2003 Prospettive, nuove proposte artistiche; curated by Michele Tavola; Villa Sirtori, Olginate

2006 Dallo sguardo al volto impossibile; curated by Stefano Crespi, Lodovico Meneghetti, Raffaele Bedarida; Montrasioarte/Galleria Bellinzona; Milano; Galleria Bellinzona, Lecco

2008 Walking in the city, curated by Fabrizio Moretti, Ruggero Montrasio, Francesca Gavin; Moretti Fine Art, London

*Group exhibitions:*

2002 Premio Carlo dalla Zorza , Galleria Ponte Rosso , Milano

2003 Giovanni Testori, un ritratto; curated by Flavio Arensi; Palazzo Leone da Perego Legnano

2005 Premio Morlotti Imbersago, Lecco

2007 La soglia di un orizzonte: Nuove acquisizioni; curated by Daniele Astrologo Abadal Museo Floriano Bodini , Gemonio, Varese;

2007 Premio arti visive San Fedele: il male; curated by Andrea dall'Asta, Angela Madesani, Daniele Astrologo Abadal, Chiara Gatti, Chiara Canali, Matteo Galbiati, Angela Orsini, Stefano, Pirovano, Francesco Zanot; Galleria San Fedele, Milano

2007 The Pioneers, A group exhibition curated by Raffaele Bedarida and Ruggero Montrasio; Harlemstudio, New York

2007 Rassegna Internazionale D'arte G.B. Salmi curated by Mauro Corradini, Palazzo ex Pretura, Sassoferrato

2007 Concorso Profilo d'arte: finalist's exhibition Palazzo della Permanente, Milano

2007 SerrOne: Biennale Giovani curated by Cecilia Antolini, Matteo Galbiati, Chiara Gatti, Carlo Ghielmetti. Lorenzo Giusti, Serrone di Villa Reale, Monza

2007 De rerum natura; la forma organica curated by Ruggero Montrasio Christo, Fancello, Fontana, Francesconi, Long, Montani, Oppenheim, Palandri, Perroni, Rambelli, Recalcati, Romagnoni, Villa; Montrasioarte, Monza

2007 Premio Celeste curated by Gianluca Marziani, Ivan Quaroni, Marta Casati, Maria Paola Nicita; Istituto Superiore Antincendi, Roma



- 2008 Container art Genoa
- Fairs:*
- 2007 Artefiera stand: Montrasioarte, Bologna
- 2007 Salon international de l'estampe: stand: Galleria Bellinzona, Paris
- 2008 Arte Fiera Bologna;stand Montrasioarte, stand galleria Mimmo Scognamiglio
- 2008 MiArt Milano; stand galleria Mimmo Scognamiglio
- 2008 Art Paris Paris; stand galleria Mimmo Scognamiglio
- 2008 Salon international de l'estampe, Paris,stand Galleria Bellinzona

*Collaborations:*

- 2006 Louisbode: Kid's and Revolution; video animation for the booktrailer; with Marco Mancassola (text), Marco Perroni (drawings), Sergio Bertin and Giacomo Garavelloni (music)
- 2007 P.H. Frankenstein by Giordano Morganti; video animation; Palazzo Te, Mantova

*Grants:*

- 2002 Il Classified Premio Carlo dalla Zorza; Galleria Ponte Rosso, Milano
- 2003 Il Classified Premio Morlotti; Imbersago, Lecco
- 2005 Winner of the under 30 section, Premio Morlotti; Imbersago, Lecco
- 2007 Harlem Studio Fellowship, New York
- 2007 SerrOne: Biennale Giovani, Monza, work acquisition
- 2007 Premio Celeste, Roma, Winner of the painting section

*Website:*

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