

# DOMENICO GNOLI: OBSCURE OBJECTS OF DESIRE

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## THE DREAM OF A THING

The history of twentieth-century art is the history of our relationship to objects. Through the great cities of commerce whose arcades Walter Benjamin would ponder, by way of imperial capitals brimming with African statues and other colonial spoils, the 1900s took shape as a century of commodities and fetishes. From Giorgio de Chirico's mannequins to the symbolically functioning objects of Salvador Dalí and his fellow Surrealists, down through Dada's bachelor machines, Futurism's roaring motorcars, Duchamp's readymades, and Picasso's collaged still lifes, the past century has been a pageant of objects and merchandise—a *mechanical ballet* of commodities often reflected in shop windows or parading through the pages of magazines and mail-order catalogues. This spectacle of commodities reflected individual desires; and this dialogue also gave rise to hierarchies of taste and class that shaped the entire history of twentieth-century art.

The work of Domenico Gnoli fits into this long tradition. Gnoli's paintings peer into each detail of the painted object with maniacal precision; they not only probe the enigma of each portrayed thing, but search for the image of ourselves hidden among, say, a fold of cloth, or reflected in the obscure objects of desire that dominate his canvases.

Gnoli's works parallel two pivotal stages in twentieth-century art. In the 1960s, minimalism and Pop Art both examined the ontology of objects, directly resuscitating the legacy of the historical avant-garde, which had begun to redefine the status of things and commodities in the early twentieth century. Minimalism fetishized surface and finish: it scrutinized the object with detachment, freezing it into serial form and technological

repetition. Pop Art centered instead on the analysis of objects as they turned into brands and logos: the object dissolved into its own image, which in turn is located within an expanded system of communication.

Gnoli's work has often been compared to Pop Art and minimalism, yet his aesthetic radically differs from both. Gnoli might share with his Pop contemporaries the passion for immortalizing everyday objects in all their blatant banality, but his practice diverges from Pop because he is not interested in using painting as cultural or social commentary. Rather, Gnoli seems focused on the object in and of itself, on its ontological and material status. One could say that Gnoli is not a painter of the age of mechanical reproduction, but he is certainly not interested in the multiplied image: his works are grounded in pure, painterly gesture, in craftsmanship and singularity. Even his fascination with surfaces and textures does not reflect the fetish of minimalism, but rather the lenticular vision of the new objectivity employed by inter-war literature—some of the most perceptive critics discussing Gnoli make frequent comparisons to Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman*—or, to go back further, by German painters between the two world wars.



Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life (Natura morta)*, 1954

Gnoli's work has also often been described as a descendant of the tradition of metaphysical painting and Surrealism. But Gnoli seems to be less interested in the theatricality that distinguishes the work of artists like Giorgio de Chirico, Alberto Savinio, or René Magritte. His paintings do not construct stories or conjure dramas, not even oneiric ones: rather, he embraces a realism devoid of narrative. If one must speak of metaphysics for Gnoli's paintings, then perhaps a parallel could be drawn with the still lifes of Giorgio Morandi. Like Morandi, Gnoli inspects everyday objects in all their immanent manifestations, seeking a kind of profane illumination hidden in the most prosaic of forms. Like Morandi, Gnoli never seems to venture outside the four walls of his own

home—his work is a *voyage autour de sa chambre*. And if it is a dream, it is a waking one: a domestic surrealism, both milder and more delirious, free of supernatural impulses and alien to grand statements or sublime ambitions—a chamber surrealism, perhaps, like one speaks of chamber music, to distinguish it from vacuous melodrama. “I single things out and depict them,” the artist explains.<sup>1</sup> His work is a materialistic epiphany. The reveries in these paintings may belong to the objects themselves, rather than to the painter.

#### THE DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

To gain a better understanding of Gnoli's work, it should also be examined in light of what art historian Federico Zeri called the visual perception of Italy and Italians. There is a leitmotif in Italian art that runs through different generations and stylistic currents, linking artists and theorists who may seem quite different, but who are all inclined to look at the world with wide-eyed amazement. As Gnoli himself explained: “I like to see my work as part of the ‘non-eloquent’ tradition that first emerged in fifteenth-century Italy and has been passed down to the present, most recently by way of the metaphysical school.”<sup>2</sup> Gnoli has inherited its humble tools and subject matter, but combines them with unique philosophical insight: his profound reflections are carried out with what appear to be the simplest and most rigorous of means. Another legacy from the “non-eloquent” tradition of Italian art is the way in which many different Italian painters have depicted time as an eternal present: from Cimabue to Morandi, time stands still in Italian painting. This sense of suspension is a hallmark of the history of Italian art—a defining characteristic for a peculiar type of magical realism into which Gnoli's work sinks its roots.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Gnoli's work is the pictorial and material quality of his paintings: the acrylic pigments are mixed with sand and marble dust, creating a thick, textural surface that lends depth to the depicted objects, transcending the flatness and finish typical of 1960s Pop Art. Gnoli's technique evokes both his country's tradition of wall painting and the grainy surfaces employed by Italian artists working in the interbellum period, like Carlo Carrà, Ettore Campigli, and Felice Casorati. But in Gnoli's paintings, objects take on an almost sculptural dimension, rising up out of the canvas or sinking back into it as if they were bas-reliefs. This opulent physicality draws the viewer into the paintings, to analyze the details, and seen from close up, the painted objects become even larger and more enigmatic. The deeper our gaze delves into the texture, the more the object seems to grow; this inversion of perspective is what endows Gnoli's paintings with their unique sense of monumentality, which paradoxically appears to have been achieved by working in depth, animating the surface on a microscopic level.



Massimo Campigli, *The White Bird*, 1928

Gnoli tends to opt for a frontal view in his paintings, which highlights details that at first seem trifling: a curl that falls precisely in the middle of a woman's back, a high-heeled shoe sliced into two sections by a shadow as sharp as a meridian, or a tie knot that is so enlarged and so perfectly centered within the composition that the painted object becomes almost unrecognizable. Gnoli's works are endowed with a fearful symmetry.

The hieratic quality of Gnoli's compositions is often emphasized by a slightly raised perspective, framed from above. His ordinary objects are always larger than life, magnified to almost supernatural proportions. But these enlargements do not reduce the sharp resolution of Gnoli's images; instead, his paintings become vaster and deeper at the same time. The effect is not unlike fractal geometry, in which surface and depth seem inextricably linked. Gnoli's surfaces are epidermal, yet geological: shallow as skin, deep as caverns.

In a similar way, these works manage to look absolutely modern, and at the same time, ancient—Egyptian, or even Sumerian, in their extreme stylization. This is an effect not unlike the one found in the paintings of another great lone wolf in Italian art history, Gino De Dominicis, whose work also appears both contemporary and archaic. And it is a quality Gnoli shares with other eccentric masters of the twentieth century, including Morris Hirshfield and Henri Rousseau; not coincidentally, both of the latter were admired by the legendary gallerist and critic Sidney Janis, who in 1969 invited Domenico Gnoli to hold his first and only New York exhibition.

## THE SYSTEM OF OBJECTS

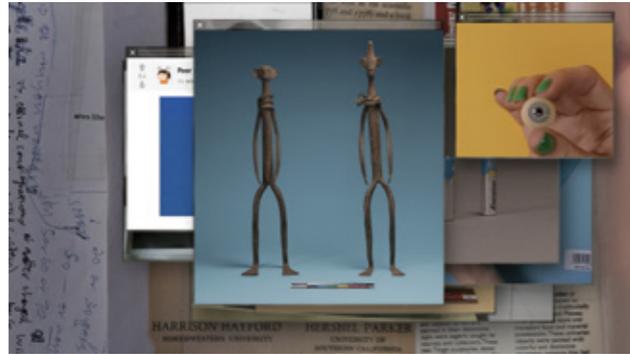
Gnoli died in 1970 at the age of just 36, a few months after his solo show at the Sidney Janis Gallery. In Italy, the 1970s brought the explosion of Arte Povera, followed in the 1980s by the return to painting of the Transavanguardia. Gnoli's art stands completely separate from those movements, and this position of distance and autonomy allows it to hint at themes that would come to dominate the artistic debate in the years that followed. Affinities can be seen not with the neo-expressionism that characterized the return to painting in the 1980s, but rather with the "commodity art" of Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach. Although he does not employ readymades, still preferring to depict objects in paint form, Gnoli presents a series of reflections on questions of desire, identity, taste, and social class that are quite similar to those raised by many American artists of the '80s. With their extreme close-ups, Gnoli's paintings also evoke the framing of Louise Lawler's photographs. More than a decade before many of the artists active in the 1980s, Gnoli conceived a world of pure products gone crazy—a universe in which commodities grow to fill the entire field of vision, becoming metaphors for the mechanisms of seduction and manipulation that shape the postmodern economy. Like Koons, Steinbach, and Lawler, Gnoli presents a world governed by the sex appeal of the inorganic, where commodities seem to have gained their own agency.

What Gnoli painted in the 1960s is the prophecy of a post-human world. The element strikingly absent from his work is the human figure: visible only as a shadow under a shirt, or hidden by a pattern of cloth, or so dehumanized that it becomes a graphic motif, like the parted hair that looks more like a vinyl or plastic surface than a portion of a human body.

In this world without people, in this "parliament of things"—to borrow a fortunate phrase from French philosopher Bruno Latour—objects claim the right to become sentient and to exist without us. Gnoli's paintings



Morris Hirshfield, *Girl with Pigeons*, 1942



Camille Henrot, *Grosse Fatigue*, 2013



Urs Fischer, *Paris 2006*, 2006

depict “quasi-objects,” to use another term of Latour’s: they are non-human, objective, artificial, but at the same time, social, collective, generated by the interaction of cultural forces and human desires. In this sense, Gnoli’s works hint at the unique ontology of objects in the digital era. They are both physical and volatile: ghostly simulacra, and things in flesh and blood. Moving seamlessly between materiality and intangibility, object and image, they are not unlike the “smart” objects portrayed in Mark Leckey’s video works, or in the videos and installations of Camille Henrot. And they are forerunners of the 3D printed sculptures by Oliver Laric, Aleksandra Domanović, or Josh Kline: physical objects, but also pure projections of desire. Or, too, they resemble the sculptures of Urs Fischer and the environments by Alex Da Corte—worlds in which all distance between image and object has been erased.

Today, as object and commodities are increasingly dematerialized and transformed into pure flows of information and communication, what can we still learn from Domenico Gnoli’s work? What image of the world is inscribed in his canvases? Is it a future without humans, of total subservience to objects, that Gnoli describes? Or rather, as objects themselves become animate and alive, is it the possi-

bility of a relationship between equals that Gnoli imagines? Gnoli’s paintings conjure up a world where we not only project our desires onto objects, but where the objects themselves are transformed into subjects of desire. And as we are busy whispering to Siri, shouting at Alexa, and dodging our Roomba, perhaps Gnoli’s paintings can teach us how to live with objects and how to love them more—and the reflections of ourselves that are hidden in their folds.

1. In J.-L. Daval “Article-Interview,” *Le Journal de Genève*, June 5, 1965.
2. Domenico Gnoli, “Dichiarazione,” in *Premio Marzotto*, exh. cat., Valdarno, 1966 reprinted in *Domenico Gnoli*, ed. Walter Guadagnini (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2001), p. 18.