Gladstone presents an unprecedented exhibition of historical works by Jannis Kounellis, opening November 6 in New York

Gladstone presents an unprecedented exhibition of historical works by the late Greek artist Jannis Kounellis (1936–2017), one of the defining figures of Arte Povera, opening November 6 in New York. Several of the works have never been shown in a gallery exhibition in the United States. Bringing together a group of works made between 1965 and 1969, the exhibition captures the pivotal years in which Kounellis moved from the canvas to begin his lifelong experimentation with the Arte Povera sensibility.

When the critic Germano Celant coined the term Arte Povera in 1967, he described a generation of Italian artists who rejected the polished finish of industrial culture in favor of humble, elemental materials. Kounellis soon emerged as one of its most radical voices, presenting substances as they are found: raw, heavy and often perishable. In his practice, these materials stand in for ancient symbols, half-forgotten yet deeply evocative.

The artists associated with Arte Povera emerged in Italy during a period of profound social and political change. Europe was still living with the consequences of the Second World War. Cities had been destroyed, communities displaced and families divided. A generation had grown up with direct memories of occupation, violence, deprivation and loss. For those born after the war, these experiences were not distant history. They were an unequivocal facet of the reality in which they were raised, carried through family histories, silences, damaged landscapes and the collective psychology of a society trying to rebuild itself, despite massive collective trauma.

Italy was undergoing rapid industrialization and economic transformation. The optimism of the postwar economic miracle existed alongside deep social divisions, political unrest and a growing distrust of established institutions. By the late 1960s, student movements, workers' struggles and wider political upheaval were challenging the existing order. A new generation of artists was questioning not only what art could be, what form it could take, but how it could exist in the first place.

The materials used by these artists were fundamental. Earth, stone, coal, wood, iron, glass, cloth, wax, water, fire and living plants entered the work. They were materials of labor, industry, agriculture, survival and everyday life. These materials could decay, burn, change or return to the earth. They contained time, instability and the physical conditions of existence. The ordinary was given weight. Matter itself became a way of thinking.

The works in this exhibition explore that transformation in Kounellis's oeuvre. In *Untitled (Carboniera)*, 1967, a low iron bin brims with coal. In *Untitled*, 1969, burning metaldehyde pellets are set against a sheet of iron. In each, a real substance, with its own weight, texture and smell, takes the stage. The two works on canvas explore the limits of a confined space and its subject matter. In *Untitled (Rose)*, the iconic rose peeks delicately through the stitching; in *Untitled (Paola)*, the name "Paola" recalls a medium's mysterious evocation, as if summoning a sibyl.

Central to Kounellis's work is the idea of space as a charged field rather than a neutral container. He placed opposing forces in deliberate tension: hard and soft, inert and alive, dark and light, so that the room itself became an active participant. This tension plays out across the installation, as the dense, floor-bound mass of coal and iron is answered by the open, leaning frame of wood and wool. In *Untitled*, 1968, the wool is dipped in pink dye, a burst of color against the near-monochrome palette of the other works.

For Kounellis, the relationship between material and existence was particularly direct, bringing together the ancient and the contemporary, the natural and the industrial, mortality itself. Coal, iron, fire, burlap, coffee, smoke and living animals were not artistic devices. They carried the weight of human history suggesting a world in which civilization and nature, order and disorder, freedom and confinement remained in constant tension.

Kounellis understood the world as something unstable, shaped by history, conflict and the conditions of our existence. He offered neither resolution nor reassurance, confronting the viewer with the plain and powerful presence of things.

Today, we are living through a period in which war has returned to the center of political and personal life, populations are displaced, borders are contested. The language of power and security often stands against the immediate reality of human vulnerability. The images of destruction, migration and state violence that enter daily life are becoming part of a new collective memory.

The distance between the postwar generation and our own is not as great as it might appear. The circumstances are different, but the questions remain. What does it mean to live in a world marked by violence? What survives after destruction? How does a society carry the memory of events it cannot fully resolve? And what can art make visible that political language often cannot?

The past is not separate from the present. It remains in the objects we inherit, the structures we inhabit and the memories we carry. The world changes, but we remain implicated in the histories we inherit.

Exhibition Details
Jannis Kounellis
November 6–December 19, 2026
Reception: November 6, 6–8pm
130 East 64th Street
New York, NY 10065

About Jannis Kounellis
Jannis Kounellis (1936–2017) was born in Piraeus, Greece. The backdrops to his childhood were World War II and ten years of civil war in Greece. In 1956, he moved to Rome, where he spent the rest of his life. By 1960, he was an active member of the Arte Povera movement.

Kounellis's work has appeared in key, historical exhibitions such as the first Arte Povera exhibition, *Arte Povera*, Galleria La Bertesca, Genova, Italy (1967); *When Attitudes Become Form*, Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland (1969); Documenta 5 in Kassel, Germany (1972). His work has been featured in solo exhibitions at several major institutions, including: Kunstmuseum in Bern (1977); Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands (1977); Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France (1980); Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (1981); Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, France (1985); The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Illinois (1986); Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montreal, Canada (1987); Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli, Turin, Italy (1988) Jannis Kounellis: Via del Mare, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands (1990); The Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (1996); Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany (1997); Neue National Gallery, Berlin (2007); and Monnaie de Paris, France (2016).

About Gladstone Gallery
Gladstone is known for its commitment to artists whose prescient approaches and experimental practices have defined the contours of contemporary art. The gallery has long been an active partner in the cultivation of iconoclastic careers, fostering a roster of artists recognized for their ground-breaking contributions. Headquartered in New York and including outposts in both Brussels and Seoul, Gladstone's impact extends globally, enabling both the presentation of new bodies of work, and an amplification of the international reach of its artists. Alongside its work with contemporary artists, the gallery is steward to the legacies of pivotal historical artists and serves as an advocate for the enduring power of art. Gladstone is led by a team of partners who spearhead its long-term vision and program, building on the values of its founder Barbara Gladstone.

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