

Press Release

Piero Manzoni. 'L'invincibile Jean' and Early Works 1956-1957

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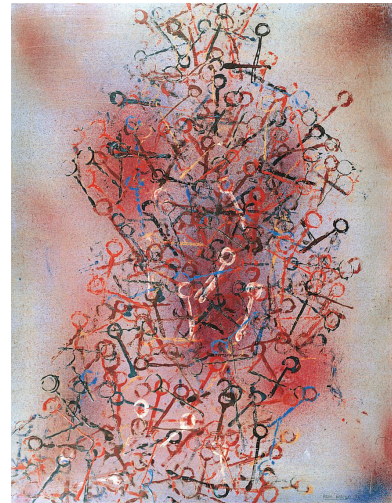
Hauser & Wirth Basel



This November, Hauser & Wirth is pleased to present 'Piero Manzoni. 'L'invincibile Jean' and Early Works 1956 – 1957' at our Basel gallery, an exhibition curated by Rosalia Pasqualino di Marineo and conceived in close collaboration with the Fondazione Piero Manzoni in Milan. A leading figure of the 1950s Italian avant-garde, Piero Manzoni (1933 – 1963) had a profound impact on the course of twentieth-century art during his brief yet prolific career, directly influencing the development of Arte Povera while paving the way for conceptual, body and performance art. Featuring a selection of the artist's early works on view together for the first time, the exhibition is a rare opportunity to explore this formative phase of Manzoni's practice, revealing the unexpected foundations on which his later artistic production—including his widely celebrated series of white Achromes—was built. The exhibition is accompanied by a new publication edited by Rosalia Paqualino di Marineo and published in collaboration by Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Hauser & Wirth and Silvana Editoriale. It is the first publication exclusively dedicated to this early and formative phase of Manzoni's practice and includes an essay by scholar and curator Choghakate Kazarian.

Born in Lombardy in 1933, Manzoni began his career as an artist in 1956. He would go on to produce a rich and innovative body of work before his career was cut short just seven years later by his sudden death from a heart attack at the age of 29. A self-taught painter, Manzoni exhibited his work for the first time as part of the Mostra d'Arte Contemporanea in 1956, organized at the Castello Sforzesco of Soncino on the occasion of the local market fair, where he presented two works, including 'Domani chi sa (Tomorrow who knows)' (1956). On view in Basel, this work reveals the extraordinary inventiveness of Manzoni's approach from the very beginning, with the painting created by stamping keys dipped in paint over a dynamic, gestural abstract background. Manzoni's lack of formal education in the fine arts left him free to develop an entirely original artistic identity, unencumbered by received ideas or accepted conventions. Immersing himself in the melting pot of the Milanese art scene, he encountered work by artists including Enrico Baj, Roberto Crippa, Sergio Dangelo, Gianni Dova, Ettore Sordini, and Angelo Verga. He approached his influences with irreverence, playfully combining elements of Art Informel, Surrealism, Dada and the historical avant-garde into a new pictorial language that was wholly his own.

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Manzoni quickly found himself embedded within a sprawling international network of artists, including Lucio Fontana—who became both a friend and a mentor to the younger artist—and Alberto Burri. He briefly emerged as a key member of Arte Nucleare, with his work strongly influenced by the movement's interest in the psychoanalytical theories of Carl Jung. His writings from this period—Manzoni composed no fewer than nine manifestos between December 1956 and December 1957—are also characterized by Jungian rhetoric, conceiving of art as aligned with the unconscious and the mythical. The exhibition showcases a selection of paintings, including 'Milano et mitologia (Milan and Mythology)' (1956) and 'Arrivano cantando (They come singing)' (1957), the latter of which is exhibited publicly for the first time since 1971. Populated by a surreal cast of anthropomorphic apparitions (often referred to as 'extraterrestrials') that float against abstract backgrounds or are partially obscured by splashes of enamel, these paintings show Manzoni exploring ideas of alienation, repetition and prefiguration. These signs recur throughout Manzoni's work from this period, forming part of a heavily abstracted figurative iconography that begins to gesture towards the artist's already ambiguous relationship with the idea of the image. A highlight of the exhibition is the science fiction-inspired 'L'invincibile Jean (The Invincible Jean)' (1957), in which this iconography evolves into a skeletal humanoid silhouette, daubed onto the canvas using thick streaks of tar.

Common to all the works on view in Basel is an intense focus on materiality. Believing that art should express the primordial aspects of human existence, Manzoni realized that it was necessary to develop a new formal language. He committed himself to the reinvention of painting, exploring a range of experimental techniques in his pursuit of such 'primal images'. Dispensing with figuration altogether in the pursuit of an 'inner image' of the unconscious, the completely abstract, pitch-black landscapes of the tar paintings both anticipate and provide a counterpoint to the radically reduced, monochromatic surfaces of the 'Achromes' that were soon to follow. With the 'Achromes', Manzoni obviated colour and eliminated traditional materials from his practice, launching a total rejection of art as a form of representation or expression—a radical moment of transition that could only have been reached through his earlier experimentation.

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Opening hours:

Tue – Fri, 2 pm – 6 pm
Sat, 11 am – 4 pm

Caption and courtesy information:

All artworks © Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan

Piero Manzoni
L'invincibile Jean (The Invincible Jean)
1957
Oil and tar on canvas
60 x 50 cm / 23 5/8 x 19 5/8 in

Piero Manzoni on the terrace of his first studio
(via Montebello, Milan), 1957
Photo © Uliano Lucas

Piero Manzoni
Domani chi sa (Tomorrow who knows)
1956
Enamel, tempera and wax on board
90 x 70 cm / 35 3/8 x 27 1/2 in

Piero Manzoni in his studio, via Montebello,
Milan, 1957
Photo: Emilio Colella
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