

THE ARTIST ROOM

LEONARDO DEVITO:

PICCOLO TESTAMENTO

23 February – 18 March 2023

Private view: Wednesday 22 February 2023, 6–8pm

Opening times: Wednesday–Friday, 11am–6pm, Saturday, 11am–4pm

Some images have a particular meaning for me; they come from personal experiences or from distant stories that I feel involved with or relate to. When I focus on an image, meanings, analogies, contrasts and complementary elements start to emerge that I decide to discard or keep until everything becomes perfectly clear.

– Leonardo Devito, 2022

The Artist Room is delighted to present a solo exhibition of new paintings by Leonardo Devito (b. Florence, 1997). This is the artist's first exhibition in the United Kingdom and their first solo exhibition outside of Italy.

Combining autobiographical allegory with interests in religion and literature, Devito's works are grounded in compelling narratives devised by the artist, often explored through sequences of paintings. The paintings in *Piccolo Testamento* [*Small Testament*] relay the story of an adolescent male youth's hedonistic final days spent on the run in Italy.

Central to Devito's interest in painting is the potential for images to tell stories. Inspired by medieval-Christian and Renaissance cultures, where the creation of religious imagery was necessary to communicate the sacred scriptures to an often illiterate audience, Devito seeks to revitalise painting's 'peculiar' capacity to carry allegorical and moralistic traits. The artist often borrows compositional elements from pre-contemporary artists, reflecting on how historical events or fables can be understood in present-day terms.

Piccolo Testamento begins with *First time* (2020), a painting that depicts a young couple's first experience of erotic intimacy together. In presumed elation and bliss, the male figure's head levitates away from his own body. Later, in *Pickpockets* (2022), the same figure – in a seemingly calmer aura – is witnessed with a friend pickpocketing a figure absent from the frame in a seaside city at night.

In *Caccia* [*Hunting*] (2022) three hounds hunt for the boys in the countryside, and the two police officers controlling them fade into the distant woods behind. Meanwhile, in *Sleeping Thieves* (2022) the figures rest alongside a bush surrounded by ghostly insects and lizards. The tree central to the painting *Caccia* is visible in the distance behind – indicating the police are close and arrest appears imminent.

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Before being caught, the boy has a dream. *Dream of a Prisoner* (2022) depicts a knight appearing to save him; defeating a multi-headed hydra guarding his eventual prison's walls that can be seen in the distance. The structure of the painting references *Hercules and the Hydra* (c.1475) a tempera-on-panel painting by Antonio del Pollaiuolo that is housed in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence and *Saint George and The Dragon* (1502) by Vittore Carpaccio housed in the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni of Venice.

Execution (2022), the final painting in the exhibition, takes place on the opposite side of the wall as *Dream of a Prisoner*. In this work, the protagonist is being executed by a police firing squad – marking the end of his being on the run. In its structure, the work inverts Édouard Manet's painting *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (1867) by swapping the position of the protagonist and those chasing him. Marking the end of his life are three small flowers growing, their vivid colour echoing the vast red mountain on the horizon.

While the works on view can be understood as a whole narrative, Devito asserts how each work can be interpreted on its own terms. 'Each painting is an inconclusive story that can leave the viewer with the freedom to conceive a particular narrative,' he explains. 'The way in which the writing in books leaves us the faculty to be picture totally different images depending on who we are.' As such, in his practice, the artist seeks to link two cultural forms - writing and painting - by distilling images that hold peculiarities to define a certain context and an 'atmosphere and narrative not unlike that of literature.'

Approaching his work, Devito draws from varied sources of interest: fresco cycles of the Italian fifteenth century; the dreamlike atmosphere of Franz Kafka's novels such as *The Trial* and *The Castle*; stories by Italian writers Italo Calvino and Dino Buzzati; and the practice of reclusive American artist Henry Darger. As such, Devito's complex worlds, incorporating idiosyncratic and recognisable characters – often situated in dark and dramatic environments – are laden with symbols and parables relevant from historic times to the contemporary. Functioning like a coming-of-age story, the works in *Piccolo Testamento* tell a familiar saga, of confidence causing conflict and the downward spiral of losing oneself to one's ego.

Notes to Editors

Leonardo Devito (b. Florence, 1997) lives and works in Turin, Italy. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts of Florence (BFA, 2020) and at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna. Devito is currently pursuing an MFA in painting at the Albertina Academy of Fine Arts of Turin.

Devito recently received a solo exhibition at Era Gallery, Milan, Italy (2022). Recent solo exhibitions include *Giorni e L'infante*, B.east Gallery, Florence (2021); and *48H*, Palazzo dei Painters of Florence, curated by Leonardo Moretti, Academy of Fine Arts of Florence, Florence, Italy (2018). In April 2023, Devito will receive a solo exhibition at Galleria Acappella, Naples, Italy.

Recent group exhibitions include *Unity Wanted Volume 2*, Street Levels Gallery, Florence (2021); *Urban Art City*, curated by Street Levels Gallery, Civic Art Gallery of Follonica, Follonica; and *XI Biennale di Incisione, as part of the exhibition Jean Dubuffet - Mimmo Paladino*, Mac, n, Monsummano Terme, Italy (both 2019).

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