

Press Release

Antonio Calderara *From Lake Orta*

6 July – 20 August 2022
67 Lisson Street, London

“The importance of the landscape of Lake Orta in my painting lies in the reason that the light is so special, [it] has a profound weight on my spirit, so much so that I identify with it.”

The Italian artist Antonio Calderara’s career was marked by his gradual journey towards abstraction, although his earlier work was resolutely figurative, consisting of self-portraits, landscapes of the lake around the island of San Giulio in northern Italy and still life paintings. Lisson Gallery has, for the first time, gathered and loaned a number of these overtly representational, mid-century works, many of which have not been exhibited in public before, to chart the trajectory of his radical move towards a flattening and simplification of the world, while acknowledging that figures and objects – whether architectural, pastoral, domestic, personal or otherwise – would always somehow maintain a ghostly presence in his compositions.

Beginning in 1948, this exhibition reveals two enduring subject matters for Calderara: his family and his idyllic surroundings. His wife Carmela (*Head of a Woman* or *Testa di donna*) was a frequent sitter (also seen in *Maternità* of 1953), as was his daughter Gabriella, although she died tragically young, a few years before reappearing in a composition of female figures grouped around the dinner table. The real constant was the shimmering view over Lake Orta, towards the Piedmontese hills and the floating world of San Giulio, a turreted island that hovers on every horizon, come snow or sun. A particularly wintry scene across the water is depicted as if through a veil of thick fog, the subtle variations on white presaging Calderara’s almost entirely abstract, bleached out picture of 1959, in the final room of the show.

His early period sees Calderara moving away from the officially sanctioned Novecento style that harked back to Italian art of the 19th century, through a period of magical realism and metaphysical painting, towards the full abstraction he discovered in the 1950s. This stylistic journey saw him distilling the Alpine landscapes of Segantini, the stripped back bottles and cups of Morandi, as well as the spatial anomalies of de Chirico and Fontana, before discovering the gauzy colours of Rothko and the pure lines of Mondrian. Indeed, like the Dutch modernist master, Calderara’s early tree studies and townscapes were already carving up the pictorial space into blocks, squares and planes – before being released into a dimension beyond the visible.

This progress, from Italianate to international artist and from painter of form to composer of light, is uniquely captured in a series of watercolours made in 1976, shortly before his death. In this grid, or *Story of Lake Orta* (*Storie del Lago d’Orta*), the familiar watery vista is sequentially edited, element by element, until almost nothing is left. This atmospheric reductivism represents the apogee of Calderara’s personal project, yet the lineage suggests no hierarchy to this endeavour other than the passing of time and the lifelong honing of a truly universal narrative.

--- About the artist

Self-taught as a child growing up in Milan, and later mentored for a time by a young Lucio Fontana, the earliest influences of Antonio Calderara were of the figuration and light effects of Piero della Francesca, Seurat and the Milanese Novecento painters. After abandoning his university studies in engineering in 1925 the young man dedicated himself fully to experimenting with colour and form. Through portraiture, landscapes and still lifes, Calderara depicted the people, scenes and

objects of his native Italy – all suffused by a delicate, misty light inspired by the atmospheric glow of Lake Orta in Vacciago, where the artist moved in 1934 with his wife Carmela, and where he would work for most of his life. By the mid-1950s, Calderara began to move away from figurative painting to embrace a more geometric approach, radically reducing both the scale and the compositional elements of his paintings through use of simple forms and flat blocks of nebulous and subtle colour. Situated neither within Constructivist nor Minimalist movements, his pared-down vocabulary of lines and squares, refined colour palette and precise measurements nevertheless positioned Calderara closely with other minimalist painters at the time, including Piet Mondrian and Josef Albers, both of whom the artist admired greatly. Later in life, and with failing health, Calderara began to focus on watercolours, a medium that perfectly captured the subtleties of transparency, washed with an equal, uniform treatment.

Born in 1903 in Abbiategrosso, Italy, Antonio Calderara continued to work up until his death in 1978. Solo exhibitions include 'Antonio Calderara: Light-Spaces. Paintings from Fifty Years', Ernst Barlach Haus, Hamburg, Germany (2018); Kunstmuseum, Winthertur, Switzerland (2017); MASI, Lugano, Switzerland (2016); Fondazione Zappettini, Milan, Italy (2011); Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, Germany (2003); Contemporary Art Museum of Genoa, Italy (1995); ICA, London, UK (1974); Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, Germany (1973); Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland (1969); Stedelijk Museum, Schiedam, Netherlands (1968); Kunstmuseum Lucerne, Switzerland and Museo d'Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (1965). His work was included in the Venice Biennale in 1948 and 1956 and Documenta 4 in Kassel, Germany in 1968. Most recently his work has been included in the 33rd São Paulo Bienal, Brazil (2018). His work is featured in numerous private collections, as well as the R&B Collection and Sammlung Hackenberg in Munich, Germany; P420 Art Gallery, Bologna, Italy and the Josef Albers Museum in Bottrop, Germany.

The legacy of this important Italian artist is preserved through the Fondazione Antonio and Carmela Calderara, the artist's former home and studio housed within a 17th-century villa in Vacciago, near Milan. The collection includes many of Calderara's own works, plus more than 300 artworks by dozens of international artists with whom he had relationships of friendship and esteem, all joined together by a general tendency towards abstraction. Established in 1979 by Giuseppe Alemani, the foundation organises an annual programme of exhibitions and is open to from May until October each year.

--- About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, three across New York City and East Hampton, and one in Shanghai. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estates of Leon Polk Smith, Ted Stamm and Roy Colmer. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky, Hugh Hayden, Van Hanos and Cheyney Thompson.

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