

GUGLIELMO CASTELLI

Crociere Estive

Cundu Luna Vini: *The producers*

Sylvia Kouvali, *Piraeus*

June 2026

When Guglielmo Castelli first told me about the exhibition *Crociere estive* (Summer Cruises), it triggered a vivid memory from my childhood, when I was trotting alongside my grandmother on a beach covered with rocks and algae following a storm surge, walking along the constantly morphing edge where land meets sea. We were scouring and sifting through what was accumulated on that border in search of treasures brought from the sea, and our feet were covered in tar. In my eyes as a little girl, that sticky, smelly black substance was the tangible trace of a secret game that only my grandmother and I knew.

Crociere estive has the flavour of that secret: at Sylvia Kouvali, Castelli has installed an exhibition of relics from a time long past or perhaps that never was, washed up on the shore because lost or abandoned in some other place, discards forgotten in the open sea or on dry land.

Entering the gallery, which was once a bazaar and is still cool as a cave, you leave behind the dazzling sun of the summer solstice and become immersed in a dark sea, thick with memories that might also be dreams. The summer cruises of the title, with their garish hues, promise of endless entertainment and the smell of 'suntan lotion spread over 2,100 pounds of hot flesh',¹ are far away and all expectations are ignored.

Here, the sea is not made up of water but of purplish lace and trimming, ploughed by a pair of swans guided by a messenger clothed in a red uniform so tight it seems almost like a corset (*The painting powder*, 2026), and its breakers seem to open beneath the powerful wind blown by a Zephyrus raised up by a wave, while the sun's rays pierce through a thick bank of threatening clouds illuminated by pearls stuck in the net he holds in his hands, a net that he himself seems to be tangled up in (*Zefiro*, 2026). Looking closely, the power of the sea seems to be held back by a deep blue enclosure and reveals the same feeling of constriction as the sinuous swans kept on a leash: the oxymoron of an unstoppable force of nature nevertheless contained and held in check by boundaries, limits and ties.

This sense of constriction is a constant in Castelli's works, which depict figures that are sometimes enslaved by, sometimes freed from social constraints, formalized in bows, clothing and taut cords, in the artist's continuous attempt to renegotiate these limits and lead the viewer to dip in and out of identification with the figures. This negotiation seems to be the main theme of *Mino's maze*, in which a Minotaur with thick, jet-black hair and human features is depicted stretching out over the flowering hedges, apparently torn between the desire to escape his labyrinth and nostalgia for that feeling of containment, his eyes full of tears that transform into ephemeral white veils.

¹ David Foster Wallace, 'Shipping Out: On the (Nearly Lethal) Comforts of a Luxury Cruise', *Harper's Magazine*, January 1996.

Similarly, in the oil on canvas *Tiny tiny anarchic candle*, four candles are lined up like soldiers standing at attention on an old table made of dark wood, their flames almost burnt out, while the anarchic candle of the tiles rebels, raising itself up, its small face blowing as if to fan the flame, a little incendiary fantasy masquerading as a children's fairy tale.

The work that gives the title to the exhibition is part of a series of collages created by the artist on fabric found in flea markets and embellished with bric-a-brac like beads, buttons and other small items. They are fragments of a 'little world of the past', the same one we find in the costumes and objects that make up the seven *Idoletti* created for the exhibition. Here, seven puppets stage a show with no action: suspended from the ground, their bodies made of fragmented limbs, they seem powerless and frustrated by their incompleteness. The name *idoletto*, a term of endearment for *idol*, renders them even more sinister and ambiguous, because there is no sweetness about them. The twee clothing contrasts with the unsettling faces, some with scowling eyes like a chastised child; some with the glass eyes of a doll. A gaze that generates the same disturbing feeling of primordial terror that we feel when reading 'The Sandman' (Der Sandmann), published in 1815 by E.T.A. Hoffmann, in which the main character falls in love with Olympia, only discovering that she is an automaton when he accidentally comes upon her creators while they are fighting over her, taking her in hand and tearing her apart, her glass eyes popping out of their sockets. A vision that leads the main character to madness and then suicide.

'Looking at the sea, you feel more broken because there is no other land in sight. And children believe that the world ends there, but not all things that have a limit have an end and at times they are merely interrupted, reaching for an absence that ends up counting more than what's present' are the words of Michela Murgia that the artist cited when telling me about the exhibition.

It is a feeling of suspension that we also perceive when looking at the female figure enveloped in a cloud of colourful butterflies while she picks an apple from a tree. The title *A Snake, They Said, Sleeps in This Garden* reveals that this is not just any woman, and Adam and the snake are nowhere to be seen; who knows if they will ever arrive. As if what we are seeing is a still of a more complex narrative, the beginning and end of which are unknown, like a riddle that feels almost impossible to solve.

A few clues to this riddle might be found in the artist's biography. Born in Turin to a middle-class family, he attended religious schools until he was a teenager. His childhood spent bound by rigid, anachronistic rules and dressed in uniforms that were 'beautiful but didn't allow you to hug anyone' inspires and nourishes his image world, having learned from those constraints the importance of limits and overcoming them.

Across his career, Castelli has given visual form to his interior world, which, to cite the artist, reflects on 'the exercise of and subjection to power'. It is this dialectical tension between the freedom of childhood and the constriction of bodies bound by rules that filters through every work and leaves us with a sticky, black feeling like tar.