

Matteo Callegari

FEDERICO VAVASSORI



View of “Matteo Callegari,” 2015. From left: *SDGI*, 2015; *SDGII*, 2015. Both from the series “Gradient Paintings,” 2014–15. Photo: Alessandro Zambianchi.

This recent staging of Matteo Callegari’s new series of oil paintings, “Gradient Paintings” and “Scratch Paintings,” both 2014–15, displayed the artist’s engagement with the process of stratification. A close examination of each work reveals two layers, one superimposed over the other, featuring disparate approaches to form and mark-making. One layer appears to be a controlled reproduction of a digital image—the brushstrokes seem almost programmed—and the other layer is free and gestural. In the three “Scratch Paintings” on view, the more measured painting sits in the background, a saturated monochromatic support for the expressive marks, and in three “Gradient Paintings,” we see the inverse: The more sculptural, spontaneous brushstrokes (in red and violet hues) serve as a foundation for a flatly rendered lime-green image. Indeed, to produce these works, Callegari typically begins with a digital image of an old-master painting, which he then deconstructs and recomposes before transferring the resulting defaced picture to canvas.

These works give the clear impression that, for Callegari, painting is primarily a mental activity. It isn’t so much that the artist is interested in investigating the depths of his unconscious, but rather that he seems to want to capture the moment at which an image is received by his eye but hasn’t yet been intellectually processed. We might interpret these works as his attempts to materially translate the cerebral dynamics that allow one to perceive and interpret visual stimuli; his layers materialize the slippages that occur between an image and the viewer’s subjective grasp of it. Callegari seems to propose that the very act of seeing is a cognitive function informed by the sum of our experiences and dreams. His project, then, can be understood as wrestling with the idea that the context of any given image is, in effect, limitless.

In producing a painting based on a source image, one could take into account everything from the medium via which it was originally encountered (print or online, for example), any texts that may have accompanied it, or even the mood of the viewer. In other words, the artist’s wide-ranging investigation of the subjectivity of images expands to include many media and many forms of interpretation, from photography to writing. In fact, in the “Scratch” series, his painting itself becomes calligraphic, either literally, as when he uses his fingers to directly remove paint from the surface of the image, or more figuratively, as when he deploys a sort of alphabet of gestural markings. Callegari’s method may seem rational and programmatic, but his paintings also embrace the unforeseen; just as the works exhibit extreme control, they occasionally admit brilliant passages of aleatory marks.

—*Marco Tagliaferro*

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.