

FEATURE

The Impalpable Citadel

Sylvain Amic on the art of Claudio Parmiggiani

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Untitled (1970)
Photography by Carlo
Vannini

Claudio Parmiggiani was born in Luzzara (Italy) in 1943. Those wishing to know where he comes from need only turn the pages of the book *Un paese* by Paul Strand, which depicts this little village in Emilia. The photographs reveal a land of earth and straw, of steel and wood, a land of work and also of blood. A land of few words, slow and dignified. A world that has vanished. Since then we have lived in the time of neon lights and television. A time that aims to obliterate time. What the hand once knew, we have lost. What the eye understood, we no longer perceive. There is so much noise in our times that we no longer even turn around to see what has fallen down. The promises of happiness are so numerous that tragedies, both great and small, pass like a shower of rain.

Parmiggiani has seen all of this. He has seen the most sacred things corrupted, words become money, art become advertising. His voluntary exile from the Italian art scene, and his obstinate silence for forty years, denote a unique, radical stance. In a context in which the dilution of values is the rule, his absence has become a moral force, his silence a critical authority. Claudio Parmiggiani's silence has, over the course of time, become a material, a space that he models.

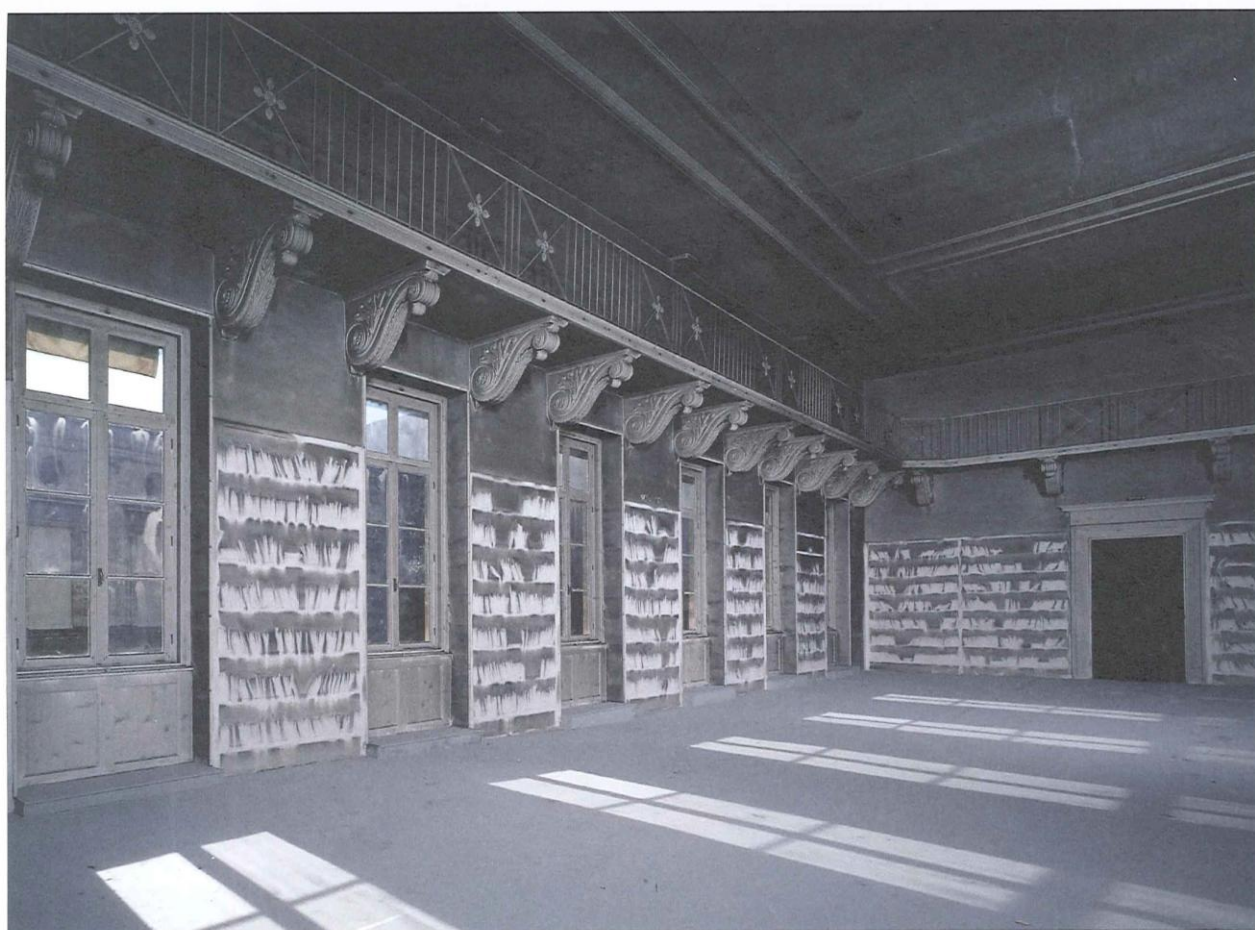
In the spring of 1964, Parmiggiani met the poet Ezra Pound at his last place of exile, in Venice: "He wished to speak no more, which is very different from not writing or painting any more. To speak no more, as the sign of a further vision of poetry. He looked, he listened, without ever uttering a single word" [Arturo Schwartz, ed., *Claudio Parmiggiani*, Reggio Emilia: Grafis Edizioni, 1985, pp. 14–15]. Another silence crosses the path of the young artist: that of Giorgio Morandi's studio in Via Fondazza in Bologna, which he used to visit on summer afternoons. "Windows just ajar to keep out the heat and the world, nothing but the ticking of the clock; everything was motionless" [Claudio Parmiggiani, *Stella, Sangue, Spirito*, Arles: Actes Sud, 2003, p. 60]. From now on Parmiggiani's silence would

be a weapon, an insurrection. When someone asks the artist what the word "subversion" might still mean today, he replies: "Silence, for example. Silence is a subversive word today and it is subversive because it is a place of meditation" ["Discussion," op. cit., p. 72]. Henri Matisse told those who wanted to become painters: "You must start by cutting out your tongue, because from today on you have to express yourself solely by plastic means" [Dominique Fourcade, ed., *Henri Matisse: Écrits et propos sur l'art*, Paris: Herman, 1972, p. 308]. Like that of Matisse, Parmiggiani's silence is not an absence but a moral necessity. It is the opposite of another silence, which has been placed over his work for a long while, like a lid.

In 1981 an international exhibition entitled "Italian Identity" intended to present an overview of Italian art since 1959. The organizer did not think to include Parmiggiani or even mention his name in the introduction to the catalogue. There were so many selections that seemed like gross blunders, discrediting the declared aspiration to reflect history. Measure for measure, silence for silence, Parmiggiani has never expressed himself on this subject. Nevertheless, in 2003, he thought again about these years of ostracism in a text addressed to an artist friend: "Having refused to sit down at a table has meant witnessing, in time and in indifference, the day-by-day concealment of a history, not mine, but ours: the suppression of the footprints that day after day we have left, barefoot on the path. This has meant paying. We have done it in silence, but out loud. I write you this after a long howl lasting forty years, and expressing a truth. Now it is enough" ["Une lettre," in *Parmiggiani*, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna: Silvana Editoriale, 2003, p. 208].

In this sense Parmiggiani's work is a kind of subversion. It's a word that he grew up with in the red house on the banks of the Po: "The peasants thought of it as a place of subversion because it was our house that saw the formation of the first red workers' cooperative





in post-war Italy" [Schwartz, op. cit.]. As if through the habit of being clandestine, his work has flourished in the most unexpected places, far from the fortresses where a certain history of art was being written: A lighthouse lost in the middle of the wilderness of Iceland. The prints of golden hands laid on Monte d'Oro. A planet buried in the courtyard of the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon. A forest that listens and watches in Strasbourg. A marble egg in a crevice in the rock at Carrara. A head placed on a well at Rennes. A ladder, leaning on the sky, in Provence. The door of a monastery at Camaldoli.

This scattered work is simply the result of necessity, or of a natural process. Its exploded form also reflects a way of thinking that challenges time and space. In this way Parmiggiani constructed *Una scultura*, a work dispersed to the four winds, made in four places over an interval of sixteen years, from 1975 to 1991. *Clavis* is in the north, near Brescia; *Pietra* is to the south, on an island in the Nile; *Torre* is to the west, near Albi; while *Casa sotto la luna* lies eastward, at Sobotka in the Czech Republic. "My idea was to scatter and conceal their four parts. North, South, East and West, in so many parts of the world, to disperse their members, to break up rather than to bring together, to do the opposite of what we call a 'creative process'; not to transform an idea into

an object, but an object into an idea, and to bury it far away" [Nord Est Sud Ouest. *Une sculpture. 1975–1991*, Ville de Rennes, 1993]. Four countries, four landscapes, four languages, but a single piece of sculpture, and one single, universal material: brick. A work made with earth, by hand, as men have always made their homes.

Una scultura, of which the viewer will never see more than a fragment, may be viewed as a metaphor for Parmiggiani's work. Employed for its synecdochic value, the fragment has always played a fundamental role. Pieces of plaster, heads, hands, breasts, busts: all speak to us of man, of woman, perceived in a timeless form that we have inherited from antiquity. Found objects — shoes, hats, clock cases, boats, violin cases — are like the wrappings of an absent body, and recall the inner anguish of loss and death. In Parmiggiani's case the fragment is not a quotation, as some would have us believe; nor is it a commentary. To understand this work as specifically Italian, as the product of several centuries of humanist culture, is at the same time exact and mistaken. Parmiggiani's work has never stopped being rooted, ever more deeply, in the culture, the land and sky of Italy. But it is an Italy taken as a metaphor for humanity as a whole, not of a tradition with paralyzing virtues.

This page:
Scultura d'ombra (2002)
Installation view at Musée
Fabre, Montpellier
Photography by Carlo
Vannini

Next page:
"Naufragio con spettatore,"
installation view at Palazzo
del Governatore, Chiesa
di San Marcellino, Parma
(2010)
Photography by Lucio Rosso

*All the images courtesy of
the Artist; Bortolami, New
York; and Simon Lee, Hong
Kong/London/New York*



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There are many who have co-opted the elements of this plastic language. Present day Italy has seen the appearance here and there of ancient heads, sooty smoke, broken glass, bronze bells, as if it were a matter of a common heritage that everyone was in the habit of using. But faced with these objects, of which one recognizes the form without grasping the meaning, one stands nonplussed, waiting for a revelation that never comes. For time has passed its hand over these works which have subjugated our epoch. Now, at the moment of retrospection, what matters is disappointment. A feeling of vacuity, as if their driving motor had started to spin in neutral, without producing anything but the repetition of the same tautological absurdity that their theoretical apparatus no longer conceals. The very position of these artists in our time has become unintelligible. Their voices carry no further than themselves, and impart nothing to the world but the comforts in which they have settled.

On the contrary, Parmiggiani's work unfurls in time like a global project, the coherence, singularity and scope of which have done nothing but increase. These last twenty years have witnessed both the appearance of absolutely original motifs (anchors, bells) and the re-use of old themes (*Delocazione*, the glass labyrinth, pigments). Now Parmiggiani is working with whatever is least concrete: dust, empty space, fire, smoke. In this territory, made of mere breath, where none have ventured before, he builds a sort of impregnable, impalpable citadel.

The renewal we are witnessing benefits the artist's work as a whole: the present sheds light on the past, reveals the underground links connecting works that one thought were unrelated. Thus the work becomes a whole, as if the scattered parts of a dismembered body were finally reunited.

At the same time, the appearance of his work in public has become increasingly rare. Yet his artworks strike with ever-greater force, like repeated blows on a locked door. It is a theater of terror and drama, a sense of the tragedy of existence that is in proportion to the increasing violence of our times. Moving about in these spaces is not insignificant. There is no artifice here to distract the eye, but a black lake like a mirror in which the world watches itself sink. The ships, the boats that pass through his work, are like arks. They bring the things humanity holds most precious: planets, flour, painted sails, fantastic animals. They carry man's dreams, to save them from drowning.

The power of the image and the formulation of dream are two fundamental aspects of Parmiggiani's work and its communication to the world. If the work is eloquent, that means the artist has created a fascinating image that has proceeded from a vision. This vision, which has imposed itself on the artist, can be transmitted to the viewer because it triggers the same reaction: dreams are experiences shared by everyone. However, Parmiggiani's dreams are not ours, for each of us harks back in sleep to personal obsessions, situations, fears and desires. In his dreams we come across men

drawing in nets filled with swallows and numbers, incandescent statues, sky-mounted ladders made of bread that climb toward the sky, whales spouting jets of stars. Parmiggiani's dreams are the sources of his works, which may one day be brought to fruition, or perhaps never. In either case, they already exist in the studio: "The best studio," he says, "is the mind" [*L'atelier*," in *Stella, Sangue, Spirito*, p. 155].

This workshop of images is also a theater of shadows: an insistent presence in Parmiggiani's work, starting from the *Self-portrait* as a shadow, up to the drawings in which men fight with their shadows, whip their shadow, or are nothing more than shadows. "It is with the shadow that the sense of birth and death are associated," he writes. "It is the secret place where images and ideas are formed" [*Regard sur le néant*," in *Stella, Sangue, Spirito*, p. 11]. Drawing shadows is part of an apprenticeship that artists have undergone through the centuries. Parmiggiani was among the last generation to receive this lesson. But over the course of the same centuries art has been content to place shadows on a flat surface to convey the illusion of space. Since 1970 and the first *Delocazione*, Parmiggiani has been placing shadows on real spaces, on the architecture of our world. These shadows are not abstract, but are always linked to a human presence, the memory of which remains tangible, like a shape in the sand. Books, statues, clocks, ladders, bottles — these are objects that man has made and handled, the shadows of which have remained forever on the walls, just as they were caught in Paul Strand's images.

The human condition is, ultimately, Parmiggiani's sole subject. Every time the place accorded to man is seen to shrink, it is he who struggles to hollow out a space for dreams. Parmiggiani has not given up. From the depths of this wreckage to which we are clinging, he sends out signals. He builds lighthouses.

Recent solo shows: Bortolami Gallery, New York; Meessen De Clercq, Brussels; Simon Lee Gallery, London; Palazzo del Governatore, Parma; Galleria Christian Stein, Milan; Galleria Gian Ferrari, Milan; Galerie Serge le Borgne, Paris; Musée Fabre, Montpellier; Galleria de' Foscherari, Bologna; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana.

Recent group shows: Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York; Le Crédac, Ivry sur Seine; Musée du Louvre, Paris; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Palazzo delle Papesse, Siena; Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Grand Palais, Paris; Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Trento; Palazzo Grassi, Venice.

Upcoming shows: Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong (solo); Meessen De Clercq, Brussels (solo); Italian Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennale (group).

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