

Paolo Scheggi, an Italian artist you're going to hear more of

Record prices spark interest in protagonist of Milan art scene

by ERMANNO RIVETTI | 17 June 2015



Paolo Scheggi with Intersuperficie Curva dal Bianco (1966) in his studio in Milan. Photo © heirs of Ugo Mulas

Paolo Scheggi was almost totally overlooked by the market until a few years ago, but is now attracting the interest of international collectors and, slowly but surely, museums too. A contemporary of Manzoni, Castellani, Morandi and Bonalumi, Scheggi (1940-71) was a forgotten protagonist of Milan's burgeoning art scene of the 1960s and scion of Lucio Fontana's Spatialist experiments. Tornabuoni Art (C4) is making its Art Basel debut with four works by Scheggi, gathered together for the first time since they were exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1966. One is officially for sale with an asking price of just over €2m. "For our first time [at Basel] we wanted to show something really significant," says Michele Casamonti, of Tornabuoni.

Scheggi in print

The gallery is concurrently publishing a book on Scheggi and the Venice Biennale, edited by Luca Massimo Barbero, the associate curator of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. Barbero is also the editor of the first complete Paolo Scheggi catalogue raisonnée, which the Associazione Paolo Scheggi is due to publish in September.

Barbero is taking part in a talk at Art Basel this week, focusing on the significance of Scheggi and the Milanese art scene of the 1960s with the art historian Mirta d'Argenzio and Bernard Blistène, the director of the department of cultural development at the Centre Pompidou and the director of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. For an artist whose work has been largely ignored for the past three decades, this is a significant step forward.

Made by the market

In two years, and without much institutional interest, Scheggi has gone from being the underdog in Christie's and Sotheby's Italian sales to one of the main attractions in the post-war and contemporary evening sales in London and Milan. "Sometimes people forget about certain artists and it's up to the market to rediscover them," says Claudia Dwek, the deputy chairman for Sotheby's Europe.

"The market has dictated his success. Has he had a big show at the Museum of Modern Art? No, but he's made huge advances at auction," says Lorenzo Ronchini, whose gallery was the first to show Scheggi's work in London, first in 2012 and again in late 2013. According to ArtPrice, of the ten works sold at auction in 2013, only one sold for between \$100,000 and \$500,000. This year ten works

have been sold so far, of which six have fetched between \$100,000 and \$1m, and two have gone for more than \$1m. His gallery prices have risen accordingly: Tornabuoni's asking price of just over €2m for the work at Art Basel is well above the current auction record of \$1.8m.

Scheggi, who died of a long-term illness in 1971 at the height of his career, produced just over 300 of his highly sought-after wall pieces. Powerful galleries such as Tornabuoni, Robilant + Voena, Mazzoleni Art and Cortesi Gallery, and the growing strength of Christie's and Sotheby's Italian sales, have guaranteed Scheggi's success. "His is not a speculative market though—important collectors buy his work," says Mariolina Bassetti, the head of modern and contemporary art at Christie's Italy. At least three significant works, for example, are in Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli's collection.

It is not all about supply and demand, however. "These minimal, monochromatic works are also perfectly aligned with the current tastes of the international collecting elite," Luca Massimo Barbero says. Scheggi's work, it would seem, is in the right place at the right time. "His prices beat Fontana's at the [May] auctions in Milan, which gives you an indication of how the public is reacting to his work," says the gallerist Marco Voena.

The catalogue raisonné will no doubt bring an added element of scholarship and prestige to Scheggi's work, which is now being critically revisited too. "It's important to remember that he was immediately successful in the 1960s and that his work resonated in Germany, France, the Netherlands and with the Zero and Nul groups," Barbero says. The father figure of Italy's post-war avant-garde, Lucio Fontana, singled him out for the quality of his work when Scheggi was still in his 20s.

"There's been a gap between the market and the speed at which museums have reacted, but it's refreshing to see growing international interest in Italian mid-century art that's not Arte Povera," Barbero says. The presence of Italian artists in a recent exhibition on the Zero group at the Guggenheim Museum, New York (closed 7 January) and in a show at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (4 July-8 November) shows a growing curatorial appetite for artists that were closely linked to Scheggi and the scene in Milan.

"I wouldn't be surprised if we were soon to see an exhibition [of Scheggi and his peers] in a major foreign museum," Dwek says.

Museums interest

The curator and critic Ilaria Bignotti, who works for the Associazione Paolo Scheggi, says some foreign museums have approached the estate to buy his work, which is already in the collections of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Turin, and the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome. His surge in popularity means museums now risk being priced out by big collectors eager for a Scheggi to hang alongside their Fontana. However, "many foreign institutions have good patrons and are also known to buy at auction," Mariolina Bassetti says.

Gallerists and auction houses, as well as critics, are hoping the Scheggi effect will rub off on other artists from the same milieu. For example, Robilant + Voena are opening a London show in October dedicated to Gianni Colombo, an underrated Milanese artist who won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 1968, while Tornabuoni's Paris space is currently showing work by the kinetic artist Alberto Biasi (until 27 June). "There are still many Italian artists that require further attention," Bassetti says, pointing to Carla Accardi and Marina Apollonio.

It will be interesting to see how Scheggi's success will be sustained. The art historical and market reputations of Italian blue-chip artists such as Manzoni, Burri and Fontana have had decades to mature, whereas those for Scheggi are "incredibly young", Lorenzo Ronchini says. "He is still a bit of an unknown quantity, and that's both a good and a bad thing." A museum show would certainly help. • *The Salon talk Paolo Scheggi: Milan in the 60s is at 4pm on Thursday 18 June in the Auditorium, Hall 1*