

ACHROME.

Piero Manzoni: Painting without colour 17.6 – 25.9.2016

You are cordially invited to attend the
press conference on Thursday 16 June 2016 at 11am

Opening reception

Thursday 16 June 2016 at 6.30pm

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Admission free

Opening hours

Tues - Wed - Fri: 11 am – 6 pm

Thurs: 11 am – 8 pm

Sat - Sun: 11 am – 5 pm

Mon: closed, including 1 August and Lundi du Jeûne
(Federal Fast Monday)

Museums Night, 24 September: 2 pm – 2 am

Public transport

Metro M2: get off at Riponne-Maurice Béjart

Bus 1, 2: get off at Rue Neuve

Bus 7, 8: get off at Riponne-Maurice Béjart

ACHROME.

Piero Manzoni: Painting without colour

17.6 – 25.9.2016

Maybe I've already written to you about my latest «manner»: totally white pictures. Very controversial, but basically they're the most important artistic act of these last few years.

Piero Manzoni, letter to Valentino Dori, Milan, November 1958

The Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne is presenting the first museum exhibition in Switzerland of the work of Piero Manzoni (1933–1963). Centred on the *Achromes* – the white monochromes the artist worked on during his brief career (1957–1963) – the exhibition comprises 70 outstanding works ranging from the famous wrinkled canvases to the final polystyrene pieces, not to mention his few sculptures and works on paper.

A major figure on the art scene of the 1950s–1960s, Manzoni enjoys the same status as Lucio Fontana and Yves Klein as one of the most innovative artists of the time. Like them he experimented with monochrome, but took the concept further by opting for the a-chromatic: the very absence of colour.

Driven by a determination to free the work of art from the painterly tradition and from the action-painting approach that dominated postwar Informal art and Lyrical Abstraction, he opted for minimal types of intervention (folding, coating, sewing) that gave rise to simple forms (pleats, lines, grids), and for natural and synthetic white materials including wrinkled canvas soaked in white clay solution, cotton wool, synthetic fur, bread rolls and polystyrene pellets. Leaving these materials free to react in their own specific ways, he transformed the picture into a space of infinite possibilities.

Exhibition curators

Choghakate Kazarian

curator at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

Camille Lévêque-Claudet

curator at the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne

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Piero Manzoni | Achrome

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Price: SFr 40.-

Excerpt

The very first white works covered with a layer of plaster look like primed canvases. This gives the *Achrome*, in its seeming indeterminacy and unfinishedness, a primordial appearance: whiteness awaiting colour. Astonishingly, while the spiritually inflected approach of Vassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) is far removed from Manzoni's, the Russian conceived of white as "a silence . . . pregnant with possibilities." It is, he also wrote, "a nothingness which is young, or more exactly a nothingness from before the beginning, before birth." Manzoni's colourless white embodies to perfection this degree zero of colour, serving only to underscore the materiality of its components. Specifically Manzoni settles for leaving his naturally achromatic materials colourless: kaolin, nylon foam, eggs, toilet paper and so on.

Surprisingly, in this quest for art's degree zero Manzoni avoids the pristine canvas – that monochrome dead-end or joke leading nowhere. He merely touches upon it, with his series of sewn works in which the unsullied canvas presents a grid whose geometry has been violated by stitching that makes play with the texture of the canvas as if with skin. In contrast with the pristine canvas the *Achrome*, despite its white, more or less uniform surface, refuses to be filled. Everything is possible, but everything is already there, unmanifested and in the process of becoming.

Choghakate Kazarian, "Achrome, the totality of possibilities", p. 10

THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition comprises some 70 *Achromes* in separate series. This presentation allows us to retrace the evolution of the concept of achromia and illustrates the development and recurrence of the systems used to underscore the possibilities of each material.

Plaster

In 1956 Manzoni was already imagining the work of art as an «authentic, pristine zone» stripped of all «useless gestures». The results were canvases coated with raw plaster – rough, incised surfaces – and first shown in March–April 1958 at the Galleria del Circolo di Cultura in Bologna. The artist applied a minimal composition principle, most often in the form of a line dividing the canvas into two unequal areas.

Wrinkled canvas and kaolin

In 1958, Manzoni began what would be, quantitatively, his largest series: the *Achromes* made of wrinkled canvas coated with a mix of glue and kaolin, a naturally very white clay used in the production of porcelain. This series in relief was the first suggestion of an ambiguous status for the *Achromes*, between painting and sculpture.

Squared canvas and kaolin

Far from a straightforward *tabula rasa*, Manzoni's achromia was fertile ground that he began cultivating in 1959 in a new series of *Achromes* made of ragged squared canvas soaked in a mix of kaolin and glue and laid out in a precise, repetitive sequence, on another canvas. This grid allowed the artist to introduce the notion of infinity, not as a metaphysical concept but rather as a physical principle of modular repetition. Nonetheless, the works' strict geometry is tempered by the organic nature of the kaolin.

Sewn canvas/Paper

In 1959–1960, Manzoni embarked on a fresh series of *Achromes* using a sewing machine. In a radical adaptation of the non-colour principle, each canvas was criss-crossed with stitching that formed a grid, with some areas flat and others raised. Manzoni also drew on the naturally achromatic character of paper, applying the organisational principles already used for his canvas *Achromes*: horizontal pleats running across the middle, and juxtaposition of squares.

Sculpture

In 1960–1961 the painting/sculpture ambiguity already present in the wrinkled canvas *Achromes* was pushed still further in a number of explicitly three-dimensional works. Manzoni created numerous «object»-related works, but only a very few were titled *Achromes*. Of different types and shapes, they are characterised by the same white colouration: most of them are coated with kaolin, which puts them in the achromatic category and excludes them from the status of readymades.

Cotton wool

The use of cotton wool for a new group of *Achromes* in 1960–1961 marked the beginning of experiments in which Manzoni gave up working in two dimensions. Here he returns to the grid principle applied in the previous series, but with a manufactured product – squares or balls of cotton wool – arranged edge to edge. Soft and unstable, this material is ill adapted to the strict geometry of the grid, and disrupts its rigidity and contours.

Bread rolls

Several works dating from around 1962 are made from typically Milanese bread rolls. By coating them with kaolin, which solidifies them and gives them a sculptural, achromatic quality, Manzoni strips them of any readymade character. In this series he resorts once more to the grid, whose geometry is violated by the bread's organic nature, lumpy surface and irregular shape.

Cobalt chloride/Phosphorescent varnish

Around 1960, Manzoni began exploring the notion of achromia as chromatic indeterminacy. In one instance he played on the chromatic instability of cobalt chloride, whose colour varies from pink to blue according to the ambient humidity and temperature. The *Achromes* made of expanded polystyrene and coated with a phosphorescent varnish that emits light in darkness, proceed from the same dialectical relationship with their environment. They give expression to Manzoni's quest for a living, autonomous artwork existing independently of any intervention by the artist.

Synthetic fibres

During a stay in Denmark in the autumn of 1961 Manzoni experimented with synthetic fibres like polyester and nylon at the Angli shirt factory in Herning. Some of these fibres play on organic/synthetic ambiguity: when short they resemble fur, in an ambiguity that is all the more striking in that at the same time Manzoni made a sculpture out of real rabbit skin. Coated with an antistatic product, long fibres float like “clouds”: here the *Achrome* no longer has definite contours and comes to look like an organic object.

Package

Made around 1962, this doubly mysterious series is made of unknown objects covered with wrapping paper or newspaper, and tied up and sealed like postage parcels. We can identify two kinds of packages, however: soft ones, doubtless containing cotton wool, and hard, more angular ones, probably with cardboard boxes inside. The two different types come in pairs, in a play on the contrast between opposites. Although he at first reserved the term “achrome” for his white pictures, Manzoni broadens its scope here, applying it to multicoloured works midway between painting and sculpture and far removed from his initial monochromes.

Pebbles/Polystyrene pellets

In 1962, Manzoni abandoned the grid surfaces he had mainly worked with in favour of an all-over spread of kaolin-coated pebbles or polystyrene pellets. This saturation of the picture refers back to some of the early *Achromes* for which he used a more or less uniform spreading of plaster.

BIOGRAPHY

Piero Manzoni

1933

13 July. Born in Soncino, in the province of Cremona, Italy.

1956

Manzoni officially begins his career as a painter.

His first works are pictures using imprints of objects – keys, scissors, clamps, pins – and strange anthropomorphic figures, like hominids with antennae.

1957

Creates his first “matterist” works, notably using tar.

Towards the end of the year he begins his first white canvases.

1959

First sewn canvases. He begins the *Lines* series.

27 May: First appearance of the term *Superficie acroma* on the postcard/invitation for the exhibition *Piero Manzoni* at the Bar La Parete in Milan.

3 September: publication of the first issue of the magazine *Azimuth*, founded by Manzoni and Castellani.

4 December: Solo exhibition *Manzoni 12 linee*, Galleria Azimut, Milan. This is the opening exhibition at the gallery Manzoni has founded with Castellani.

1960

2 June–8 July: During his stay in Denmark Manzoni meets the industrialist and art collector Aage Damgaard, who invites him to his Angli textile plant in Herning.

In the course of the year Manzoni produces several series of *Achromes*, notably using cotton wool, polystyrene and phosphorescent varnish, sewn fabric, and cobalt chloride. He also makes little sculptures

coated with kaolin and the *Artist's Breath* series, balloons he has blown up and attached to a rectangular wooden base.

21 July: As part of the performance *Consumazione dell'arte Dinamica del pubblico* *Divorare l'arte* at Galleria Azimut, he gives the audience hardboiled eggs to eat, signed with his thumb print.

1961

January: Manzoni begins signing people as *Living Sculptures* and provides them with *Certificates of Authenticity*. He also produces a number of *Magic Bases*.

May: He makes 90 cans of *Artist's Shit*.

25 September–9 November: Second stay in Denmark, where among other works he makes *Base of the World*.

In the course of the year he produces new series of *Achromes*, using natural and artificial fibres, synthetic fur, and balls of cotton wool, as well as two *Achrome* sculptures, one of rabbit skin, the other of straw and kaolin.

1962

He makes *Achromes* with bread rolls, pebbles and polystyrene pellets; others come in the form of wrapping-paper and newspaper packages.

1963

6 February: Manzoni is found dead of a heart attack in his Milan studio.

WRITINGS BY THE ARTIST

Some quotations

Subjectively excerpted from Piero Manzoni's theoretical writings or his letters.

A totally white – or better still totally colourless, neutral – surface, unrelated to any painterly phenomenon or any intervention foreign to its surface value: a white that is not a polar landscape, a beautiful or evocative substance, a sensation or a symbol or something else still: a white surface which is a white surface (a colourless surface which is a colourless surface) or even better which is and that's all: being (and total being is pure becoming.)

Free Dimension, 1960

I don't understand painters who say they're interested in modern problems yet still confront the picture as if it were a surface to fill with colours and shapes in line with some more or less assessable, more or less inculcated taste. They trace a sign, step back, look at their work as they twist their necks and squint, then spring forward again, add another sign, another colour from their palette, and keep up these gymnastics until they've filled the picture, covered the canvas: the picture is finished: a surface of unlimited possibilities is now reduced to a kind of receptacle into which unnatural colours and artificial meanings are forced and squeezed.

Why not, on the contrary, empty the receptacle?

Why not liberate this surface? Why not try to discover the limitless significance of a total space, of a pure, absolute light?

Free Dimension, 1960

It's a real pleasure to know that my pictures enrage people. I call them pictures for the enraged, because you can throw things at them without breaking them.

It's a real pleasure to know that my pictures enrage people..., 1960

GUIDED TOURS AND EVENTS

Guided tours

Thursday 23 June at 6:30 pm
Sunday 26 June at 3 pm
Saturday 2 July at 3 pm
Thursday 21 July at 6:30 pm
Thursday 11 August at 6:30 pm
Sunday 11 September at 3 pm
Sunday 25 September at 3 pm

Lunch tours

A guided tour (45 mins) followed by a snack
Thursdays 7 July, 25 August, 15 September at 12:30 pm
Price: SFr 10 (snack included, advance booking required)

Wine-tasting tour

Manzoni's fifty shades of white echo the sensory delights of a Chasselas wine tasting with Jérôme Aké Béda, the Gault & Millau top Swiss sommelier for 2015.

Tuesday 20 September at 6:30 pm
Price: SFr 25 (advance booking required)

Concert

Italian music of the 20th century
Saturday 25 September at 3 pm
Free

Young visitors

Tours/workshops for all the family

A chance for kids and grownups to talk about art and try out Manzoni's techniques with different materials (advance booking required)

Age 7 and up

Wednesdays 29 June, 31 August, 14 September, 2 – 4:30 pm

Discovery-booklet

Activities in the exhibition

Age 7 and up, free

Holiday workshops

Create your own artwork out of very different – and very white – materials. Plus a free (white) snack. Ages 9–15.

Wednesday 6 July and Friday 8 July: 10 am – 12:30 pm/2 – 4:30 pm

Booking: www.apvrl.ch

PRESS IMAGES

<ftp://ftp.vd.ch/MBA/pub/presse/>

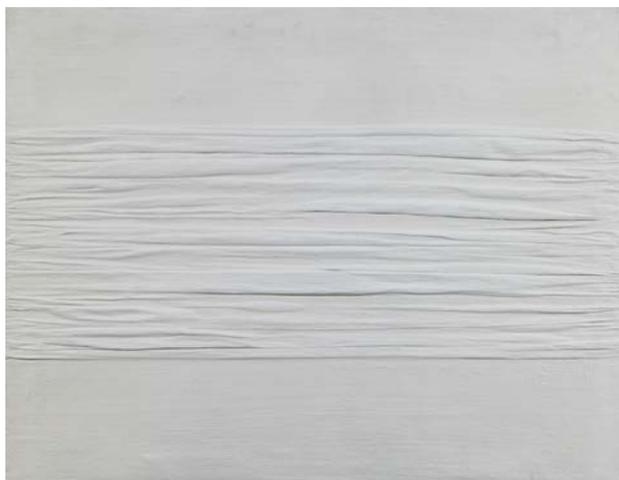
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1 *Achrome*, 1957-1958. Wrinkled canvas and kaolin, 71 x 90 cm. Florence, Private collection. Photo: DR



2 *Achrome*, 1958-1959. Wrinkled canvas and kaolin, 50 x 70 cm. London, Mazzoleni Art Gallery. Photo: DR



12 *Achrome*, 1958-1959. Wrinkled canvas and kaolin, 70 x 90 cm. Private collection. Photo: DR



3 *Achrome*, 1958-1959. Wrinkled canvas and kaolin, 70 x 100 cm. Milan, Gallerie d'Italia – Piazza Scala . Intesa Sanpaolo Collection. Photo: DR



4 *Achrome*, 1958-1959. Squares of wrinkled canvas and kaolin, 75 x 100 cm. Private collection. Photo: DR



5a-5b *Achrome*, 1961. Polystyrene and phosphorescent varnish, 60 x 46 cm. Milan, Fondazione Piero Manzoni. Photo: mcb-a /Nora Rupp

► 5b = 5a in its phosphorescent state

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6 *Achrome*, ca. 1961. Compressed paper and kaolin, 20 x 18 x 10 cm. Fioravanti Meoni Collection. Photo: mcb-a /Nora Rupp



7 *Achrome*, ca. 1961. Synthetic fibres, 22 x 19,5 cm. Milan, Fondazione Piero Manzoni. Photo: mcb-a /Nora Rupp



8 *Achrome*, 1961-1962. Cotton wool balls, 19,5 x 27 cm. Milan, Fondazione Piero Manzoni. Photo: mcb-a /Nora Rupp



9 *Achrome*, 1961-1962. Synthetic fibres, 22 x 20 cm. Milan, Fondazione Piero Manzoni. Photo: mcb-a /Nora Rupp



10 *Achrome*, ca. 1962. Bread rolls and kaolin on panel, 85 x 90 cm. Private collection of the Esther Grether family. Photo: Robi Baye



11 *Achrome*, 1962-1963. Polystyrene pellets and kaolin on canvas, 81.5 x 65.5 cm. Milan, Fondazione Piero Manzoni. Photo: mcb-a/Nora Rupp