

Giulia Massari*

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****The Opportunities****

On the very first day, twelve thousand visitors.

"My paintings—I either sell them for a high price or keep them... they're better than Guttuso's. I challenge him to paint side by side with me, and we'll see who's better."

"That guy? That's publisher Mazzotta. He offered me a studio, asked for a hundred paintings over ten years, half for him and half for me. We had a fight."

"The other one? My publisher, Nanni Balestrini. He published my first book after I had a falling out with Feltrinelli."

The worker-writer ****Vincenzo Guerrazzi****, author of six books and now the subject of an exhibition at the EUR Congress Palace, roams cautiously among his paintings. Around him, in the grand palace dedicated to the event "Do It Yourself," celebrating leisure and hobbies, families linger mainly by various alarm systems—for cars, motorcycles, windows, doors, purses, and wallets—ignoring the boats, airplanes, and trains meant to be assembled. When they stop in front of the worker-writer's paintings, they seem at first inclined to move on, but then they're drawn in by the pleasure of recognizing familiar faces.

"That's Berlinguer," someone says, "and look, that's Andreotti, and there's Togliatti, and that one's Agnelli."

In reality, there are many, many faces to recognize, from both the past and the present, captured with the skill of a portrait artist and only lightly touched with irony or mockery—because they speak for themselves.

What these canvases depict—with dark, earthy tones for the ruling class and pale, nebulous ones for the working class—is our contemporary history, shown through its most significant moments: ****"The June 20th Event,"**** ****"The Historic Compromise,"**** ****"The Non-Confidence."**** The narrative almost always traces back to the past. One example is

a painting showing Berlinguer and Togliatti, pants rolled up, feet trudging through a sort of swamp, dragging Gramsci in a cage. The painting is titled *"The Dowry."* They're bringing Gramsci as a dowry—and it's not just Berlinguer carrying him; the idea goes back to Togliatti. That's Guerrazzi's perspective—Calabrian, a long-time factory worker and activist at Ansaldo, now officially just an artist.

"Gramsci," says Guerrazzi, "because Marx is nothing but a fetish anymore."

"With your paintings," a visitor tells Guerrazzi, "you express yourself better than with your books. The working-class family swallowing bolts in front of a glowing TV says more than an entire chapter." Guerrazzi smiles. In the past, he would've argued. He used to be fiery, combative. Once, at a writers' convention in Orvieto, to show that the city was indifferent to intellectual games, he walked around asking a stationer, a housewife, and a girl on a bicycle who Malerba, Arbasino, or Pagliarani were. "Never heard of them," they all replied. He recounted this on stage at the theater and was met with a storm of boos.

This year, he entered the Strega Prize. Though he didn't win or receive any votes, he enjoyed insulting everyone and keeping the cultural elite on edge. People feared he'd do something extreme, something violent. Now he seems calmer. Or perhaps writing gave him complexes that painting doesn't?