

ArtForum

March 1999

Stefano Arienti, Studio Guenzani

By Giorgio Verzotti

This exhibition contained works by Stefano Arienti from the past three years: a group of large, chromatic portraits on tracing paper created entirely with spray paint. Although the aerosol cans he uses relate his practice to graffiti, the artist is careful to specify that, unlike street artists who often adjust the sprayer in order to have more control over it, he leaves the head intact. The broader jet of paint produced by a can that hasn't been modified for "artistic" ends makes any kind of detail work virtually impossible. The final likeness - whether of a person, animal, or flower - can be difficult to recognize, which is exactly how the artist likes it. He has always been drawn to image-reproduction processes that entail the image's gradual destruction (for example, in earlier pieces he painted directly onto Monet and van Gogh posters).

For the recent works, Arienti converted various photographs (his own or taken from magazines) into slides. Projecting each slide in turn onto tracing paper mounted on the wall, he spray painted over the projected image. Such a method forces him to work in the dark, and he must also paint rapidly, making definitive gestures without relying on underpainting or touch-up. The paintings exhibited were nearly monochrome, built up out of graduated relationships of reds and oranges (although a few other colors, such as brown and blue, were also introduced). Tracing paper, the work's sole support, usually affixed directly to the wall, intensifies the spray paint's vaporous effect and emphasizes Arienti's chromatic shadings and passages from one tone to another. Although the end result is always an aggregate of colored patches where the figure is notably summary, its original identity lost and almost irretrievable, the artist's skill enables him not only to retain the salient features of a physiognomy, but, in the case of his portraits, to capture a psychological state. This show included twenty portraits - of the artist himself, his friends, and several public figures - all indiscriminately titled with first names only.

Each of Arienti's images appears almost insubstantial, seeming to float in the void and emanate a luminous energy, accentuated in this show by the great quantity of works exhibited. For once, the artist's aggressive approach to mass-media icons was tempered by the delicacy of a painter turning his attention to tonal harmonies, even if their point of departure was industrial paints and the "street trash" of spray cans.

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.