

MILAN



PRINT SUMMER 2011

All Cities
Singapore
Austin, TX
Barcelona
Belfast
Berlin
Chicago
Denver
GENEVA
Glasgow
Hamburg
Lausanne, Switzerland
London
Los Angeles
Milan
Montreal
Munich
New York
New York
Paris
Philadelphia
Salzburg, Austria
San Francisco
Seoul
Turin
Vancouver



View of "Gabriele Di Matteo," 2011.

Gabriele Di Matteo

FEDERICO LUGER (FL GALLERY)

In the inventory of the Prado in Madrid, Velázquez's *Las Meninas* used to be called, rather, a "family portrait," and this is how Gabriele Di Matteo titled his exhibition: "*Quadro di Famiglia*." Five large replicas of the celebrated painting were exhibited on the walls, each the same size as the original but fragmented into sixteen square modules that, together, make up the famous scene—the presentation of the Infanta Margarita during a sitting for a portrait. More precisely, four paintings repeated this scene, while the fifth showed the modules in scattered order, a sort of re-creation in puzzle form. Additional modules, bringing the number of "family portraits" to a total of twenty, were stacked against the wall and in the gallery office. The idea of fragmenting the image came from the way in which large-scale paintings were often treated in the past, when they were cut into smaller pieces to facilitate sales, thanks not only to their size but also because of the changing popularity of various painting genres—a still life might be detached from its former context, for instance. Di Matteo's intention was to compare a fundamental painting of our history, one famously studied by philosophers, with the quotidian reality of the copy, as if to compare learning (art and philosophy) with its vulgarization.

In order to do this, Di Matteo set in motion a curious collective process. He invited five members of the Cooperative of Commercial Neapolitan Painters, accustomed to painting stereotypical subjects such as seascapes, flowering terraces, or floral still lifes in quantity, to accompany him to the Prado. There the painters spent three days studying Velázquez's masterpiece, developing a specific method for creating the twenty requested copies in twenty days. A principal desideratum of commercial painting being speed of execution, upon their return to Naples, the five painters worked to produce one complete set of the sixteen modules each day, using as their point of departure a reproduction available at the museum.

Each painter concentrated exclusively on one part of the composition—the central figures, the backgrounds, and so on. The twenty resulting copies broadly resemble the original but are not exactly faithful copies of it, since one hand's pictorial gesture will always differ from another's. All the same yet all different, these nonetheless impressive *Meninas* present the problem of authorship that stems from the overturning of the distinctive individual gesture; they seem to be a parody of authorship, its almost farcical reversal. In fact the style here is careless, anonymous, realized without particular attention and without "cultured" intentions.

Moreover, the pieces that were not visible (those stacked up against the wall) underscored the economic, salable aspect of commercial painting, or simply of painting, if one thinks of the fate of many dismembered canvases of the past, restored to integrity, if at all, only by the

philological rigor of our present-day art-historical approach. This loss of pathos, of aura, may be counterbalanced by the liberal use the purchaser could make of Di Matteo's work, beginning with the painting's commercial dimension: One can buy a few modules suitable for freely reconstructing the scene, or just one, as a souvenir. Commercial, indeed.

—*Giorgio Verzotti*

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

ARTFORUM INBOX

Register to receive our newsletters—*The Archive*, *Must See*, *Dispatch*, and *The Issue*—as well as special offers from *Artforum*.

artguide

ADVERTISE

SIGN IN

SUBSCRIBE

BACK ISSUES

CART

PRIVACY POLICY

CONTACT



All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY. [Terms](#)

You have 2 articles remaining this month. [Subscribe](#) for immediate access to this and over five decades of articles from our archives.

