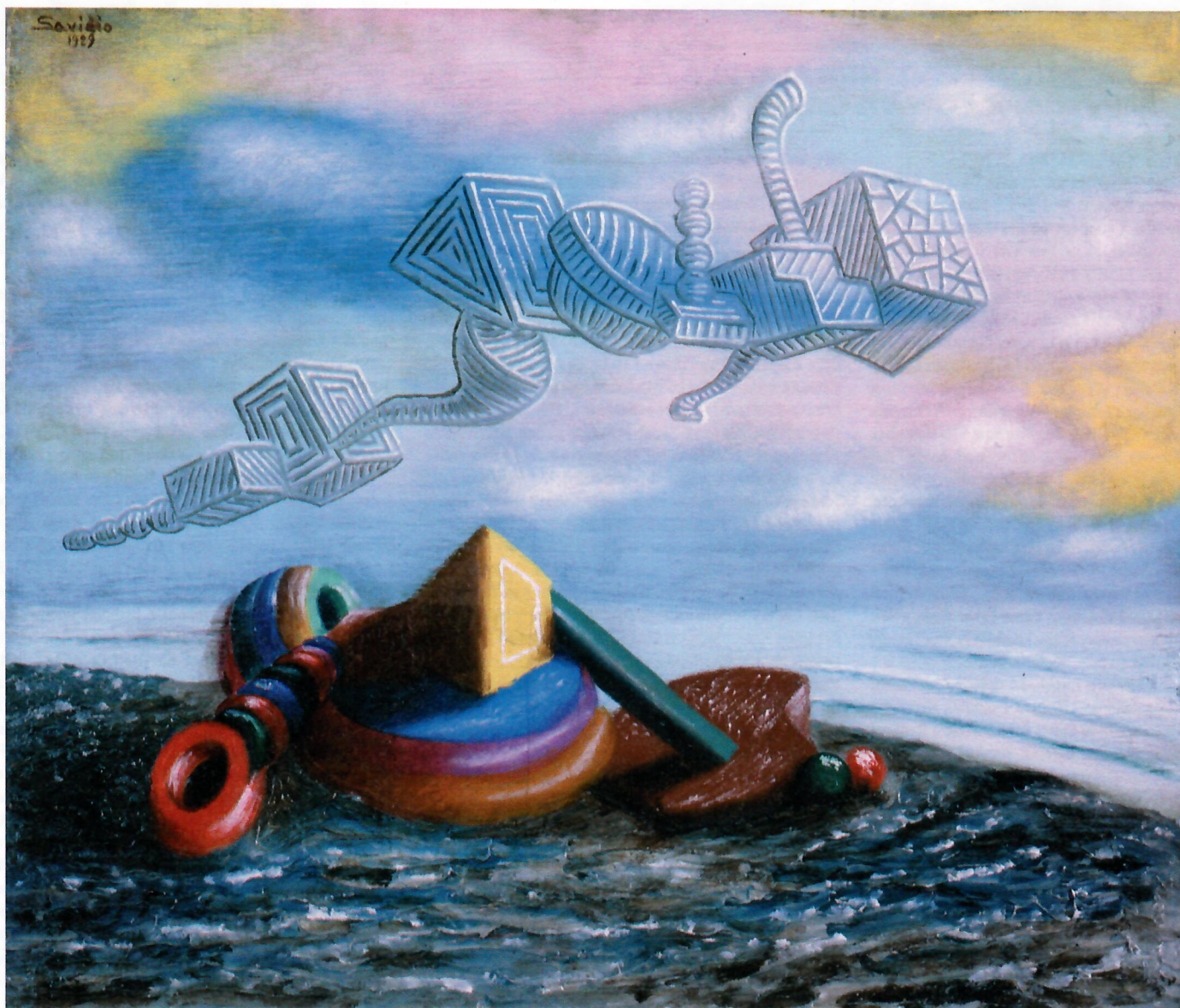


The Other Brother

ALBERTO SAVINIO GETS A RARE EXHIBITION AT THE CENTER FOR ITALIAN MODERN ART. BY JOHN DORFMAN



Alberto Savinio, *L'abandonnée*
(*The Abandoned One*), 1929.

THE MULTI-DISCIPLINARY artist Alberto Savinio has generally been overshadowed by his more famous brother, Giorgio de Chirico, and the Center for Italian Modern Art in New York is redressing the balance by dedicating its annual installation to him. “Alberto Savinio,” which opened in October and runs through June 23, 2018, is the first solo exhibition of the artist’s work ever to be held in the United States. With 25 works on

view, it should awaken Americans to a rare talent whose creative force and incisive mind exerted influence far out of proportion to his name recognition. The show’s ambitions are in keeping with the mission of CIMA, which was founded in 2013 by scholar and collector Laura Mattioli to reveal aspects of Italian art that are unknown to or underappreciated by non-Italians.

Andrea Francesco Alberto de Chirico



Clockwise from top left: *Jour de reception* (Reception Day), 1930; *Le navire perdu* (The Lost Ship), 1928; *L'île des Charmes* (The Charmed Island), 1928.

was born in Greece of a noble Genoese family in 1891. The pseudonym Alberto Savinio, which he adopted in 1914, was an attempt to distinguish himself from his brother, who was three years older, although the two were very close at the beginning of their careers and only much later had a falling out. Or so it seems. The exact nature of their relationship is hard to determine, but whatever the case may be, Savinio was always very much his own man. Unlike de Chirico, who was a visual artist and art theorist, Savinio was not only a painter and a critic but a musician, composer, fiction writer, essayist, journalist, playwright, and set designer.

It was with his music that he made his first impact in the world of culture. After graduating from the Athens Conservatory with a degree in piano and composition, he wrote two operas, which got the attention of Pietro Mascagni, the composer of *Cavalleria Rusticana*. At the age of 20 Savinio was performing in Paris, where he attracted the attention of a very dif-

ferent sort of cultural figure, Guillaume Apollinaire. Having shown that he could write traditional Italian opera, Savinio now invented a style that he called Sincerismo, which abandoned harmony for dissonance and rhythm and was clearly much more avant-garde. After attending a piano recital of his, Apollinaire wrote, in typical enthusiastic-waggish fashion, "I was surprised and beguiled; Savinio mistreated his instrument so much that after each piece the keyboard had to be cleared of chips and splinters. I foresee that within two years he will have gutted every piano in Paris. Savinio will then go on to destroy every piano in the universe, which may be a true liberation."

Around this time





Clockwise from top left: *Autoritratto in forma di gufo* (Self-portrait as an Owl), 1936; *Famille de lions* (Family of Lions), 1927; *L'annunciazione* (The Annunciation), 1932.



Savinio created a work that, as he recounted, would cast a shadow over the rest of his life's work in all media. *Les Chants de la mi-mort* ("Songs of Half-Death") is something between a poem and a play, in several languages and with musical accompaniment, and its subject matter is the realm of sleep (death's half-brother, in Ancient Greek lore). Savinio's explorations in this subconscious realm marked him as a precursor of the Surrealists; André Breton enthusiastically hailed him as a kindred spirit and acknowledged his influence. Among the recurring images in *Les Chants* is a manikin with no face, an uncanny figure that haunts not only Savinio's paintings and those of his brother but those of Surrealists yet to come.

While it might appear as if Savinio could hardly have been bothered to lift a brush after trashing pianos, composing symphonies, and staging plays, he began to participate in the visual art world during World War I, while he and de Chirico

were in the Italian army, stationed in the city of Ferrara. There the brothers met the young painters Carlo Carrà and Filippo de Pisis, with whom they founded the *scuola metafisica*, a new movement in painting, though never a very organized one. The word "metaphysical" meant various things to various artists, but basically it referred to a form of seeing that attempted to penetrate deeper than the apparent, to look behind the scenes of the world. For de Chirico, the connection to dream states was important. For Savinio, on the other hand, notwithstanding his oneiric poetry, painting needed to be anchored in concrete reality and conscious seeing.

In 1919 he wrote, "Art, and I say this particularly for the benefit of certain idealists and mystics, has no point of resemblance with dreams." Instead he was seeking a quality that he called the phantasmic or the spectral: "Spectrality is the true, spiritual, and substantial essence of every appearance. To



Le songe d'Achille (The Song of Achilles), 1929.

reproduce this essence in its complete genuineness is the highest aim of art.” Citing one of the earliest Greek philosopher-scientists, he continued, “Heraclitus says that Nature loves to conceal herself....In painting irony occupies a most important position, once the mind of the artist achieves the maximum degree of clarity. Then he perceives exactly the original precision of nature.”

Savinio’s paintings, polished in technique and reveling in strange forms in even stranger combinations, are certainly no direct portrayals of nature, but they are intensely ironic and tend to make the viewer revisit old symbols and haunting images of the past and present with new eyes. The incongruities on view include a juxtaposition of old fam-

ily photographs with animal imagery and a speeding train representing 20th-century technology (*Famille de lions*, 1927), grotesque birds of prey filling up a loggia space where humans more rightly belong (*Jour de reception*, 1930), a wrecked ship conflated with eerily colorful toys (*Le navire perdu*, 1928), and a self-portrait as a gigantic, fierce owl dressed in a 19th-century suit and necktie (*Autoritratto in forma di gufo*, 1936).

Most of Savinio’s painting was done in the late 1920s and the 1930s. After that, he mainly confined himself to writing fiction, memoirs, and literary criticism, with occasional forays back into musical composition. Just before his death in 1952, he completed his fifth opera. It was about Christopher Columbus. 