

RIPENESS

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Do you know the land where the lemon-trees grow ... ?

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

There are at least two Pier Paolo Calzolaris. One orchestrates large-scale installations. These grand set-pieces combine humble means – burnt wood, lead, copper, large tobacco leaves, shells, frost, fire and so on – with others that require more human intervention, including felt, leather, neon tubing and refrigeration units. Throughout, time plays a crucial, if understated, role alongside the mix of nature and culture. For example, such elemental assemblages draw beholders into their perceptual weft and warp, surrounding them visually and psychologically like a quiet energy field composed with textures, planes, directions, light, shade and thoughts. As the viewer parses the objects, duration becomes pivotal to the whole experience. This much is obvious.

More subtly, flames, ice, water, plants and metal suggest cyclical evolution – decay, deliquescence, states by turns tarnished, dull, extinguished, rekindled and refulgent – in their very makeup. Hence these components as well as the various neon writings and other inscriptions represent metonyms for a larger story. Its lineaments are immediacy and transience with its chill, even mortal overtones. In short, seasons at once natural and emotional. Arthur Rimbaud probably had a similar idea in mind when he began a famous poem with the apostrophe:

Ô saisons, ô châteaux

Quelle âme est sans défauts?

[O seasons, o châteaux

What soul is without flaw?]¹

As if to say that human dwelling and destiny belong to one temporal continuum, an existential learning process (some critics interpret the “season” and “château” as respectively “life on earth” and “the soul”). Though Rimbaud’s symbolism may be arcane, the message is clear enough. We build and go, so to speak, where time leads us.

1. “Ô saisons, ô châteaux” [1872, publ. 1886], in Arthur Rimbaud, transl. Martin Sorrell, *Arthur Rimbaud: Collected Poems* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 194.

A second Calzolari paints monumental semi-abstract dramas that parallel Neo-Expressionism in Europe and America during the 1980s. Their *Sturm und Drang* counterbalances the relatively tranquil sculptural ensembles. Its range extends from the *Naschmarkt* (1984) with its explosive colours and Baroque turbulence alluding to the open-air Viennese market laden with meat and other victuals to panoramic stormy skyscapes exemplified by the Wagnerian *Naturlandschaft mit Vogel* (1981) in which the heavens seem to move apace. But then beyond this turbulence lies another, dulcet, mode. Compared to the operatic fortissimo that resounds through the big paintings, its tenor is more akin to what the nineteenth-century American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson called “the still, small voice within us.”² Here is the third Calzolari, an intimate philosopher. *Muitos estudos para uma casa de limão* stems from this sensibility.

Never before exhibited, the project comprising twenty-two studies for a “lemon house” is *sui generis*, a one-of-a-kind suite complete in itself. Nevertheless, its matrix belongs to Calzolari’s wider practice – specifically the aforementioned painting-as-lyric mode. Executed on Torchon Arches paper mounted on board, the support’s roughness not only has a grain that helps texture the milk tempera medium, it also chimes with another of Calzolari’s signature substances, layered salt. In turn, the granular pigmented surface deftly embellished by marks made with ultra-soft, friable pastels (*pastel à l’écu*) establishes a concrete metaphor for the look and feel of a lemon’s skin. But before considering the fruit, Calzolari’s touch in this pictorial style merits mention. He has described painting as “a butterfly”. The butterfly and Calzolari’s facture have one common quality (beside their beauty): they quiver light as a feather (which, by no coincidence, belongs among the artist’s leitmotifs). Lightness is to materiality as transience is to time. After all, fruits form a late stage in a plant’s development, a prelude to its dormancy or death.

Morbidezza and light – the second understood simultaneously as noun and adjective – pervade these “studies for a lemon house”. Indeed, in certain sheets the lemons dissolve into a Mallarmé-like white void. In others, stars in a deep blue-sky shine with a yellowness that is a chromatic synecdoche for the unseen lemons. An early work confirms that Calzolari understands this particular hue as a material representation of ideal luminosity. In *Finestra* (1978) daylight streams through a real window embedded within a painted yellow monochromatic expanse. Likewise, the artworks in this exhibition find their closest counterpart in a hallmark painting from 2017. Reciprocal factors include the media, a shimmering paleness, stem-like strands, starry points and lemon yellow juxtaposed with a blue recalling both sky and water. The work’s title? *Paesaggio Veneziano*. Venetian light, refracted by the Adriatic and glowing softly upon ancient marbles, has long been Calzolari’s muse. Scant wonder, then, that in the present studies everything is air, dissolution and reformation. This flux and haziness imply an Impressionist gaze. On one

2. David Greene Haskins, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Maternal Ancestors with Some Reminiscences of Him* (Boston: Cupples, Upham & Co., 1886), p. 48.

hand, they recall Impressionism's impulse to capture fleeting qualia (by "Impressionism" I also advert to possibly its greatest heir, Pierre Bonnard). On the other hand, their faintness evokes memory or the inward eye. Even that most rigid modernist compositional structure, the grid, mellows into a trellis's network tracery. We seem to be in a realm of reverie or remembering. This is the tonic key spurring lyric poetry, its apotheosis being John Keats's odes. Recall "To Autumn":

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core.³

Calzolari's studies, awash with colours and "the maturing sun", explore twenty-two successive stages – almost a storyboard – that mine rhapsodic phases involving growth, maturation, fruition and finality. In some the pendant lemons become akin to suns. In another – hypothetically the last – the atmosphere turns ashen, even frosty.

What of the twofold subject itself? Twofold because there is the "house" and the "lemon". The first sounds cryptic. In Portuguese "*casa de limão*" does not really denote the English word "conservatory" nor do we ever altogether see any "house" per se. Perhaps, therefore, the deeper meaning connotes a dream house, an imaginary idyllic site. Or is there a further dimension? Namely, a building that has acquired storied fame in the annals of art. That is, Vincent van Gogh's rented rooms in the Yellow House in Arles. Like Calzolari's, the site bridged material reality and the metaphysical. Van Gogh's own description remains the best testimony as to whether it deserves a place in Calzolari's scheme: "Also a sketch of a 30 square canvas representing the house and its setting under a sulphur sun under a pure cobalt sky. The theme is a hard one! But that is exactly why I want to conquer it. Because it is fantastic, these yellow houses in the sun and also the incomparable freshness of the blue. All the ground is yellow too."⁴ Intentional or not, "cobalt sky" and "sulphur sun" provide perfect watchwords for Calzolari's depictive *ambiente*.⁵

As for the "lemon", it yields a piquant final flavour. Lemons entered Europe near southern Italy no later than the second century AD. Their origin is unknown. Aptly, the fruit lends its name to an artist's pigment.

3. "To Autumn" [1819, publ. 1820], in John Keats, ed. Jack Stillinger, *John Keats: Collected Poems* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 360.

4. Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh (September 29th, 1888). <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let691/letter.html>

5. The very word "studies" suggests a final composition-cum-edifice as yet unrealised and, maybe, unrealisable insofar as it is at root a project of the mind.

Van Gogh's sometime friend Paul Gauguin even conceived a Breton woman entirely clad in the colour (1884). Moreover, several lemon yellows consist of salts formed from a favourite substance in Calzolari's repertoire, lead. Notwithstanding, the lemon has a fascinating artistic lineage. To cite only two instances, in Francisco de Zurbarán's only known still-life (1633) the lemons consort with oranges and a rose, glowing against a dark background so that they assume a preternatural aura that prefigures Calzolari's treatment of them.⁶ In a second tableau, the tonality is subtler and more pearlescent, hence closer to Calzolari. Jan Davidsz de Heem did not depict the whole lemon, just a slice and its peel (p. 16). Why need he? For the lemon's essence lies in its juice and its zest. Both are evanescent – a quality that renders them the more intense. Intensity and evanescence strike to the core of Calzolari's treatment. With concision and consummate deftness, he transforms a simple workaday ingredient into a meditation on taste and time. Calzolari's palette evokes the former through synaesthesia, while his changeful, ever-dissolving traces serve the latter.⁷ Sometimes stormy, sometimes tranquil, daylit or nocturnal, the "many studies" are nothing if not alive with zest. Zest and pathos. Why pathos? The answer lies in the ultimate elusiveness to Calzolari's vision: the "lemon house" never quite materialises, as though it were a distant beloved.

Arguably the most poignant address to the lemon's manifold associations occurs in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96). Roving through space-time in his quest for fulfilment, the story's protagonist hears a melody sung by the child whom he had adopted as a daughter. A haunting hymn to *Sehnsucht*, its pathos waxes unmistakable:

Do you know the land where the lemon-trees grow,

In darkened leaves the gold-oranges glow,

A soft wind blows from the pure blue sky,

The myrtle stands mute, and the bay tree high?

Do you know it well?

It's there I'd be gone,

To be there with you, O, my beloved one!

Do you know the house? It has columns and beams,

6. Zurbarán likely intended religious symbolism. Cf. also Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still-Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), p.88. "Lemons, Oranges, Cup and a Rose shows a visual field so purified and so perfectly composed that the familiar objects seem on the brink of transfiguration or (the inevitable word) transubstantiation. Standing at some imminent intersection with the divine, and with eternity, they exactly break with the normally human."

7. In the cinema, the dissolve is a classic device to indicate the passage of one moment into another.

There are glittering rooms, the hallway gleams,

Are those figures of marble looking at me?

What have they done, child of misery?

Do you know it well?

It's there I'd be gone⁸

Such are the poignant, lyrical feelings that the *Muitos estudos para uma casa de limão* may inspire in the sentient observer. Is it fanciful to link the Italian Calzolari to the German, ergo Nordic, Goethe? No, since by May 1788 Goethe had voyaged to his beloved Italy. The route took him through the Brenner Pass to Lake Garda, famous for its lemons in a climate sheltered by the icy Alps from the cold North. Let Calzolari explain in a mere two sentences the magnetism between the poles that his art plumbs and which vibrates through his lemon house: “Well, I am an Italian, Venetian artist. It is impossible for a southern artist to forget about this dichotomy between hot and cold, just like Eros and Thanatos.”⁹ Unlike, say, limes, lemons need a colder spell to fruit properly. In art as in life, ripeness is all.¹⁰

8. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [1795-96], translated by A.S. Kline. Significantly, the verse has inspired diverse composers to write *Lieder*, among them Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert and Alban Berg.

9. Jon Wood, “In Conversation with Pier Paolo Calzolari,” in *Pier Paolo Calzolari* (London: White Cube, 2018, p. 72).

10. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 5, Scene 2, lines 9-10: “Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither: Ripeness is all.”