



Emilio Vedova  
*documenta 7*

10 February—26 March 2022  
London Ely House

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London Paris Salzburg Seoul

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Emilio Vedova's (1919–2006) first solo exhibition in the UK will reunite his five monumental canvases from the landmark *documenta 7* exhibition in 1982, curated by Rudi Fuchs. These paintings will be shown alongside a selection of important works from the 1980s, a period considered the pinnacle of the artist's career. Presented in association with the Fondazione Emilio e Annabianca Vedova, this exhibition marks the fourth decade since his participation in *documenta 7* in Kassel and the 40th Venice Biennale, held in the same year.

By the 1980s, Vedova was widely regarded as one of the most influential abstract Italian artists of his time, having exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1947 and the legendary *documenta* exhibitions I, II and III (1955, 1959 and 1964) in Kassel. His invitation to exhibit once more in *documenta 7* demonstrated his significance for the up-and-coming generation of Neo-expressive artists. It preceded a number of publications and solo exhibitions as the decade progressed, including a retrospective of 280 works, curated by Germano Celant at the Museo Correr in Venice, and a subsequent show at the Staatsgalerie Moderner Kunst in Munich.

*When [Vedova] worked on a painting, he threw himself into the canvas and therefore there was no planning, because throwing oneself into the canvas means entering a white void and finding a way to communicate a feeling that was given by the material of colour.*  
— Germano Celant, 2019

Vedova's paintings attest to *documenta* curator Rudi Fuchs' desire in 1982 that the invited artists would 'do justice to the dignity of art', freeing it from the 'various constraints and social parodies it is caught up in' by presenting a selection of works with the power to show themselves 'unrestrainedly' – works whose reception would outlive the situations of their production.

In a letter to Fuchs in August 1982, Vedova wrote: *Your 'love' for art, especially for what you do and have done with so much enthusiasm and generosity for documenta and for the artists, I felt it even more strongly in your tormented movements and actions in Kassel in those days, in those inevitable conflicts with the artists themselves. [...] Those active exchanges are the most important result of an international exhibition: exchanges between artists and a 'character' like you who is so much – if not as much – involved in our problems. [...] Then I hope that we will meet again.*

*The experimentalism of Vedova is really impressive. When I went to see a full retrospective of his work in Rome, I was dazzled by the variety and the complexity of what he does. It is true that the gestural component, the livid bold abstraction of his style is pervasive, but the variety of what he produced, even in his palette, was dazzling to discover.*  
— Philip Rylands, 2020

Vedova navigated between tradition and the avant-garde throughout the course of his career and played a central role in forging a new path for Italian art in the modern era. Revered as one of the most notable painters to emerge from post-war Europe, Vedova was praised by Peggy Guggenheim as a rising star of the European avant-garde. He had a firm and enduring friendship with Georg Baselitz, who once described his work as ‘all the heart could desire’. Baselitz dedicated a series of paintings to his recently deceased friend at the 2007 Venice Biennale, shown alongside a three-dimensional work by Vedova himself.

The exhibition will shed light on a striking and radical artist, whose reluctance to be associated with any definitive movements, or to participate in capitalist art market structures, prevented his work from entering into mainstream art historical discourse to the same extent as that of his peers. A revolutionary of his time, Vedova gained notoriety in the 20th-century art world by spearheading movements including the anti-Fascist artist’s union, Corrente, and the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti; in 1946 he co-wrote the *Manifesto del realismo di pittori e scultori*, also known as *Oltre Guernica*. In the 1950s Vedova was considered one of the leading exponents of Italian and European Art Informel, together with Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana, alongside Abstract Expressionist painters from the United States such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline.

Deeply rooted in his experiences of the Second World War, Vedova approached his painting with dynamic force, galvanised by the desire for political change, and engaged with the exploration of existential questions borne from human experience. His entrenched belief that revolutionary art must be forged through abstraction led him to a rejection of the expressionistic approach of painting about painting itself. His process involved a direct confrontation between his body and the canvas, a confrontation that permeates the viewer’s experience.

Vedova’s entire oeuvre is anchored in Venice, where he was born and spent most of his life – the light of the city, the water, the sand and the architecture are constantly present in his paintings. He also looked back to his Venetian predecessors from the late Renaissance, in particular Tintoretto – he was impressed by his bold brushstrokes, accentuated gestures, dramatic use of light and by his persona. As art historian Carlo Bertelli writes: ‘[Vedova] assaulted Tintoretto with the fury of a Kokoschka’.

Profoundly influenced by his surroundings, Vedova’s works from the 1980s were largely inspired by a trip to Mexico at the turn of the decade. Here he found inspiration in the vast landscapes, traditional architecture, cultural artefacts and richly coloured, monumental murals by José Clemente Orozco. In subsequent paintings, he reintroduced an explosion of colour into his palette and refined the abstract painterly style that had defined his practice throughout his career.

Despite this shift in focus, the works on display continued to push painting into new territories with an expressive ferocity, rejecting any totalitarian regime in favour of conveying the complexities of lived human experience.

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Emilio Vedova was an Italian painter born into a Venetian artisan family in 1919. Forced to start earning a living at a young age, his artistic abilities were virtually self-taught. During the Second World War, he worked with the Italian resistance, expressing his political beliefs through the medium of paint. In 1943, he joined the anti-fascist group Corrente, which celebrated the revolutionary aspects of painting. A pioneer of expressive abstraction, he co-signed the *Manifesto del realismo di pittori e scultori* in Milan in 1946, declaring that socialist painters should move away from the figurative example of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). Instead, they should adhere to the very nature of revolutionary art through abstraction.

Vedova's personality has a raw presence in his canvases through his distinct fusion of politics and artistic technique. His compositions of wild, expressive strokes and smears of paint engaged with the reality of the time. In 1948, he made his debut at the Venice Biennale. From that point onwards, Vedova would not only return to make regular appearances at the Biennale, but would become a celebrated artist who received several distinguished prizes and awards including the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale in 1997.

In the 1960s, Vedova began to realise more complex works, such as his *Plurimi (Multiples)* series that consisted of freestanding, hinged sculpture-paintings constructed from painted wood and metal. From that point onwards, he experimented with more diverse media and larger scales, incorporating light, metal and glass into his work. Until his death in Venice on 25 October 2006, he remained active in his artistic experimentation.

Since 2006 the Fondazione Emilio e Annabianca Vedova has played a major role in preserving his artistic heritage through a series of exhibitions and publications.

In recent years, Vedova's work has been exhibited at institutions including the Arnulf Rainer Museum, Baden (2020); Palazzo Reale, Milan (2019); Centre Pompidou-Metz (2019); Museo Novecento, Florence (2018); and Museum Küppersmühle für Moderne Kunst, Duisburg (2016).