

Salvatore Scarpitta

(New York, 1919 – Milan, 2007)

After his figurative works of the immediate postwar period, where various expressionist and Post-Cubist accents emerge, Scarpitta developed his signature work in the second half of the 1950s, with a combination of pictorial and sculptural attributes. The stretcher frame becomes a structure around which he stretches strips of canvas, interwoven and overlapping, to compose a mosaic that does not consist of juxtaposed tiles but is innervated with colors that assume the corporeality of the folds and the contracted energy of the stretched fabric. In later pieces the intersection of the strips is covered by a unified surface of color, like a slow sedimentation of time or a natural growth of mold.

In the early 1960s he started making bandage paintings, like splinted plaster casts, and incorporating rigid elements, parts of objects. Scarpitta inserted straps, car scraps, or exhaust pipes until 1964, when he decided to change direction in his work. That year, during the opening for what would be his last show at the Castelli Gallery, he happened to hear a young man say to a friend, in front of one of his works, that he still perceived something of the 1950s and their echo of human tragedies. The artist understood that perhaps it was no longer the time to torment the spirits with stories of pain. On the fourth floor of his New York studio he constructed his first car, *Rajo Jack*, 1964, now in the CRT Collection. Here he reproduced a racing car as faithfully as possible, placing it against the backdrop of a garage door and flanked by two gas station pumps.

The human event is not hidden, does not vanish into nothingness, but is constructed in absence. The car, for him, was like the abandoned skin of a snake during molting. Its cab squeezes the image of the body of the driver, whose humanity is somewhat defenseless and endangered. This reference to what is not there, to the missing element, does not give rise to melancholic feelings of nostalgia. These works only show the desire to do away with the literary aspect, to restore the content of the work in its entirety, with innocence and clarity. These large toys that Scarpitta began building are tools for a more immediate confrontation of reality, free from any superstructure. The poetic dimension is replaced with the dynamism of play, made up of clear, simple rules, like those of racing. *Rajo Jack* contains the emotion of competition; the original belonged to a black driver who, suffering discrimination in the 1920s, had to compete not only against other drivers, but also social prejudice. (EV)