The Real Thing

Robert Smithson; the 19th-Century 'School of Posillipo' Paintings;
and Gabriele Di Matteo's *Land Art from My Balcony*

a visual essay, by Gilda Williams

In 1961, at the age of 23, Robert Smithson travelled to Rome. He'd fled New York in the hope of discovering the oldest, truest origins of Western culture, having become frustrated with High Modernism as it seemed to stale and stiffening into a safe, overbearing style. His three-month Italian sojourn culminated in his second-ever gallery exhibition, at the George Lester Gallery in Rome. There the American exhibited a set of weird, religious-inspired, illustration-like paintings: scrawled imagery of Aztec gods, witchy angels, winged goddesses, crucifixions. These appear startlingly incongruous with the sculptor's later, world-renowned earthworks – until we notice, for example, the curious pinwheel forms radiating from the stigmata in *Feet of Christ* or *Man of Sorrow*: the first 'real' instance of the spiral form in Smithson's art.

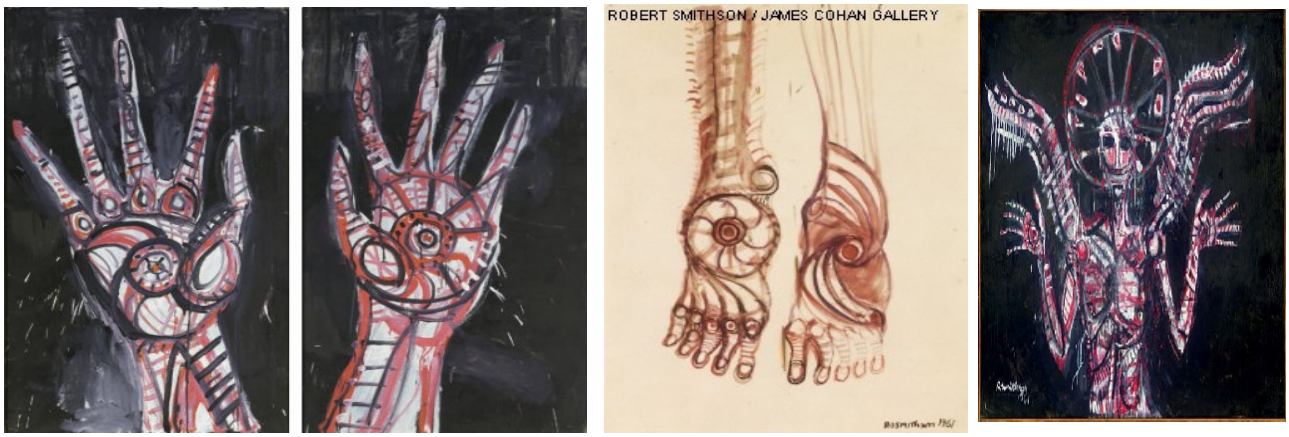


Fig. 1. Robert Smithson, l. to r., *Man of Sorrow; Feet of Christ; Blind Angel*. All 1961.

Touring the Eternal City, Smithson found himself attracted not so much to grandiose sculptures and gilded churches but to the city's shadowy undersides: catacombs, hidden mosaics, early Christian icons. As Smithson wrote in a letter to his wife Nancy Holt, he preferred the ancient city's relics because they were not mere representations of reality, like a painting. Relics, he said, were 'the real thing'.

In 1826, at the age of 20, Neapolitan painter Giacinto Gigante travelled to Rome. He was pursuing his own unique, self-taught, landscape style. Gigante later emerged as the undisputed leader of the little-known, barely remembered Posilippo School of landscape painting, recognizable for its romanticized views of humble peasants and sturdy fisherman ambling the gentle hills surrounding the Bay of Naples, or serene

landscapes dotted with castle ruins and huts, often interrupted with patches of deep, Capri blue. These are 'realistically' painted – as we observe in Di Matteo's 21st-century cover versions – yet they depict a dream world that never existed. Nonetheless, despite his love of artificial idyll, Gigante was in some ways a forward-looking artist: an anti-Academicist who insisted on working out-of-doors, *en plein air*, seeking to capture the true colours and moods of sea and sky. The School of Posillipo, too, was in pursuit of 'the real'.

Fig. 2. Gabriele Di Matteo, *Land Art from My Balcony (School of Posillipo)*, 2018.

The series *Land Art from My Balcony (Land Art dal Terrazzo)* by contemporary Neapolitan artist Gabriele Di Matteo arranges the unlikely marriage of these two distant art-makers, Robert Smithson and the posse of Posillipo. Di Matteo has created remakes of these forgotten 19th-century paintings – fakes of faked landscapes, basically – set alongside legendary photographs surrounding the art of Robert Smithson, whether in conversation with fellow artists Holt and Richard Serra as they explored the Great Salt Lake, or standard views of *Amarillo Ramp, Broken Circle* and more, familiar from art-history books. In *Land Art from My Balcony*, Di Matteo combines technical painterly abilities (associated with the art-historical past) with Land Art – an utterly distant art movement both in history and in approach yet, as we realize, equally labour-intensive, equally preoccupied with the sublime. Di Matteo's work travels in time and space – to the outskirts of 18th-century Naples, or a momentous Utah site-visit almost 50 years ago – from the comfort of his studio, browsing captioned images in a textbook, paradoxically overlapping the laboriousness of a realist painter with the laziness of an art-loving armchair traveller

Fig. 3. Gabriele Di Matteo, *Land Art from My Balcony (Robert Smithson)*, 2018.

Di Matteo has long been interested in the representation of art history – for example *Reflecting Velazquez* (2010), his 1:1-scale mirror-image painting of *Las Meninas.* Painted in black and white, this is plainly *not* a remake of Velásquez's masterwork but of a photo in a cheaply printed art-history book, vastly enlarged. Painted in reverse, *Reflecting Velazquez* shows how the Spanish King and Queen, reflected in the back mirror, would actually have viewed the scene; in this sense Di Matteo's version is more 'real' than the original hanging in the Prado. A painting is a real thing, but a photograph in an art-history book, diminished to the corner of the page and compromised by the caption beneath it, is a representation. Or is it? The Smithson images in *Land Art from My Balcony* reinforce the 'real' existence of these earthworks principally as the printed documentation, reinforced by such details as the painted 'gutter' fold down the centre. For years, photographer Giorgio Gorgoni's 1970 sequence of photographs were the only available of *Spiral Jetty.* Although in theory Smithson's signature work is a giant sculpture in conversation with the gods, drawing together the distant sky, the flat horizon, and the murky lake bed below -- in practice Gorgoni's oft-reprinted (and pricey!) photos supplanted for decades the 'real' artwork, which now looks strange and 'unreal' in countless #spiraljetty Instagram selfies by 21st-century art-pilgrims. Always flexible with the truth, Di Matteo has subtly doctored the mythical double portrait of young Smithson and Serra: not only has the image been flipped, but Mount Vesuvius is seen miraculously emerging in the distance, from the Great Salt Lake.

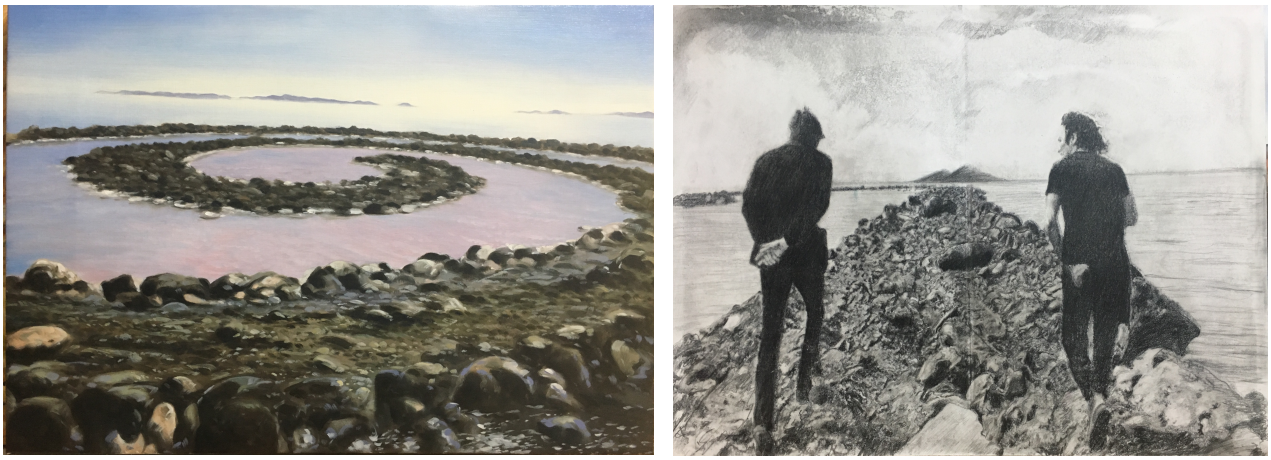
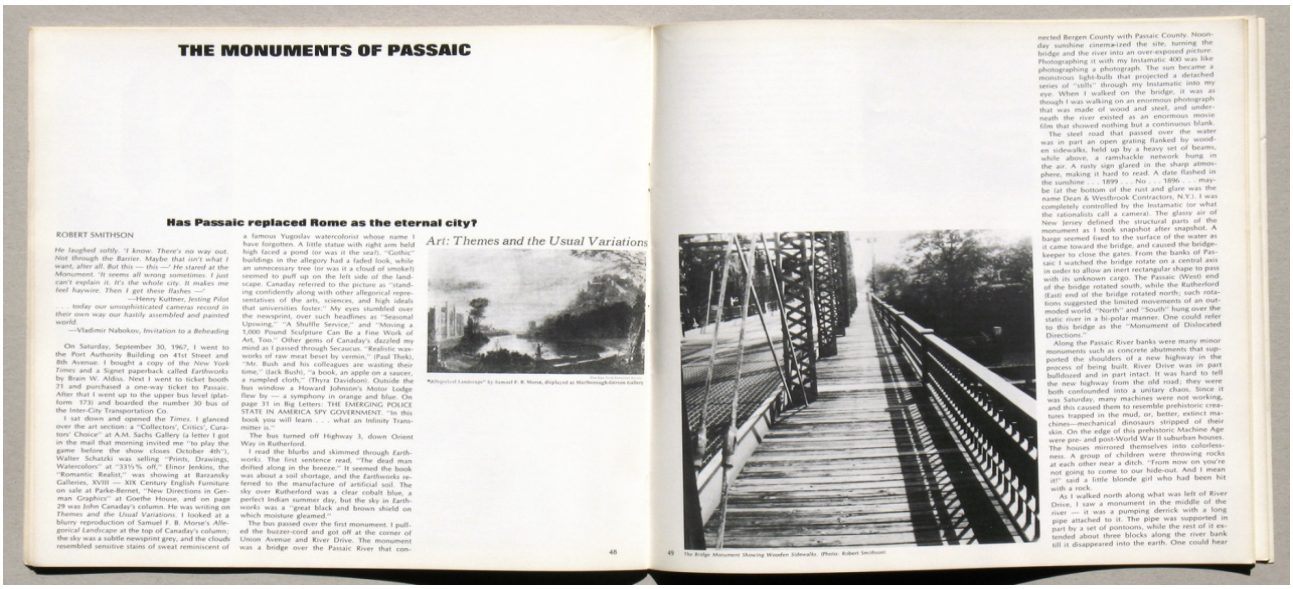


Fig. 4. Gabriele Di Matteo, *Land Art from My Balcony (Robert Smithson)*, 2018.

In 1967, at the age of 29, Robert took a bus from New York City to visit the industrial wasteland of Passaic, New Jersey, near where he was born. Just as he'd travelled to Rome six years earlier, the artist wanted to investigate the place for himself, pondering whether these muddy banks had supplanted the 'real'

eternal city. In his visual essay *The Monuments of Passaic* (1967), the artist opens with an image he'd spotted, printed in that day's *New York Times.* Entitled *Allegorical Landscape* (1836), this anaemic painting is by Samuel Morse, a painter idealizing the landscape in America around the time the Posillipo School was busy concocting theirs. Like Di Matteo, Smithson deliberately includes the caption printed beneath this picture, to underscore its nature as a reproduction. The image's inky, barely decipherable contours further remove the picture from whatever 'truth' rests within this painting – a 'truth' which, as Smithson point out,


THE MONUMENTS OF PASSAIC

Has Passaic replaced Rome as the eternal city?

ROBERT SMITHSON

Art: Themes and the Usual Variations

Fig. 5. Robert Smithson, opening spread from 'The Monuments of Passaic: Has Passaic replaced Rome as the eternal city?', ***Artforum*****, December 1967.** Note, in the newspaper cut-out on the l.h. page, the original caption has been included beneath the historical landscape painting.

was dubious from the start. Di Matteo similarly goes to great lengths to preserve printed captions, which seem to highlight each painting's status as a copy-of-a-copy. Meticulously painted, the simile-print of Di Matteo's captions is a mesmerizing detail, often absorbing our attention over the 'featured' picture above.

In 1973, at the age of 35, Robert Smithson was killed in a plane crash while surveying his planned *Amarillo Ramp*. The crash site is located just a few hundred yards from the hill, bringing a special mournful poignancy to DiMatteo's painting of the photo. Among Smithson's other unfinished projects was *Floating Island to Travel Around Manhattan Island, New York, NY*, 1970, which existed solely as a pencil drawing until it was realized in 2005; in *Land Art from My Balcony*, Di Matteo has repainted a photograph of this 21st century re-make. So which is the 'real' artwork? A visionary sketch by the artist? Or a three-dimensional artwork, posthumously created? Or perhaps DiMatteo's painting of a photograph of an artwork imagined

from a drawing? In the words of Hito Steyerl (who, perhaps, has taken Smithson's place today as our most gifted and imaginative artist/writer): ***'One could argue that this is not the real thing, but then—please, anybody—show me this real thing.'*** Is an unrecognisable, early religious painting in Smithson's own hand more or less a 'real' Smithson than his signature *Spiral Jetty*, constructed by earthmoving machines? Photography once seemed to hold some special purchase on the 'real', but this has long been thrown into doubt. Painting – with its slow-time fabrication and deliberateness – can seem a more authentic art object; and for some, still pining for the days of pre-Conceptualism, painting will always feel more like 'real art'.

Fig. 6. Three versions of *Floating Island to Travel Around Manhattan Island, New York NY.* Drawing by Robert Smithson, 1970; painting from *Land Art from My Balcony* by Gabriele Di Matteo, 2018; realization by Minetta Brooks/the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2005.

In 1969, at the age of 77, the Coca Cola company introduced a new slogan: *It's the real thing.* Around that time, bulldozers were preparing to shift 6650 tons of salt, basalt-rock, and mud to turn Smithson's impossible vision into 'reality'. The *Spiral Jetty* recently re-emerged from the Great Salt Lake, now entirely encased in salt crystal and brightly sparkling like some unreal diamond serpent, magically buried in the lake. Meanwhile, the Posilippo School's idealized depictions of the Bay of Sorrento have been updated by glamorous aerial postcard shots on Internet tourist sites – 'real' photos, if taken a safe distance from the

Fig. 7. Gabriele Di Matteo, *Land Art from My Balcony (School of Posillipo)*, 2018. Contemporary online view for tourists of the same bay (Sorrento), viewed from above.

actual streets of one of Europe's poorest cities (*not pictured!*). The question Di Matteo regularly and concisely asks is, in what limbo do images exist? And how, in particular, can we classify his artworks -- at once 'real' paintings, and 'copies'; 'fakes', yet 100% genuine paintings, genuine 'Di Matteos'? A mute reply is offered by the ghost of Smithson himself, whom Gabriele Di Matteo has roughly drawn in this chalk portrait: the American artist peering out from behind his aviator glasses, across the turpentine stains of a timeless, readymade, painted object: the painter's box.