

# Art in America

## SALVATORE SCARPITTA MARIANNE BOESKY

Why has Salvatore Scarpitta (1919-2007)—he of the bandaged canvases, strapped-up sleds and wryly decorated, often functional racing cars—been so overlooked in his native U.S.? Though better known in Italy, where he lived for nearly 20 years, the artist has sparked only periodic interest here, never to be sustained.

This excellent show, titled "Trajectory," contextualized the artist with an impressive array of his students, admirers and, perhaps most important, contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic. Having grown up in Hollywood, Scarpitta moved to Rome in 1936 to study art—an inauspicious time, to say the least. He served in the U.S. Navy as a translator, and helped repatriate looted art. Later, he shared a studio in Rome with Cy Twombly, then returned to the States in 1958, joining Castelli's stable.

Boesky showed some constructed canvases from the late '50s and early '60s—"bandaged" with strips of canvas, rubber tubes and belts—alongside works by coevals from the Italian milieu, Alberto Burri, Lucio Fontana and Piero Dorazio.

One wonders—viewing Scarpittas that mutely, eloquently, allude to trauma—what he must have experienced during the war. Among American works, there was a painting by de Kooning with a treatment of abstract composition not unlike Scarpitta's, and a solvent-transfer work by Rauschenberg (who also showed at Castelli) that reminded one of Scarpitta's similar tendency to mine the slippages between art and life. De Kooning owned the first of Scarpitta's materially inventive sleds: the totemic, wood-and-bandage *Sled Log* of 1973, which, notably, was also at Boesky. Beuys beat him to the sled, but Scarpitta's mythologizing tilted toward Dada: in *Lobster Sled* (1987), Scarpitta attached a shredded American flag, bringing to mind a scruffy, aging rocker.

In 1964, Scarpitta began tapping his lifelong obsession with race cars, creating his first full-scale model, *Rajo Jack Special* (not in the show), a motorless facsimile of a car he had admired as a boy. He followed up with others, entirely self-built, some fully functional—*Sal Cragar* (1969), for example, included at Boesky. In addition, blaring throughout the run of the show was the artist's manic rant from his video *Sal Is Racer* (1984). In it, he plays Sal, a hopped-up world-renowned racer, free-associating—with no small measure of mad humor—about the relationship between high-speed driving and art, and signing autographs for young, imaginary fans.

Given this performative streak, along with the suggestively fetishistic metal-and-fiberglass wall relief *Car Shell (Yellow)*, 1968, a nearby C-print from Matthew Barney's "Cremaster" series



View of Salvatore Scarpitta's exhibition, showing *Sal Cragar*, 1969, race car; at Marianne Boesky.

seemed apt: there are plenty of echoes of Scarpitta throughout Barney's work. Among Scarpitta's students, Nancy Rubins contributed a large, hanging graphite relief, in which one could read traces of Scarpitta's material grit and neo-Futurist dynamism.

Still, for the many affinities so happily drawn here, there is no doubt that Scarpitta's "trajectory" was quite unusual and may well have doomed him to the lot of splendid anomaly. In a collaged, *affichiste*-like self-portrait from 1966, we see his face above a race car, logos spinning around like the debris of some crash. Heir to Marinetti's "beauty of speed," Scarpitta was downright unfettered.

—Faye Hirsch