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OBITUARIES

Enrico Castellani, Artist in the Postwar Avant-Garde, Dies at 87

By ROBERTA SMITH DEC. 12, 2017

Enrico Castellani, an Italian artist who was a prominent member of Europe's postwar avant-garde, died on Dec. 1 at his home in Celleno, Italy, near Rome. He was 87.

A spokesman for Lévy Gorvy, the gallery that represents his work in New York and London, said the cause was complications of a respiratory illness.

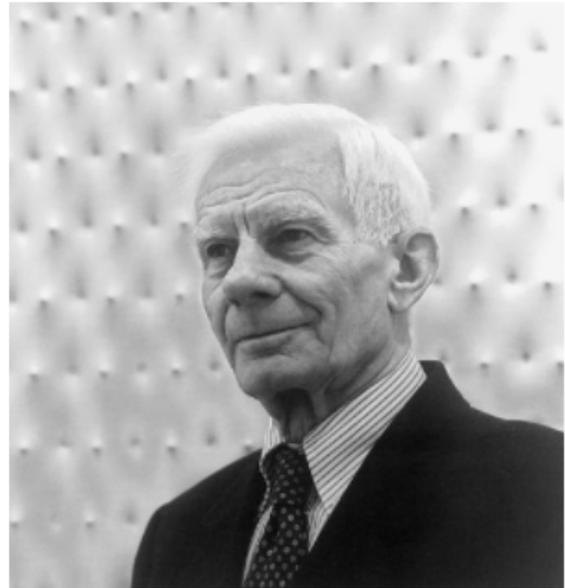
Mr. Castellani participated in the swirl of movements and self-proclaimed groups, some armed with manifestoes, that flourished on both sides of the Atlantic in the late 1950s and '60s. They included Group Zero in Germany and the Cobra group in Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, as well as the circle around Yves Klein in France and the Neo-Concrete artists in Brazil.

Many of these artists emphasized everyday materials and processes; most rejected the expression of subjectivity and emotion that prevailed in the gestural abstract painting and figurative sculpture that immediately followed World War II.

Mr. Castellani's art consisted of reliefs in the form of monochromatic canvases with row upon row of taut, protruding, tented points. He achieved this effect by hammering scores of carefully placed nails into elaborate wood supports, stretching the canvas over their protruding heads and then painting it, usually white but also silver, red or black.

What resulted remained true to painting's basic materials while turning its traditionally flat surface into a field of topographical undulations that, interacting with light, appear to change a great deal as the viewer moves around them.

Incorporating aspects of sculpture, furniture and architecture, these pieces resemble streamlined mattresses and also suggest scale models of vast modern buildings whose roofs involve some previously unknown engineering technology.



Enrico Castellani in 2011 next to one of his monochromatic reliefs consisting of tented points. Nando Lanfranco, courtesy of Fondazione Enrico Castellani

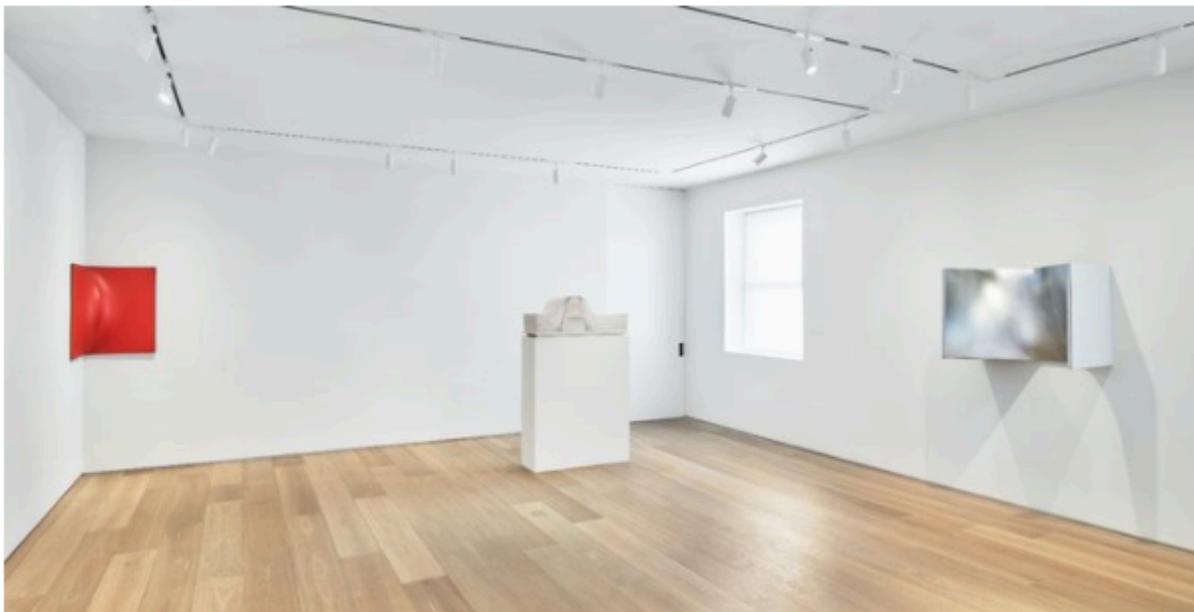
Especially when white, Mr. Castellani's reliefs, which have an alien, lunar air, were part of a widespread trend among younger artists to project painting out from the wall. His peers in those efforts included the American artists Lee Bontecou and Donald Judd and the German artist and Group Zero founder Günther Uecker, who also used nails to create raw, fetish-like surfaces.

Enrico Castellani was born on Aug. 4, 1930, in Castelmassa, in the Veneto region of Northern Italy. His father was an industrial technician.

Mr. Castellani said he knew he wanted to be a painter at a young age, although he earned a license as a building surveyor, which would prove to befit the precision of his later artistic work.

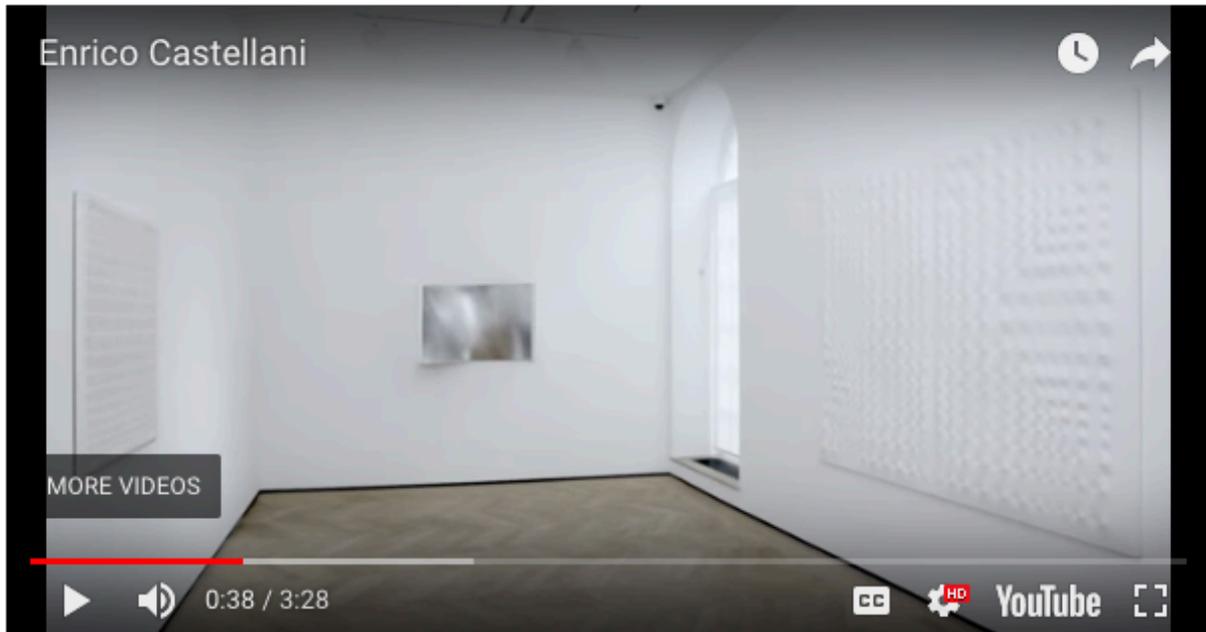
He went to Brussels in 1952 to study painting at the Académie des Beaux-Arts but soon decided that it was a waste of time and dropped out. With his knowledge of surveying, he enrolled in an architecture school there, earned a degree and found work with an architect in Milan, moving there in 1956. But he continued to paint in his spare time, drawing inspiration foremost from Jackson Pollock's drip paintings.

Mr. Castellani sought a way beyond gestural brushwork and painted motifs to what he called a "not painting" form of painting. He soon met Piero Manzoni, an avant-garde artist three years his junior, whose mercurial temperament was the opposite of Mr. Castellani's reserve.



An installation by Mr. Castellani at the Lévy Gorvy gallery in New York in 2016.

Courtesy of Lévy Gorvy and Tom Powel



Enrico Castellani Video by Lévy Gorvy

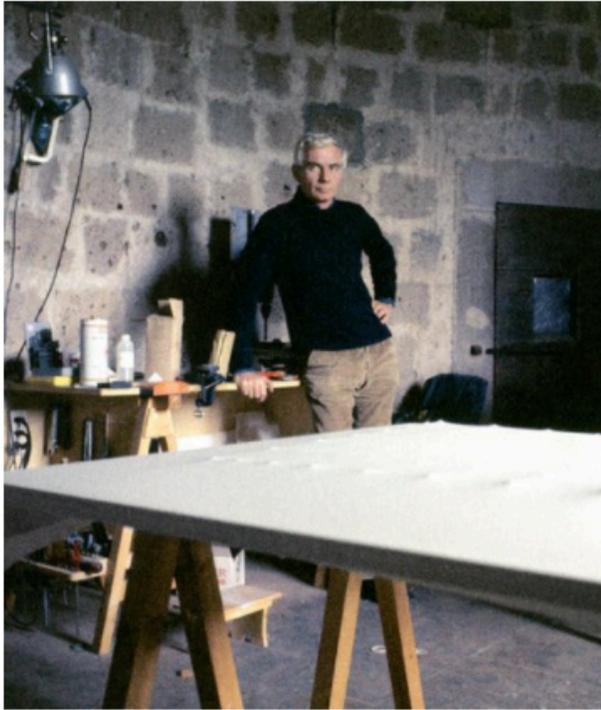
Manzoni was already making his own “not painting,” works he called white Achromes. These were white reliefs with surfaces made from familiar materials and objects (fabric, bread, cotton wool) covered in liquid kaolin, a white clay, which stiffened when dry.

Both artists would eventually join Group Zero. In September 1959 they established Galleria Azimut in Milan and an accompanying experimental magazine, Azimuth. Both gallery and publication featured an international roster of artists, and Azimuth, while short-lived (11 months and two issues), had a galvanizing effect on the Italian art world and beyond.

It was also in 1959 that Mr. Castellani hit on his own, relatively exquisite method of eliminating any sign of the artist’s hand. On his first attempt at a relief-like surface, he placed hazelnuts beneath the canvas. But he soon settled on nails.

He also created environmental works and made monochromatic paintings with smooth curving surfaces. But the canvas-and-nail reliefs remained his chief format.

He achieved great variety in his surface topographies by placing the nails in different patterns, hammering them to different heights or bending them, thus changing the surface significantly. He also hammered nails into the stretched canvas between the raised points, creating counterrhythms.



Mr. Castellani in his studio in Celleno, in central Italy, in the late 1970s.
Franco Pasti, courtesy of Fondazione Enrico Castellani

Mr. Castellani had his first solo show at the Galleria Azimut in 1960 and quickly began exhibiting in art capitals across Europe. He was included in “The Responsive Eye,” the Museum of Modern Art’s popular survey of Op Art in 1965, and had his first solo show in New York at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1966. He represented Italy at the Venice Biennales of 1964, 1966 and 1984.

Mr. Castellani’s career unfolded largely in Europe, but after the turn of the century, with growing interest in avant-gardes around the globe, he had solo shows in New York in 2009, 2011 and 2016.

His longtime companion, Renata Wirtz, died in 2016. He is survived by a son from that relationship, Lorenzo; a daughter, Francesca Castellani, from an earlier relationship; two grandchildren; and one great-granddaughter.

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