

MARCA-RELLI

PASTES A PAINTING

BY PARKER TYLER, PHOTOGRAPHS BY WALTER SILVER



The artist in his bare, spacious Long Island studio.

Talking to a painter about something that is an intimate, inward and, in one sense, inarticulate part of his being is necessary to the understanding of his movements as a maker of things. It has been said that the most ideal tribute which may be paid a work of art is silence. But what was meant by that, I believe, was silence before the finished work. Such a dogma is premature as well as tardy because life, every day, comes around again to words. Words can tell many things that otherwise might never become known or at least not until long after one wanted to know them. Painters come around again to relaxing and to talking about their own work.

Conrad Marca-Relli was enduring with a certain stoicism the ceremony of inquiry into his working habits and his conscious

creative hypotheses. The unambiguous "No" with which he answered my first three questions had been an excellent start, because the questions, asked of an abstractionist of the figure, might have compromised his purity, made the "game" rather too obvious, had he admitted—for example—to using a model, either for study or final work, or to restricting his warm tones to areas of flesh.

In fact, he also denied that his forms may be called "anatomic." One suddenly realizes, standing in the interior of his house at The Springs, East Hampton, Long Island, that its warm white walls, its ruddy or, blond woods, the ghosts of former upper floors and walls which had been removed for spatial effect, all appertain to his recent paintings, to their elusive yet pressing—and pressed—warmths.

About two years ago, the light-drenched walls of adobe houses in Mexico changed his whole artistic vision. It is strange how his work still retains its opacity, but "blinkingly," as though it were grasped under a noonday sky; at the same time, there is no trace of glare to it: it is adjusted to eyes that see in shade.

Marca-Relli pointed at a large painting, *Struggle*, leaning against a wall near his staircase. Its light tones were a deep suntan and seemed to suggest figures against a strong background. "In a way," he continued, "this is symbolic of all my work. Notice it has two figures rather than the one I've used previously. As I said, I don't mind my work's being put in the figure category, but every figure I deal with is subject to what I call its 'opposites,' with which it becomes fused. This fusion make a constant over-all play between 'negative' and 'postive.' A light area in the progress of a work may exchange places with a dark one, and so on."

He paused as for a while we looked together at the painting. "Everything is in motion until the final touch; everything is subject to modification by its neighbor until the very end."

Usually Marca-Relli's first step is to draw a laconic sketch on the canvas chosen for a major work or else paint an all-over black ground on it. But, as each single work passes through so many stages, neither of these beginnings is likely to be apparent in the final version.

Now he was suddenly prompted to go on. "Take an anatomic entity, the finger. . . A 'finger' in the configuration of my paintings is not just the finger of a hand, which in turn belongs to an arm, but a 'finger' of the total space of the work as it has come into being."

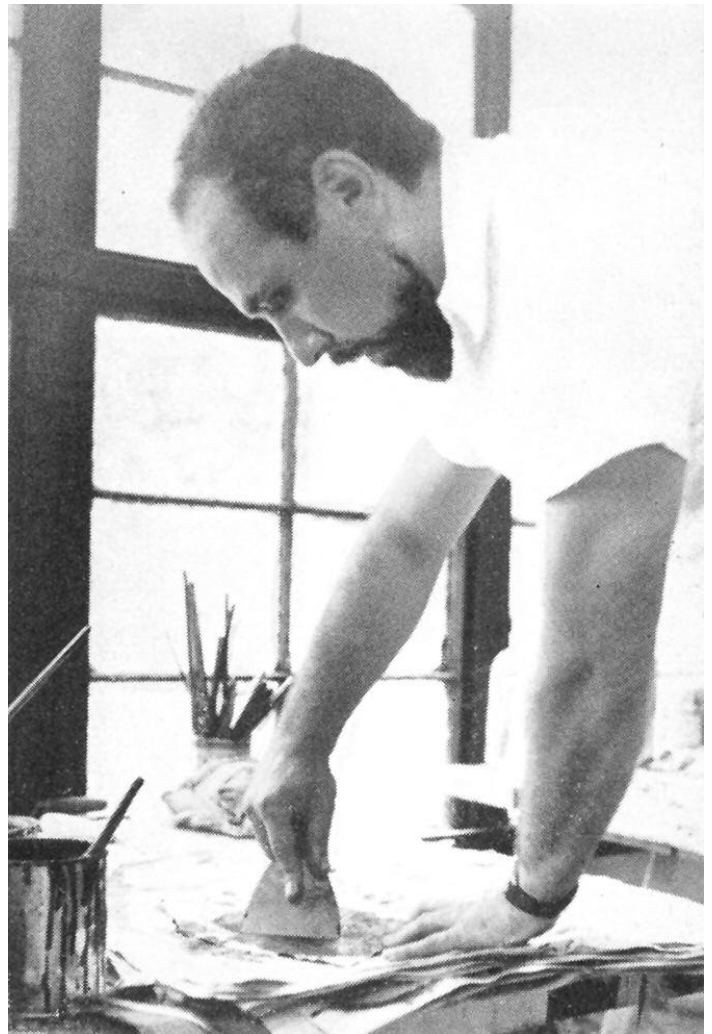
"You mean," I asked, "the finger is the painting's 'tenant' as well as the human body's 'tenant'?" Because the title of his, work-in-progress was *The Tenant*, he flashed a grin, set off by a meticulously trimmed black beard.

"I see," I observed, "why you think of your paintings as classical. The part is inseparable from the whole in more than a mechanical sense. You'd probably say that the figure inhabits the whole painting as the soul the living body."

He replied: "I accept literary and metaphysical interpretations, but I never mean to illustrate them." Naturally this was quite true: *they illustrate him*.

It was time to get back to that delicate anatomic operation of exposing his working method. As Marca-Relli led the way through the hot sunlight, he shrugged and remarked in a low tone as though it might be a heresy: "Not even a movie of every gesture made by a painter before a canvas would tell *everything!*" The building we had just left, completely transformed by its tenant's sensibility, was something ready-made he had acquired and rendered extraordinary, while what we were about to enter, his studio, situated a dozen yards back of his house, was where he performed the dialectic of his art. While Marca-Relli's, style has its kinship with several contemporary ones, its unique qualities open backward, of course, upon correspondingly unique procedures.

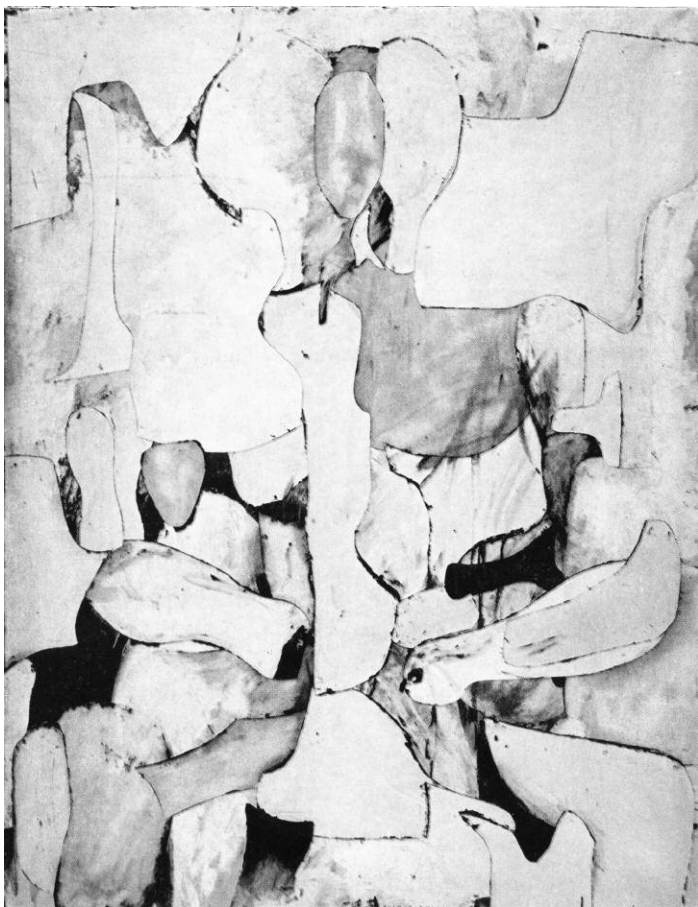
Since the previous day *The Tenant* had been transformed. The term "configuration" rather than "figure" is to be accepted for Marca-Relli's art because of the fact that, in the interchange between figure and surrounding space which he had designated as a struggle, even an "onslaught" by space, the painting invades and overspreads the figure as reciprocally the figure invades and overspreads the painting. Marca-Relli's clear-cut aim is to avoid the sense of the body's dispersal in this negative-and-positive interchange; or rather, he doesn't think of analysis, but of building and rebuilding with forms that do not begin as anatomy but as shapes of light and dark.



Spread out evenly with a spatula, this glue-like pigment helps fix the patch to the work's surface and, oozing out around the edges, suggests and accentuates the forms.

As he copies neither living nor artificial models, at any time, he cannot conceive of the given rounded anatomic body turned into chiaroscuro by a given light or lights falling upon it. The meeting of his darks and lights is not such a meeting and nothing which a photograph of nature would be likely to verify. What he thoroughly and effectually shuns is the anatomic deformation and break-up practiced by Surrealist painters, who adopted the representational canon deliberately and ingeniously to derange and fragment it. "Mine is a different world," he said.

This world holds the secret of his poised ample figures, his procreative configurations, and one part of the secret,



The Tenant, 1955. Everywhere in the finished work, background overlaps figure, form overlaps form—as actual canvas flaps overlie areas of scraped and oozing paint, in a constant process of mutation. 72 inches high; Stable Gallery.

perhaps, is the magic of the Osiris myth: the dismemberment and living reconstitution of gods. While the actual physical body is never implied by Marca-Relli's art (maybe *because* it is never implied), the immaterial bodies of gods might suffice for the visible anatomic element. At least, this artist "dismembers" only by analogy. What he dismembers is the "body" of the work in progress, which then may appear to him as—dead.

This is what had happened to *The Tenant*. "Its meaning escaped," he explained. "I had to bring it back." He further explained that this was a common emergency; not even an emergency, virtually a routine. Lying near us was a series of the studies in watercolor and small collages, which had functioned in leading to the moment when he was moved to begin a major work. Only as these studies may be placed in an

order of growing complexity may *The Tenant* be said to have any preliminary studies.

As if to demonstrate how fluid is the metamorphosis he is used to coping with, he removed a piece of raw canvas lately pinned to the surface. As a rule, he uses three ordinary pins experimentally to fix a blond piece of canvas, which has been given its shape by a razor blade or knife.

As always, Marca-Relli had gone through the procedure of cutting out pieces of canvas, painting one side with a black paint-mixture applied by brush, and pressing the pieces upon the surface of the work (always hanging on the wall) where they stuck. The black paint oozes out beyond the edges and makes the characteristic black outlines visible in the final work. Not that such a line is permanent: he may paint and/or paste over a given area as many as twenty times.

Even in the mixture of paint, Marca-Relli sustains the esthetic impulses of his original style. He works with various blends of white lead, glue base, varnish, Venetian turpentine (an extra-heavy type), linseed oil and oil paints. There is no set combination of any of these. Of whatever color—black, white, red—they simply vary from heavy to less heavy; the heaviest mixtures require a wide spatula for application rather than a brush. Though direct color-accent sometimes appear, black receives the burden of carrying Marca-Relli's darks—both in their negative state, when they form the oozing back-paint which has seeped through, and in their positive state, when they face out.

The blends of paint and the ways of applying them are likewise subject to the subtle veerings of the artist's dialectic method: his play of "negative" and "positive."

If Marca-Relli "draws," he does so only with a razor blade—or occasionally a knife. One might ask if the paint seeping through to the face of the pasted piece and forming texture and tone (often, if black, a bluish or cool tone) may be called "painting." It may be indirect painting but it is painting nevertheless, as the resultant silhouette of the individual pasted piece, moreover, may be called reinforced drawing.

Marca-Relli disclaims even a single established sequence amid his complex procedure. It all depends on impulse, on the

emergent necessity. "A certain sequence of method," he declared, "works one time that will not work the next. I never know why. I myself am surprised. . . So I must alter it. During the course of a week," he went on, "I may suddenly find that the figure—or rather my sense of it—is lost. It is all too abstract, it has yielded too much to spatial pressures. So I have to reorient myself; I have to salvage the figure. Then I go back to the an atomic sense. . . In the end, there is a balance between space and figure."

An example of this was in *The Tenant's* current phase and the figure in it loomed out as though, like Vishnu, it was expanding itself into worlds, filling space with substance.

"Sometimes," said Marca-Relli, eyeing his canvas, "this dialectic takes the form of separate studies: a specific 'figure' orientation sets off a specific 'abstract' orientation, or vice versa."

I mentioned the "balance" he had just cited. "Isn't it also a balance in terms of impasto—of the projecting and recessive surface, illusory or real?"

"There, too," the painter said, "is a case of positive acting against negative. Remember I always start with a simple canvas surface. Yet, as I said, I never conceive of it as the traditional 'hole in space,' the 'window,' in which the illusion of three-dimensional objects appear. Most often, I start with the picture plane and work *forward*, that is, toward *this* side. But as I go on I may find myself, with a collation of blacks, working *backward*, into it.

The Tenant was very near its completion. Only yesterday, and the day before, it had rested uncertainly.

The surfaces of these collage paintings—canvas on canvas toned like a chameleon, casual furrow, impasto of silhouetting ooze—seem as fluid, in the variation between, high point and low point in their relief, as the rise and fall of the chest, in breathing. The sense of the nude, in the pinkish or creamy (or daringly dead-grey) tones, renders the canvas weave as a collection of "pores." A certain part of *The Tenant* seems, as casually scored, as suggestive in texture, as an adult's thigh.

Marca-Relli was pursing his lips in judicious thought while looking at his work in the light of such reflections. From beyond his studio's specially constructed screen-door, heat and light poured in. The pleasantly informal grounds held

masses of wild sweet-peas, purple-pink in hue, that shimmered abstractly in the intense sunshine.

Handling his spatula playfully for a moment, the painter dropped it decisively and sat down. He was cool and collected when faced, by the mystery of the human body as a thing translated into terms of art. Was he considering how, as he had said, he had turned from one figure to, two, and called the painting *Struggle*? Obviously *Struggle* is an encounter between lovers. But his own term for what I had thought a forearm in *The Tenant* was . . . "the expectation of a forearm."

Perhaps even representational artists, in the throes of work, forget that what they may be working on is a "forearm" or a "head." It exists only in a kind of "expectation." The sense—or the sensation—of being immersed in the design, striving to control it: this is the love felt by every artist. His human subject or theme, the source in nature, is lost sight of and he sees and feels only the special senses of the *métier*. Marca-Relli had felt involved in a definite sort of motion, a motion having the illusion of being perpetual . . . The fact that it had come to rest—in the form of *The Tenant*—perhaps surprised him a bit. Doubtless he was already thinking of his next project.