

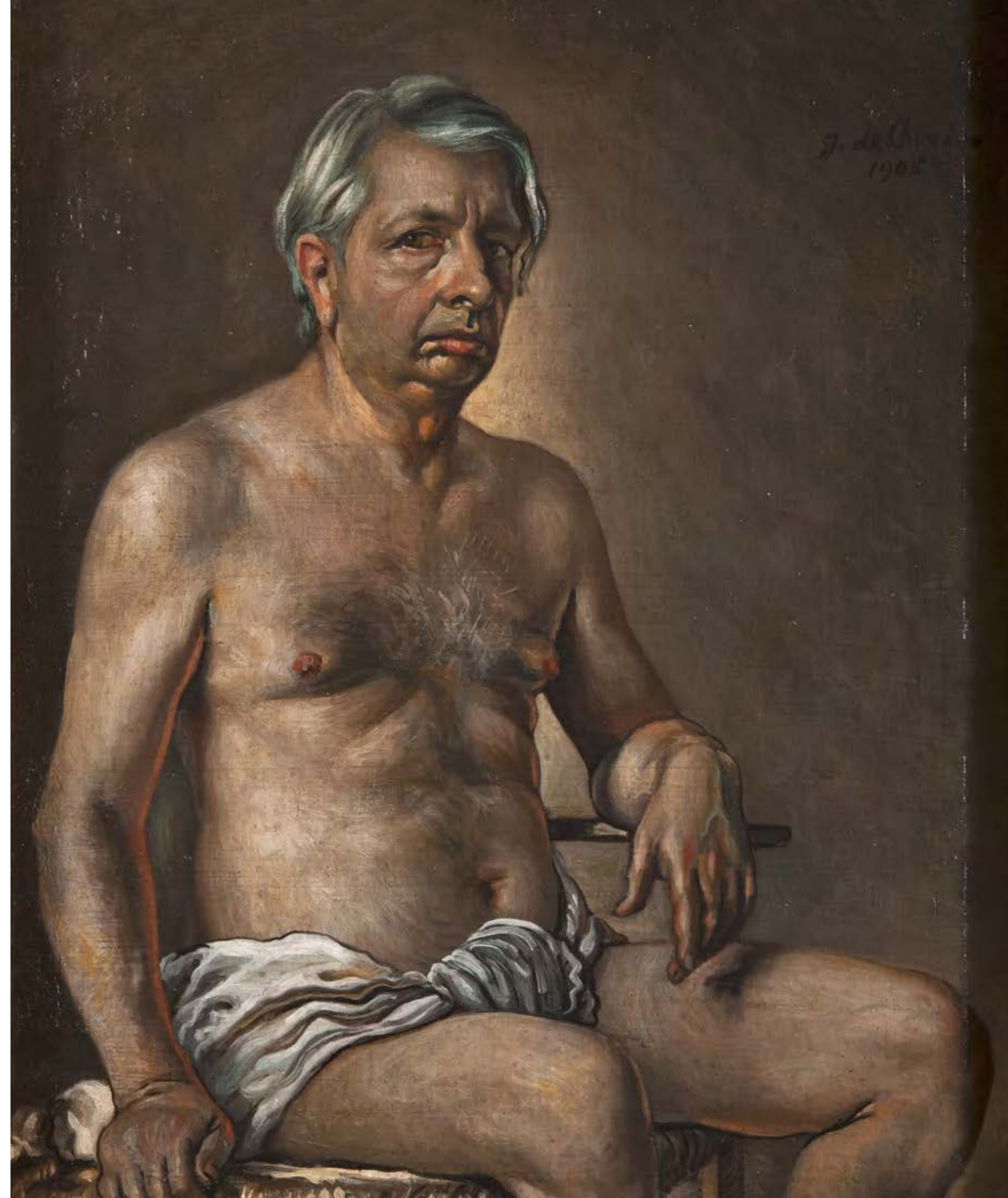
THE ORIGINAL

DE

POSTMODERNIST

CHIRICO

Words
DAVID SALLE



Empty piazzas bathed in gold light, solitary figures casting protracted shadows, a bunch of bananas the size of a house: welcome to GIORGIO DE CHIRICO's metaphysical theater. Yet today, it's not these modern classics that resonate, but the stylistic promiscuity of his later work. Why should an artist be just one thing? *David Salle* investigates

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reat art is always unanticipated. Once seen, it feels inevitable. In the early years of the last century—from 1911 until a change of heart in 1918—de Chirico created some of the most unexpected images in the history of Western art. His first mature paintings, all made before his 30th birthday, arrived with the authority of something preordained, and they still have the power to stun. His work influenced generations of artists, both visual and literary. Think of André Breton and the surrealists, photographers Paul Outerbridge and William Eggleston, and

cinematographer Vittorio Storaro. De Chirico's way of giving form to complex, multilayered emotions has become part of our collective memory. But there is another de Chirico as well, or perhaps better, several others, as in his long life the painter commandeered a broad range of historical inflections to construct one of the most fluid pictorial identities of the last 100 years. If his early, savant-like paintings are inarguable masterpieces, his work from the 1920s onward is by turns nostalgic, wishful, maddeningly elusive, hilarious, campy, gorgeous, and poignant. Some of the 1920s paintings have the elegiac spirit of Rilke, while others from the 1940s are closer to the Marx Brothers. The relationship between de Chirico's early pictorial purity and his later stylistic promiscuity, and the question of the later work's relative quality, not to mention just what the hell it means, has been contested ground for decades. Some art historians have sought to enforce a strict before-and-after schism in the master's production, while other younger voices have wanted to make his untamable spirit a precursor of more liberated things to come.

From today's perspective, de Chirico can be celebrated as the first postmodernist, or he can appear as someone courting obscurantism, deliberately cultivating a hermetic insularity. Or both. His paintings seem to ask: why should an artist be just one thing? De Chirico tried on many hats, not a few of which were adorned with fancy buckles and plumes. Do clothes make the man? If the style in which an artist paints speaks directly to their character and inner life, then just who was he, and how did he see himself? In our current era, one in which "style" and its relationship to identity is being interrogated, it is this lesser-known de Chirico, the champion style devourer and pictorial inventor, that seems especially relevant.

Giorgio de Chirico was born in 1888 in Greece to a Sicilian aristocrat father and a noble mother of Genoese origin. His father was the chief designer of the Thessaly Railways. A brother, Andrea, was born four years later and showed early promise as a composer (to distinguish himself from his famous sibling, he would take on the name Alberto Savinio). Excessively bright and studious, both boys were home-schooled by their mother, reading Nietzsche in their early teens, in French—it was that kind of family.

When Giorgio was 15, his mother decided to move with the children to Munich so that he could study at the Academy of Fine Arts, and his younger brother with composer Max Reger. There, the precocious duo encountered the paintings of 19th-century Swiss symbolist Arnold Böcklin. Not since the time of Bruegel had an artist depicted so many fantastical beings and such unnatural goings-on with such realistic aplomb. At the academy, de Chirico acquired the classical technique to anchor his own visions in a convincing-enough but still fresh-looking realism. It's doubtful, however, that this training accounts for his dynamic sense of composition and spatial organization. From the consistent presence of



THE ANGUISHED MORNING, 1912
Oil on canvas, 81 × 65 cm

First spread: NUDE SELF-PORTRAIT, 1943
Oil on canvas, 62 × 51 cm

drafting tools and units of geometrical measure in his work, we might assume that the young artist absorbed from his architect father a feeling for the plasticity of pictorial space as well as a sense of the monumental.

In 1911, Giorgio joined his brother in Paris and began to paint dreamy landscapes with allegorical overtones. Then came the war. The brothers served in the Italian army (partly to get Italian passports), and later de Chirico was treated for a nervous disorder at a hospital in Ferrara, where he met a patient suffering from shellshock, Carlo Carrà, the past and future Futurist. It was while convalescing in this city of Renaissance promenades that the two men came up with the concept and name for a new kind of art that would reflect their philosophical turn of mind and the glories of an imagined classical past: metaphysical painting. Their discussions evidently flipped a switch in de Chirico's psyche; he went from a tepid, dreamy realist to a protean stager of psychologically charged tableaux in one great leap.

The painter had his first show in 1918 at the Paul Guillaume Gallery in Paris. Paintings of empty sun-struck piazzas bordered by receding planes of colonnaded archways, richly ochred and deeply shadowed, the ground plains alarmingly canted like the raked stage of a baroque opera, are marked by the abiding melancholy of adolescence. The charged spaces may be occupied by a monumental mannequin casting an improbable shadow, an enormous red smokestack rising out of the agricultural plane, or a cannon with artichokes for ammunition—all are emblems of foreboding and existential alarm that seem to be frozen in time. De Chirico's lonely, stately pageantry pierces the heart.

The originality of de Chirico's work was immediately acknowledged by the new generation of artists and critics. Aside from the sheer thrill of his imagery and the audacity of his compositions, what sets his work apart are its saturated colors, orchestrated into major-key harmonies, and the way that he utilized and exaggerated the harsh contrasts of the Mediterranean light. Never before had antiquity looked so modern, nor modernity been so rooted in a deeply shadowed past. More than any other 20th-century painter, with the possible exception of Picasso, de Chirico was in an active dialog with history. He was a romantic who channeled a potent and lurid dream of classicism into a newfound modernity.

The means de Chirico used to construct his theatrical scenes—deep space and forced perspective, and the staging and massing of forms—combine compositional ideas from various classical masters (from Fra Angelico and Mantegna to El Greco and Titian) with images from his youth: the rocky landscape of Greece, the railroad his father designed, the romanticism of 19th-century German Symbolist painting, and the arcades of Ferrara, as well as something borrowed from science fiction.

Though constructed from concrete images and fragments of actual places, with prosaic elements like food and pots, de Chirico's paintings are pictures of feelings, states of mind, and autobiographical clues. They have an unusually tenacious emotional weather, a sense of being trapped. He brings us to this state of high suspense using only the art itself—the carefully calibrated relationships of scale, color, placement, light and shadow, and so forth.

If de Chirico hadn't been a painter, he could easily have been the greatest set designer of his day. His sense of staging, that is, of composition and of value pattern—the arrangements of dark and light shapes—is surpassingly brilliant. The surfaces of his paintings are specific and local, their short choppy brushstrokes part of the narrative drama. The emotional urgency contained within his imagery is telegraphed by the sophisticated use of black outlining, for which he uses a different, more fluid brushstroke. Every element in his paintings is in sync with the pictorial concept. The black outline, sometimes quite pronounced, other times just a whisper, makes his images more graphic and assertive, and also, in a seeming paradox, less precious. This is not academic realism. His images are assembled, staged, lit, and painted for immediate dramatic effect. We absorb them instantly, like a drug. Though infinitely deeper in terms of psychology, some of these early paintings have the directness of billboards, and their complex narrative relationships can be taken in all at once. More than 100 years after they were painted, his images speak at the speed of today's visual language.

Among his more radical pictorial inventions is a very stylish version of the trompe-l'œil convention of the signboard, in which the painting surface is aligned with that of an advertisement, store display, or candy box. It is a painting game that has engaged artists from Mantegna to Lichtenstein. In works like *Greetings From a Distant Friend* and *The Gentle Afternoon*, both from 1916, de Chirico paints collections of objects, such as pastries or rectangular, ridged biscotti, along with perspective-destabilizing geometric forms, or something that looks like a giant eye on a piece of paper, one corner of which has been turned down. The cookies are presented as if affixed to a velvet panel and framed, like the kind of thing one sees at a Museo della pasta that beckons tourists. Like many of de Chirico's pictures, this is a painting about presentation, and also about categories, either adhered to or subverted. It mimics the shop-sign genre of painting that was common in the 18th century, but in lieu of a sign, we are given a fetishized display object.

Although he avails himself of different pictorial conventions (no "painting as window" for him), the artist closest in spirit to these curious signboard pictures is Jasper Johns, who also establishes a reciprocity between paint surface and object, and who uses trompe-l'œil to map remembered experiences as



GREETINGS FROM A DISTANT FRIEND, 1916
Oil on canvas, 48 × 37 cm

Below: THE LOBSTER
(STILL LIFE WITH LOBSTER AND PLASTER CAST), 1922
Oil on canvas, 77 × 99 cm



a fragmented composition. De Chirico pushes these sign-like constructions close to the picture plane, where they take on a monumental, oracular significance. I find these paintings to be satisfyingly perverse as well as forward-looking. They seem to be about something that was desired in childhood—his *madeleine* perhaps—or about the absurdity of fetishized desire generally; something made enormous and alluring but, on closer examination, worthless; just a picture.

The feverish intensity and efficient delivery system of 1910s de Chirico was short-lived. From the beginning of the 1920s until the end of his long life, he alternated between neoclassical genre scenes, still-life painting (both straightforward or full of wildly improbable juxtapositions), allegorical narratives, self-portraits of rustic or grandiose camp, and intricately constructed compositions that resemble board games or scavenger hunt maps. What appeared as a regression, or as a retreat from the blazing force of the early pictures, was a life-long pursuit of originality that communed with spirits of the pictorial past. One year saw white horses cavorting on the beach, another year ushered in pictures of men in tweed suits rowing little boats around a maze of bathing pavilions. De Chirico's manner of painting also shifted radically, then shifted again and yet again as he explored the way existing styles could be taken up and inhabited almost as a kind of camouflage—much the way certain mollusks will take up residence in a vacant shell.

If de Chirico hadn't been a painter, he could easily have been the greatest set designer of his day

Having given the world these iconic lamentations of loneliness and longing that ignited the whole surrealist movement, de Chirico progressed to another way of working altogether, one that was more private and interior, as well as even more literary, historical, and idiosyncratic. He spent the rest of his life seeing what kind of pictures could be constructed out of an active disregard for spatial logic or stylistic consistency. Hailed in his youth as an innovator, a sensibility maker, a public artist channeling his dream imagery into paintings of high drama and legibility, he would subsequently morph into a more ruminative painter, quietly mining, if not exploding, some unlikely pictorial conventions. The audience did not always follow, nor were they meant to. Over a very long career, de Chirico would never again galvanize the viewing public as he had in his 20s. His was not to be an art of easy take-aways,

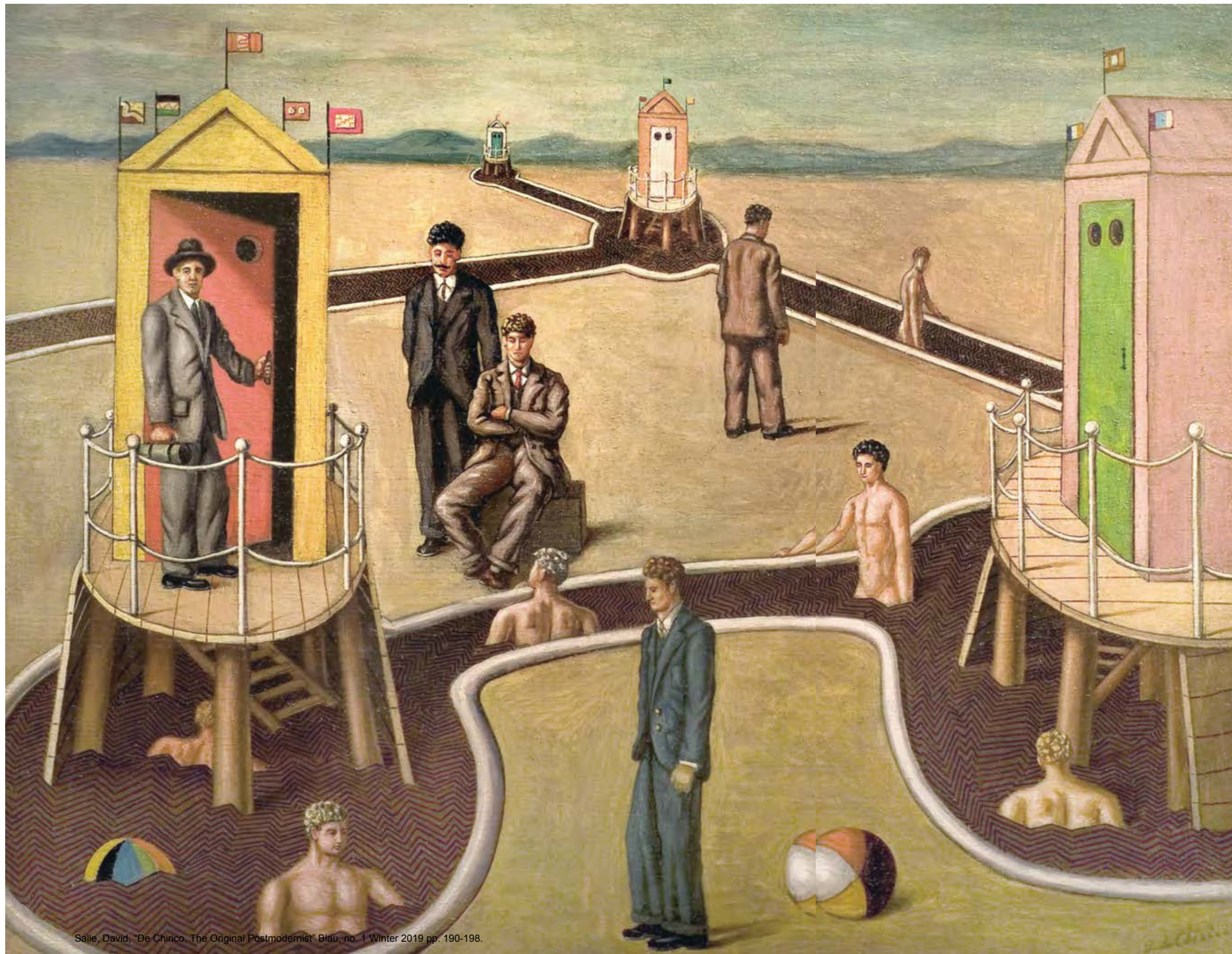
and the fact that his late work is now being recognized is good news, a possible antidote to our present fixation on the reductive, the Instagrammable.

The first sign that the art world had changed in its relationship to realism came in 1981. That year the curator Kasper König staged *Westkunst*, a giant exhibition in Cologne with the modest goal of reimagining the narrative of modern art. New constellations were being drawn across the firmament, and the reassessment of late de Chirico was part of the agenda. Other modern masters were also shown to be much more perverse and promiscuous than had been thought. Next to late de Chirico, König highlighted perennial modernist outlier Francis Picabia, whose figurative paintings from the 1940s had at that point hardly ever been seen, and a group of marginalized paintings René Magritte made at the end of the 1920s: almost alarmingly loose, garish, and very unbourgeois paintings that had been dubbed "vache," as in "cow," as in "dumb as a..." That was the new constellation, the new canon.

These revisionist rumblings evidently irritated MoMA curator William Rubin, a man known for being easily provoked. In 1982, a de Chirico survey was the last major exhibition that the imperious curator created during his eventful tenure at MoMA, and Rubin saw no reason to extend an olive branch to the younger critics and curators who even then were eager to embrace de Chirico's later work as a harbinger of postmodernity. A strict by-the-book modernist, Rubin would establish de Chirico's links to cubism and futurism, and make him the main exit on the road to surrealism, but as for all the late messing around with kitsch styles, that was just not part of the story he wanted to tell. Rubin's show was almost exclusively composed of works made between the fateful years of 1911 and 1917, and it ended with just a few paintings from the mid- and late 1920s. Considering that de Chirico lived until 1978, painting away in his studio at the base of Rome's Spanish Steps, taking his daily coffee at the nearby Café Greco, that's 50 years of an artist's life ignored.

It has taken close to 40 years for the museum world to make amends. Finally, an ambitious exhibition currently at Milan's Palazzo Reale wants to reclaim de Chirico's work after 1918 from its outlier status, and to place it on a continuum with his whole career, in terms of both style and quality. This time around, curator Luca Massimo Barbero wants to show that it is really the later work that excites our contemporary sensibility and extends our sense of the possible. And since we acknowledge the underlying fluidity of identity itself, de Chirico, in all his many guises and poses, is once again a person of interest.

The exhibition makes clear that de Chirico was an era-straddler from the beginning. He blended several centuries of techniques—quattrocento fresco, cinquecento panel



painting, the early mannerism of El Greco, 19th-century Art Nouveau, and 20th-century billboard and advertising art—to arrive at a look that was both antique and up-to-date. He was a great manipulator of scale. In his first decade of painting, his figures are either tiny, in the far distance, or looming right in front of us, touching both the top and bottom edges of the canvas, like a cinematic close-up. He was also expert at girding his compositions with an ironclad understructure of light and dark shapes. The ramped-up value contrasts and the hardened surfaces of his pictures have something in common with both the chiaroscuro of Masaccio and the jauntiness of the neo-classical Picasso or Léger, though de Chirico largely lacks their School of Paris levity.

From the 1920s onward, with his groundbreaking work behind him, de Chirico was sustained by a fantasy of inserting himself into a nobler past, one taken even more directly from mythology and a lofty ideal about what paintings—and painters—represent. Somewhat ironically, in his longing for a classical past, a few of de Chirico's ideas are to be found the playbook of the postmodernists—the imposture and ventriloquism, the painting as game board or chess match, and the reliance on costuming and other visual tropes, as well as literary and mythological references. It's all great fun and, if you're a painter, he left us a lot of ideas to work with. But some of the later pictures lack a feeling of consequential, necessary action. It is possible that, having started off his career with such a strong sense of the inevitability of his vision, he assumed it would always be there for him. It's also possible that he never noticed nor particularly cared when it no longer was.

After 1920, de Chirico's paintings lose most of their hard edges and black outlines. He turned to traditional still-life set-ups: fish or lobsters on a white tablecloth, a violin on a wooden table, and almost always present, just as one sees in paintings from the past, is a talismanic bust from antiquity or mythology—Apollo, Homer, and Dante all make frequent appearances—suggesting the irrevocable loss of something precious, definitive.

In the late 1920s, de Chirico began a series of paintings of gladiators—eight are in the exhibition—and they mark the beginning of when things started to get really weird. Groups of naked, or barely draped men, all with tightly curled hair, or sporting face-covering helmets, are seen in both combat and repose. The knotted clusters of battling bodies, as if staged by a fight choreographer who has smoked a lot of weed, are mostly seen in the same constricted interior spaces with backgrounds of columns and drapery. Occasionally the long-limbed youths are permitted to play outdoors, but it's the interior poses that have the deliciousness of arty Italian design, reminiscent of early-1990s Versace campaigns. What is most curious about the

pictures is the way the Gumby-like men are painted fairly roughly, each figure in just two colors. The lights and darks defining the muscles are scumbled in a way that recalls frescos, and the colors vary from figure to figure. The clumping group of figures, sort of comically smushed together into a mound of bodies, points in the direction of Philip Guston, with his pileups of legs shod with extra-large shoes. In fact, there is a meandering line from de Chirico to Guston's later work. The alternation between self-regarding grandiosity and self-debasement (certainly more debasement where Guston is concerned); the use of still life in its original allegorical sense—a life summed up by the stuff on the table or the floor, a suffocating interiority, even when painting outdoor scenes, and the deliberately ham-handed use of black to delineate shadows and to provide emphasis: these are all things the two painters have in common.

The masterpiece in this series is *Gladiators at Rest*, from 1928–29. Five buff men with large torsos and small heads topped with dark poodle-y hair, their faces distorted and shrunken, like tennis balls with noses, are standing in a group. One figure is naked, with his back toward us, and two have cloth draped around the hips. One man stands behind the others, mostly hidden—we can see his face and arms. The central figure gazes past us, his head tilted down, the expression on his face one of interiority. It is a kind of a post-game recap painting; they have survived the challenge, made it through once more. All of the figures are placed so that their curly heads almost reach the very top edge of the picture, giving the painting a sense of compression; these giants of combat, though motionless and looking enervated, can barely be contained by the frame. The fascinating and hard-to-articulate part is just how constructed this scene is, and how de Chirico follows the rules of representational painting, but only just, and only when it suits him. He doesn't seem to be interested in distortion for its own sake—the tennis-ball heads with twisted, smushed-up features, and the elongated torsos. Rather, he does it in a matter-of-fact way, neither outrageously, the way Picasso might, nor heroically, like Marsden Hartley. De Chirico seems to be listening to the brush itself, following its meanders, its ever-changing degrees of urgency and pressure. This impression is of course an illusion, as it is de Chirico's own hand that is guiding the brush. This sense of auto-painting—a feeling of someone following the whims of an off-stage director—features in almost all of the late work, and I think it is a large part of what makes it so confounding as well as compelling.

How do you maintain the hostility and immediacy of youth throughout life? What exactly are the means by which an artist stays radical? Is it intent? Personality? Aesthetic inclination or happy accident? Willful disregard for fashion or skewed misreading? And where do we see it in the work? How do we

know that what we are being offered is not tainted by a con, by a theatricality with a kernel of bad faith at its heart? Who is that peering at us from behind the curtain?

Self-Portrait in a Bullfighter's Costume (1941–42) is one several overtly confrontational paintings in the show. A portly double-chinned Giorgio is poured into a tight-fitting red brocade jacket covered in gold braid, epaulettes—the works. A skinny red tie and the most preposterous black matador's hat balances awkwardly on the maestro's artfully side-swept silver bangs. This painting is so frontally, aggressively kitsch it makes Francis Picabia, who painted his share of bullfight scenes, seem like Fra Angelico. Yet where Picabia's perversity is ice cold, daring you to raise an objection to his transgressions of taste, de Chirico's is generally warm and also seems to want to be loved. The pose's faltering, emphatically projected self-confidence, the over-emphasis on the shadows cast by the elaborate gold braid, the goopy, swirly gray-blue of the sky behind our hero—he seems to be daring us to find him ridiculous. In terms of the patent absurdity of the pictorial conception, even an artist as perverse as John Currin, working in his most academic manqué mode, seems expected in comparison.

How good are the later pictures? Maybe the answer doesn't matter; all a painting has to do is be interesting. But what is the relationship between interesting and satisfying? Do you have to give up something to get something else in return? There really seems to be no free lunch to be had in the universe. Perhaps, in a cosmic souk that puts a valuation on aesthetic ideas and facilitates their exchange, the cost of a postmodern imagination is a loss of gravitas. "You can enjoy all these freedoms," says the cosmic arbiter. "You can put anything with any other thing you can think of; you can work in any manner or style, throw consistency to the wind; you can meta out until the wee hours, or until everything, every reference and pictorial conceit is part of one big, fluid, mythological bouillabaisse—but it will come at a price."

De Chirico is part of a small anti-pantheon of modernist originators who, in whole or part, either all at once or intermittently, or in stages, turned their backs on what the theory-heads like to call the modernist project. The group is larger than one might think, depending on how you look at it, at times encompassing minor armies of contemporary artists, but its core members, apart from de Chirico, are André Derain, Francis Picabia, and shapeshifter-in-chief Pablo Picasso. All four artists helped birth the most advanced styles of the early 20th century, and all either actively repudiated the hothouse flowers of their early years, got bored with the expectations placed on them by history, or simply had other fish to fry. In the case of Derain and de Chirico, and to a lesser extent Picasso, the return to classicism, as it was known, was part of a wider phenomenon resulting from a massive disillusionment following the trauma of WWI. If this is what modernism

His long career saw the maestro sampling styles like a drunken guest lurching around the buffet table



GLADIATORS AT REST, 1928–29
Oil on canvas, 159 × 199 cm

Previous spread: THE MYSTERIOUS BATHS, 1934
Oil on canvas, 80 × 100 cm

wrought, so the thinking went, let us go back to an aesthetic that embraced permanence, precedent, and eternal, often religious, values.

In a long career which saw the maestro sampling styles like a drunken guest lurching around the buffet table, there is one group of paintings from the mid-1930s, collectively dubbed *The Mysterious Baths*, that tests our ability to suspend disbelief along with the narrative capability of visual art in general. Six of these paintings are in the exhibition—and they are doozies. The basic scheme is a raw sienna-colored ground plain that stretches up to the high horizon line. Narrow waterways are incised into it which, at certain points, widen out to become circular pools. Rising out of these plunge pools that dot the brown waterways are elevated wooden platforms that support bathing huts, which are in turn encircled by stanchions and rope. De Chirico chose to render the water in this hydraulic system as a brown-and-black herringbone pattern. Alongside the narrow channels, men in baggy suits either stand or walk, or row themselves downstream in little boats. The channels and pools themselves are occupied by faceless male bathers standing chest-high in the brown water, their heads coiffed in a tight cap of curls. The paintings are a men-only preserve and seem to reverse the gender sign on the famous 1920s bathing-hut paintings that Picasso produced at Dinard, on the Brittany coast. De Chirico's huts are similar to those that so obsessed Picasso, little shrines to erotic intrigue with triangular pediments from which fly little decorative flags, and with tall doors that sport twin peepholes and prominent keyholes in lieu of handles. These elevated huts are the locus of erotic mystery and reverie, and in de Chirico's world, the doors are mostly closed. In a painting from 1935, one opens to reveal a tousle-haired youth in a blue suit making eye contact with one of the male bathers, his broad back visible above the brown herringbone waters. Make of the images what you will, collectively the paintings have an attitude of frozen time and quiet desolation. They're like a cross between a Super Mario Bros game and stills from a student remake of *Last Year at Marienbad*.

In the early 1970s, de Chirico experienced another bout of inspired clarity and forthrightness in a group of pictures known as *Spettacolo Misterioso*, or *Mysterious Show*. In these works, the familiar tropes are curtains parting to reveal a bare stage, its floorboards rendered in perspective; large windows cut into the sides of the room/stage set we are in; an accumulation of drafting tools, T-squares, triangles, and so on; and on easels or in shallow boxes, or peeping from behind the windows, are enormous, cartoony renditions of a big yellow sun, its rays depicted as squiggly, zig-zaggy shapes, with everything edged in red. Sometimes the yellow sun is accompanied by a blackened faltering twin, and both the yellow and black suns are connected to what looks like power cables which disappear somewhere off-stage.

The choices de Chirico made—to be less declarative and to court obscurity, to look back rather than to embrace the “now”—were not for effect



There is often a slice of moon as well, similarly tethered to a defunct black rendition of itself. In one of the most thrilling paintings in the current exhibition, *Mysterious Show* from 1971, the audience consists of a row of pale beige triangular shapes, each participant sporting a black semi-circular “eye” as they all give their attention to the mystery unfolding before them. Was Philip Guston standing in de Chirico’s studio at the time? We know that Guston was in residence at the American Academy in Rome in the late 1960s, but I’m not aware of any record of the two mavericks ever meeting.

These are the paintings that speak most directly across the decades to our contemporary sensibilities. They prefigure aspects of not only late Guston, but also current eccentric scene constructors like Carroll Dunham and the younger Dana Schutz.

These paintings, like others in this show, work by imposing one type of pictorial reality—hard-edged, cartoony, faintly alarming, or unsettling imagery—on top of a very different one, classical, nostalgic, etc. The juxtaposition of the different styles releases something in the imagery: one is expressed through the other; everything is fitted into everything else; every relationship is calibrated with the sensitivity and assurance of a Swiss watch. This is yet another meaning of the term metaphysical painting—the mysterious relationship between a sensibility and the means of its expression. The choices de Chirico made—to be less declarative and to court obscurity, to look back rather than to embrace the “now”—were not for effect, and his taking of pictorial liberties was not just posturing; they all speak to the character of the artist. You can tell a lot by what someone is willing to sacrifice.

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO, Palazzo Reale Milan, September 25, 2019 to January 19, 2020

I am indebted to two individuals for some of the ideas in this essay: Gini Alhadeff, whose essay about Alberto Savinio in the New York Review of Books provided important background, and painter Nicole Wittenberg for her insights into some critical aspects of de Chirico’s work and sensibility.

Left above: MYSTERIOUS SHOW, 1971
Oil on canvas, 50 × 60 cm

Right: SELF-PORTRAIT IN BULLFIGHTER’S COSTUME, 1941–1942
Oil on canvas, 80 × 60 cm

