Giosetta Fioroni’s interview with the art historian and critic Maurizio Calvesi, published in September 1964 in the journal Marcatrè, opens with the following exchange:

[Calvesi]: I saw your four panels with an image that recurs in more or less the same pose but with different values of contour, light, etc. Could you explain your procedure?

[Fioroni]: I don’t agree with the word “panels.” What interests me is very simple, it’s a certain type of narration linked to a cinematographic image that repeats itself. I insist on calling it narrative because for almost a year now I have been looking for ways to recount certain things.¹

The painting in question is The Image of Silence (1964), a large work that Calvesi included in the Italian pavilion at the Venice Biennale that summer, alongside three other Roman Pop artists from the so-called “Scuola di Piazza del Popolo”: Tano Festa, Franco Angeli, and Mario Schifano.² A picture taken by photographer Ugo Mulas—best known for his spirited coverage of the Venice Biennales—captures (from left to right) Festa, Schifano, the gallerist Gian Tommaso Liverani (the owner

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¹ Maurizio Calvesi, “Intervista con i pittori,” Marcatrè 8-9-10 (1964), 235. Except where indicated, all the translations are my own.
² Works by Mimmo Rotella were in a separate room, curated by the French critic Pierre Restany.
of La Salita, which competed with Plinio De Martiis’s La Tartaruga for the representation of Pop art in Rome), and Fioroni standing in front of the aforementioned painting [PL. 53]. The picture reflects these artists’ reliance on photographic media, showing Fioroni with a handbag over her arm and a camera around her neck. But perhaps most noticeable is the photograph’s de-centeredness: each of the protagonists is looking in a different direction at something outside the picture frame. The four seem oblivious to the feminine silhouette behind them in *The Image of Silence*; it is as if they were searching for the woman in the painting.

Taking note of Fioroni’s pointed response to Calvesi, the critic Gillo Dorfles later elaborated, in the brochure for the artist’s solo show at the Galleria del Cavallino in Venice, on “[Fioroni’s] sometimes insistent repetition of the same figure, of a silhouette, sometimes magnified and sometimes the reverse, vanishing into nothingness like a cinematographic fade-out,” with the effect of “an apparition whose impalpable presence we perceive while recognizing its improbability or threat.” Although the filmmaker’s name never appears in the literature on Fioroni, every one of Dorfles’s key phrases—“vanishing into nothingness,” “apparition,” “improbability,” and “threat”—conspires to project us into the universe of Michelangelo Antonioni, whose “tetralogy”—*L’avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), *Eclipse* (1962), and *Red Desert* (1964)—singlehandedly brought Italian cinema out of the political engagement of the immediate postwar decade dominated by Neorealism and into the political indifference and psychological disaffection of the years of Italy’s “Economic Miracle.” Everything in Mulas’s image, from its decentered composition to the clothes worn by the photo’s four protagonists on that summer day at the Biennale—Festa’s black polo shirt, Schifano’s white rolled-up sleeves, Liverani’s light summer suit and straw hat, and Fioroni’s checked dress—makes it look like a still from *L’avventura*; it evokes, for example, the scene in which the film’s lead characters search for their lost companion, Anna, among the deserted rocks of the Lisca Bianca in the Aeolian Islands.

The passage that best describes the arc of Fioroni’s production was actually penned by a film critic, Pascal Bonizer, who could have been

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writing about her trajectory—from *Girlfriend* (1961), where a young woman with sunglasses walks, loose limbed, in T-shirt and pleated skirt, along the nondescript ledge formed by the bottom edge of the paper (a drawing Fioroni would recycle in 1966 and 1967 in two different formats) [PLS. 36, 50]; through to *Beach Girl* (1965), where a young woman in a sarong walks, head down, along the beach, as though searching for something; and up to the point where figures vanish altogether from her works in the spectral landscapes and cityscapes of 1970–71—when he writes in “The Disappearance (On Antonioni)”: 

Antonioni is a painter in the sense that, for him, white, black, grey, and the various colors of the spectrum are not merely ornamental, atmospheric, or emotional, but are veritable ideas that envelop characters and events… White connotes the absence, the disaffection, the emptiness that paralyzes Antonioni’s characters… *L’avventura* is ostensibly the story of a disappearance, but a disappearance whose importance and density evaporate little by little, until the very structure and form of the narrative are perilously contaminated and impaired: what happens in reality is the disappearance of the disappearance of Anna. We note that many of Antonioni’s other films have for their argument an inquest, a police-style investigation. In many Antonioni films something or someone disappears, but this disappearance is such that the tension appropriate to the police investigation, to the chase, to suspense, tends to vanish as well. Thus, in *L’avventura*, the disappearance of Anna underlines, insidiously, another disappearance, more secret and harder to make out, which haunts and misleads the remaining characters, preventing them from concentrating on the missing woman… Plastically, narratively, and ontologically, Antonioni’s world is in pieces, and “putting the pieces back together” is precisely the operation abandoned by Antonioni’s derailed, alienated, characters… We find, in his perambulating characters (people walk a lot in Antonioni’s films), an insistent fascination with the amorphous, the formally abstract, the self-hidden, self-erased figures slipping into non-differentiation… [As in] an unfinished sketch, the art of the cinema inextricably contains a-priori forms (the mental object which the mise-en-scene must bring forth on the screen) and raw images offered by the real world. The sketch disappears, but this disappearance is not a simple erasure; we shall never recover in its primal freshness “the virgin page defended by its whiteness.”

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PL. 54
Michaelangelo Pistoletto. *Uomo seduto (Seated Man)*, 1962–63
The title that Bonitzer’s essay bore when it was originally published in Italian, “Il concetto di scomparsa,” involves a wordplay between comparsa, meaning “extra” in a play or film, and scomparsa, meaning “disappearance,” which points to something Fioroni shared with the Turinese Michelangelo Pistoletto’s cinematic “Mirror Paintings.”

In 1962, Pistoletto began to cut life-size silhouettes of friends and mundane objects out of thin, translucent paper, which were then placed on the reflective surfaces of highly polished stainless steel [PL. 54]. Walking into a gallery, we encounter both the lifelike cutouts and our own images reflected in the “mirrors,” which exist only until we leave the room. But during this encounter we realize that we took part in a situation where everyone—we and Pistoletto’s nameless protagonists—performed not as actors but, in fact, as extras.

There might have been a further meaning in disarray conveyed by Mulas’s 1964 photograph. That summer, American Pop art took the Venice Biennale, and Europe, by storm. The controversial award of the coveted Grand Prize in Painting to Robert Rauschenberg’s combines signaled the obsolescence of painting’s conventional definition. By all accounts, the intense political in-fighting among nations produced by the system of awarding Biennale prizes reached a climax that year. The most widely reproduced photograph of that Biennale, also by Mulas for Domus, shows canvases by Rauschenberg being carefully loaded on a motorboat so that they could be spirited from the U.S. Consulate, where they had been on display, to the grounds of the Giardini, so that they could qualify for the coveted prize; this “abduction” elicited press coverage that ranged from fascination to outrage.

Pop art has been largely dismissed, especially by American critics and scholars, as a derivative and doomed option for European artists. Embracing Pop was seen as surrendering to America and to the

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5 On Pistoletto and the cinematic as well as his relation to American Pop, see my “Flashbacks and Eclipses in Italian Art in the 1960s,” Grey Room 49 (Fall 2012), 102–27.

6 For a detailed recounting of the facts by Calvin Tomkins, then reporting for the International Herald Tribune, see Calvin Tomkins, Robert Rauschenberg: The Artworld of Our Time (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 10.
amnesiac pleasures of the postwar economic boom. Studies of the Nouveaux Réalistes, the French counterparts to the Pop artists, have thus emphasized their confrontational, anti-consumerist resistance to America. The Americanophilia of English Pop has conversely been interpreted as an ironic, deflationary stance. The German artist Gerhard Richter’s photo-paintings have been viewed, meanwhile, both as a response to Andy Warhol and, in German terms, as the by-product of a traumatized historical memory. The “Pop” attitude in Italy—of which Fioroni was part—was quite different, however, and cannot be grasped either as rejection, as ironization, or as a traumatized embrace of American-style consumerism. Italy in the 1960s produced its own idiosyncratic take on Pop Art.

The best word to describe the images produced by Italian Pop artists is “refractive.” They seem to be drained out, as if from fear of the empire of the sign and a desire to distill the stream of Pop images emitted by Italy’s overly charismatic transatlantic counterpart. In his 1963 article “La giovane scuola di Roma,” Cesare Vivaldi, a critic closely identified with the movement, described the works in terms of a disappearance: the mass-media repertoire of American Pop—Coca-Cola bottles, tin cans, ads, labels, tabloids, comic strips—found previously in the works of Schifano and his cohorts, had all but disappeared, replaced by landscapes, real people, objects, and symbols [Pl. 55]. To perceive objects and landscapes via photography involved the reconstruction of data no longer perceptible to the naked eye, Vivaldi noted, and this pointed to a sensibility Italian critics found lacking in American Pop.7

It was Pierre Restany, the critical champion of the Nouveaux Réalistes, who, in retrospect, most cogently described the climate surrounding Italian Pop. In an interview published in the exhibition catalogue for Roma anni ’60: Al di là della pittura, he said: “Italian artists were able to look at America from a distance and that gave them operative space…One should recall that Rome had been the epicenter of the grand quarrel about Socialist Realism. It is there that the fall of Marxist ideology took place and its rejection on the part

PL. 55
Mario Schifano. *Ai pittori di insigne (To the Sign Painters)*, 1964
of many artists.” “Rome,” Restany surmised, “did not want to force its destiny. It had forced it during the ventennio [Mussolini’s twenty years in power], and maybe that period served as a lesson.” 8 Most emblematic of this is the work of Franco Angeli, who explained to Calvesi (just a few pages away from Fioroni in the pages of Marcatrè) how he veiled his symbols of violence and power—Rome’s she-wolf; imperial eagles taken from the U.S. dollar; red stars from Communist banners; crosses next to Nazi swastikas—with cotton gauze sprayed with enamel, achieving a degree of color saturation that allowed “the image to appear, but never too much.” 9

Fioroni’s work changed in 1966–67. The turn to black and white and the quality of incompleteness in her images began to suggest temporal flashbacks. While drawings such as Boy Alone (1967) [pl. 41], whose figure stands in one of her signature nondescript spaces, are difficult to date; others, such as Self-Portrait at Age Nine (1966), Little Balilla (1969), which shows a boy in uniform, or Contemplation of the Capo (1969), made their historical referents perfectly clear. Fioroni first exhibited these works in the spring of 1970, in Florence, at the Galleria Indiano, accompanied by a brochure featuring as its frontispiece Obedience (1969), which shows a young woman giving the fascist salute [pl. 56]. In the text, Fioroni writes somewhat cryptically of images that hovered in between private thoughts and the society surrounding her: “faces, clothes, fashions, and, above all, feelings that circulate—the ghosts of consumption, of a funereal remake [Fioroni’s emphasis] underway around us.” 10 By that time memories of the ventennio had acquired a topical relevance. After the neo-fascist bombing in Milan’s Piazza Fontana that killed seventeen people on December 12, 1969, Italy would continue to be rocked by bombings in the bitter and obscure struggle between the extra-parliamentary Right and Left, which became known as the Years of Lead. Some time later, in the first extended monograph devoted to her work, Alberto Boatto urged Fioroni to comment again on these images, which in his interview

9 Maurizio Calvesi, “Intervista con i pittori,” 220.
10 Reprinted in Celant, Giosetta Fioroni, 184.
he contrasted with the dogged presentness of American Pop. Fioroni answered, somewhat wistfully: “I wanted to propose a series of emblematic portraits of a bygone Italy. A sweet, rural Italy that no longer exists, replaced nowadays by a telegenic one. There were photos of isolated, lost children, in the aftermath of the war, photos of the early years of fascism, ruins, stunned sites and figures.”

At the end of 1970, the figure disappeared from Fioroni’s work. Gathered at La Tartaruga under the title Laguna were views of palaces along the Grand Canal of Venice, the trapezoidal shape of Piazza San Marco seen from the air, the Veneto countryside near Pieve di Soligo in pencil highlighted with enamel on cardboard paper. Engulfed in a ubiquitous fog, the silvery silhouettes of buildings and the landforms around them had now become nearly invisible. Two drawings nevertheless stand out. One is The Mountain Tomb (1971), a picture of a mountain in the Alps near Belluno that was the site of violent combat between Italian and Austrian troops during World War I [pl. 57]; the mountain owed its name to its pyramidal (tomblike) shape. Another, entitled Big Arrow Pointing to the Countryside House (1970), was also configured like a pyramid [pl. 56]. It is no doubt significant in this respect that the first solo show given to Richter outside of Germany took place at La Tartaruga in 1966, and that many of the paintings in that show were group portraits based on family photographs shot either during or just after—Richter always keeps one guessing—the Nazi years, as well as a painting entitled Small Pyramid (1964), a motif that has been interpreted in his work as one of his many allusions to the consigning of those years to the grave of historical memory.12

Reminiscences of fascism and deserted architecture coalesced in the series of mural-sized drawings that Fioroni produced as a temporary installation for Vitalità del negativo nell’arte italiana 1960/70, an ambitious exhibition showcasing the work of thirty-six artists curated by Achille Bonito Oliva at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in

11 Alberto Boatto, Anne-Marie Sauzeau, and Andrea Carancini, eds., Giosetta Fioroni (Ravenna: Essegni, 1990), 16.
12 Gerhard Richter, Galleria La Tartaruga, Rome, January 20–February 20, 1966. Interestingly, nowhere in the literature on Italian Pop is this exhibition mentioned.
PL. 57
Il monte tomba (The Mountain Tomb), 1971
PL. 58

Strada per Fregene (Road to Fregene), 1970
Rome at the end of 1970. While the titles of these drawings—*Studies for: Room of Landscapes, Villa Valmarana, Vicenza, 17…*—referred to a Palladian villa in the Veneto whose guestrooms were decorated in the 1750s by Gianbattista and Giandomenico Tiepolo, the stark modernist geometries of the drawings pointed to something altogether different. Penciled on one was the word *autostrada*, and I would suggest we see their empty platforms, with their long, rigid lines receding precipitously toward a bleak horizon, as those that Fioroni glimpsed from her car window while driving through EUR on her way to the beach, and which she pictured in *Road to Fregene*, the title of one of her smaller landscape drawings made in Rome in 1970 [pl. 58]. EUR, Mussolini’s monumental Third Rome planned for the Olympic games of 1942, but unfinished at the outbreak of World War II and completed only in the 1950s, became one of the most iconic sites in postwar Italian cinema: a place of Partisan resistance in Roberto Rossellini’s *Rome: Open City* of 1945; of urban and psychological alienation in Antonioni’s *Eclipse* of 1962; and the relentless, seductive mise-en-scène of fascism in Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Conformist*, a film that came to the screen just as *Vitalità del negativo* opened.13

Attending closely to the architectural container of that exhibition, namely the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Bonito Oliva immersed in blinding light or, alternatively, in near darkness, paintings by the Roman school of Pop, kinetic environments by the Arte Programmata groups, works by members of Arte Povera, and other installation artists. In doing so, he exposed himself to the accusation of having hijacked Italy’s avant-garde into an atmosphere suffused with violence. In his review of the show, entitled “Il sacrario del negativo” (“The Shrine of the Negative”), Cesare Vivaldi emoted:

>The atmosphere of many of the rooms echoes, in one of those strangely vengeful moments of history, the infamous “Mostra della rivoluzione fascista” which took place, as it happens, in this very same palazzo. I remember (as a child) a black hall, with the countless inscriptions, in bronze, of the word “Presente” with psychedelic-patriotic

Ugo Mulas. Giosetta Fioroni at Vitalità del Negativo, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, 1971
music in the background… This is no coincidence. The “Mostra” was a shrine and the same is true of *Vitalità del negativo* for the simple reason that negativity, as soon as it is institutionalized, loses all vitality and becomes its own gravedigger.\(^1\)

Most controversial was the exhibit’s entry space, redesigned by the architect Piero Sartogo. Like Fioroni, Sartogo approached the ideologically charged space by staging an eclipse: he split the rotunda in two by wrapping an X of semi-opaque black ribbon around its white Corinthian columns. With the cupola shrouded in darkness, the visitors were only able to see their own silhouettes reflected on four large screens via projectors in the bottom half. In effect, he rotated the ubiquitous X of the infamous 1932 Mostra—where it appeared both as the Roman numeral signaling the Year Ten of the regime and in the omnipresent word DUX (for duce)—from a vertical to an horizontal axis. Working in 1970 in a climate of critical revisionism, in which, as architectural historian Dennis Doordan has noted, images of fascist monumentality acquired a power and validity that they had been denied since the end of the war,\(^1\) Bonito Oliva, Sartogo, and Fioroni were committing what we may call a “mimetic subversion,” engaging the enemy on its own ground.

Let us end by looking at a second photograph by Ugo Mulas, in which Fioroni is standing in front of her deserted wall-drawings wearing a fur jacket [PL. 59]. Her head is slightly thrown back and something appears to have caught her attention from beyond the frame on the right. Another woman faces the opposite direction, examining something also invisible to us in one of Fioroni’s works. We are transported once more to a film set: the scene in *The Conformist*, in which Marcello Clerici, the turncoat hero of the story, takes his eccentric mother to visit his demented father at an asylum, filmed in situ at EUR. In that shot, the mother, the son, and a doctor stand silhouetted against the chilling whiteness of a cold marble-clad platform. All facing the same direction, they stare at something in the distance, once again outside the picture frame. Marcello’s mother, like Fioroni, is wearing a fur: in this case, a 1930s

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stole wrapped around her shoulders. In contrast to the 1951 novel by Alberto Moravia upon which it was based, Bertolucci structured his narrative around a series of ellipses and flashbacks. The film begins where it will end, with Marcello riding in car from Paris to the site where his former university professor, Luca Quardi, an anti-fascist in exile, will be assassinated: a site whose traumatic meaning is revealed to us only much later in the film.\footnote{See Milicent Marcus’s chapter on that film in \textit{Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 285–312.} Fioroni also toyed with the idea of a temporal disturbance: the title of her mural drawings—\textit{Studies for: Room of Landscapes, Villa Valmarana, Vicenza, 17. . .}—contains an encrypted date that reads as “71” in reverse. It was Moravia who wrote the brochure for Fioroni’s show \textquote{‘La Vita a Roma’: luoghi, paesaggi, dimore}, which opened at Il Naviglio in Milan just weeks after the closing of \textit{Vitalità}. Its opening sentence reprises the theme of eternal recurrence that had haunted her work and that of others in those years: “Dear Giosetta, the paths of poetry are few and you can only travel them in one direction. If you set off on a given path, you inevitably end up in places that are foreseeable, though always new.”\footnote{Reprinted in Celant, \textit{Giosetta Fioroni}, 102.}
PL. 60
Palazzo sul Canal Grande (Palazzo on the Grand Canal), 1970
PL. 61
*Casa di M con limoni (M’s House with Lemons), 1971*
PL. 62
Il sole sui giardini di Piazza della Libertà (Sun on Piazza della Libertà’s Gardens), 1970
PL. 63
La casa di Federico (Federico’s House), 1970
PL. 64
Fagaré della Battaglia, 1970
PL. 65
*Grande freccia che indica la casa in campagna (Big Arrow Pointing to the Countryside House)*, 1970
PL. 66

*Autunno al Foro Italico (Autumn at the Foro Italico)*, 1970
PL. 67
Visione lagunare (Lagoon Vision), 1976
PL. 68
Vela in laguna (Sailing in the Lagoon), 1971
PL. 69

Piazza San Marco, 1970
PL. 70
Chiosco (Kiosk), 1970
PL. 71

Il Palatino sotto la neve (Palatino Covered in Snow), 1971
PL. 72
La Montagne (The Mountain), 1970
PL. 73
La casa di Salgareda (House in Salgareda), 1970
PL. 74

*Gabbiani in volo sul Tevere (Seagulls Flying over the River Tiber)*, 1971
Fossalta, ponte di barche sul Piave (Fossalta, Bridge of Boats on the Piave), 1971