

[dip] contemporary art

Paolo Canevari
DECALOGO, 2008



Paolo Canevari

Born in Rome in 1963, Paolo Canevari lives and works between Rome and New York.

Born in an elevator and raised in a family where his grandfather was a painter mosaicist and his uncle a sculptor, Canevari is one of the most internationally renowned artists of his generation.

Coming from a family of painters and sculptors who worked with an expressive rhetoric based on sacral and military imagery, which included the Roman she-wolf and eagle, helmet and sword. It was his inevitable destiny to become an artist who sought a mobile material and language strove for the anti-monumental. For these reasons, from the start of his creative development, Canevari has been fascinated by the icons which since the war's end have shaped the memory of Italian culture, but the subjects them to an anti-nostalgic process, in which the material of their figuration evokes the crisis and decline of a civilization.

Indeed, his work stems from thoughts and reflections on the transient nature of art and on the significance of artistic sculptures in modern society. While wondering on the value and origin of the most intimate aspects of memory, the artist develops his own personal language where symbols, pop culture, historical knowledge and politics are intertwined in a new interpretation of daily life.

Canevari uses different media and materials, from sculptures to installations, from drawings to video.

Everything fragile is poetic. Drawing is by its nature this: an example of fragility and poetry.

The drawing remains a unique sign compared to its sister writing. It is only reproducible visually and cannot be read, recited or transcribed. Canevari has always sought an alternative support to paper, one that would not deny the idea of drawing, in fact one that would make it more unique.

The works on glass, the projections and etchings, the works on marble, all stemmed from this idea, of a drawing in another dimension, another material, another life. The artist's urge to place a sign on a material synonymous with sculpture, solidity, immortality, is meant to reflect the fragility of art even in its traditionally strongest element. The black marble surface is the opposite of the sheet of paper with its whiteness, the carved sign does not allow for mistakes, as does graphite. We "remove, not add," as Michelangelo said about sculpture. The sign is only a scratch on the stone that has waited millions of years. Now it lives.

The connection with historical movements and the influence they have on younger artists is a natural thing.

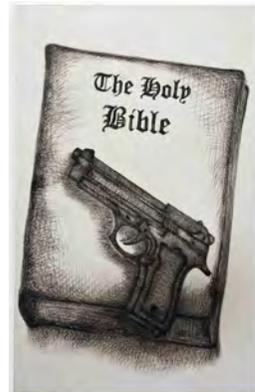
Canevari has participated in numerous museum exhibitions, public commissions and publications throughout Europe, the Americas and Asia. In 2007 he participated at the 52nd Biennial in Venice curated by Robert Storr. His work is collected by major museums throughout the World: Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato; Museum of Modern art MoMA, New York; Foundation Louis Vuit-

ton pour la Creation, Paris; Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, Miami; Macro, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rome; MART Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto; Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg; Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica Calcografia Nazionale, Rome; GNAM Galleria Nazionale di Arte Moderna, Rome; Perna Foundation, Capri; Olnick Spanu Art Program Garrison, New York.



Burning Skull
Burning Colosseum
Hang Around
Beata Vergine
Burning Mein Kampf
Burning Tree
Seed
Burning Gun
Holy Bible
Godog

n. 10 etched copper
and dry-point, nickel
plated
139.7 x 88.9 x 1.9 cm
Edition unique



Decalogo

Brett Littman

Paolo Canevari's project *Decalogo*, a commission for the Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica of Rome and produced with the assistance of the master printer Antonio Sannino at the Calcografia Nazionale, directly inverts our expectations of how prints operate. Here, in place of the prints on paper, the plates themselves become the primary object.

Although Canevari employs traditional engraving techniques -he learned how to engrave and etch places when he was a young art student in Rome, and since that time, he has incorporated the logic of printing into his large and varied body of work- he purposefully created the places as discrete objects whose end goal is sculptural rather than functional. The ten large places (the largest ever produced at the Institute) have been bent and mounted on the wall and are displayed independently of the prints, which is rare, as one does not often see the plate itself displayed as a work of art. As well, since the place is mounted, it can no longer be archived or reprinted, which cancels one of its main *raison d'être*. In showing the places themselves, Canevari focuses our attention on their impressive and technically challenging scale and on the role that the quality and density of the lines on the plate play in creating the print on the paper.

A word about the process: these copper plates are first ground with wax to create an engraving surface, and then the wax is scored with points of different sizes to articulate the depth of the lines that will form the image. After the engraving is set, the plate is "bit" with acid, which is left on for varying durations depending on the depth of the etching and the desired effect on the plate. For *Decalogo*, the images have been etched into the plates so that they may be "read", after inking, on the plate surface itself rather than only on the ensuing print.

This decision determines that any text in the print will appear backwards, which further reflects the secondary status of the print with regard to the primacy of the plates.

Each plate bears an iconic image from Canevari's personal visual lexicon. They are challenging, provocative, and direct in their message. Six plates and their accompanying prints show conflagrations: a burning gun, skull, tree, dress on a cross, the Roman Coliseum, and a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Such gothic images of torched objects and places highlight the destructive property of fire and provide an excellent opportunity for Canevari to exploit the relationship between drawing and etching: representing fire in a drawing, plate, or print is not an easy task, but Canevari, through his total control and knowledge of how to work the wax-ground plate, is able to capture the fleeting kinetic energy that is released when something burns.

The remaining four plates and prints show an ominous tire swing on a hangman's wooden frame, a dog chained to a tire upon which "god" is written, a Bible with a gun placed on it, and a man poised to catch a falling bomb. These images are more static than the fire images but no less powerful. To my mind, they are meditations on personal freedom, destiny, and the negative effects of religion on our society.

The exploration of these ideas are not new territory for the artist. He has been mining the harrowing nature of war and torture in much of his recent work. Shown in the P.S. 1 courtyard in 2004, *Welcome to Oz*, composed of inner-tube tires and a wooden frame, simulated the barbed wire outside of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. It was a stark reminder of the newspaper photos showing smiling American military personnel outside the prison where terrible atrocities were being committed. In Robert Storr's 2007 Venice Biennial, Canevari's arresting video, *Bouncing Skull*, showed a young Serbian boy kicking a rubber skull like a soccer ball in a bombed out courtyard. Powerful in its economy of means, this video is one of the best examples of Canevari's clear vision when it comes to difficult material.

For Canevari, *Decalogo*, the Italian shorthand for the Ten Commandments and perhaps the most well known social contract or "rules to live by", is a logical extension of his continued investigation into how these dynamic images reveal political and social crises.





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