

# museoemblema

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## Salvatore Emblema

Terzigno, 1929-2006

### Works in public collections:

Galleria degli Uffizi, Firenze (Italia)  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (U.S.)  
Museum Bojmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (NL)  
Ludwig Museum, Koblenz (DE)  
Università Normale, Pisa (Italia)  
Museo del 9cento Castel Sant'Elmo, Napoli (Italia)  
Museo Bargellini, Pieve di Cento (Italia)  
Museo Madre, Napoli (Italia)

### Works in private collections *(selection)*

David Rockefeller Collection, New York  
Collezione Gianni Agnelli, Torino  
Collezione Dino De Laurentis, Roma/Los Angeles  
Collezione Giulio Carlo Argan, Roma/Torino  
Collezione Gennaro Moccia, Roma  
Collezione Principessa Maria Camilla Pallavicini, Roma  
Collezione Kelly Merryman, Los Angeles  
Collezione Ursel Steinecker, Koblenz  
Collezione Ferruccio Bonetti, Torino  
Collezione Alberto Finestauri, Roma  
Collezione Carlo Bisogniero, Washington  
Collezione Sandro Dorna, Torino  
Collezione Cupini - De Filippo, Roma  
Collezione Fondo P.C.I., varie sedi in Italia  
Collezione Remo Missori, Roma  
Collezione Sandro Bosi, Roma/New York  
Collezione Li Mollet, Bern  
Collezione Paulo Herkenhoff, Rio de Janeiro  
Collezione Silvia Franchi, Roma  
Collezione Cleto e Dino Polcina, Roma  
Collezione Jimmy Traboulsi New York  
Collezione Maurizio Calvesi, Roma

Collezione Alfonso Perez y Perez, Ciudad de Mexico  
Collezione Amnon Barzel, Tel Aviv  
Collezione Elmar Zorn, Munich  
Collezione Carlo Levi, Roma  
Collezione Mario Sonnino, Roma  
Collezione Giorgio Preziosi, Genova  
Collezione Monsignor Angelo Francia, Città del Vaticano  
Collezione Daniéle Perrier, Bad Ems  
Collezione Pasquale Isidoro, Roma  
Collezione Elena Pugliese, Torino  
Collezione Fondo d'Arte Biosana/Svas, Napoli  
Collezione Edoardo Palumbo, Napoli  
Collezione Gennaro Nappo, Napoli  
Collezione Cynthia e Renato Penna, Napoli  
Collezione Alberto di Mauro, Los Angeles  
Collezione Ugo Moretti, Roma  
Collezione Alejandra Kieffer, Munich  
Collezione Maria Kreuz, Koln  
Collezione Luciano Caramel, Como  
Collezione Barbara Vergnano, Milano  
Collezione Marcello Silva, Roma/Montecarlo

## Exhibitions

(P) solo show

(C) group show

- 1952 Napoli- Galleria al Blu di Prussia (c)  
1954 Roma - Galleria San Marco (P)  
1956 Roma - Galleria La Vetrina di Chiurazzi (P)  
1956 Roma - Galleria Il Camino (P)  
1961 Napoli - Circolo nautico Posillipo (c)  
1962 Roma - Galleria La Seggiola (P)  
1963 Napoli - Galleria Tanino Chiurazzi  
1965 Roma - Galleria San Marco (p)  
1967 Napoli - Foyer Teatro Mercadante (P)  
1969 Aulla - Premio Città di Aulla (c)  
1971 Milano - Galleria Borgonuovo(P)  
1972 Roma - Galleria Arti Visive (P)  
1972 Salerno - Galleria La Seggiola (P)  
1972 Napoli - Galleria Diagramma 32 (P)  
1973 Torino - Galleria Christian Stain (P)  
1974 Napoli - Galleria San Carlo (P)  
1975 Roma - X Quadriennale d'arte (c)  
1976 Bari - Expoarte (c)  
1977 Termoli - Galleria Civica d'arte Moderna (P)  
1978 Roma - Galleria Lastaria (P)  
1978 Milano - Galleria Morone (P)  
1979 Trieste - Galleria Forum (P)  
1979 Ferrara - Palazzo dei Diamanti (P)  
1979 Napoli - Museo Villa Pignatelli (P)  
1979 Alessandria - Galleria Comunale (P)  
1979 Roma - Galleria Rondanini ( P)  
1980 Venezia - Biennale Arti Visive/ Magazzini del sale (C)  
1981 Cesena - Galleria Pinacoteca Comunale (P)  
1981 Napoli - Galleria San Carlo (c)  
1980 Termoli - Galleria Civica d'arte Moderna (c)  
1981 Roma - Palazzo delle Esposizioni " Linee della Ricerca artistica in Italia 1960-1980" (c)  
1981 Firenze - Galleria degli Uffizi (C)  
1982 Venezia - Biennale Arti Visive (sala personale)  
1982 Pozzuoli - Scavi archeologici Terme Puteolane (P)  
1982 Rotterdam - Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (P)  
1983 Napoli - Studio Miele (P)  
1984 Taormina - Pinacoteca Comunale/Chiesa di San Francesco (P)  
1985 Napoli - Palazzo Reale (P)  
1985 Roma - Studio Due C (P)  
1985 Milano - Arte Borgogna(P)  
1985 Napoli - Studio 85 (P)  
1985 Genova - Galleria Cesarea (P)  
1985 Palermo - La Nuova Barcaccia (P)  
1985 Roma - Galleria Borghese "L'altra Faccia di Una Musa" (c)  
1987 Parma - Studio Nazzari (P)  
1987 Ercolano - Villa Campolieto (c)  
1988 Caserta - Palazzo Belvedere di San Leucio " Exvite" (c)  
1989 Benevento - Studio ErreCi (P)  
1990 Koblenz - Galleria Ursel Stainaker(P)  
1990 Koblenz - Ludwig Museum(P)  
1993 Heimbach - Haus Schonblick (P)  
1993 Ischia - Castello Aragonese (c)  
1994 Milano - Arte Borgogna (P)  
1994 Comune di Milano - Mostra di sculture Via della Spiga (P)  
1994 Roma - Galleria Banchi Nuovi (P)  
1995 Salerno - Galleria Il Ponte (P)  
1996 Ravello - Villa Rufolo / Chiesa di Santa Maria a Gradillo (P)  
1997 Ascoli Piceno - Palazzo Dei Capitani (P)  
1997 Schwaz - Rabalder Haus Museum "Kunstler in Italien seit 1945" (c)  
2001 Vicenza - Basilica Palladiana (P)  
2002 Salerno - Tempio di Pomona (c)  
2001 Salerno - Studio Ruggiero (P)  
2001 Siracusa - SEPRS (c)  
2002 Monaco - Kunsthau "Vulcanik" (c)  
2003 Arezzo Galleria Pinacoteca Comunale "Da Picasso a Botero" (C)  
2004 Benevento - Museo del Sannio (P)  
2004 San Paolo del Brasile - M.A.C. (P)  
2005 Rio de Janeiro - Museu Nacional de Belas Artes(P)  
2005 Città del Messico - Museo de la S.H.C.P. (P)  
2005 Aichi - Expo universale Padiglione Italia (Sala Personale)  
2005 Bologna - Galleria Artsinergy (P)  
2005 Palermo - Galleria Artsinergy (P)  
2005 Pavia -Galleria Artsinergy (P)  
2005 Milano - Galleria Artsinergy (P)  
2005 Aprilia - Galleria Artsinergy (P)  
2005 New York - Galleria Artsinergy (p)  
2006 Roma - Galleria Ulisse (P)  
2006 Chieti - Galleria Comunale "La Fiamma di Cristallo" (c)  
2006 Valmontone Palazzo Doria Pamphilij (P)  
2008 Vicenza - Yvonne arte contemporanea (P)  
2008 Venezia -Palazzo Grassi "Italics" (c)  
2009 Venezia Biennale arti visive (sala personale Padiglione Repubblica Araba di Siria)  
2009 Chicago - MCA "Italics"( c)  
2010 San Benedetto del Tronto - Galleria Artsinergy (P)  
2010 Napoli Castel Sant'Elmo Museo del Novecento (c)  
2011 Napoli - Villa di Donato (c)  
2011 Vicenza - Yvonne arte Contemporanea (P)  
2011 Napoli - Maschio Angioino (c)  
2012 Chicago - MCA "Language of Less / Then and Now" (c)  
2012 Napoli - Spazio Nea (c)  
2013 Los Angeles - IIC "Transparency" (P)  
2013 New York "Transparency/ The missing link in Italian post-war" (P)  
2014 Miami Art Wynwood (through David Richard Gallery) (c)  
2014 Santa Fe "Transparency/Through Color and Light" (P)  
2014 Napoli - Museo Pan (c)  
2014 Livorno - Galerie 21 (P)  
2014 Miami - Art Miami (through David Richard Gallery) (c)  
2015 Brescia - Galleria AB arte (c)  
2015 Milano - Expo Universale Padiglione Italia (c)  
2015 Spoleto - Palazzo Collicola Arti Visive (P)  
2015 Torino - Palazzo Bricherasio (P)  
2015 Parigi- Galerie Bugada Cargnel (P)  
2016 Napoli - Palazzo Leonetti (P)  
2016 Centre d'art contemporian Les Tanneires ( c)  
2016 Napoli - Museo Madre "Performare una Collezione"

## Recent Bibliography:

“L’Arte Moderna Secondo Novecento” testo didattico di Giulio Carlo Argan e Lara Vinca Masini, Sansoni per la Scuola 2001  
“DaPicasso a Botero” di Vittorio Sgarbi e Giovanni Faccenda, Torcular 2004  
“Colore e Trasparenza” di Barzel, Maghallaes, Sgarbi, Torcular 2004  
“Appartengo alla Luce” di Emanuele Leone Emblema, Iron Production 2007  
“Italics: Arte Italiana fra Tradizione e Rivoluzione” di Francesco Bonami, Electa 2009  
“Emblema” Monografia in Occasione della 53° Biennale di Venezia AAVV 2009  
“Museo del Novecento per una collezione in Progress” AAVV Electa 2010  
“EmblemaTrasparenza” di Emanuele Leone Emblema, Me? Editions 2011  
“Transparency” di Peter Frank, lemme edizioni 2013  
“Nudaluce” di Gianluca Marziani, lemme edizioni 2015

## Chronology:

### 1929

*Salvatore Emblema born on April 25th in Terzigno, to a family of small landowners of French heritage.*

### 1941-1948

*Graduates the Scuola del Corallo in Torre del Greco and leaves family. He attends the Royal Academy of Arts but doesn't complete his studies. Makes a series of travels in Europe (France, England, Holland) until settling in Rome in the early 50's.*

### 1954-1956

*First solo exhibition at the Galleria San Marco in Rome is curated by Neo-realist writers Ugo Moretti and Carlo Levi. The two intellectuals come up with the image of the artistfarmer, animated by genuine passion and bucolic lyricism. A stereotype that will give him great success in the cultural Roman environment pervaded by aesthetic neorealism, but that the artist feels as limiting. Starts work as an assistant set designer at the Cinecittà film studios. One of his works, a portrait of Pope Pius XII, made with dried leaves, is acquired by the Vatican Museums collection. Marries Raffaella Auricchio in the Church of the Artists in Rome: his witnesses were Ugo Moretti and American philosopher James McAllen.*

### 1957-1958

*On behalf of the invitation*

*of the magnate David Rockefeller, who buys one of his works, Emblema flies to the United States. He moved in 133 West 69 Street, as a guest of the musician Don Henry. He met Mark Rothko, which deeply influenced his research. Emblema's first stay in the States is the occasion of decisive encounters for his painting. However, the artist feels New York like an alien territory. The difficult integration is enhanced by barriers and social language.*

### 1958-1964

*Back in Italy, continues to work at Cinecittà for Dino De Laurentis Productions. Becomes assistant to Mario Chiari. Exhibits his works in various Italian cities. Commissioned by Dino de Laurentis to paint a nude portrait of De Laurentis' wife, actress Silvana Mangano. He lives between Rome and Terzigno, and in the meantime his works are displayed in various places in Italy.*

### 1965

*He flies to the United States for the second time. He meets the historian Giulio Carlo Argan in New York. His trip is a tardive attempt to reconnect relationships with the artistic environment in New York, abruptly interrupted years before. Despite this, he returns to Italy some months later.*

### 1969

*Emblema establishes a relationship of deep esteem with Argan. Aware of the lesson learnt in the States and the intellectual debate Argan addresses him to, he slowly starts focusing on the core elements of his research. He starts his analysis on the concept of Transparency: the word coined by Giulio Carlo Argan will be indissolubly linked to his art.*

### 1971-1979

*This is an extremely successful period. Solo exhibition curated by Palma Bucarelli, Director of the Gallery of Modern Art in Rome. Exhibits in Rotterdam, Turin, Rome, Milan, Naples, Ferrara. In Naples, the exhibition at the Villa Pignatelli proves controversial with professors and students of the Academy of Fine Arts. The academic environment accuses Emblema of being the product of Argan's heavy interference as well as (the political games) in the national artistic environment.*

### 1980

*He is selected for a collective at the Arsenale for the Biennale in Venice. The following year one of his portraits is acquired by the Uffizi Museum in Florence. In 1982 he is one more time at the Biennale in Venice, Pavilion Italy curated by Luciano Caramel.*

### 1985

*Emblema's works are displayed at the Royal Palace in Naples. The Royal Academy of the Arts criticizes him again. The artist Piero Dorazio on the Corriere dei Libri e dell'Arte (May 29th 1985) accuses Emblema of being*

*"a famous artist only in his family". From this moment till his death, Emblema will never organize an exhibition with his works in his hometown again. During this same year he hosts Philippe de Montebello director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York in Terzigno.*

### 1990-2003

*The cultural environment in which Emblema is one of the major exponents, starts collapsing. Two of his major supporters die: Giulio Carlo Argan and Palma Bucarelli. The gallery in Rome he is linked to is involved in some scandals. Emblema's name is not frequently found in the Italian art chronicles. His works are displayed abroad, especially in Germany, and he moves in his house on Mount Vesuvius. His works are inserted in the art book for schools "Storia dell'Arte Italiana" curated by Argan and Lara Vinca Masini.*

### 2003-2005

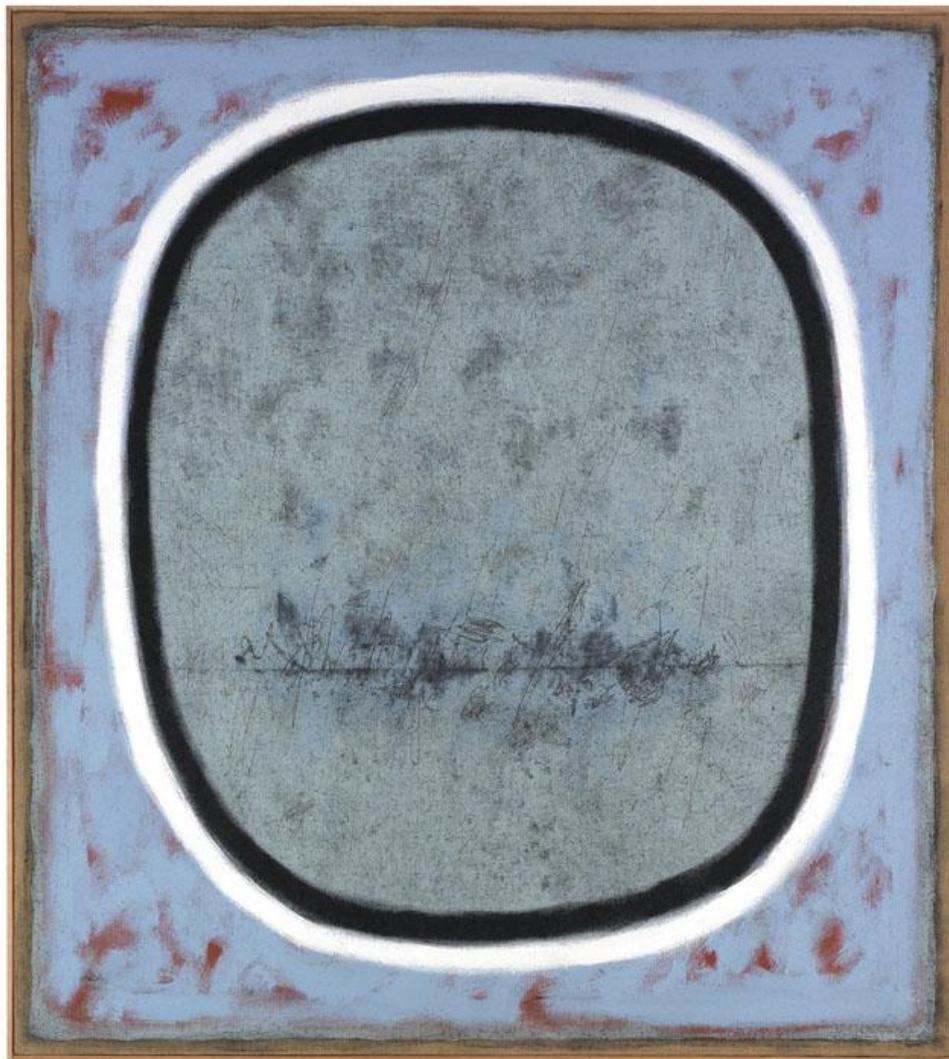
*Various reasons lead him to sign an exclusive agreement with Telemarket, a TV channel specialized in selling art works. This controversial choice, which brings him back to success and, despite the numerous disapprovals, allows him to come out from a relatively isolated period. During these years his works are displayed in Rio De Janeiro and San Paolo Del Brasile, in Japan and Mexico City. He also holds lectures in these cities.*

### 2006

*Falling ill in Mexico at the end of the previous year, Emblema dies in Terzigno on February the 2nd.*

# Works

selection 1959 -1978



“Senza Titolo/ Self-potrait”  
tinted soil, ashes on burlap  
180 x 160 cm  
Artist's estate collection

Salvatore Emblema's work was strongly influenced by his environment. Born on the flanks of Mount Vesuvius, in the city of Terzigno where he spent most of his life, he took samples of organic matter - such as leaves, volcanic soil, petrified lava and oxidised metals - to create his own colors and textures.



"Senza Titolo" 1967  
raw lapillus stones on panel  
252 x 124 cm  
Artist's Estate Collection

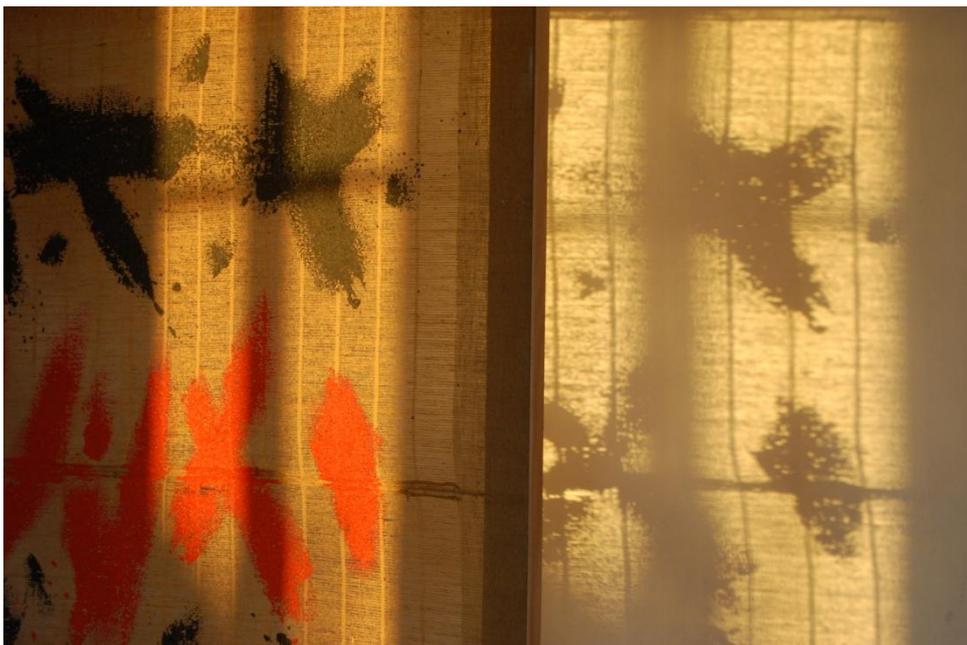
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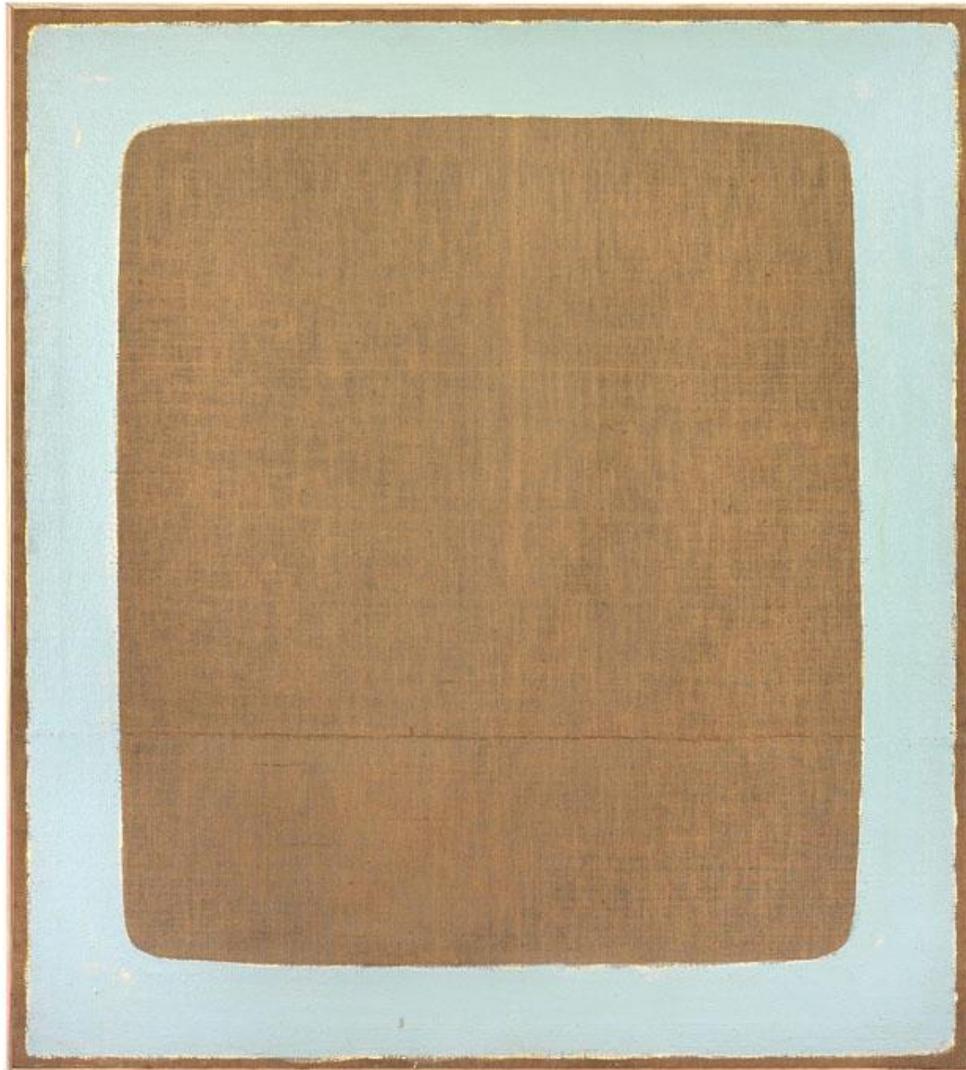
*“Emblema’s work is not about painting, but color and light must be present in every painting. In several paintings from 1966, stripes of opaque color border a transparent area of the canvas, fusing it with the frame; in more recent work, thin, dull shades soak into the canvas and permeate its*

*weave. Emblema, thus, does not intend to purify painting or dispel its basic ambiguity, acts which lead not to creation but to its opposite, imitation. Instead, by practicing a clearly manual, non-creative activity, reworking and thinning out his material, he re-discovers light, space and time, the essential and non metaphoric power of the symbol. By contesting dualism and discovering a possible coexistence between Transparency and Opacity, Rothko became one of the most advanced exponents of modern artistic research. Without claiming to surpass him, Emblema has started an analytical process within Rothko’s synthesis, and today his primary interest seems to be to demonstrate that not all paintings are painted, or in other words, that the painting itself is what one pursues through the act of painting, and the painting’s only significance is its own existence as an object. The painting is the symbol of itself. The historical threshold of painting was probably reached some time ago, but there are undoubtedly still problems to be resolved the only possible way, within the space-time dimension of the canvas”.*

(Giulio Carlo Argan “Dipingere? Meglio detessere” L’Espresso, aprile 1979)



**Detail** (shadows on the wall)



“Senza Titolo/Fascia” 1968  
Tinted soils and ashes on burlap  
200 x 180 cm  
MCA Chicago Collection

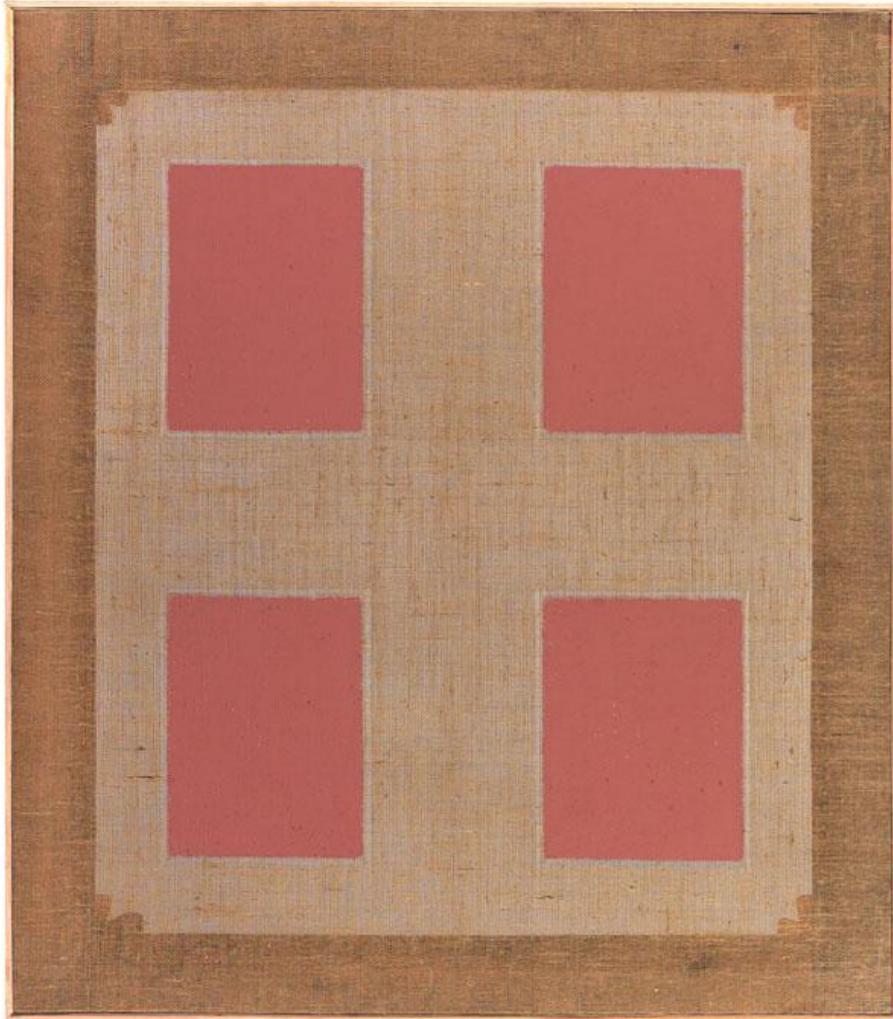
In the pictorial field, beginning in 1950s, Salvatore Emblema applied natural materials directly to the work, such as the 1956 painting scattered with volcanic rock, or the 1959 painting tinted with volcanic ash. His works from the 1960s show a gradually reduced gesture: in paintings from 1965 and 1968, EMBLEMA scratched the pictorial material. Beginning in 1969 and throughout the 1970s, his paintings are even frayed, enabling the eye to perceive the light on both sides of the work. The pictorial journey offered in this exhibition emphasises this attempt to get as close as possible to transparency by subtly playing with the material's shadow: a plastic approach as an oxymoron.

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“Senza Titolo / Materico” 1971  
Wood axes on burlap  
130 x 110 cm  
Artist's Estate Collection

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“Senza Titolo” 1971  
tinted soil on de-threaded burlap  
150 x 130 cm  
Artist’s Estate Collection

Emblema defined his goal as one of “Transparency.” Clearly, he was concerned not with the literal circumstance of transparency - otherwise he could have painted on clear plastic or glass - but with the *perceptual condition* of transparency, the interpenetration of light and substance and the dynamic relationship of an art object to the context of its presentation. This quest became Emblema’s identity. Invariably, his application of pigment to sackcloth became his “look,” the combination of materials that instantly distinguished his artworks from everyone else’s. From the late ‘60s on, Emblema did indeed stay true to a closely maintained, closely examined evolution of forms and

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formats. The jute alone betrays an Emblema artwork, and the restricted but lavishly applied paint (or in certain crucial instances its absence) announces how he may have been exploring light and space at any given time.



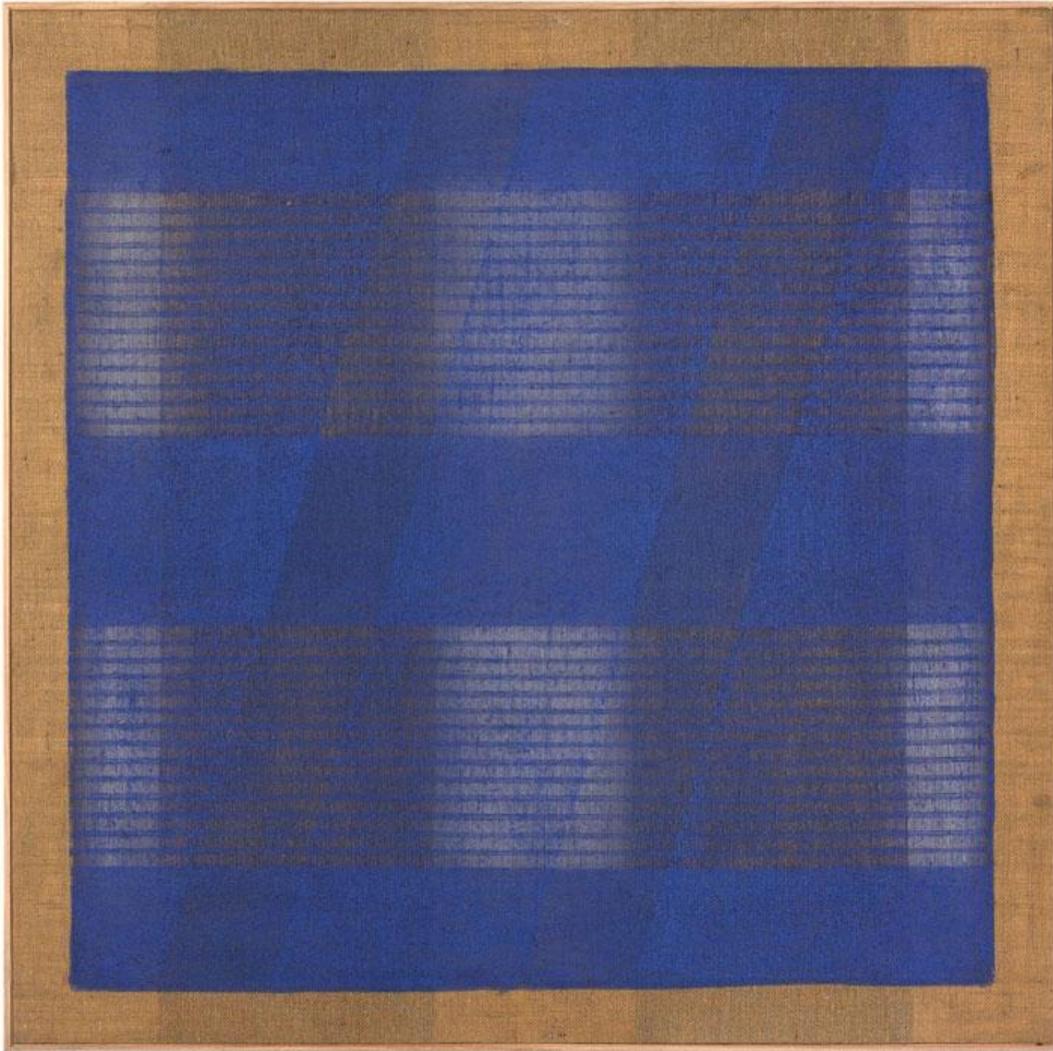
Senza Titolo, 1974  
Dyed overlaid and de-threaded burlaps  
180 x 300 cm  
Private Collection

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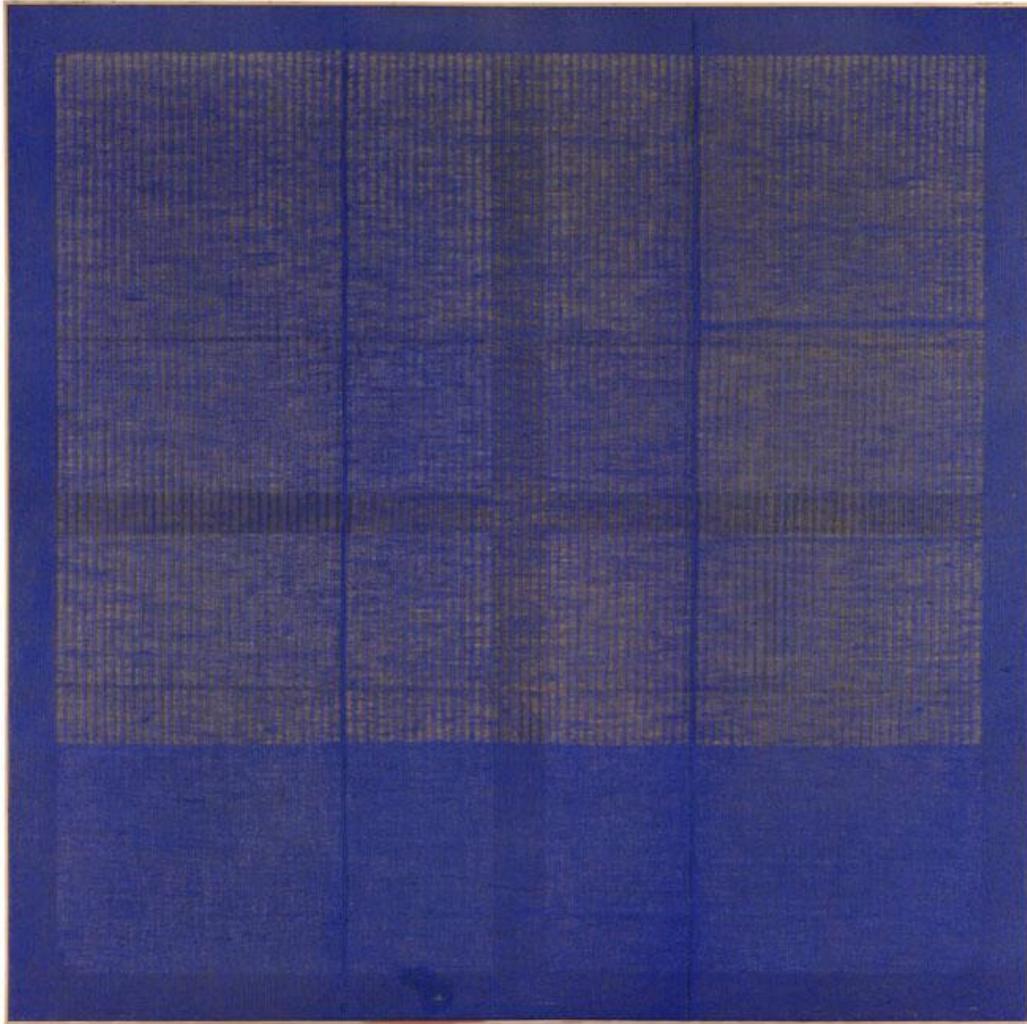
Senza Titolo, 1974  
Dyed overlaid and de-threaded burlaps  
130 x 150 cm  
Artist's Estate Collection

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Senza Titolo / diagonale, 1975  
Dyed overlaid and de-threaded burlaps  
150 x 150 cm  
Artist's Estate Collection

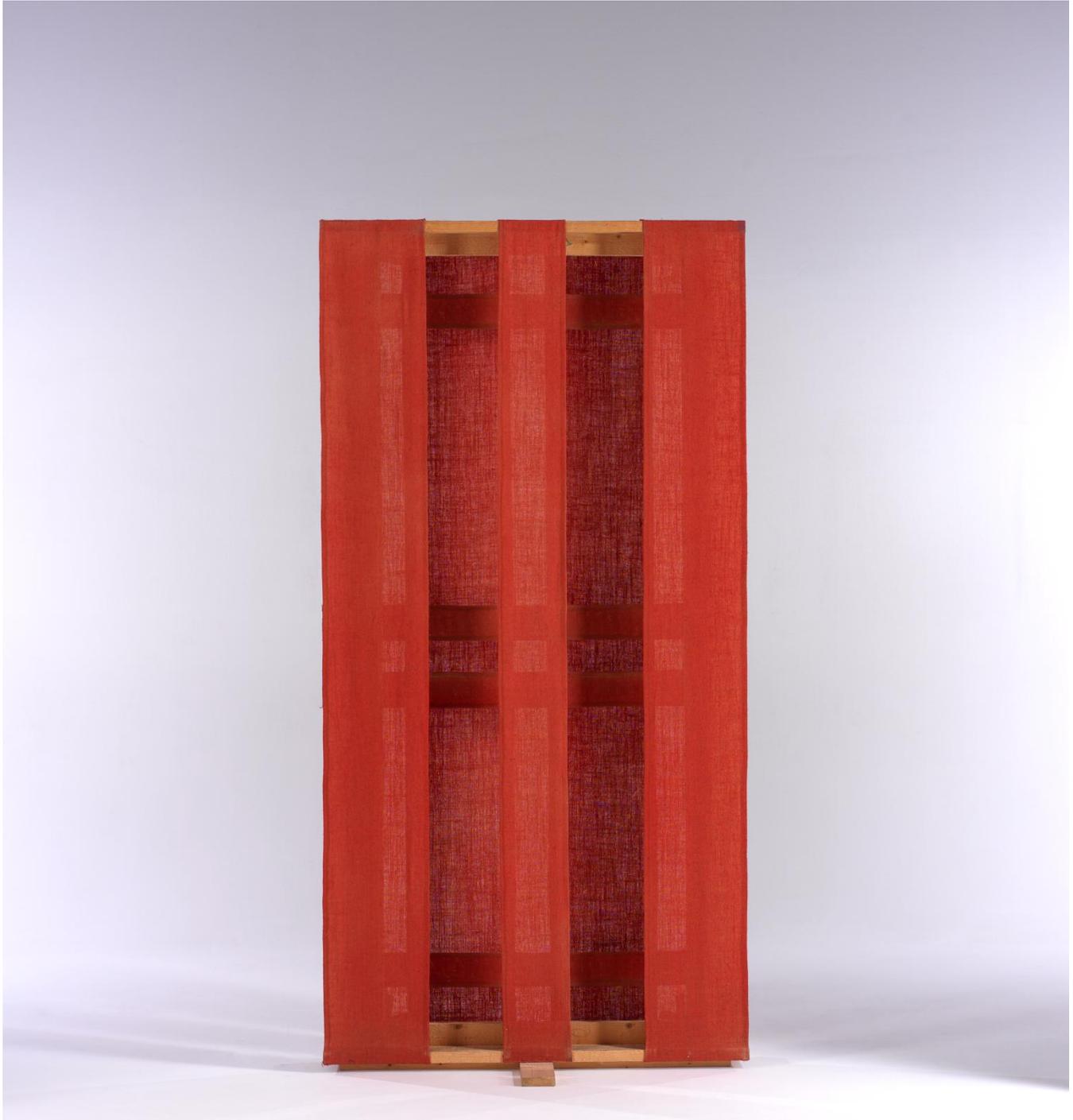
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Senza Titolo, 1978  
Dyed overlaid and de-threaded burlaps  
300 x 300 cm  
Museo Emblema Collection

Through transparency, the artist's installations and paintings interact with existing light and space. He attempted to depart from the conventional plane by making the flat surface transparent. Abandoning shadows to focus solely on clarity, he invited ambient light to enter his paintings and installations without artifice. If chiaroscuro is the use of subtle gradations of light and shade to create depth and drama in painting, it could be said that Emblema revisited this concept in the abstract.

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Senza Titolo / Porta / Structura, 1974  
Self-supporting module made of dyed jute canvases on wooden structure  
215 x 100 x 18 cm  
Artist's estate collection

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Senza Titolo, Bandiera, 1975  
dyed de-threaded jute canvases hanged on self-supporting wooden frame  
180 x 140 x 55 cm  
Artist's Estate Collection

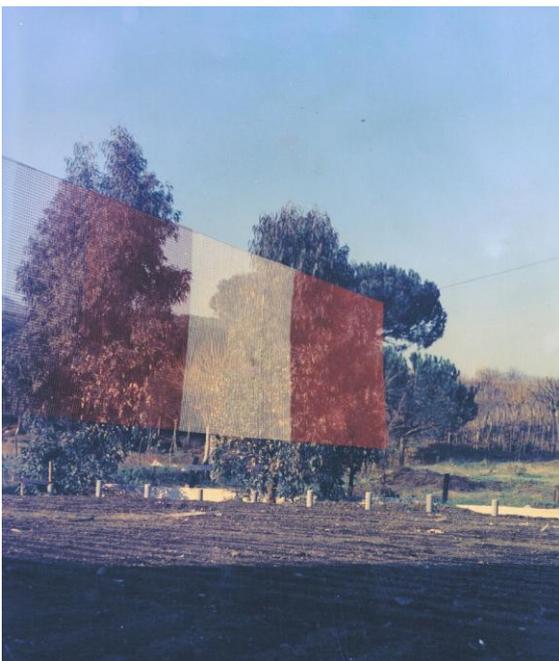
In his earth / environmental art work, Emblema achieved transparency through pictorial interventions on the landscape itself: in 1967, the artist started applying paint created from organic matter directly to the surface of trees. He gradually developed more evanescent installations, such as a stretched jute canvas in the early 1970s, whose transparency let the landscape draw itself, on perforated metallic structures. This work, usually presented outdoors, was painted with a blue, a red and a white that Emblema prepared himself in order to achieve a painting that absorbs light.

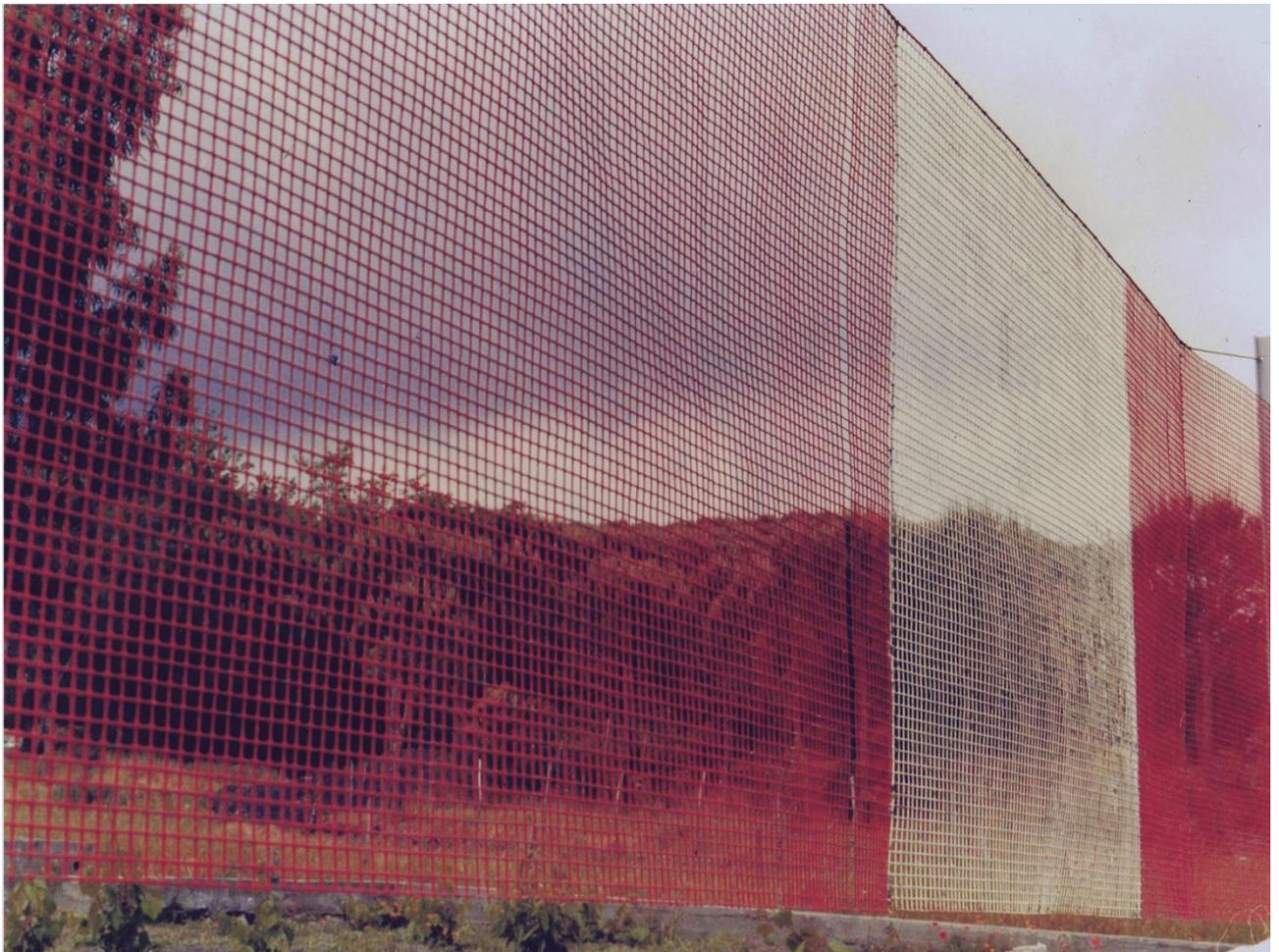
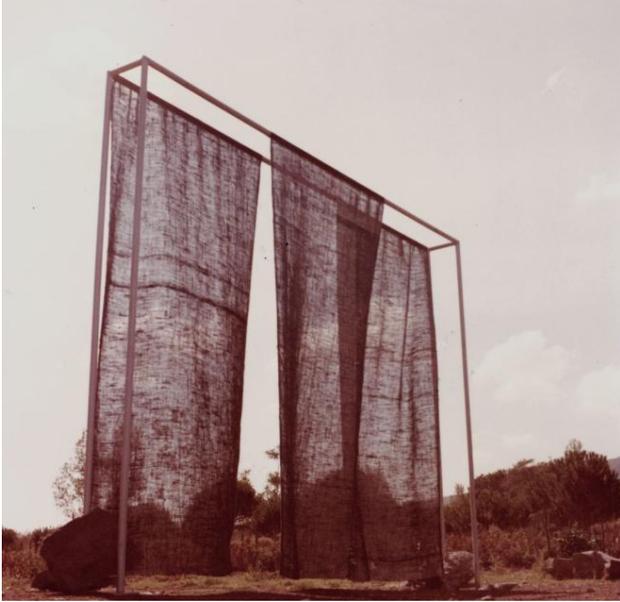
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Survey on landscape / Colored Trees, 1967  
Raw pigments on pine trees  
Ephemeral work

## “Surveys on landscapes” environmental works 1972-1974





June 2013: Salvatore Emblema  
The Italian Cultural Institute, Los Angeles  
by Megan Abrahams



*Salvatore Emblema, Untitled, 1967 (150 X 130 cm.)*

*Transparency*, a captivating retrospective of the work of Salvatore Emblema, is a window into this artist's innovative approach and singular artistic vision. Dating from the mid-1950s to 2005, the 21 artworks presented in this survey still seem refreshingly new -- their timelessness part of the indelible legacy of an artist who

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played a meaningful role in the post-war Italian avant-garde. Among Emblema's most profound influences was the environment of Terzigno, a town near Naples, in the Campania region of Italy, where he was born in 1929, and lived most of his life. Perched on the slope of volatile Mt. Vesuvius overlooking Pompeii, the dramatic landscape, volcanic rock, rich soil -- and surrounding ruins and frescoes - had a combined impact on the artist's sensibilities.

An evident purist, Emblema showed a reverence for nature, texture, shadow, and above all, light. These values are featured prominently in his art, which has the appearance of having been derived -- or perhaps having evolved -- from nature. He did not use conventional paint, but created his own somewhat subdued palette from organic raw matter, including volcanic earth and leaves. As Peter Frank, curator of the exhibition, remarked in an interview at the opening, "The colors weren't out of the tube, they were right out of the ground. All his materials were natural pigments -- compounds he made."

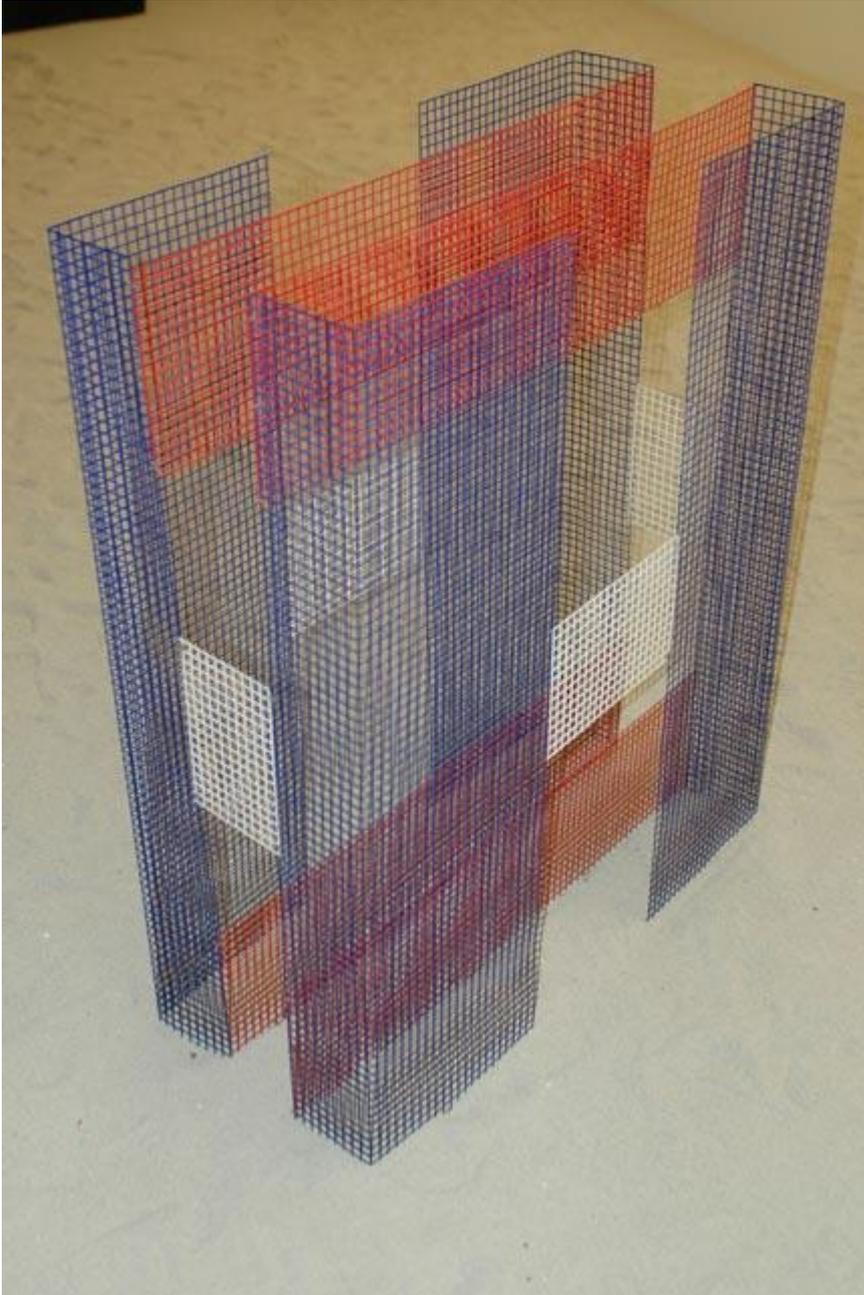
In the earliest work represented here, Emblema used intact organic materials, not even made into pigments. *Untitled (Portrait)* 1956, (60 X 50 cm.), the only figurative piece featured in the retrospective, is a striking and sensitive portrait of Emblema's wife Raffaella, rendered in dried leaves. In this collage, the artist achieved the line and subtle shading to articulate the features and contours of his wife's face in fine detail. Emblema also eschewed canvas, choosing to paint on stretched sackcloth, a practice he began as a young art student, in an effort to save money. Over time, he realized the natural straw color and coarse open weave of this fabric suited his aesthetic, lending a characteristic rawness to his work while allowing light to penetrate between the fibers.

Later in his career, Emblema manipulated the jute, removing some of the threads and inviting light to enter in a deliberate pattern. In a somehow counterintuitive approach, he seemed to be taking away a layer, rather than adding one, but the net effect was that the element of light could play a defining role in the painting. In *Untitled* (1973, 130 X 140 cm.) Emblema removed threads in two horizontal bands across the picture plane, and one diagonal band, so that light -- literal negative space - becomes a component of the composition. Stemming from this process, art historian Giulio Carlo Argan, Emblema's contemporary and critical champion, described the artist's work using the term, Transparency. Taking the practice a step further, Emblema added strands of jute to some of his paintings, as in, *Untitled* (2004, colored earth and jute filaments on dethreaded jute, 100 X 80 cm.) Here, he attached jute fibers to the surface of the painting, adding a layer of texture. The shape of the mounted threads, superimposed on top of the stretched fabric ground, softly echoes through the loose weave onto the wall behind. The shadows cast on the wall become the new background, in effect, adding a third dimension, depth. In *Untitled, (Triptych)*, 1970, colored earth, charcoal and de-threaded jute, 200 X 450 cm. 3 panels) the wood of the stretcher is visible through the rough, partly sheer open weave of the jute material. Like an armature - a skeleton of the painting's structure - the vertical and diagonal lines of the stretcher interplay with the outlines of the frame and the dashes of pigment on the surface.

In the mid-1950s, Emblema received a Rockefeller grant and spent a year in New York. While there, he became friends with American painter Mark Rothko -- who was a pivotal influence on his work. Emblema's compositions of rectangular shapes with soft diffused edges, the attention he pays to the borders - the outer limits of the plane -- are reminiscent of Rothko. With the jute background, and

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Emblema's characteristic subtlety, the connection is more of a hint, a suggestion, a subtle sense of Rothko unplugged. The suggestion is more pronounced in pieces like, *Untitled* (1976, 200 X 150 cm.), a painting with interrelated rectangular shapes in red tones. Still, the work is distinctly that of Emblema, whose spare, pure style exudes an air of simplicity and understatement.



*Salvatore Emblema, Altro Spazio, 1972 (100 X 80 X 40 cm.)  
and Altro Spazio, 1972 (70 X 90 X 12 cm.)*

If chiaroscuro is the use of subtle gradations of light and shade to create depth and drama in painting, it could be said that Salvatore Emblema revisited this concept in the abstract. Dropping the oscuro, Emblema focused his attention on the chiaro to the extreme, inviting ambient light to enter his paintings without artifice. He sought to strip away from the conventional plane, making the flat surface almost transparent. As such, Emblema added literal shadow on the wall, paradoxically creating depth and dimension with refreshing ingenuity. Emblema was passionate about the qualities of color, light and substance, and focused on

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their properties throughout his career. His work intersected movements, like Arte Povera, process art and Minimalism, but he worked mostly in isolation, irrespective of what was going on elsewhere. He died in 2006.

According to Frank, Emblema was quite well known in Italy -- southern Italy in particular -- and northern European countries such as Switzerland and Holland. "Toward the end of his life he exhibited in Latin American countries such as Brazil and Mexico. He'd never lacked for some prominence right from the beginning (mid-1950s), when the Vatican acquired one of his leaf-collage pieces. But, especially after the 1960s, he got caught in the crossfire between various artist, and political, groups and was shunned by various colleagues (Dorazio, Accardi) at least in part for his alliance with a breakaway group from the predominant Communist party. Emblema was himself not particularly political, and shrugged off the shrugging-off. He went back to his native town of Terzigno and worked happily there the rest of his life." Frank said.

In Emblema's work, Frank recognized a significant contribution to the Italian avant-garde, describing the artist as the missing link between Fontana and Burri, and arte povera. "His emphasis on materiality and light comes straight out of those artists of great sensuality and opticality from the 1950s and points to the almost Zen investigation of abjectness and dematerialization at the heart of arte povera's sensibility. Emblema was too involved in painting to be, or be like, Arte Povera, but he relied much less than did Burri or Fontana on gesture, especially on the destructive-creative gesturalities their work displays... Influenced as he was by Rothko, Emblema was one of Italy's few non-geometric, quasi-conceptual minimalists-reductivists," Frank said.

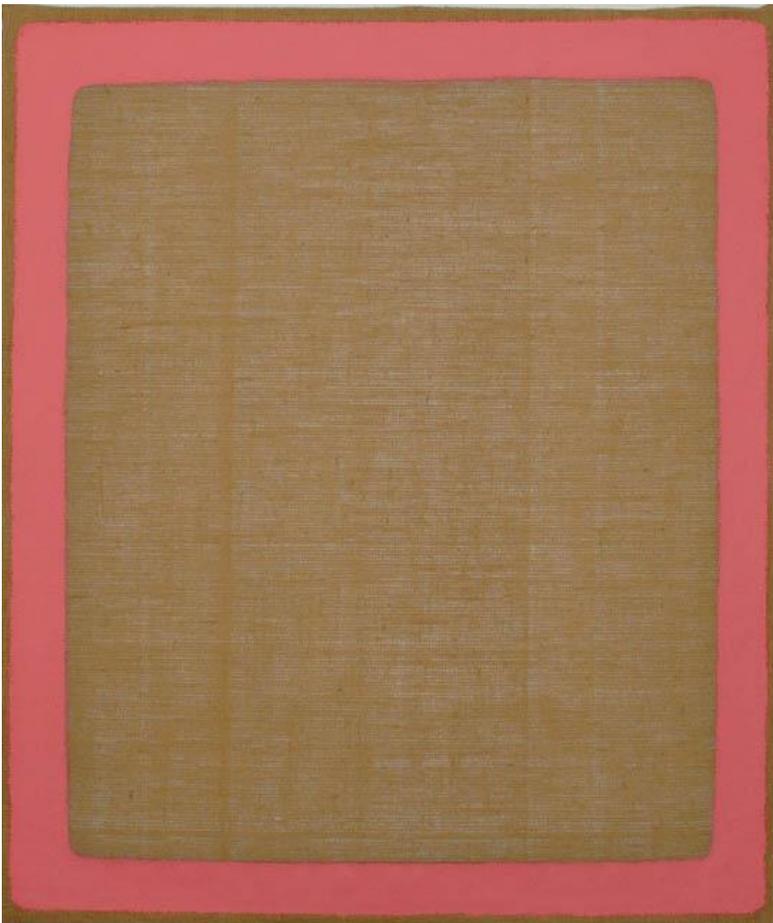
In preparation for this retrospective, Frank traveled to Italy to ensure all the pertinent periods in the artist's development were represented. Organized by Museo Emblema as part of 2013 year of Italian culture in the U.S., the exhibit is absorbing - a catalyst for further investigation into Emblema's life and work. It is heartening that MOCA has recently acquired two paintings from this retrospective.

The first solo exhibition of Salvatore Emblema in LA has special significance as a sort of homecoming for an artist who lived and worked in the U.S. during his career, and was profoundly influenced by American painting. Whatever his influences, they were all filtered through Emblema's own exacting personal point of view. Throughout his lifetime, he demonstrated a consistency in his approach, an underlying continuity of purpose, a commitment to the use of natural media, and the innovative infusion of light.

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Salvatore Emblema, *Untitled*, 2004 (60 X 40 cm)



Salvatore Emblema, *Untitled/Fascia*, 1967 (150 X 130 cm.)

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# HYPERALLERGIC

## Rediscovering Salvatore Emblema

By Hrag Vartanian

The story of artist Salvatore Emblema (1929-2006) says a great deal about the American century and how it inspired and dominated the narrative of art history. A show devoted to Emblema closes this weekend at BOSI Contemporary on the Lower East Side, but seeing it may only answer some of your questions about this Italian artist, who cultivated a dreamy enigma in his work through color, light, and, most importantly, transparency, the title of the exhibition.

During a recent panel discussion on the life and work of Emblema, curator Amnon Barzel explained that transparency has a special meaning for an Italian artist, particularly one from the region of Naples, like Emblema. “The word ‘transparency’ has a political connotation because Italy is not transparent,” Bazel said. “You see through the canvas, you see the landscape ... not as an illusionary one but a real one.”

The majority of the works in *Transparency* glow with a mysterious visual haloing effect that is amplified by the contrast of the bright colors with the rough porous burlap. The Kabbalah’s concept of reduction, which was important for American artists like Barnett Newman, was also integral to Emblema’s work. The Italian met many of the big names of mid-century American art during a two-year sojourn in the States from 1956 to 1958. He visited Mark Rothko’s studio and realized he shared affinities with the American artist’s work. You can see those similarities writ large in this show, where brushy shapes are stacked and forms float near the edges of many of the paintings. Works like “Untitled” (1978) are obvious nods to Rothko’s organization of space and the otherworldliness of his colors, but Emblema has pared things down – often manipulating the jute threads of his surfaces – until they seem on the verge of fading away.

Rothko once asked Emblema why he came to the United States, when Italy was flooded with great art. Like many of his compatriots, Emblema came to the US “looking for confirmation of his work,” another panel participant, curator Renato Miracco, said.

If the influence of New York is obvious in Emblema, the Italian imprint may be a little more subtle. Lucio Fontana, who is best known for his slashed and cut canvases of the 1950s and ’60s, certainly had an impact. As Miracco reminded the audience at the panel, “Fontana didn’t want to destroy the canvas but look behind the canvas.”

That desire to peer into something comes across at BOSI. Emblema used burlap starting in the 1950s, when he traveled to Rome and found a bakery that gave him their old sacks, and the burlap surfaces lend the work an earthy quality that dovetailed with the interests of Italian art movement Arte Povera and its elevation of common materials into art. Many of these works resist the trends of each decade, and over the course of half a century his art seems intently focused on the notions of transparency and ambient color; judging by this show only his colored metal grid sculptures of the 1970s diverge from that tendency.

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When he returned to Italy, Emblema realized his art was possible as he got the “confirmation” he was looking for. That may seem like a peculiar thing to think, but in an era with no art fairs and limited galleries, and in a country with no real contemporary art museum, he must’ve felt like contemporary art was a world away.

Emblema worked in isolation for most of his career, though notably he visited New York again in the mid-1960s, and that certainly impacted his work, since he was far away from the curators, critics, gallerists, and others who could’ve guided his career. Another panelist, Veronique Chagnon-Burke, academic director of Christie’s Education, said it plainly, “[the] art world is a network of dependency,” and Emblema was mostly outside that web of connections.

Yet there remains an enigma in Emblema’s work that I haven’t quite cracked. Paintings like “Untitled” (1965) haven’t settled in my mind. There is a disconnect between the white and yellow frame and the scratched pink field in the center, both of which vie for your attention, while the materials list (ash, carbon, and tinted soil) is perplexing. These works aspire to be more than mere paintings, and he appears to want us to look beyond them, but to what exactly?

*“Could Transparence be a new word for painting? I think so,” Emblema said in a statement about his work. “And if it is true, then we should work hard, because one day we will conceive painting without body, made up only of lights and emotions. Without any canvases supporting them, without any lies justifying their existence.”*

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# ACTS OF MATERIAL, ACTS OF LIGHT: SALVATORE EMBLEMA PAINTS TRANSPARENCY

By Peter Frank

In 1965, during his second stay in New York, Salvatore Emblema, then 35, made the acquaintance of his countryman, Giulio Carlo Argan. The writer, a generation older than the painter and a keen observer of both Italian and international art, had been noting a growing crisis in painting throughout the western world, and he sensed it in Emblema's work as well. Even as he praised that work, Argan challenged Emblema to think about why he painted. Emblema insisted in response that what interested him - color, substance, light, and their effect on the viewer - were painterly concerns. Perhaps, countered Argan, but don't these qualities exist independent of pigment applied to a support? Painting is a historical practice comprising traditional materials, and Argan noted that, like other painters of his generation, Emblema was already pushing beyond that practice, in ways that exposed the facture of painting and implied a release from its tradition. Emblema came to realize that, even as he could, and should, continue to paint, his painting could, and should, concern itself only with color, light, and substance. The effects of transparency he was achieving with the application of pure pigment on sackcloth - more or less raw color applied to the coarse weave of jute fiber - were not the means to something else, but were the goal itself.

Back in Italy, Argan became one of Emblema's most ardent champions. Emblema had others as well; and he had his opponents, which in the contentious, continually politicized atmosphere of Italian cultural discourse also marked him as an artist of significance. Right up to his death early in 2006 Emblema regarded these arguments with bemusement; he was not a scrapper or an ideologue, but a seeker and a contemplator, removed from conflict and monkish in his concentration on a set of rules and questions, broad as that set may have been. Emblema's reputation did suffer from this diffidence, and also suffered from letting high-profile figures like Argan hold him up as an exemplar of thought and practice, especially when such thought and practice lost currency, inevitably, to countervailing concepts and styles.

But even in his heyday Emblema was a problematic figure in Italian art. As Argan recognized in the mid-1960s, the work of his friend related to, and even anticipated, some of the western world's most urgent art movements. But Emblema fit comfortably into none of them, seeming instead to lie across so many, to combine them even as he prefigured them. In this regard he was a missing link between many of the phenomena of late modernism and early postmodernism, and it was necessary for those on the battle lines to make sure he stayed missing.

Salvatore Emblema didn't even come from, or live in, the "right place," artistically. He was born in 1929 in Terzigno, a town resting on the slope of Vesuvius, overlooking Pompeii. It was a precarious perch, and the notorious mountain rumbled to life at least once during the artist's lifetime, but it was home, and Emblema lived and worked there his entire life. During that life he exhibited

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throughout the world, and even in his formative years spent plenty of time in nearby art centers such as Naples and Rome. The sojourn in New York during which he met Argan was his second; during his first, he befriended an American painter who became his single greatest artistic influence. But the single greatest aesthetic influence on Emblema was his native soil, the fertile ground and distinctive rock particular to volcanic regions.

Emblema's heightened sensitivity to natural stuff drew him early in his career to the work of Jean Dubuffet, whom he met in Rome in 1953-4. Dubuffet's evocation and incorporation of natural substances such as gravel, leaves, and butterfly wings, notably in his work around this time, gave Emblema license to work with such crude materials. Such experimentation, however, led Emblema to work not with odd collage sources so much as with coarse materials, to paint on support at least as textured and self-evident as the pigment being applied to it. Emblema originally employed sackcloth as a canvas substitute in his student days in order to save money, but quickly grew to appreciate such coarsely woven jute for its own qualities. Earthy, scumbled, and riven with little gaps that let in light and the contrasting qualities of the wall, jute could be felt and seen and at the same time seen through. Jute became the means to Emblema's ultimate search, and the representation of his ideal.

The young painter was of course already aware of the work being produced by Lucio Fontana and Alberto Burri, the most prominent Italian artists of the postwar era to address issues of materiality, anti-illusion, and the relationship of substance to picture plane and picture plane to visual space. But Emblema was interested less in emphasizing physical facture than in making it begin to disappear. He wanted to dissolve material into light, or at least examine the point at which that becomes a possibility of perception. Argan articulated this for Emblema as an artistic crisis and turning point in 1965; but, as mentioned, another New York encounter a decade before had actually set Emblema on this path.

During the year-plus Emblema spent in New York on a Rockefeller grant in the mid-1950s, he befriended Mark Rothko. The emerging Italian artist, finding himself in the right place at the right time, took in the entire New York art scene, and found Rothko its most relevant and persuasive figure. By the time of Emblema's stay Rothko's interest in issues typical to Abstract Expressionism had waned. By then Rothko was more engaged with the relation of a painting to a viewer, the canvas as a realm of light and space that acts, and relies, upon the viewer's own perception. The viewer was to disappear into the painting - and the painting itself disappear into a higher plane of sight. Such a metaphysics of paint appealed to Emblema, but put him in a quandary: already devoted to the granular weft of jute, how could he achieve Rothko's transcendent state of vision while maintaining such humble, honest - and sensuous - tactility?

Emblema found partial answers in Burri's and, especially, Fontana's practice. But he had to oscillate between the twin "purities" of material and color - the nappy ground and lucent figure, and also the partial transparency of both weave and light - until Argan, himself influenced by and supportive of Fontana and Burri, provided him intellectual and practical context. Certain of Emblema's paintings from the early '60s, pre-Argan, are among his most alluring; although relatively modest in size, hold their own among the color abstraction of the day. But, just as Rothko's example was a revelation for Emblema, Argan's challenge was a breakthrough, giving Emblema permission to assume Rothko's scope in pursuit of

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a parallel but distinctly different goal. It was a goal as dependent on material as on image, one that set the artist in search of light.

From that point, Emblema defined his goal as one of "Transparency." Clearly, he was concerned not with the literal circumstance of transparency - otherwise he could have painted on clear plastic or glass - but with the perceptual condition of transparency, the interpenetration of light and substance and the dynamic relationship of an art object to the context of its presentation. This quest became Emblema's identity. Invariably, his application of pigment to sackcloth became his "look," the combination of materials that instantly distinguished his artworks from everyone else's. From the late '60s on, Emblema did indeed stay true to a closely maintained, closely examined evolution of forms and formats. The jute alone betrays an Emblema artwork, and the restricted but lavishly applied paint (or in certain crucial instances its absence) announces how he may have been exploring light and space at any given time. But what really identifies an Emblema work, what embodies his insight and his impulse, is the ineffable way a painted image, a stroke or a clot or a dash or even foliage-like form, maintains its optical presence while dissolving into its gritty, golden-brown background.

Emblema pursued his metaphysical, if emphatically physical, goal with unstinting fervor throughout his career. He never produced "examples" of his art, only manifestations of his search. He never got into the rut of fabricating "Emblemas," the way so many moderately (and immoderately) successful artists do. He always concentrated on that day's or week's investigation into transparency, into substance and insubstantiality, and his paintings documented and displayed that inquiry. Even his works on paper manage to convey something of this experience without the jute, pushing beyond the "souvenir" status to which they could well have been confined. Emblema was incapable of parodying himself.

In this regard, he continued to answer Argan's challenge for the rest of his life. Other artists from the mid-60s on rejected painting, the art object, even visibility. Certain of them mocked the very pretensions of their fellow artists, criticizing the branding process into which contemporary artistic discourse - and commerce - had forced them. Flying below their radar, Emblema stuck to his scruples, and to his (literally) visionary quest. After Rothko and Fontana, and of course the informel abstractionists into whose world he had emerged in the early '50s, Emblema worked in relative isolation. He anticipated broader developments - like France's Support/Surface, for instance, or even Arte Povera - or backed into them. That said, he was hardly unaware of artistic developments, and his painting (and meta-painting) evinces stylistic shifts responsive to such developments. Later-'60s Earth Art, for instance, prompted him to realize several outdoor installations; but these, too - emerging from and usually taking place in and around Terzigno - were part and parcel of his intimate engagement with nature and "native soil." (He would later fashion sculptural objects and environments out of pieces of volcanic rock, their gridded, mosaic-like application recalling the sackcloth's weave and light-filled porousness.) Similarly, Emblema's paint-less work of the early 70s, realized by removing portions of jute thread in overlaid geometric patterns, clearly responds to minimalism and process art, while the relative gestural quality of works painted in the 1980s takes its cue from that decade's celebration of paint for paint's sake. But Emblema's work rarely if ever entraps itself in a certain period. It clearly comes from an era, responding as it does to the existential and perceptual questions of the 1950s and early 60s. But it is never of an era.

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One movement, however, provides a surprising but logical connection to Emblema - even though he could have been only dimly aware of it, and then only the work of a few of its practitioners. The Light-and-Space tendency in California art has (until recently) had little currency outside its home state. Many artists associated with Light-and-Space have exhibited in New York since about the time Emblema last lived there, and have gained an increasing appreciation since then in Europe as well. But their overarching "movement" was rarely presented during Emblema's lifetime as a notable, coherent, and timely tendency. Timely it was, however, and remains; and it remains pertinent to Emblema's research as well. "Transparency," Emblema's expressed goal, was also a goal of Light-and-Space artists, whose very label implies a search for the interpenetration of something and nothing. Their preoccupation with materials in the search for this "transparency" clearly recalls Emblema's. And their ingenious engagement of the viewer's optical abilities, and limitations, echoes (and, admittedly, exceeds) his. Indeed, an offshoot of Light-and-Space practice in California, identified in the 1970s as "material abstraction," mirrors Emblema's own preoccupation with the sensual as well as perceptual nature of materials. Perhaps he ought to be regarded as a Light-and-Space artist *avant la lettre* - one well removed from California, but peculiarly Californian. All that separated Emblema from his Light-and-Space coevals and their "material abstraction" successors, besides geography, was his enduring allegiance to paint - tying him as much to Rothko's New York passion as to California dreaming.

Such "perceptualism," as Light-and-Space artist-theorist Robert Irwin labeled it, need not have been confined to the American west coast. The Campania region of Italy boasts its own provocative light, and, enveloped in this light, Emblema found his space, and his materials, on the side of a local volcano - the very volcano that had spawned a profound philosophical discussion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century about the "sublime." Like his Light-and-Space compeers (who were all but invisible to him) and their successors in material abstraction, Salvatore Emblema sought a kind of sublime in art that rendered the image superfluous, the object mysterious, and qualities of light and form themselves the entire reason for looking at art. This experience of the thing as no-thing, this transparency among materials and shapes, comprises the contemporary sublime.

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