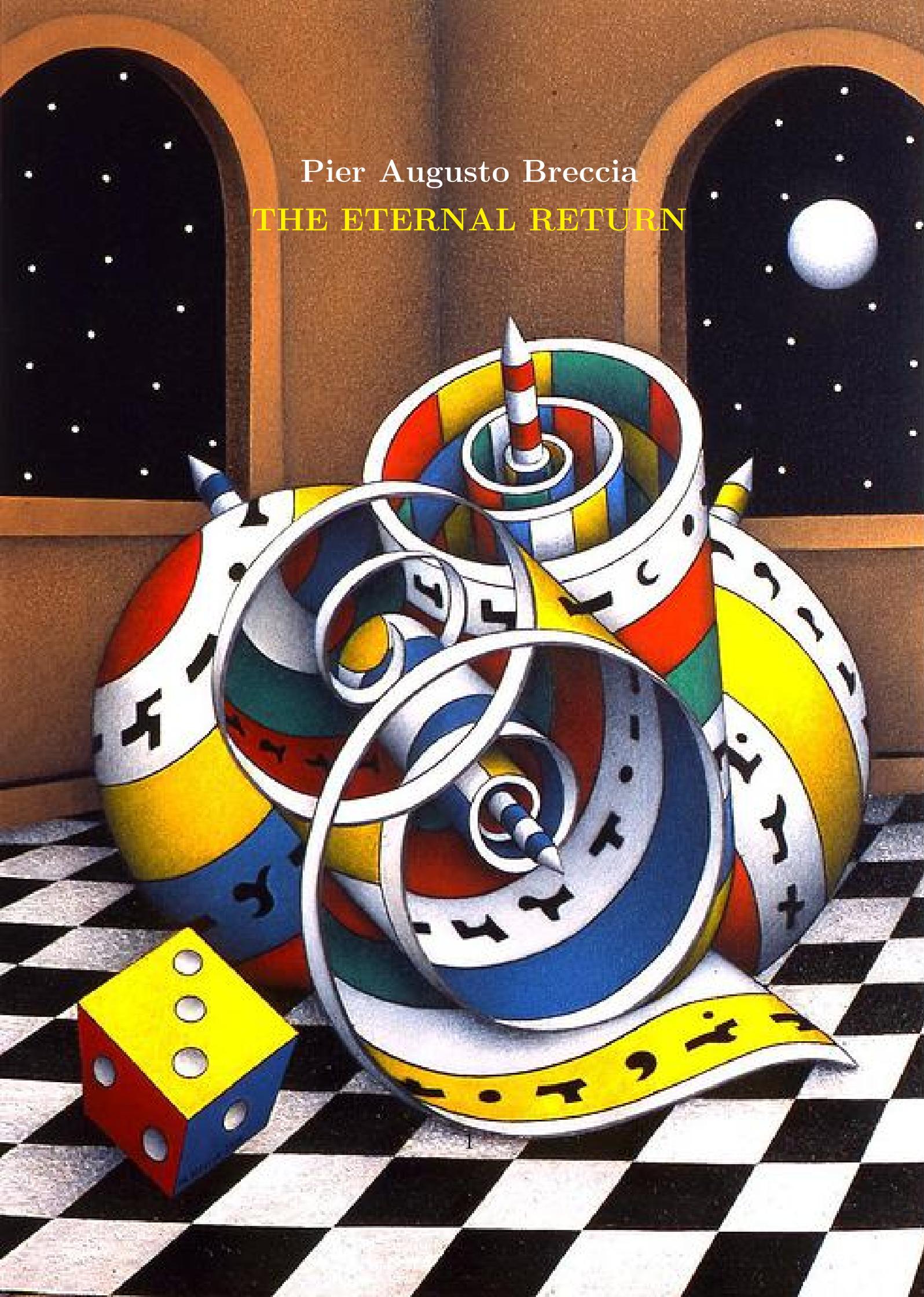


Pier Augusto Breccia
THE ETERNAL RETURN



The Eternal Return

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Painting on the front cover:

Qumran

2006, oil on canvas

70x100 cm.

Painting on the back cover:

Open book

2005, oil on canvas

70x50 cm.

The Eternal Return

Pier Augusto Breccia

Translated by Monica Borg

Introduction

This short story is an extraordinary paradox, where the sense of the unmeasurable and, thus, incomprehensible is brilliantly displayed through the eye of rationality. Rationality is eager to measure and comprehend, but struggles to comprehend the inevitable and unacceptable destiny of all human beings: death. The main character, Professor Giovanni Maria del Corvo, deals with his obsession about death and losing his identity forever. He does it without what he considers an unnecessary comfort: love and faith.

His life resembles the journey of science; a journey towards axiomatization. The very field in which Professor del Corvo is an expert, the field of probability, has travelled in a most iconic way, ending its long journey into the realm of mathematics. Probability, from being an undefinable entity -which only exists through the senses of the subject as *belief*, *chance*, or through its connection to the object as *frequency*- has now its own identity and is equipped with an arsenal of axioms. Namely, probability is a measure; the measure of uncertainty. Professor del Corvo knows well and he is determined to go further. As the personification of modern science, Professor del Corvo pins down the underlying causes from which apparent randomness results. Nevertheless, the act of *measuring*, which the Professor masters so well, can only concern “measurable” things; that is, objective, concrete things, which do not vanish under our nose as we take out our ruler or are not even there, perhaps not yet. Yet, the rational space becomes very elusive if what one can measure must somehow belong to the same space of the ruler.

What happens then when Professor del Corvo drags the mystery of death into the space of his ruler? Everything can be measured and understood, even God and eternal life. And all this is proved with certainty by the theorem of the eternal return, whose most fundamental corollary shows the Professor how to secure his place back on earth. His return is guaranteed without any need to invoke faith because God’s space in the Professor’s mathematical equation is clearly identified; so clearly that His visibility to the eye of reason makes faith simply unnecessary. The painting on the cover, “Qumran”, gives a different point of view

and answers the above question with a paradox. The Bible scroll with its mysterious language is fully comprehended by the rational space of the three Cartesian axes, yet, at the same time, it completely escapes it, unfolding into an unmeasurable space generated by the object itself.

Reason cannot resolve the paradox of the Qumran. Following the lines of the unfolding scroll simply makes one lost. The space, the perspective, everything is impossible, but at the same time so many readings of the inner space of the scroll become possible. Which one is the right one? Perhaps, a random guess might tell. Yet, even a dice, which has mysteriously escaped the laws of physics, stands in perfect and impossible balance unable to guess. However, the eye of imagination does not sense the impossibility and the many *in*-possibilities of the Qumran as a mistake or as the output of chaos. On the contrary, everything just stands and goes as it should, but not for the “right reason”.

To the reader who is not familiar with Breccia’s art, “The Eternal Return” can be the door into Breccia’s world of imagination. A world where the mystery is revealed in the form of unmeasurable space. The Qumran, as well as the selected paintings accompanying this story, acts as a counterpoint rather than illustration to the story and shows the mystery from the point of view of imagination rather than reason. If Breccia’s paintings were under the lens of reason alone, reason itself would evaporate into a cloud of paradoxes, making the unmeasurable incomprehensible and thus renewing the mystery. This sort of immunity of the mystery to the assaults of rationality, congenital to Breccia’s art, is the canvas behind “The Eternal Return”.

Adriana Enoksson

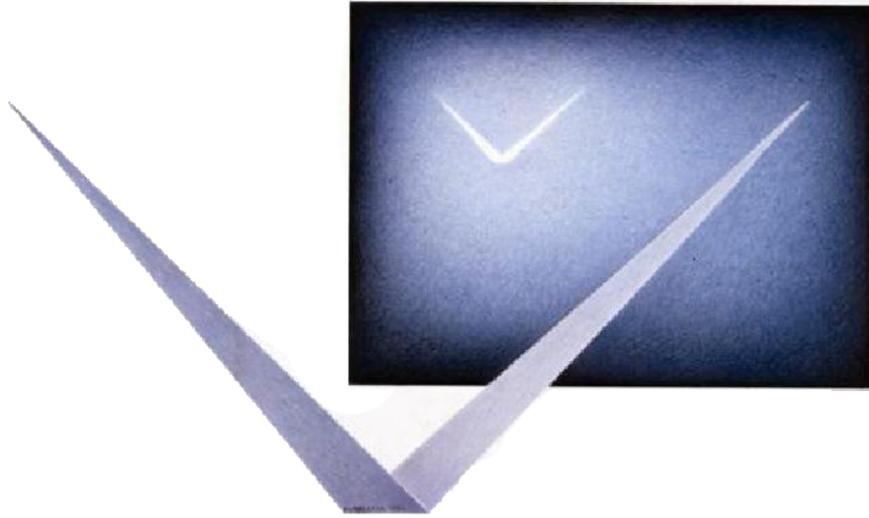
“Imagination never kills the truth,
it simply moves it further on”

Pier Augusto Breccia

The Eternal Return

Giovanni Maria del Corvo had his first encounter with death at the age of eight, when he was still being called Giannino. But it was not until two years later that he started to understand what it really meant.

It first happened when Paolo died. Paolo was one of his playmates of the same age. He was told about Paolo's death by his parents, who broke the news with an expression of resigned anguish on their face accompanied by a thousand caresses and just as many words of comfort and reassurance. The other kids were told in a similar manner; a pack of little boys who shared a passion for football, wrestling, hide-and-seek, or simply just messing about, racing and making a racket in the little parks in the neighbourhood. All of them knew that Paolo had a weird illness. They'd all overheard grown-up talk punctuated with words like blue syndrome: a heart disorder which made the face and lips turn a bluish hue and all the more so when games got a bit rough. Occasionally, Paolo, their little friend, would stop dead in the middle of their games; he'd crouch down on the floor, crunch both knees up to his face till he got his breath back and the colour flowing back into his cheeks. They all thought it was just very funny and never gave it a thought. None of them really took it seriously. But one night Paolo's heart stopped beating; and the next day their little friend did not turn up to play. There and then, they never asked. They carried on playing as usual, making a racket, cracking jokes, running around and squabbling.



Absolute spirit, 1984, pencil on paper, 70x50 cm.

Then they were told, some in the afternoon, some in the evening, some the following morning; all of them were told that Paolo had died. When they met up again, they had a little chat about it but then proceeded to play as usual. But that day, they shouted less, laughed less, squabbled less, and had a bit less fun. A strange calm settled over them, but that did not keep them from playing their games as usual.

Giannino, being the son of a doctor, was familiar with the idea of death. He tried to explain and tell everyone that Paolo would never come back to play. Yet, deep down, at the bottom of his heart, he too found it hard to believe that this had happened, and perhaps so did everyone else.

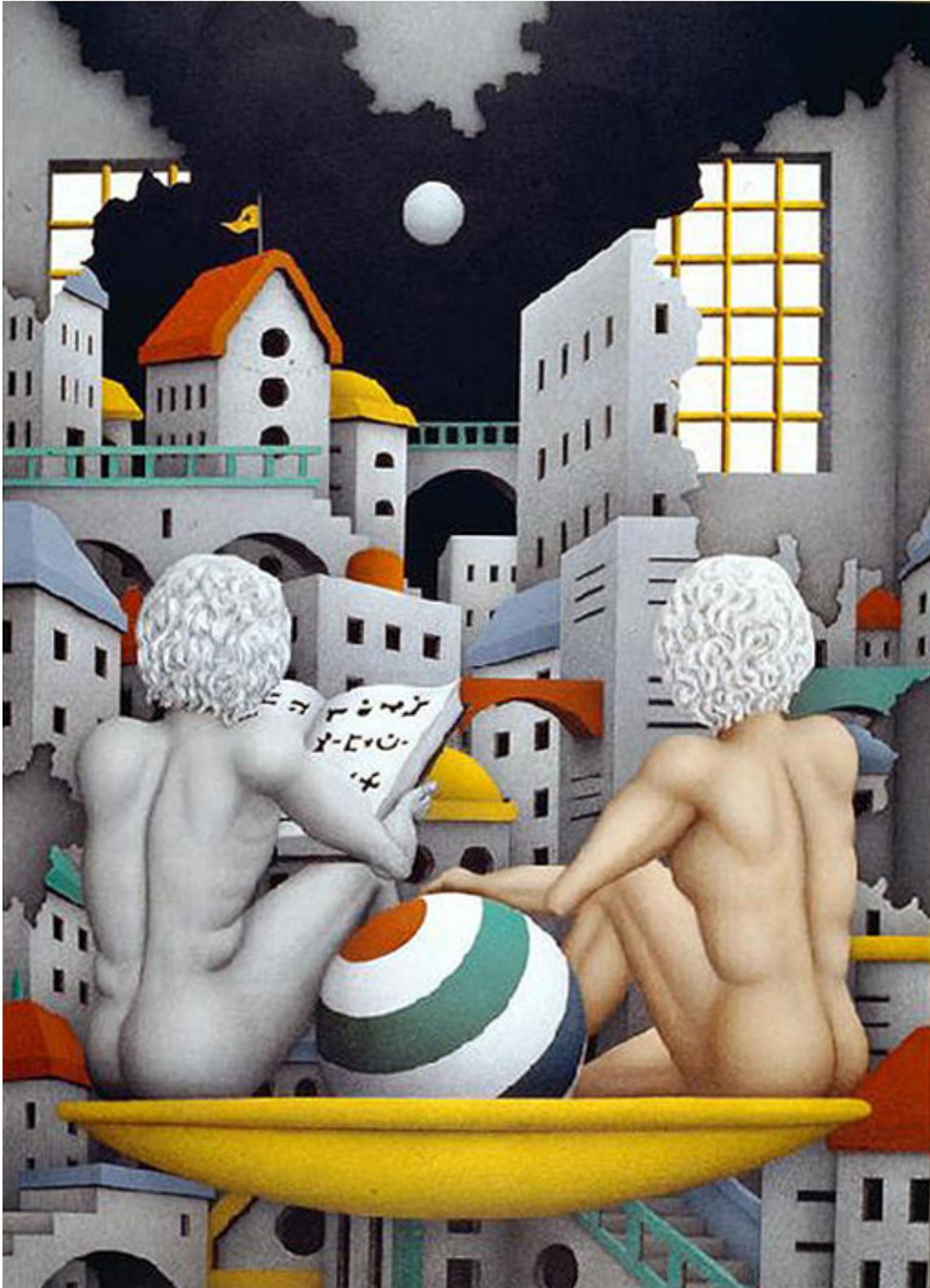
It all really sank in at Paolo's funeral. They were all in church, that morning. Some of them were accompanied by their parents; some had come on their own but they were all duly dressed up for the occasion. They had lined up in the front benches. Standing tall and composed,



The bay of the angel, 2012, oil on canvas, 100x140 cm.

they just stood there taking in each and every word chanted by the priest, responding to his gestures, riveting their heads and gazing curiously at him as he walked round the little flower-strewn coffin, blessing it with drops of water and whiffs of holy incense. What Giannino could not understand, and neither could, he then suspected, any of his mates, was why Paolo's parents and sisters were so sad and why they were sobbing so much. Could they not feel the calm that fell over the crowd every time the priest uttered Paolo's name? Could they not understand what the priest was saying? Could they not see his solemn gestures? Surely, Paolo was having a great time; the most exciting time ever. Paolo, the kid with the blue lips, the kid who never won a race and was laughed at each time he fell to the floor, crouching like a frightened puppy, now stood triumphant at centre stage. He was being blessed and glorified. He was being honoured with tears, solemn ceremony and incense. He had at last broken free from the shackles of his funny illness. As the priest said, and everyone nodded in agreement, Paolo was now flying with the angels in heaven in eternal bliss. Giannino could not help but conclude that Paolo had simply become invisible; he was still there, somewhere and most likely he was standing here right next to him. He instinctively turned sideways. Not that he could see him, but he just knew it, he felt that Paolo was standing right there beside him. He even felt a wee bit envious about his friend's extraordinary piece of good luck. "Lucky chap!" he thought thinking of Paolo as he flew recklessly in the light with a host of angels, just like the ones frescoed high up on the cupola which was flooded with 'eternal light . . . amen'. With these words the funeral service was brought to an end.

On his way out, Giannino lingered at the entrance to chat a little with his mates. He reckoned that they, too, had come to the same conclusion: namely that Paolo had become invisible and was far better off than they were. One of them, remembering the words spoken by the priest, even went so far as to crack a little joke: 'Not bad; not bad at all! From blue syndrome to the blue sky! . . . not bad at all!' They all burst out laughing. That afternoon they went back to play as usual but each and every one of them was also secretly trying to work out where exactly in the park the now invisible Paolo would be.



Equation in two unknowns, 1997, oil on canvas, 140x200 cm.



Time of times, 2013, oil on canvas 100x140 cm.

So had it come about that Giovanni Maria del Corvo, at the tender age of eight, had already had his first reckoning with death. That particular experience, however, never troubled him much, given that Paolo continued to stay by his side, as if nothing had happened. There was even the odd occasion or two when he sorely regretted not being able to be invisible like his little mate. This happened particularly when, after one of his endless misdemeanours, he found himself crouching under the table or hiding in some corner of the house, trying to get away from his father's punishments. A true biblical man! That's what his father was! Even more so, each time he managed to grab hold of his son - "Here's a good beating by the rod" and "better straighten the tree while it's still young" - he would hear him mutter in solemn prayer. His dad had his own ways of reciting the Scriptures. On these occasions, his friend Paolo would come to mind and as he curled into a tight ball he just wished he was invisible. But the unfortunate blows inflicted by his father soon brought him back to earth reminding him he was far from dead.

Sacred Scriptures aside, his father was a man who commanded great respect. "Great medic" some patients would be heard saying, or, "great professor" some colleagues would mutter, after consulting with him on a particularly difficult case. For him, his father was simply someone he looked up to. He admired him for just about anything he did. He took on his advice and teachings with a kind of reverential awe and acknowledged his authority so much that he was prepared to put up with almost anything from him, including, though this admittedly was far from his liking, his frequent reproaches and punishments.

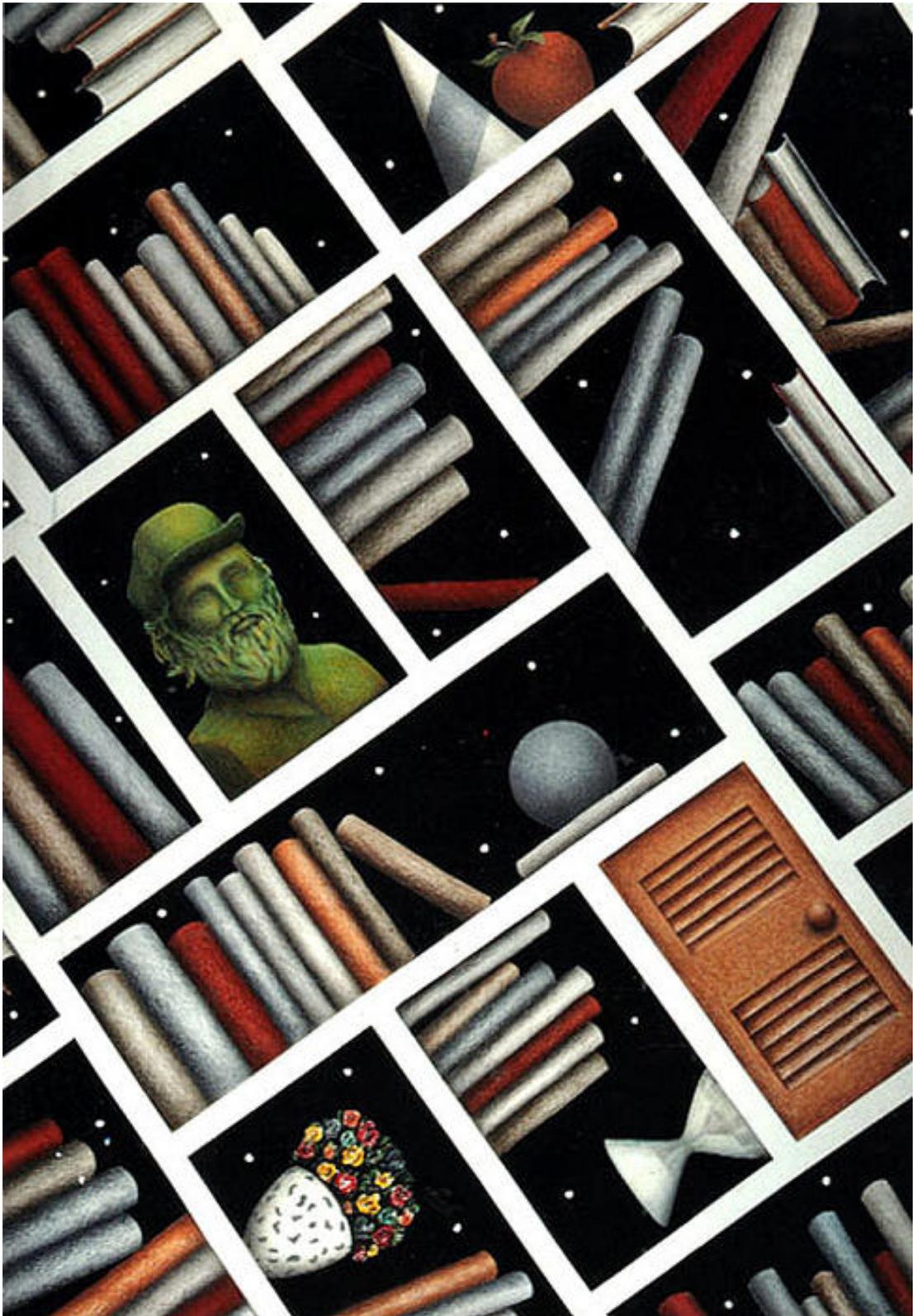
So his little boy's heart just swelled up with pride when one day he heard his mother announce that it was time for him to leave the small room he shared with his sister and move to the larger room where, twice a week, his father used to receive his patients. It was very special, that room was, with its antique furniture and its austere looks. At the far end of the room, just by the window, a dark rectangular wooden table, with feet carved out like a lion's paws, dominated the room. To the right there stood a massive wardrobe in the same style with two doors paneled with opaque yellowing glass that rested on a single drawer at the base. This, too, came with carvings to match the other pieces of

furniture in the room. Three leather chairs with huge arm rests, one bigger than the others, were carefully arranged so that the largest one, the professor's, stood behind the table facing the two smaller chairs opposite. Lastly, on the right, just by the doorway, a precious wooden chest added a final finishing touch to the sophisticated antique look of the study. The place where he was to sleep consisted instead of a more modern sofa bed. This had also been meticulously chosen to fit in with the rest of the furniture. It stood to the left of the room, opposite the massive wardrobe, and was crowned by a number of elegantly framed certificates, diplomas and professional awards that hung on the wall above the headstand. The older bed, which had formerly been used for the medical visits, stood covered with a sheet, hidden away at the far end of the room, wedged between the wardrobe and another door that connected the studio to the rest of the apartment.

It was here, in this room, that Giovanni Maria del Corvo, now aged ten, was to have his second encounter with death. But this time the experience was to leave him scarred for life. Before it happened, he had just about happily settled in, in his new room, feeling extremely proud and happy with the extraordinary piece of luck that fate had reserved for him. He would swell up with self-importance every time he sat on that throne, spreading his books and notebooks out on the massive top of his lion-pawed table. It felt good, and he felt happy studying there. He would shut the doors, do his homework, read. Occasionally, he would stretch out on the sofa or go and have a little peak out of the window. He just loved being seen there whenever his mates came to visit, although none of them had started calling him 'professor' yet. Whenever he felt the urge to play, all he had to do was slip back into his sister's little room, where several of his toys, clothes, books and other belongings had been left behind. His new study cum bedroom had very little storage space in it, and this meant that he could not possibly fit all of his stuff in there. The only possible space available was inside the wardrobe. But that was strictly out of bounds and reserved for his father's things, the real professor, the only one allowed to access, to the sound of several turns of his keys, the doors and drawer of this impregnable fortress.



Ludoteca, 2003, oil on canvas, 100x140 cm.



Scientia, 1992, pencil on paper, 70x100 cm.

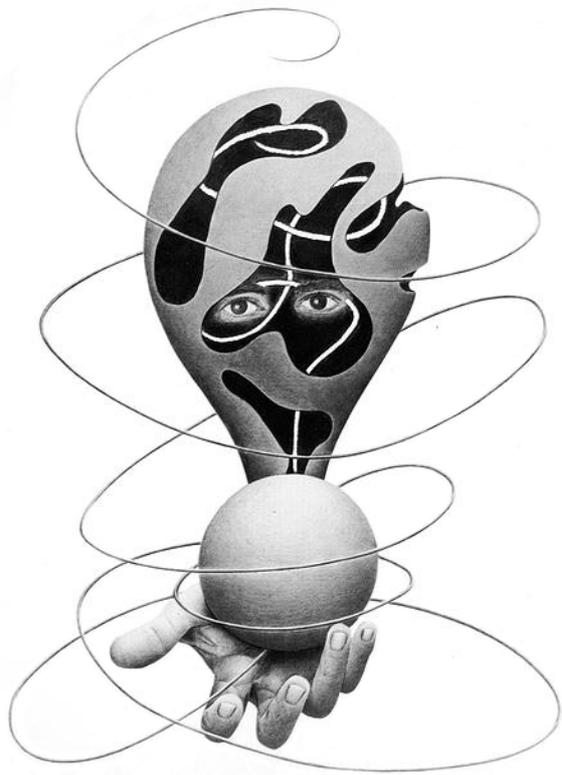
Now every child, we all know, is blessed with a vivid imagination and Giovanni was certainly no exception to the rule. If anything, he excelled in it. Each time he saw his father march towards and away from the secret doors of that castle, he wasted no time in casting a surreptitious glance at its content, making mental notes and tracing his imaginary treasure map. Yes, a treasure map! Because right there, on the middle shelf, buried under heaps of books, magazines and surgical instruments, there must have been something particularly precious, something his father was guarding and wanted to kept to himself. The said treasure was a roundish object, more or less the size of a rugby ball; it was wrapped up in a white cloth which had turned yellow with age. This thing was so different from everything else around it that it stood out like a sore thumb from amongst the thousands of other things that he had seen inside there: objects he had mentally tagged as trivial and insignificant. What on earth was that thing? Why was his father hiding it? Why didn't he ever move it, or place it elsewhere? How long had it stood in there guarded under lock and key? Why had it been wrapped up in that yellowish cloth? In fact, Giovanni was not looking for answers. What really fascinated him, what really tickled his imagination was the secret itself, the secret for its own sake. He was so awestruck by the mysterious aura hovering over the object that, each time his gaze fell on that wardrobe, he just started asking himself the same old questions. Solving the mystery, by finding out what was in there, would simply spoil all the fun. But at that age he was far too young to know.

However, as we all know, children's curiosity is so overwhelming that it would sooner or later have the upper hand over the pleasure of mystery as such. Curiosity prompts the object to be unveiled and the object itself is the only one able to answer. And this was how, "one fine day", so to say, Giovanni was to find out about the object and the answer.

That afternoon, the autumnal sky hung heavy and low in grey leaden clouds. Beads of water were trickling down the window panes from the light but persistent drizzle which had been falling since morning. Giovanni could be found studying in a halo of light that fell from the lamp on the massive table. A few minutes had gone by since his

father had come into the study and opened the wardrobe to fish out some book. Suddenly, as he stood there, the phone rang followed by talk of medical matters. Then, as if to stop interfering with his son's concentration or, more likely, to make sure he would not overhear what he was saying, the "professor" decided to take the call in the next room. The wardrobe door was left open. The keys were left behind in the key-hole and were still swinging from side to side like a pendulum. It was that soft nearly imperceptible tinkle that got him, making him feel as if he had been hypnotized. He stood up, walked to the wardrobe, flung its doors open, stared at the mysterious parcel, cupped his hands delicately around it, carried it to the table and placed it on top. His father was still on the phone. He could hear him in the distance but could tell that he was still deep in conversation; the call would be a long one. He simply could not let his chance fly out of the window.

The mystery treasure now stood there, staring at him from the top of the table. The time had come. He needed to find out what it was. He sat down, shone the lamp on the mysterious bundle and with great caution started to unwrap it, taking note of each crease so that, once he'd placed it back, no one would be able to tell it had been handled. Something started to show. Something white with a hard shiny surface and a rather unfamiliar texture. He took a few guesses: the crust of one of those forms of cheeses given as a thank you gift to the "professor" by some grateful farmer . . . a white chocolate Easter egg that had aged with time after sitting there for so long . . . one of those plastic objects that doctors were known to handle . . . an invaluable work of art offered as



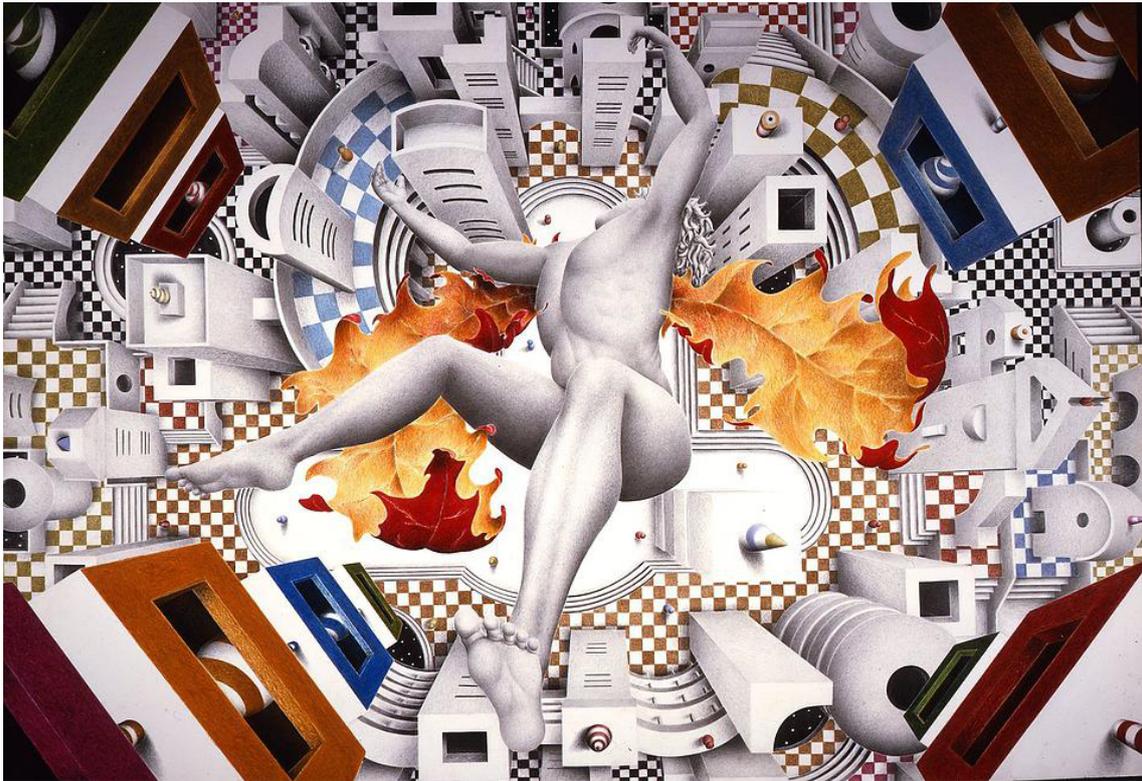
Self-portrait, 1980, pencil on paper 50x70 cm.

a gift by some famous sculptor. As his hands ran over the mysterious object, peeling back the cloth it was wrapped in, his imagination ran off with him, galloping all over the place. He also went so far to think it was an ivory item that had been illegally imported from Africa. That made sense and explained why it stood hidden away in the wardrobe. The final flap of the cloth, now no longer supported by the rest of the fabric, slid to the side and flopped onto the table revealing its unexpected content. He jolted back on his chair, his hand slapping the object that now stood staring at him through its hollow sockets. It swiveled sideways, twice, perhaps three times; its top fell over onto the table top. He jolted back again, this time so violently that he knocked his knees against the table. The object jumped too, clamping its jaws before it toppled sideways landing on one corner of its lop-sided toothless grinning mouth. His secret treasure now stood there revealed, right before his very eyes. Giovanni Maria del Corvo, now aged ten, found himself staring death straight in the face. For the very first time he could see what death really looked like, what it really meant. It was as if that human skull, which had been carefully sectioned and reassembled to give a lesson in anatomy, was now standing there before him to teach him that death and being invisible were two completely different stories. But he had no time to waste, no time to stop and think. He needed to act fast: put the skull back together, bundle it up exactly as he had found it, put it back onto the shelf in the wardrobe before his father finished his phone call. Giovanni never understood how on earth he had managed to sort everything out so quickly. The anticipation of the terrible punishment that awaited him prompted his hands to move swiftly, despite the gutting feelings that had been triggered by his painful discovery. When he came back, the “professor” noticed nothing. He did not see that his son was pale and shaking. He locked up the wardrobe doors, flung a furtive smile at Giovanni and left the room quietly.

There is nothing worse than having a trauma and not being able to tell anyone about it, all the more so when the person in question happens to be a child. Overwhelmed by this larger than life experience, he felt he needed some tender loving care. Not that caring adults were wanting in his life; there were plenty of them fussing over him both at home and further afield. But the sense of guilt at having done something



The protagonist, 1981, pencil on paper, 50x70 cm.



The fall, 1986, pencil on paper, 100x70 cm.

he wasn't supposed to have done kept him from pouring it all out to someone. The cause for all his obsessions was to remain a locked secret throughout his adult life. That evening, together with that autumnal rain, the angels had fallen from the sky. He had realized, there and then, it simply did not add up! For how on earth could the dead be flying with the angels above the clouds when their skulls had been left behind, here on earth, for everyone to see? So that was what really happened! That was how human beings, Paolo included, would end up after they died. When he thought about all this, he could not fall asleep. He woke up several times in the middle of the night, screaming and sobbing. Lying in bed opposite that wardrobe did not help much either. He could not possibly stop thinking or obsessing about that skull. Sooner or later he, too, would die. He would have to lie motionless and still, cramped in that position, just waiting for his head to turn into a skull. Sometimes he would just practice lying still for a few minutes, just to get a feel of what it would be like to be dead. This experiment

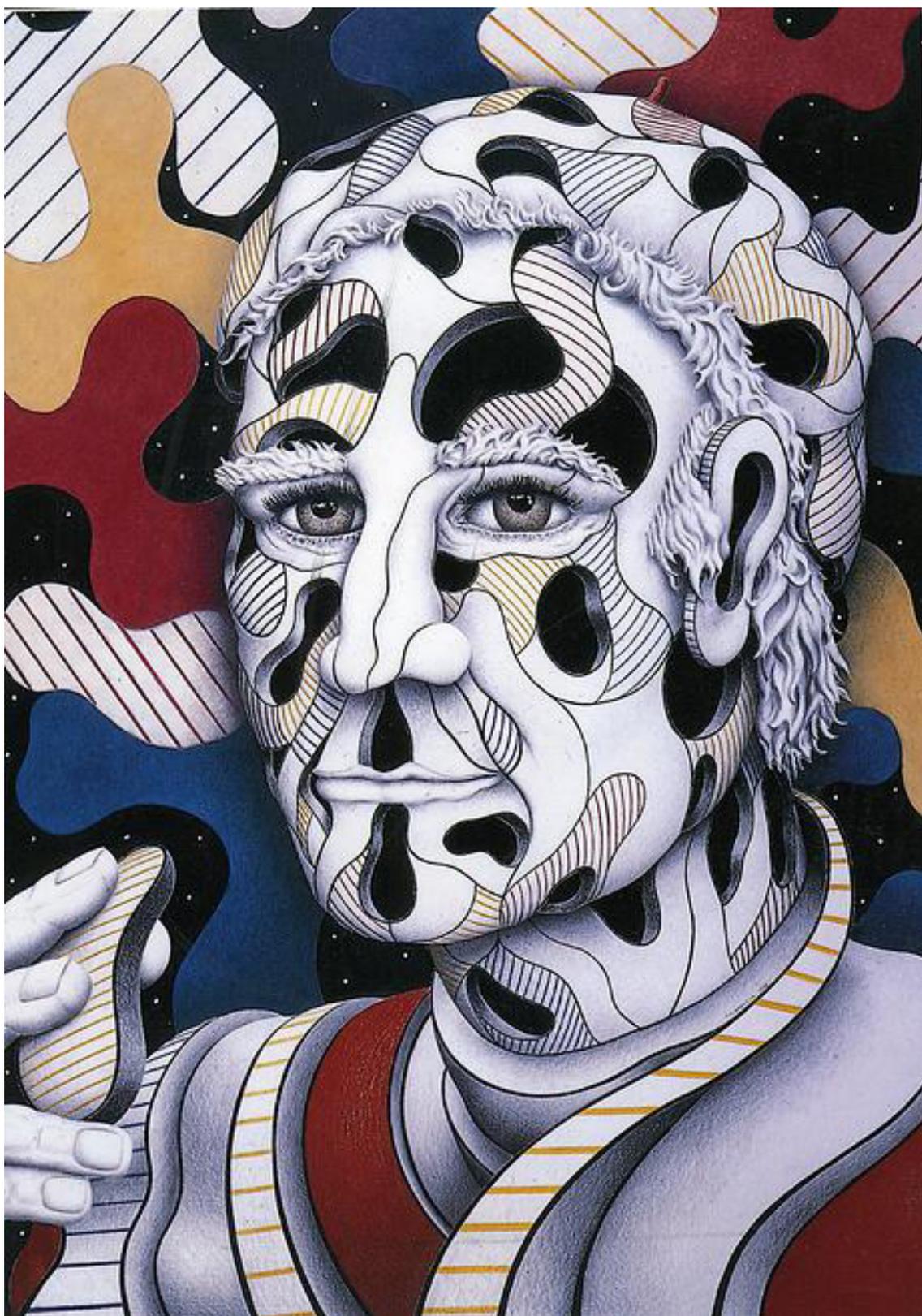
invariably ended in tears; and his mother rushing to his bedside in the middle of the night, asking him questions, comforting him, trying to calm him down. “Mother, I’m scared of dying!” She would reply that some things were not for children to bother their little heads about and that anyway children were angels and just like angels they would never die. Comforted by her words, he would go back to sleep. Not that he ever took her seriously, but at least he felt that, with her so close, he could not possibly die. Not that night at least.

Sometime later he started obsessing with yet another issue. This time he wanted to find out who the skull had been before dying. This fixation was to trouble him for the rest of his life. Who did that skull belong to? What had its name been? Had it lived as a man or a woman? Where, how and how long had it lived? Maybe one day he would come up with some rational answers and work out that dying was simply an unavoidable disappearance from the earth, from the world of the living. What he could not come to terms with was the idea that dying led to a loss of identity: a loss of one’s name. He could not accept that dying meant disappearing without a trace from the face of the earth, as seemed to have happened to that skull in the closet. Without a grave and a tombstone, one was sure to end up like that poor old chap, or rather, like that poor thing. An old skull lost in the midst of other nameless objects; a mere thing which at most could be tagged “Mr. Skull”. Giovanni was then far too young to know any better. Nonetheless he promised himself that, as an adult, he would try to do anything to avoid ending up like that. Little by little, as the years went by and he got swept off his feet by a host of teenage interests, he finally managed, albeit not completely, to put his irrational fear of death behind him. It was, in the end, his passion for mathematics, a passion which was to inform his studies and his professional life, which gave it the final blow. Without too much fuss he could now see clearly how the sorry fate that had been reserved for Mr. Skull could be avoided.

He was just over twenty when he obtained a first class degree with distinction, after having impressed professors and peers alike with his extraordinary gifts for either solving what looked like unsolvable mathematical theorems or for inventing new ones even more enigmatic and perplexing. The academic world and scientific community received him



Sincerely yours, 1998, oil on canvas, 70x100 cm.

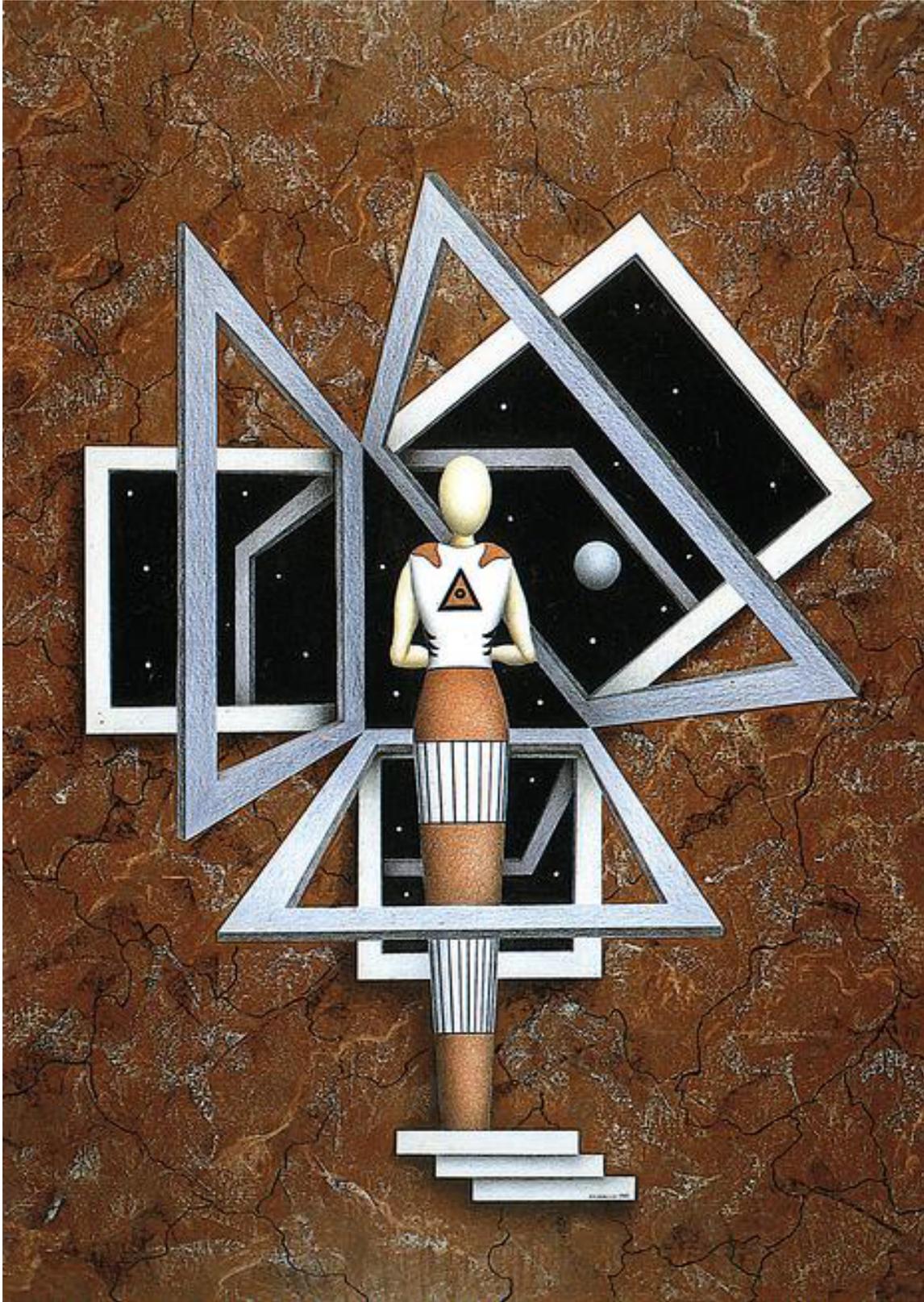


Self-puzzle, 1988, pencil on paper, 70x100 cm.
20

with open arms and treated him with great admiration and respect. Soon he was made president, the youngest to date, of the “World Mathematical Society”. Professor Giovanni Maria del Corvo was now convinced, and duly proved on several occasions with formulaic precision, that anything that happened in the universe could be explained by one single theory. A theory that explained, albeit in a somewhat fragmentary manner, just about anything that happened under the sun in the whole universe, including each and every event in the life of each and every individual: the motions of a planet, the disappearance of a star, a friendly get together, a volcanic eruption, a plane crash, a walk in the park, a war, a revolution, a day’s holiday with the family, a coffee break in the local café or in the city centre. Nothing was unpredictable. There were no surprises, no mysteries, but simply fragments of one single mathematical expression. It was just a case of spotting the constituents, calculating them and reading the results. Everything just boiled down to formulae. Everything could be mathematically analyzed and predicted, and so could fate, indeed that too. Professor del Corvo, who was acclaimed for his expertise in the field of probability theory, had come up with a remarkable and original theoretical system, a system capable of trapping chance within iron rules and reducing its effect to zero.

For quite some time now Giovanni had stopped going to church and dedicating himself to religious-philosophical issues concerning other worlds than the ones falling into the realms of the concrete and objective here and now.

He did not have to be a genius to understand that death was the one mathematical certainty destined to strike each and every living being, and, given that mathematical certainty leaves no room for further investigation, there was no point at all in trying to reckon with this numerically indefinable entity. “There are no numbers here!” - he would often bring up this punch line outside the more formal context of conferences, or mention it in journal articles and in philosophical and theological debates on television. It has to be said Professor Giovanni del Corvo was also blessed with strikingly good looks. He was handsome and he had a penetrating gaze. His warm and persuasive voice was known to charm many of his listeners and came as a welcome change



Pitagora, 1989, pencil and oil pastels on paper, 70x100 cm.



Doors to the beyond, 2001, oil on canvas, 100x140 cm.

from the cold detached tone used by philosophers or the monotone garrulousness of some religious preachers. He was loved and especially so by women; and he loved women back. He had a few deep and meaningful relationships but he never really fell in love; neither did he ever get married. For love, as well as faith, he was aware, could not be measured in numbers. Who knows? Perhaps, deep down inside, he felt it was just not worth his while. It was not worth believing in. Neither was it worth bringing children into the world. In fact as the years went by, he would often find himself muttering: “There’s no point! We all have to die in the end, anyway!” He invariably came to this conclusion each time his achievements were being acknowledged or whenever his success was being rewarded by some sublime sensations at the hands of some woman. On such occasions, that aging cloth that was wrapped around his father’s hidden treasure would rise up before him and flop on the table of his memories. “All of us have to die in the end!”

Nonetheless, as for the promise that Giovanni had made to himself, the one about making sure he did not lose his identity after he died, he had already sorted that one out some time ago. Some years after graduating, he had managed to put his first savings to good use by purchasing a burial cell in the small local cemetery where the mortal remains of the del Corvos had been laid to “rest in peace” together with the tears of their ‘loving husbands, sons, wives, relatives, and friends’ who had all duly expressed their grief-stricken loss at ‘the departure of their loved ones.’ That surname and the language of the cemetery all seemed familiar and homely. However, he cared very little about owning a grave that would simply single him out from the rest of his family. What he really wanted was to ascertain, while he was still alive and kicking, that he got his name and surname engraved on his burial cell to make sure he did not end up like “Mr. Skull”. So he planned it all out, ordering his cell to be sealed with a modest stone that simply bore his photo, his name, “Giovanni Maria del Corvo” and his date of birth. When his time came to pass into the other world, then the date could be added on, and perhaps, just for tradition’s sake, a candle might be lit and tended by some devout woman. No epitaph would be needed, for there would be no wife or children to engrave his tombstone with tears of grief for their departed loved one. As for his friends, he knew



Cosmic roulette, 2001, oil on canvas, 100x70 cm.

for a fact that, on account of his success and genius, they would sooner have engraved his stone with their satisfaction at his passing, rather than their condolences. For the mathematical formula that explained the whole universe came hand in hand with the “theory of envy” and was accompanied with the sure knowledge that geniuses had no friends in the world, and especially none in the academic world!

For some time now he’d felt he had done away with the problem once and for all. However, he was soon to realize that one crucial detail had been overlooked: the funeral procession. Having in fact no relatives or friends, who could he rely on to make sure his corpse went to the place designated? A funeral home was duly contacted and given precise orders as to what was to be done with the coffin. He settled the bills in advance, placed the instructions safely in the hands of a notary and took further precautions by taking out an insurance policy to make sure that, were this agency to go bankrupt, another one would take over.

Last but not least, every five years that contract would be subject to a review and renewal, which incurred the payment of yet another sum of money which was subject to change in line with the inflation index. Professor del Corvo, the genial computational machine that excelled in probability theory, had to make absolutely sure that no chance event would interfere with the destiny of his skull. So he duly worked it all out to make absolutely sure that this did not happen. A meticulously thought out step-by-step plan was drafted, and, just to ascertain that nothing would go wrong, he ordered his coffin, one that he had chosen himself, to be delivered to his house. This was because his theory of the universe had a very clearly underscored “You never know!” written all over it. So much so, that five years later, he decided to go over the contract again, review it and modify it by adding a clause that gave orders for his body to be cremated. After all this choice made sense. It guaranteed with mathematical certainty that he would never end up like Mr. Skull. At last he now had a burial cell, a tombstone with his name on it and, above all, was absolutely certain that his skull would not travel the world and -you never know- end up in some closet. All he had to do now was purchase an urn for his ashes and place this inside the coffin which stood at his home. Said: done! The whole matter was sorted once and for all.

In the years that followed, blessed as he was with brilliant intuitions and never ending success, he travelled to the furthest corners of the world, spending most of his time on talk shows and conferences, disseminating his radical ideas and delivering his atheist homilies to hosts of spellbound audiences. This went on until one day he came up against yet another of those importunate and fastidious “You never know!”. It dropped out of the blue one day when Giovanni had just turned forty. The first news about animal cloning had just hit the headlines. Everyone was talking about it and everyone felt they were duty bound to express their opinions on the matter. He was so struck by this piece of news that his genius soared straight to the skies. In no time at all, he came up with a theory that espoused the irrationality of faith to the objectivity of science. Backing his ideas by some simple probabilistic computations, he suddenly came to realize that somewhere in the future, little did it matter when, human cloning would be possible.

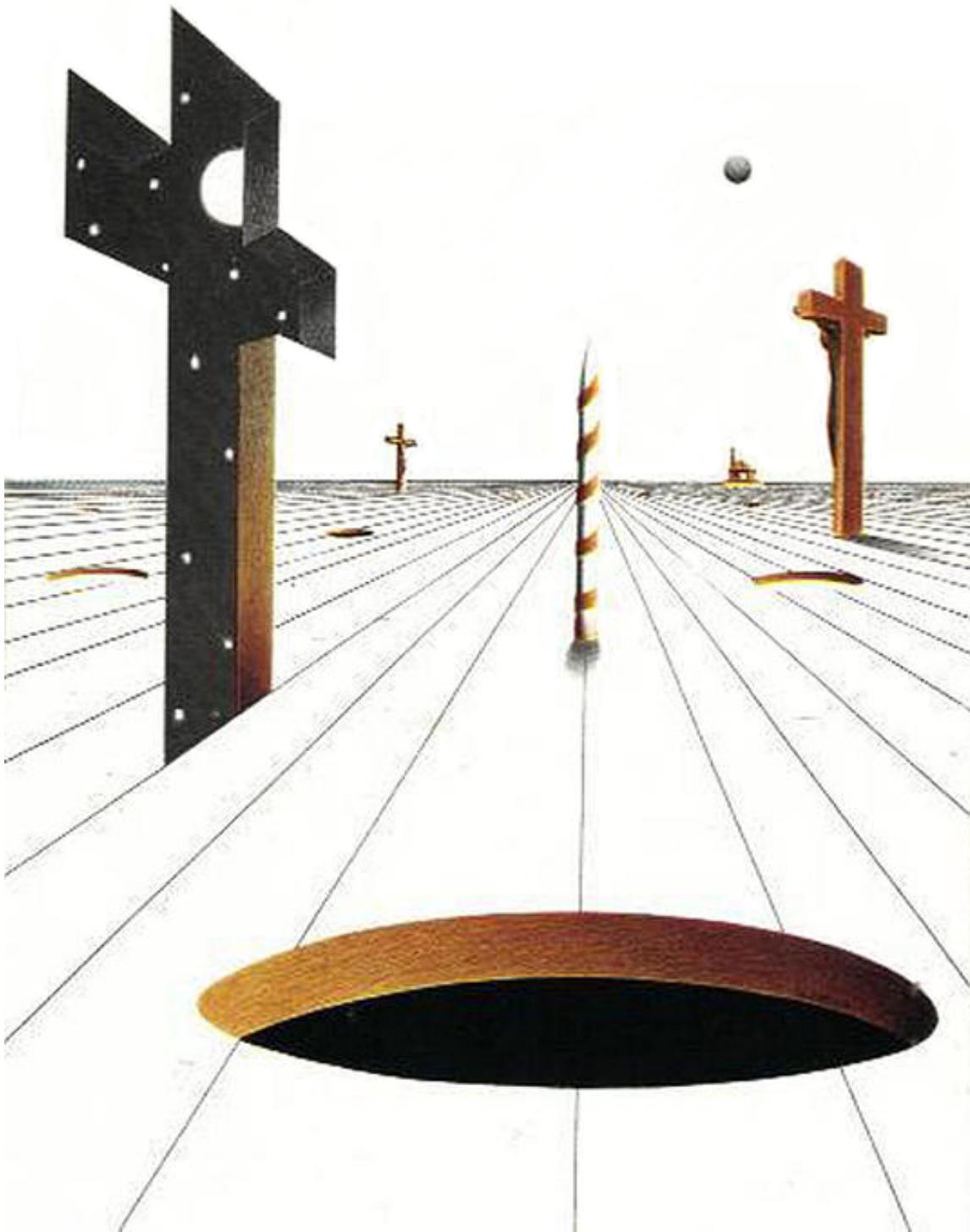


L'annuncio, 2005, oil on canvas, 140x200 cm.

After following his intuitions through, he was able to conclude and back up with mathematical certainty that sooner or later science would be able to raise people from the dead. His thoughts rushed back to the past when, somewhat absent mindedly, he would listen to the Gospel readings at church on Sundays. In view of a potential human cloning, the “resurrection from the dead” no longer sounded like a far-fetched promise pronounced by Christ just to reassure or frighten the human race. Far from it! His intuitive mathematical computations and his genius led to the foregone conclusion that the human race was about to take ‘resurrecting the dead’ into its own hands. God’s will? Maybe! However, what was the point of questioning, even if God did exist, then all would still be achieved not through a phantomatic and unnecessary ‘divine will’ but through human purpose. Resurrecting the dead could now be proved in numbers. This was a fact. The rest was beside the point. Professor Giovanni Maria del Corvo was mathematically certain about this.

This constituted a turning point as far as his private life was concerned. Suddenly, the angels came flying back, just like those times when he used to sob at night, telling his mother he was afraid of dying. But this time the angels came flying on the solid wings of science and were fully supported by concrete understandings of “resurrection”. As was to be expected, his public life took an unexpected turn. His professed atheist beliefs had always clashed dramatically with a set of traditional concepts based on evangelical promises, even though, if you looked carefully, his religious and scientific beliefs were light years away from the official interpretations of the Holy Scriptures. Nonetheless, the Catholic community, on that occasion, wasted no time in announcing, albeit with some reservations, his much awaited comeback, the return of the “prodigal son” to his father’s house. As a matter of fact, the clamorous conversion of Professor Giovanni Maria del Corvo was presented before the whole world as a true “miracle of faith”.

Miracles aside, he was prompted by his renewed faith to push the boundaries further. He started researching a spate of religious texts drawn from various cultures and religions. He came up with new findings that went to corroborate and sometimes advance his theory. In the light of his recent intuitions, excerpts from these texts all of a sudden



The last dimension, 1983, pencil on paper, 50x70 cm.

made sense. Little by little he made more discoveries drawn from the *Veda*, the *Book of the Dead*, the *Kabbalah*, the *Bible*, and several other books of wisdom which shed further light and made further additions to his mathematical theory of the universe. To broaden the scope of his research, he tapped into other fields: poetry, mythology and philosophy. And these occasionally threw up the resurrection formula. These fields of knowledge were marked by profound differences. However, they were nearly all in agreement on one thing: namely that *not* all the dead would be resurrected, and that the ultimate decision would be left with an all-knowing judge, a supreme absolute and impartial being called God, who would ultimately send the body of each being to its destined end. In no time at all Professor del Corvo replaced the word ‘God’ with a ‘scientific committee’ intent on tracking down the DNA of each and every corpse in the world; separating the DNA of the ‘good’ from that of the ‘evil’, cloning the ‘righteous’ and burning all the ‘evildoers’ till they turned into ashes. The final judgment would rest on analyses supported by DNA findings. But firstly, the supreme judge, or rather the acting scientific committee, would single out those graves which, through their outward appearance, bore testimony to the praiseworthiness and gratitude the world had showered on their occupants in their lifetime. Newton, Napoleon, Raphael, Lincoln, Marconi, Dante, Beethoven, Michelangelo came to mind and thousands of other tombs that humanity had venerated through the ages together with the urns of Saints whose relics had been preserved and displayed for centuries. He delved into the vocabulary of the cemetery, thought of words the common people had carefully chosen to personalize their tombs, almost as if they wanted to make sure that their exceptional virtues and talents would not go unnoticed on the Day of Judgment. “How naïve!” Giovanni thought. Not by any stretch of the imagination would the scientific committee have taken any notice of them. Poor old folk! But at least they had given it their best shot. What on earth was he to do? What would happen to him now that he had, out of sheer stupidity, given orders for his DNA to be burned to ashes and condemned himself to the everlasting fires of hell? And what about the squalor of that little provincial cemetery, that most modest of tombstones which contained no epigraph and hardly any information? He had done it all wrong, and

therefore, it would all have to be done all over again.

He got rid of his burial cell, took out a new contract, gave orders for his corpse to be carefully prepared before its burial. This time he went for the most important city in the country and purchased a burial plot in a conspicuous location of the city's most monumental cemetery. Within a few months a truly spectacular tomb rose on the spot, a sumptuous tomb of outstanding beauty and originality: a true masterpiece, worthy of being included in the pages of a history of art book. Following this, he ordered a statue to be built. This represented him holding a large book in his hands, about to take out, or perhaps insert into it a page full of numbers. The figure solemnly stood out above a cluster of mathematical formulae each of which were shaped into a ring and joined to the others, so that together they all made up a sphere, which had a particular symbolic significance in the world of numbers. The sphere and the said sheet of paper were made of golden bronze, whereas the statue itself was made of polished white marble. Lastly, he had his whole name "Professor Giovanni Maria del Corvo", followed by his several merits and titles, engraved in large block characters on the tombstone. This was followed by a long epitaph which ended with: "... is waiting here for the day when, armed with the certainty of faith, he would be resurrected". A bit over the top, maybe, but you never know!

Having carefully thought over and worked out everything, Professor del Corvo was able to conclude with sufficient, albeit not mathematical, certainty that he would be coming back into this world. This mathematical certainty, however, came a few years later when he learnt that he had been chosen as a candidate for the Nobel Prize. That day he was at the airport in Los Angeles waiting to board a plane and fly off to Tokyo, where he had been invited to give a guest lecture on that very same topic for which he was being considered for the Nobel Prize. He knew for a fact that that prize would be his. After all, he bloody well deserved it! Giovanni felt so proud and smug that he could think of nothing else as he boarded the plane and during the whole of the flight. That was it! A Nobel Prize engraved on his tombstone would make him stand out from the crowd. He would not have to wait too long to be singled out and be resurrected. That prize, for him, repre-



The missing piece, 2006, oil on canvas, 50x70 cm.

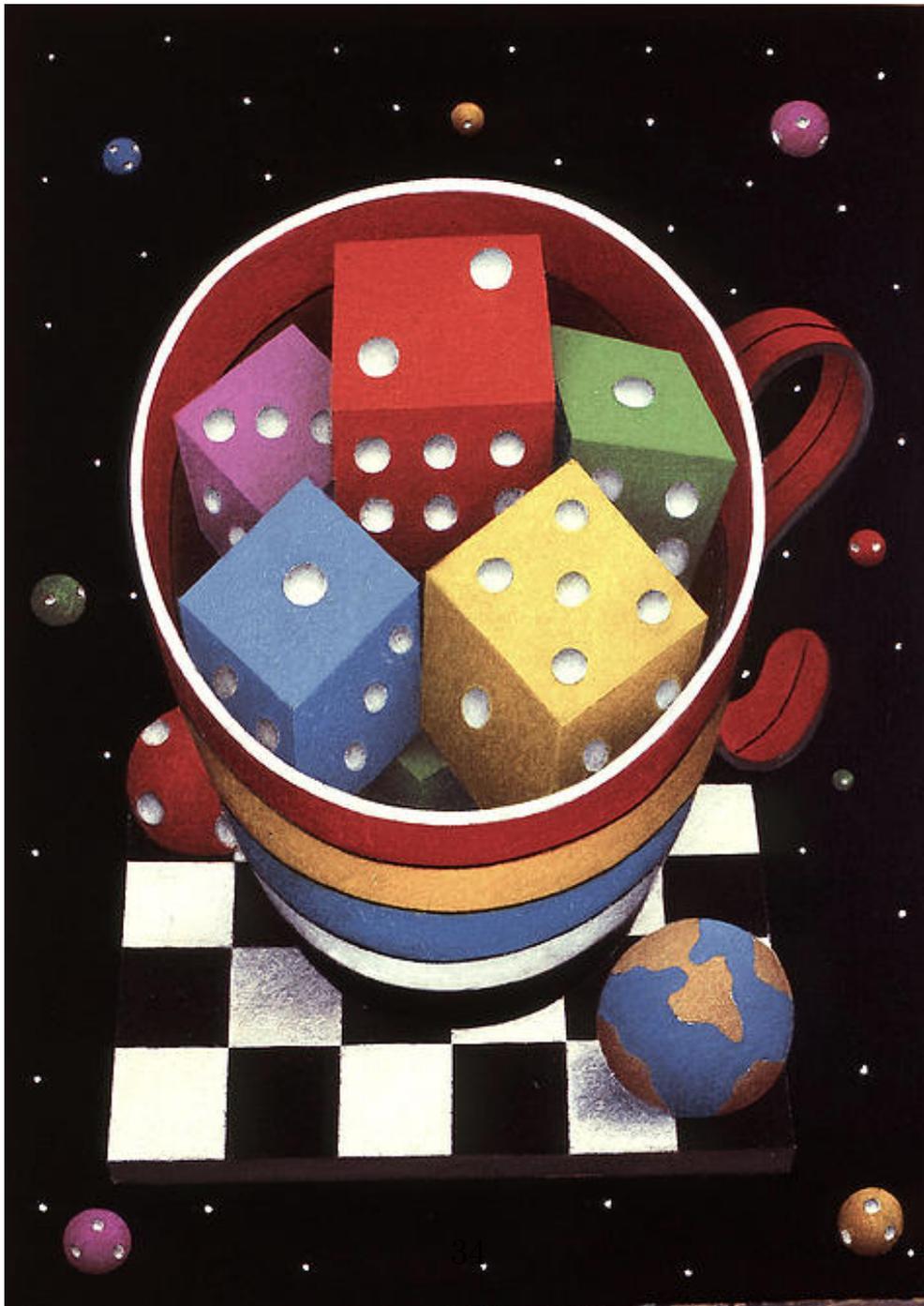
sented an ultimate guarantee, the final missing piece to his theoretical mathematical system for which, perhaps somewhat ironically, he had re-worded Nietzsche to come up with his own: "Theory of the Eternal Return".

All of a sudden, the plane hit some turbulence and, as it shook violently, so did the mathematical foundations of the certainties embraced by Professor del Corvo some seconds before. "Oh, no! Insane! It's that Nobel Prize . . . that is to blame! . . . it all went to my head! Blind, blind!" - Professor del Corvo kept mumbling to himself as the other passengers looked at each other in terror. "How could I possibly have not seen it? . . . the improbable? . . . on this very day?" As a matter of fact, on that particular day, he had not taken his mathematical formula of the universe into account. "How could I possibly have been so blind?" - Professor del Corvo kept muttering to himself in self-reproach just before the plane jerked violently again, and this time there was a horrendous blast. The porthole next to him went ablaze and in no time at all the airplane started to plummet. All the passengers screamed in terror. All except Professor del Corvo who remained speechless and petrified! As silent as a tomb and as cold as a gravestone. The plane crashed into the ocean and sank to the bottom of its depths. All 143 passengers of the Tokyo flight died in that plane crash and none of their bodies was ever to be found again.

Years later, on an island in the Pacific Ocean swarming with tourists, a local fisherman brought his overloaded fishing nets to shore. He was immediately surrounded by a flock of curious observers before whom he opened out his nets, pouring his catch onto the beach. A roundish looking object rolled onto the sand together with the fish, shells, crustaceans, algae, and jelly fish. Realizing that this roundish object was a human skull some of the onlookers fled in horror, others stayed on and stared in wonder, while others still went on to buy the fish as if nothing had happened. One young man approached the fisherman and cautiously asked him to sell him that skull. The lad happened to be a medical student who was about to graduate. After bargaining for some time, the fisherman placed the skull in the young man's hands telling him to hide it away as soon as possible. The advice did not fall on deaf ears for the student had a small white towel with him, which he

proceeded to wrap swiftly around the skull.

Had the soul of the now late Professor Giovanni Maria del Corvo been hanging around those premises, and had he recognized the skull to be his own, then perhaps he might have looked on with a bitter smile. Or, who knows, he might have tacked on a new meaning to his theory of the eternal return. As things stood now, all that was needed was a wardrobe! But then . . . you never know!



God's dice, 2013, oil on canvas, 50x70 cm.

Readers who are interested in the work
of Pier Augusto Breccia are invited to visit his website at
www.pieraugustobreccia.com

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Pier Augusto Breccia is an Italian artist whose work has appeared in major museums and galleries in Italy and the US. He has also written a number of essays on art and philosophy, as well as several short stories. Among these stories, “The eternal return” portrays, with neat precision, auto-biographical elements seminal to Breccia’s artistic development. Yet, at the same time, Breccia’s canvases would tease with irony the main character of this story, Professor del Corvo, man of Pure Reason obsessed about death.

However, like del Corvo, Breccia “has found himself staring death straight in the face”. And not only once, like Professor del Corvo, but for half of his life. In fact and quite extraordinarily, before becoming an artist, Breccia was a heart surgeon; one of the pioneers of heart surgery in Italy.

After the death of his father, for the then Professor of medicine Breccia, the operating table has become the deathbed of Pure Reason and the cradle in which to nourish the space of conscience. A space which, since then, Breccia has continued exploring on canvas.