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Reggio Emilia

Michael van Ofen

COLLEZIONE MARAMOTTI

Via Fratelli Cervi 66

October 6–January 31

Michael van Ofen's works at the Collezione Maramotti in Reggio Emilia all evince a central interest: the historical and cultural common ground uniting Italy and Germany. The artist's first solo show in Italy brings together fifteen pieces through which van Ofen delves into one aspect in particular of that overlap—namely, the two countries' shared experiences as they each strove to create a unified state during the nineteenth century. Van Ofen has subjected a selection of paintings from that period to visual reinterpretation, revealing in the process their fundamental ethical and social content. His methods of reinterpretation are radical: He empties out the original images, stripping them nearly clean of any figurative and narrative elements. In the bare-bones results, traces of color—at times applied with vigorous gestures, at others with more thought-out regularity—are the only features that attest to the initial pictorial layout.

His approach cleanses the works of academic rhetoric, allowing more authentic values to emerge. For example, van Ofen's purification, so to speak, of *Meditazione sulla storia di Italia* (Meditation on the History of Italy, 1850) by Francesco Hayez transforms the young girl at the center of the canvas into a ghostlike apparition created by the juxtaposition of black and white tonal regions. In the same manner, the illustrious subjects in the paintings of Anton Alexander von Werner, or the war scenes commemorated in works by Federico Faruffini and Domenico Induno, lose their official sheen, and are translated into stains of color that open up like startling flashes of light on the canvas. Likewise, in van Ofen's transmutation of Johann Friedrich Overbeck's *Germania und Italia*, 1828, the two nations—each personified as a fair maiden—materialize in the form of blurry signs. Symbolically uniting the historical and cultural themes in the show's paintings, a paper sculpture hangs from the ceiling, resembling a brown cocoon-like package that suggests the binding of history and abstraction into one.

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.



Michael van Ofen, *Content Loss by Communication in: Illustrative Diagram of Nicolaus Hoff after Johann Friedrich Overbeck, "Germania und Italia," 1828, 2013*, oil on canvas, 18 1/2 x 21 3/4".

— Pier Paolo Pancotto