

Claudio Parmiggiani

DEMATERIALIZATION

Cover:

Untitled, 2011. Harp and butterflies, 65 x 29 1/2 x 21 1/2 in. Image courtesy of the artist and Bortolami, New York

Art is no answer but a question, intent on remaining such.

Claudio Parmiggiani

Claudio Parmiggiani makes room-size installations as well as two- and three-dimensional works that address the passage of time, mortality, memory, absence, and silence. His art stands against the grain of our frenetic, cacophonous, image-infused culture. The artist's signature process, *delocazione* (displacement), affirms and yet questions the role of material presence in art. In many of his works, sound is implied but unheard. In others, incongruous juxtapositions defy expectations. History is a constant muse, and absence is paramount. *Claudio Parmiggiani: Dematerialization* is the first museum exhibition of the artist's work in North America.¹ The works at the Frist Art Museum reward patience and deep attention.

Parmiggiani was born in 1943 in Luzzara, Italy, a commune on the right bank of the Po River in the province of Emilia-Romagna.² Life in Luzzara during the artist's early childhood is recorded in a book of black-and-white photographs by Paul Strand, *Un Paese* (1955).³ When the artist was a teen, he saw his family home, where he had made early drawings, engulfed in flames and destroyed by fire. Later, he would use the destructive power of fire as a creative tool. From the 1950s to the late 1960s, Italy was engaged in transformation from an agricultural economy to a major industrial power (*il miracolo*). This improved the standard of living for many, but also signaled the end of the slow, quiet, dignified rural ways of Parmiggiani's youth.⁴

From 1959 to 1961, Parmiggiani attended the Accademia di Belle Arti in Modena. During that time, he became a regular visitor to the studio of Giorgio Morandi, whose incomparable mastery of light and focus on humble subjects made a lasting impression.⁵ Marcel Duchamp and Piero Manzoni are often also cited as influences. Though Parmiggiani is associated with

the Arte Povera and conceptual art movements of the 1960s and 1970s, he works somewhere in between. His art is best understood in the context of its entirety. Nevertheless, the modest selection exhibited at the Frist Art Museum reveals the consistent intentions of his oeuvre—notably how silence, stillness, and absence offer refuge to the viewer.

Early in his career, Parmiggiani made photographs. In 1970, he devised his signature process, *delocazione*, which was inspired by seeing contours left in the dust after objects were removed. The negative shadows of forms and shapes recall photogenic drawings, cyanotypes, and photograms. Instead of using photosensitive materials to achieve this effect, Parmiggiani harnesses fire and combustion in a controlled environment.⁶ Making pictures rather than painting them, he arranges items on walls, boards, or canvases, and then stokes fires burning nearby, allowing soot, dust, and pigment to settle on the surface. The articles are removed, leaving behind their silhouettes. The artist scrupulously edits each image to ensure that he has achieved the desired nuance.⁷



Fig. 1: *Untitled*, 2017. Smoke and soot on board, 55 1/8 x 39 3/8 in. Image courtesy of the artist and Bortolami, New York. Photo: John Berens

Delocazione produces neither photograms, paintings, nor prints, but it shares with photography the manipulation of light and shadow, as well as a connection to death, by recording things that were and are no more.⁸ Objects removed after the dust has settled—bottles, books, butterflies, vases, violins, a body, or a shell—leave indexical signs that like a footprint or a photograph show what was previously there. The residual forms are also symbols of *memento mori* or *vanitas*.⁹ In *Untitled* (2017; fig. 1), the last grains of sand are poised at the nexus of the hourglass. Time is running out.



Fig. 2: *Untitled*, 2017. Smoke and soot on board, six panels: 94 1/2 x 269 1/4 x 1 1/4 in. overall. Colby College Museum of Art, Gift of the Alex Katz Foundation

Parmiggiani recasts Morandi's classic vocabulary with comparable poetic resonance in an eight-panel room-size grisaille (fig. 2) where figure and ground are at once representational and anti-illusionistic. White bottles with smoky gray outlines are displayed in quiet repose on shelves that form an underlying grid. The grid affirms formalist characteristics—"flattened, anti-mimetic, anti-real"—denying the plasticity of the bottles.¹⁰ Conversely, the grid is the structure used in perspectival drawing as defined in Renaissance treatises for establishing the illusion of three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional surface. Similarly, a *delocazione* image of a canvas back declares the formal properties of painting, showing how a canvas is stretched over a frame to produce a two-dimensional surface. Parmiggiani toys with the tension between the objectives of illusionism and anti-illusionism.

The artist began incorporating butterflies into his work in 1966.¹¹ *Claudio Parmiggiani: Dematerialization* presents three butterfly panels: one entirely the result of *delocazione*, one with dead butterflies attached to the surface, and one that combines the two strategies. Caterpillars and butterflies are ancient and universal symbols of change, personal transformation, and the stages of the life cycle, including

resurrection. Butterflies in art, music, and literature allude to human vulnerability and the inevitability of loss with the passage of time. Parmiggiani captures their dynamic and inert states, freezing time, pinning them as specimens for the intense scrutiny of critics and art historians as well as the pleasure of viewers.¹²

In an untitled work from 1975, the artist delicately balances a butterfly on a torso fragment. In Italy, the past is always present. From Pliny to Giorgio de Chirico to Arte Povera artists and others, Italians have looked upon the fragmentary remains of the Roman Empire as a meditation on the relationship between time and the material world.¹³ The Frist exhibition includes sculptures from the 1970s, with black soot on white plaster fragments, negating any hindrance to creativity imposed by the weight of history. Disembodied heads imply violence against individuals



Fig. 3: *Untitled*, 1975. Plaster, wood, metal, butterflies, and pigment, 9 7/8 x 11 7/8 x 7 7/8 in. Courtesy of the artist and Bortolami, New York. Photo: Philippe De Gobert

or civilizations by natural or man-made disasters, such as Pompeii or Hiroshima. A decapitated head doused in soot, a knife resting on its side, and a butterfly (fig. 3) form an assemblage that suggests “a chance meeting on a dissecting table of sewing machine and an umbrella,” as well as how unconscious desires are manifested in dreams by substitution, displacement, and fragmentation.

The artist lives outside of Parma in the Italian countryside with peacocks, peahens, butterflies, and a cat named Sirio. In his elegantly appointed home, objects of exquisite beauty are thoughtfully arranged. In the main room, a nautilus shell lined with mother-of-pearl sits atop a rustic wooden table (fig. 4). More than once, the artist has captured with *delocazione* the cross section of a nautilus shell. The outline of the successive empty chambers records the growth patterns also found in pine cones, sunflowers, and reptile skins that were observed and studied by the Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci (ca. 1175–ca. 1250), who confirmed that the pattern of each consecutive section found in nature also closely approximates the proportions associated with the classical ratios of the golden mean found in art, architecture, and music.¹⁴



Fig. 4: *Untitled*, 2014. Smoke and soot on wood, 15 x 15 in. Image courtesy of the artist and Bortolami, New York

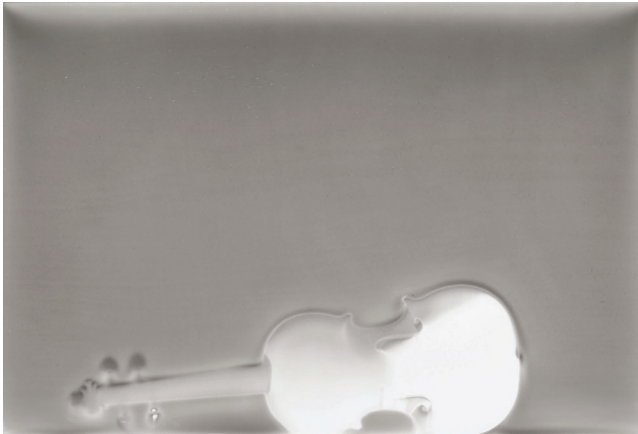


Fig. 5: *Untitled*, 2018. Smoke and soot on board, 23 5/8 x 35 3/8 in. Private collection.
Photo: John Berens

The patterns of music rely on periods of silence as well as sound. The fluttering action of butterfly wings inspired composers Frédéric Chopin, Claude Debussy, Edvard Grieg, and Robert Schumann, among others, to create works

evoking that movement—*allegro assai*, *semplice*, *allegro agitato molto*, *allegro grazioso*. Placing butterflies on the strings of an antique harp, Parmiggiani arrests motion and sound (cover). Stillness and silence imply fleeting beauty. The delicate balance between the accomplishments of culture and the fragility of nature is impossible to miss in the context of current concerns about the intrusion of excessive consumerism on the environment.

Music is the most abstract art. Ephemeral, transient, intangible, it is given immortality in memory rather than materially. In Parmiggiani's arrangement of gray and white, subtle tones faintly brush across the surface to reveal a white silhouette of a violin balanced on its side to fill the lower quadrant of the picture plane (fig. 5). The negative image of a violin reclines like a nude, anthropomorphic but inanimate, realistic yet unworldly. If pictures could speak, then this one would whisper—subtle, muted, private—quiet as the grave.¹⁵

Parmiggiani frequently uses bells in his installations. They can be clustered on the floor or suspended by their clappers, silenced, unable to toll messages. In Bologna's Biblioteca d'Arte e di Storia di San Giorgio in Poggiale, the artist has installed a large bell atop a mound of singed books in the apse of the former church, which he has lined floor to ceiling with shelves of ghostly *delocazione* images of books (fig. 6). Book burning in turn calls to mind censorship, the rise of totalitarian governments, the destruction of libraries, and threats to a free press and intellectual curiosity. The components of Parmiggiani's installation are reflected in the phrase "bell, book, and candle," a traditional reference to the Roman Catholic ceremony of excommunication. The deconsecrated church, now a research library, becomes a safe harbor for the life of the mind in a city renowned as the site of the first university in Europe.

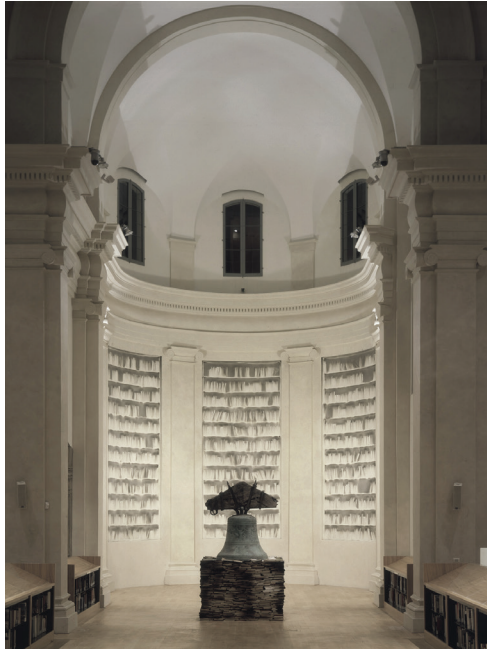


Fig. 6: *San Giorgio in Poggiale, Bologna, Italy, 2010*. Image courtesy of the artist and Bortolami, New York

Parmiggiani's art is richly informed by philosophy, poetry, literature, and history.¹⁶ He places high value on the importance of reading and libraries. He collects rare volumes and is surrounded by books in his home and studio. A panel of *delocazione* books is included in *Claudio Parmiggiani: Dematerialization*. The books on its shelves appear burned, dematerialized,



Fig. 7: *Naufragio con spettatore*, Chiesa di San Marcellino, Parma, Italy, 2010. Photo © Lucio Rosso, Studio RCR

vaporized. We see only the carbon residue of a broken humanity. Parmiggiani's *Naufragio con Spettatore* (2010; fig. 7), in Chiesa di San Marcellino in Parma, was inspired by Hans Blumenberg's *Shipwreck with Spectator*.¹⁷ Like a ship in a bottle, a life-size Egyptian felucca has run aground on a bed of sixty thousand books. In the Frist exhibition, *Il Sogno di Marcellino* (1977) brings together a stack of books, a bust, and a model ship that, like Parmiggiani's installation in Parma, triggers anxieties about society's possible collision course. Nothing makes sense in a disproportionate, disoriented wonderland where the repository of thought is in peril.

Steeped in the art of the past, as well as the concerns of his generation, Parmiggiani forged a new path. With *delocazione*, he establishes a vocabulary restrained to the brink of conceptualism, where visual calm provides "a place for the soul."¹⁸ Parmiggiani offers nuanced responses and cautionary warnings about the costs of overabundance. *Claudio Parmiggiani: Dematerialization* asks probing questions that lead to complex uncertainties rather than definitive answers. Stillness offers a refuge for reflection. Silence allows focus. Prolonged engagement with the art of Claudio Parmiggiani confirms that there is always more than meets the eye.

Susan H. Edwards, PhD

Notes

Epigraph. Éric de Chassey, Claudio Parmiggiani: *La Chambre des Amours de la Villa Médicis* (Milan: SilvanaEditoriale, 2015), 71.

1. Although the artist voluntarily withdrew from the commercial art world, returning forty years later in 2003, he is renowned in Europe because of high-profile temporary and permanent site-specific installations in historic structures such as Medici palaces, deconsecrated churches, and parks, and for set design.
2. Post–World War II Italy is well documented in neorealist films such as Luchino Visconti’s *Obsession* (1943), Roberto Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City* (1946), and Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948).
3. Paul Strand and Cesare Zavattini, *Un Paese* (Florence: Fratelli Alinari, 1955); first published in English as *Un Paese: Portrait of an Italian Village* (New York: Aperture, 1997).
4. See Karen Pinkus, “Dematerialization from Arte Povera to Cybermoney through Italian Thought,” *Diacritics* 39.3 (2009): 63–75.
5. Luca Massimo Barbero, *Claudio Parmiggiani: Petrolio* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2008), 74.
6. Parmiggiani’s classical art training prepared him for masterly manipulation of light, color, shade, and tone, as well as techniques of sfumato and chiaroscuro. For a discussion of fire and combustion in twentieth-century Italian art, see Emily Braun, *Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting* (New York: Guggenheim Museum of Art, 2015), 53 and 77–80.
7. Braun, *Alberto Burri*, 72–73.
8. Peter Hugar and Susan Sontag, *Portraits in Life and Death* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1976); Christian Metz, “Photography and Fetish,” *October* 34 (Fall 1985): 81–90; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980).
9. *Memento mori* (lit. “Remember you must die”) is a term used for reminders of mortality, such as skulls. *Vanitas* (lit. “emptiness”) has become shorthand for “earthly treasures are frivolous in this fleeting and fragile life,” and for art exploring that theme.
10. Rosalind Krauss, “Grids, You Say,” in *Grids: Format and Image in 20th-Century Art* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1978).
11. Chassey, *Claudio Parmiggiani*, 76.
12. Georges Didi-Huberman compares the opening and closing movement of butterflies to breath, heartbeat, erotic movement, and the on-again, off-again projections of apparitions and darkness in cinema. Vlad Ionescu, “On Moths and Butterflies, or How to Orient Oneself through Images: Georges Didi-Huberman’s Art Criticism in Context,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 16 (June 2017): 1–16.
13. Caroline Tisdall, “‘Materia’: The Context of Arte Povera,” in *Italian Art in the 20th Century*, edited by Emily Braun (Munich: Prestel Verlag; London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1989), 363–68.
14. In the Fibonacci sequence of numbers, each number is the sum of the previous two numbers: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, etc., evidenced by the universal principles of creation and growth. Matila Ghyka, *The Geometry of Art and Life* (New York: Dover, 1977).
15. Jean-Luc Nancy and Elena La Spina, *Claudio Parmiggiani: L’Isola del Silenzio* (Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 2008), 43.
16. Parmiggiani met Ezra Pound in 1964, the year the poet declared that he would no longer speak, equating silence with power. Others have noted affinities between Parmiggiani’s art and the poetry of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Stéphane Mallarmé, Rainer Maria Rilke, and William Butler Yeats.
17. Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).
18. Chassey, *Claudio Parmiggiani*, 80.

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