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GALLERY

Nobody is Nowhere
Francesco Paini

November 11 - December 19, 2026



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Anyone climbing the stairs, on a morning in the early 1800s, of the London home of George Bryan Brummell – the man who for almost twenty years had decided what was elegant and what was not – might have passed his valet coming down with an armful of crumpled white cravats. Asked what they were, the servant would reply – or so Captain William Jesse tells us in his 1844 biography – that these were their failures. Every morning Brummell starched the fabric, wound it around his neck and slowly lowered his chin to set its folds; if a single fold gave way, the cravat was lost and he took another. I thought back to that scene, at once comic and estranging, the first time Francesco Paini showed me his drawings spread out on the table, because in those sheets I found the same daily labour of someone who builds a presentable face out of what tightens around his throat.

Paini's figures appear half-length, frontal or slightly turned, their faces smooth as polished stone and their eyes half-closed, sometimes ringed by concentric circles that look like lenses. In some, iris and pupil seem evanescent and oversized; in others, the gaze dissolves into a void. Anyone familiar with the masks of Teotihuacan will immediately sense their influence: those stone ovals with pared-down features originally had eyes inlaid with shell and obsidian, and many have no eyeholes, so that no living person could have seen through them. This detail, long debated by archaeologists, seems to me the key to Paini's work. The ritual mask is dense with belonging; it declares which community one belongs to. Paini, however, lets it slide towards something synthetic, a black, mirror-like surface closer to de Chirico's mannequins than to a human face, and leaves open a question that sounds far less metaphysical today than it did a century ago: whether these beings are self-aware, or whether they are intelligences capable of replicating an identity without truly inhabiting it.

In some, a pupil surfaces beneath the eyelid and watches us; in others, the eyes stay closed upon themselves and the face becomes an object, a mask, an automaton.

Then there is the neck, which in these drawings is always the site of conflict. Scarves knotted up to the chin, stiff collars, bows and brooches, cravats twisted like ropes, a leather strap fastened with a buckle: everything we wear to take our place in society tightens here, and tightens gracefully.

The history of portraiture knows this tension well. In portraits of the Habsburg court, the ruff isolates the head from the body as if it were served on a platter; and when Philip IV banned it in 1623, he replaced it with the golilla, the rigid collar we see in Velázquez's

portraits, which was hardly more comfortable – for power may change the shape of the collar, but it rarely loosens it. Paini gathers up this long history of the dressed neck and carries it to the point where clothing stops being costume and becomes conditioning: a second skin, or a sentence, that its wearer no longer feels. The estrangement the artist speaks of lies entirely here, in the cravat that tightens without its wearer noticing. And yet no one put it around our neck by force. This is what moves me most, and what makes these drawings so close to the experience of each of us: we choose the garment that stifles us ourselves, every morning, in front of the wardrobe or the mirror, in order to be recognised and taken seriously – until one day we realise that the role has taken up more space than we had granted it, and that the slight discomfort in the throat, which we had long stopped noticing, was the sign of breath grown short.

No one in Italy has described this condition more incisively than Pirandello. In his 1908 essay On Humour (L'umorismo), life is a continuous flow that we try to arrest in fixed forms, and those forms are the masks with which we present ourselves to others and even to ourselves. In the same pages an old lady appears, her hair dyed and her face smeared with make-up, who at first makes us laugh; but when we sense that she dresses up this way so as not to lose the love of her much younger husband, the laughter turns into deep pity. That shift, which Pirandello called the "feeling of the opposite" (sentimento del contrario), is the same one I experience before Paini's figures, elegant and motionless in their collars yet far removed from the grotesque. It is no coincidence that Pirandello gathered his plays under the title Naked Masks (Maschere nude), and the nakedness he spoke of is the one these smooth faces seem to guard beneath the surface: an identity which, once the mask is removed, we can no longer say still exists.

The small-format drawings push the argument to its limit. The framing closes in on the knot, the brooch, the fold of satin; the face disappears and only the restraining device remains, enlarged until it becomes abstract form. The debt to Domenico Gnoli is openly declared and, to my mind, fruitful: in the late 1960s Gnoli painted shirt collars and tie knots at a scale that made them monumental, convinced that the most ordinary thing, looked at closely enough, reveals a strangeness that habit hides from us. Paini starts from there and shifts the emphasis from the enigma of the object to the constraint of the subject – so much so that inside one of the brooches there appears, tiny and mirrored, a stage with its curtain open, as if the same comedy were being performed yet again in the jewel that fastens the collar.

The backgrounds are interior architectures: long, narrow arches; slits through which light filters but no body could pass; rooms closed like perspective boxes, recalling metaphysical piazzas stripped of any horizon. Above all there are the curtains – heavy, fluted, gathered with cords – that turn every portrait into a stage. In the Holy Family in Kassel, painted in 1646, Rembrandt placed in front of the image a curtain drawn aside on a rod, as fictive as the painting itself, to remind viewers that they were watching a performance; Paini uses the curtain with the same lucidity, for his figures do not pose but play a part that coincides with their mask. When instead the curtain reveals a window – as in the sheet where two slender vases frame a desert of dunes under a white sun – one thinks of Casorati's Portrait of Silvana Cenni and of that Italian magic realism in which the motionless figure before the landscape seems to await something that will never come.

All of this springs from graphite alone, a medium usually confined to the preparatory stage on the way to something else, which here becomes the point of arrival. Paini uses soft leads for the bodies and hard ones for the backgrounds, building up the black in layers until he achieves surfaces that reflect light like metal or lacquer. Yet graphite never yields an absolute black: its mineral nature makes it shine, so that even the deepest darkness remains shot through with a gleam, as in Seurat's conté crayon drawings, where the grain of the paper goes on breathing beneath the mark. The black door reflects; the windows let the light in. Even the metal frame, mounted without a passe-partout, has a precise purpose: it frees the sheet from the subordinate status of a study and presents it with the dignity of a painting.

Between the man who cannot take off his mask even when no one is left to watch, and the man who feels he must smash it to pieces to be free of it, I wonder whether Paini's drawings do not allow us to glimpse a third, less dramatic possibility: one in which recognising our own masks is already enough not to be their prisoners, with no need either to tear them off or to defend them. When the role falls away we are all equal, but we have to notice it – and this is precisely what Paini's figures ask of us: to look at the knot we wear at our throat and recognise that we tied it ourselves, every morning, in front of the mirror, and that we therefore also know how to loosen it, perhaps with a smile, as we unwrap our failures one by one and turn them into instruments of awareness.

- Daniele Fenaroli

Curator Collezione Giuseppe Iannaccone

Francesco Paini (b.1990, Italy) is a self-taught artist living and working in Milan. His ongoing series *Imaginary Portraits* presents hybrid figures that merge human and non-human traits. Situated within sparse metaphysical environments, these subjects occupy suspended, ambiguous spaces where the boundaries of identity are destabilized. Their physiognomies suggest distant resonances of precolonial mask traditions—evoked not as citation, but as structural references to ritual, transformation, alterity, and the shifting conditions of identity and belonging. At the same time, the figures suggest robotic or synthetic presences, introducing a further layer of reflection tied to artificial intelligence. In this context, the works engage with questions of consciousness, individuality, and the shifting boundaries between human and artificial. Group exhibitions include: Paper Dreaming, F2T, Milan (2026); Contemporary Venice (2024); Itsliquid Group, Palazzo Albrizzi- Capello, Venice; Art in Loop (2023) The Holy Art Gallery, Paris/Brussels/ Amsterdam; Group Exhibition (2023), Art Number 23 Gallery, Athens; Outset, (2023) The Holy Art Gallery, London. Editorial projects include: Cover artwork, Arbiter Magazine, August/ September 2025 issue.

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