

L'ŒIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

Recap & Reload : Luca Casulli – Interview by Nadine Dinter

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Luca Casulli is a cool, internationally educated, high-class gallerist who has (fortunately) remained accessible over the years. With his impressive roster of renowned photographers like Rankin, Toni Meneguzzo, Michel Haddi, and Gian Paolo Barbieri, he has played an important role in the European gallery scene since 2013. I had the pleasure of being introduced to Luca back in 2019 by Greg Gorman, another iconic photographer he worked with for many years. We've since been in touch regularly, so I recently took the opportunity to invite him to another round of *Recap & Reload*.

Mille grazie, Luca!

Nadine Dinter: When and how did you start your career in the arts / photography business?

Luca Casulli: Since my university studies in economics and management for arts and culture, I have always shown a great deal of interest in creative industries, and my curiosity has always been piqued by the biggest challenge of cultural management, i.e., to make the artistic and the economic-management components coexist and liaise successfully. In 2010, I started organizing exhibitions and promoting artists in national and international exhibition contexts, up until I decided to set up a gallery specializing in photographic art with Eugenio Calini in Milan in 2013.

What was your main motivation for opening a gallery? Do you have any particular role models or idols?

LC: My main motivation was the possibility of conveying freedom of expression without any external influences through photography exhibitions, since our gallery is financed independently by its founding members: this has allowed us to move forward only with projects in which we truly believe, both in terms of artistic quality and durability in the long term. The other motivation was to create and cultivate a community of collectors and fans of photography that would grow and last over time in an organic and sustainable way – in

a city such as Milan (and more generally in Italy), which is very attractive and dynamic, but which was lacking a high-end international artistic proposal in the field of photographic art.

Who was the first artist you signed on?

LC: Gian Paolo Barbieri (in my opinion, one of the greatest photographers in the world, of fashion and beyond) was the first artist with whom the gallery signed a worldwide exclusive representation contract and certainly one of the most versatile artists we work with. He can boast a career spanning 60 years, impeccable thoroughness, outstanding abilities, and respect for the job. The poetics of Gian Paolo Barbieri – whom my partner Eugenio has known for over 30 years – have definitely had a massive influence on the identity of our gallery and have led us, over time, to specialize in the fields of fashion photography and portrait photography.

After how many years in the business did you get the affirmation you needed?

What drives you to continue working as a gallerist in your space?

LC: The first few years were necessary to understand the dynamics of the sector and to define our own identity, to distinguish the gallery from all the rest. We then needed to create a sense of trust among collectors. So, to answer your question, major results came after about 5 years, and we can say that we established consolidated international relations after 10 years. A passion for photography, fueled by our relationships with artists and collectors, is the engine we need to keep our eyes trained on the future.

What's your business philosophy?

LC: Quality is everything. Both in the choice of artists and in the preparation of exhibitions, in the professionalism with which we approach our customers. As a boutique gallery specializing in photography, we know that we have to focus fully on quality compared to a blue-chip gallery because it would be much tougher to compete in a globalized world if we were to focus on quantity (number of locations in the world, number of artists represented, or number of art fairs per exhibition year). Also, we prioritize the quality of relationships: our closest collectors have often become genuine friends, and this sense of belonging is difficult to replicate because it is based on quality human interaction.

How many artists do you represent now?

LC: Our gallery works exclusively in the primary market, so, also for the aforementioned needs of basing everything on quality, we represent a relatively small number of artists (at the moment 15). However, in addition to representing established international artists, we keep a keen eye on the new generations. For more than 5 years, we have supported an international competition for under-30s created in 2018 by the gallery and which we now carry forward together with the Museo delle Culture in Lugano, Switzerland. This allows us to include some emerging artists in our roster when the time is right, who show particularly strong artistic and human promise. One case in point is the young Iranian photographer Farnaz Damnabi, winner of the Unpublished Photo contest in 2019, to whom we are dedicating the first personal exhibition in Milan, opening May 23.

Has there been a major turning point, overhaul of the gallery line-up, or important move (of whatever kind) since first opening your gallery?

LC: The start of significant activity abroad, both with private collectors and with museum institutions, in Europe and the United States, thanks to the exclusivity of the artists we represent.

Any highlights or challenging moments?

LC: The prolonged closure in 2020–'21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which entailed a stricter policy of generalized closures across Italy. Nevertheless, the pandemic and the nationwide lockdown did us a great favor in that it was an opportunity to think carefully about what we do, and change some of the established practices in our sector that were outdated, including a hectic and often unnecessary rush to participate in as many exhibitions and fairs as possible, to the detriment of more reflection and higher quality.

Any particular anecdotes you want to share with our readers?

LC: I can think of two. In 2019, during the personal exhibition at the gallery of British photographer Rankin, we hosted a live event, transporting from Berlin to Milan an original and working Polaroid Land Camera outside the United States, one of two remaining Cameras of this type working worldwide.

Rankin took live portraits of members of the public, and for two days, the gallery was turned into a photo set with a large number of people requesting Rankin take their portrait photo with this particular camera.

Or the impressive and incessant flow of visitors in the 5 months of the Mario Testino *Unfiltered* exhibition in 2021

What's new & what's in store for 2023?

LC: From May 10 to 14, we are delighted to exhibit again at Photo London 2023, featuring unconventional color works by Italian master of fashion photography Gian Paolo Barbieri, unposed black and white portraits by French photographer Michel Haddi, large-format Polaroids of ethereal women by the eclectic Italian Artist Toni Meneguzzo, and rare Polaroids of iconic '90s supermodels by British photographer Rankin.

From May 23 to July 28, 29 ARTS IN PROGRESS gallery will present the first personal exhibition of the young Iranian Artist Farnaz Damnabi. The exhibition is entitled *UNVEILED*, and it brings together a selection of works that tell visitors the tale – as refined as it is powerful – of a young female photographer from contemporary Iran, suspended between past and future.

Last but not least, we are excited to announce the global representation of French photographer Michel Haddi, with exclusive access to an archive packed with over 40 years of history. To celebrate this collaboration, which we are inaugurating during Photo London, the gallery will dedicate a large personal exhibition to Haddi this autumn/winter in Milan.

Your advice for photography collectors?

LC: Probably to go beyond your usual horizons and explore subjects and themes by the same artist that are also very different and varied. This approach would allow them to learn more about an artist's creativity, about the versatility of their messages, and increase the opportunities to meet, which would probably lead to new scenarios and projects.

No-gos & to-dos when it comes to the photography business?

LC: Generally speaking, we are not interested in exhibiting artists who are already over-represented by other galleries, and we strongly believe in the value of exclusivity in the gallerist-photographer relationship for one simple reason: to be able to safeguard quality in the long term, for our artists themselves and consequently for our collectors, thus avoiding the typical overlap found in artists who are represented by too many different galleries.

In addition, there is nothing worse for a gallery than to have artists constantly coming in and out of their roster. Therefore, the main to-do is the creation of stable and lasting relationships, which is a prerequisite for the success of a gallery.

Photographers on your watchlist?

LC: Although fashion photography and portraiture are central themes of our identity, we are becoming increasingly involved with artists who also deal with highly topical issues such as social inclusion and human and civil rights, yet who do so with great poetics and beauty, characteristics that underpin our own philosophy. These include the courageous Gabriele Micalizzi, who has taken pictures of the bloodiest war scenes in the world while capturing a sense of hope and beauty that made a lasting impression on us.

There are other photographers we love, too, such as Giampaolo Sgura, who addresses fashion and celebrity portraits with plenty of punch, as well as nude photography that is both daring and ironic. But we don't usually make hasty decisions, and by focusing solely on long-term relationships, we have a structured onboarding process, which proves solid in the long run.

Upcoming presentations & shows:

PHOTO London 2023, May 10 – 14, 2023

Farnaz Damnabi *UNVEILED*, May 23 – July 28, 2023, at 29 ARTS IN PROGRESS, Milan

Follow the gallery at [@29artsinprogress](#) & visit www.29artsinprogress.com for more information.