

James Barron Art

Francesco Polenghi: Ocean of Peace

December 4, 2023 - January 20, 2024



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Francesco Polenghi (1936 - 2020) was an Italian painter based in Milan. After studying economics at New York University in the 1960s, Polenghi returned to Milan to work in advertising, while also carrying out in-depth research into the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, the Portuguese-Jewish philosopher, and developing his early painting style. Polenghi then spent much of the 1980s in India, where he lived in an ashram and continued to study philosophy and religion, particularly advaita vedanta, a school of Hindu philosophy. When he moved back to Italy in 1988, Polenghi focused more intently on painting, creating an extensive body work that synthesized his studies into philosophy and his experiences across Italy, the United States, and India.



“This is an art nurtured in independence. And it’s the fruit of much experience, not only of art but of much else besides. One particular moment, perhaps, is the fact that Polenghi spent much of the 1980s living in India... to seek out sources of its ancient wisdom.”

Barry Schwabsky

Polenghi worked in a process of “psychic automatism” in which he first covered the canvas with a network of densely layered brushstrokes. Working in a type of meditative trance, Polenghi then repeatedly traced over this first layer. He would build up the lines and forms of paintings, and sometimes incorporate multiple colors, until he felt the canvas could no longer withstand additional layers of mark-making, all the while chanting the Gayatri mantra.

In Polenghi’s monograph *Francesco Polenghi* (Skira, 2011), Italian art critic and curator Demetrio Paparoni explains:

“Initially he repeats on a square white canvas, with one color only, a form consisting of a thin cylindrical shape. Juxtaposed to one another, these tapered cylinders become organized into motion conceived as a flow of energy. Determining the character of the first layer is a sort of psychic automatism that allows the artist to remove himself from the surrounding world... Going over the initial design several times suggests a mantra, a spiritual formula... Viewed in this light, the painting becomes an instrument of mind control, capable of offering unexpected open-mindedness.”

Arturo Schwarz, the Italian poet, historian, and Marcel Duchamp expert, was an early champion of Polenghi’s work. In 2003, Schwarz organized the first major Polenghi exhibition at the Fondazione Mudima in Milan. Polenghi passed away in Milan in 2020, at age eighty-four.

“Every painting of Polenghi’s in fact obeys the Shakespearean precept ‘to thine own self be true and it must follow as the night and day, thou can’t not then be false to any man’... Thus Polenghi works in a state of trance, transcribing the uncensored dictation of his unconscious.”

Arturo Schwarz



FRANCESCO POLENGHI

Darsan, 2003

oil on canvas

40 1/2 x 40 1/2 inches (102.9 x 102.9 cm)

FRP005



"There is an intimate connection between the way that Polenghi draws us in and the contemplative experience associated with spirituality..

What contemplation, spiritual experience if you will, promises is a break from [our] visually busy environment. It is immensely rewarding, though not always easy to stop being busy and look inside yourself."

David Carrier



FRANCESCO POLENGHI

Untitled, 2002

oil on canvas

16 1/4 x 12 1/4 inches (41.3 x 31.1 cm)

FRP004





FRANCESCO POLENGHI

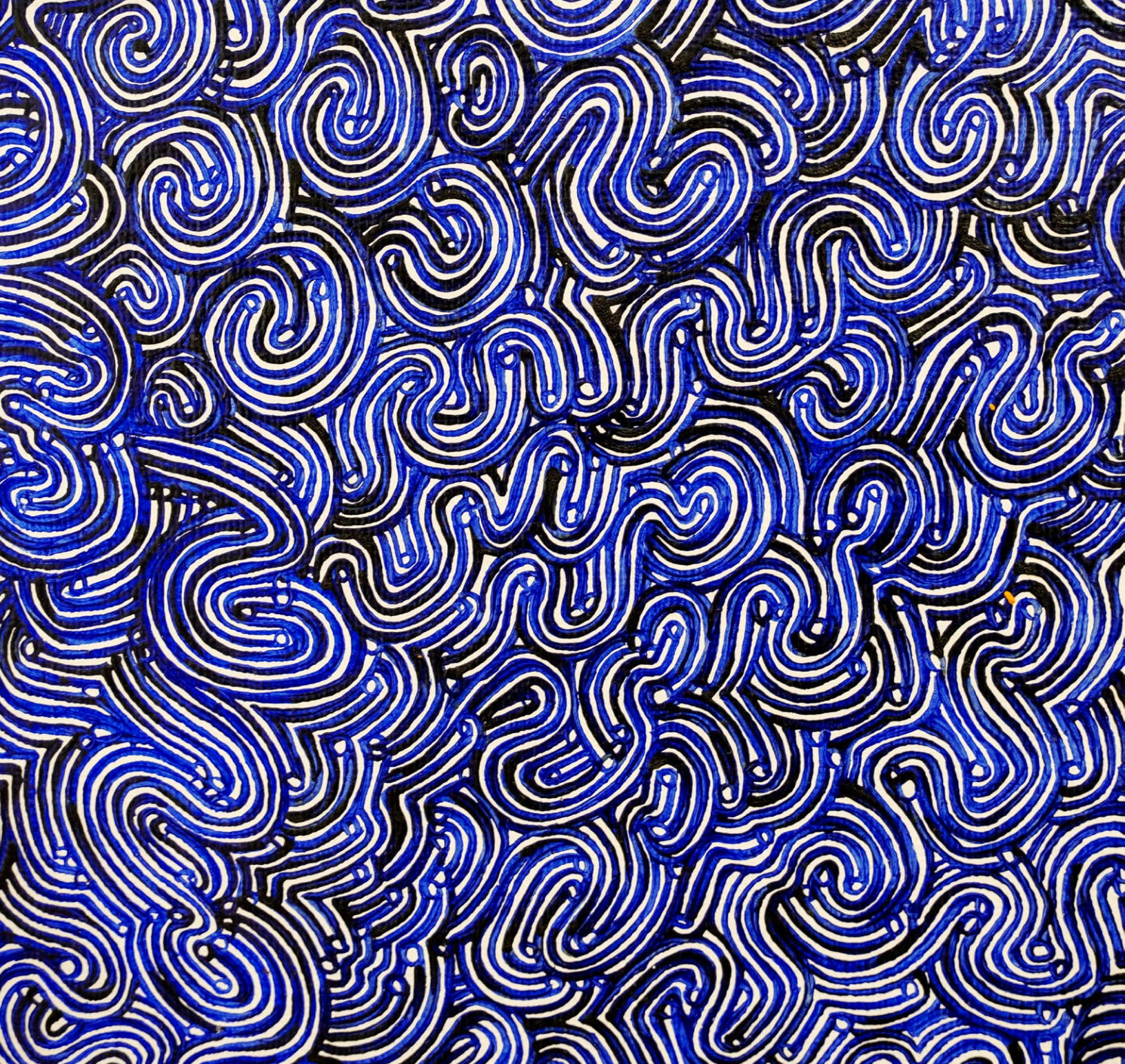
Ocean of Peace, 2004-05

oil on canvas

76 x 76 3/4 inches (193 x 194.9 cm)

FRP003





“If you look at a number of his paintings you may notice that in many of them, you will find the marks (or at least some of them) ‘ghosted’ by nearly identical ones of another color; the subdued presence of this nearly-hidden ‘extra’ color contributes wonderfully, where it exists, to the painting's atmosphere.”

Barry Schwabsky

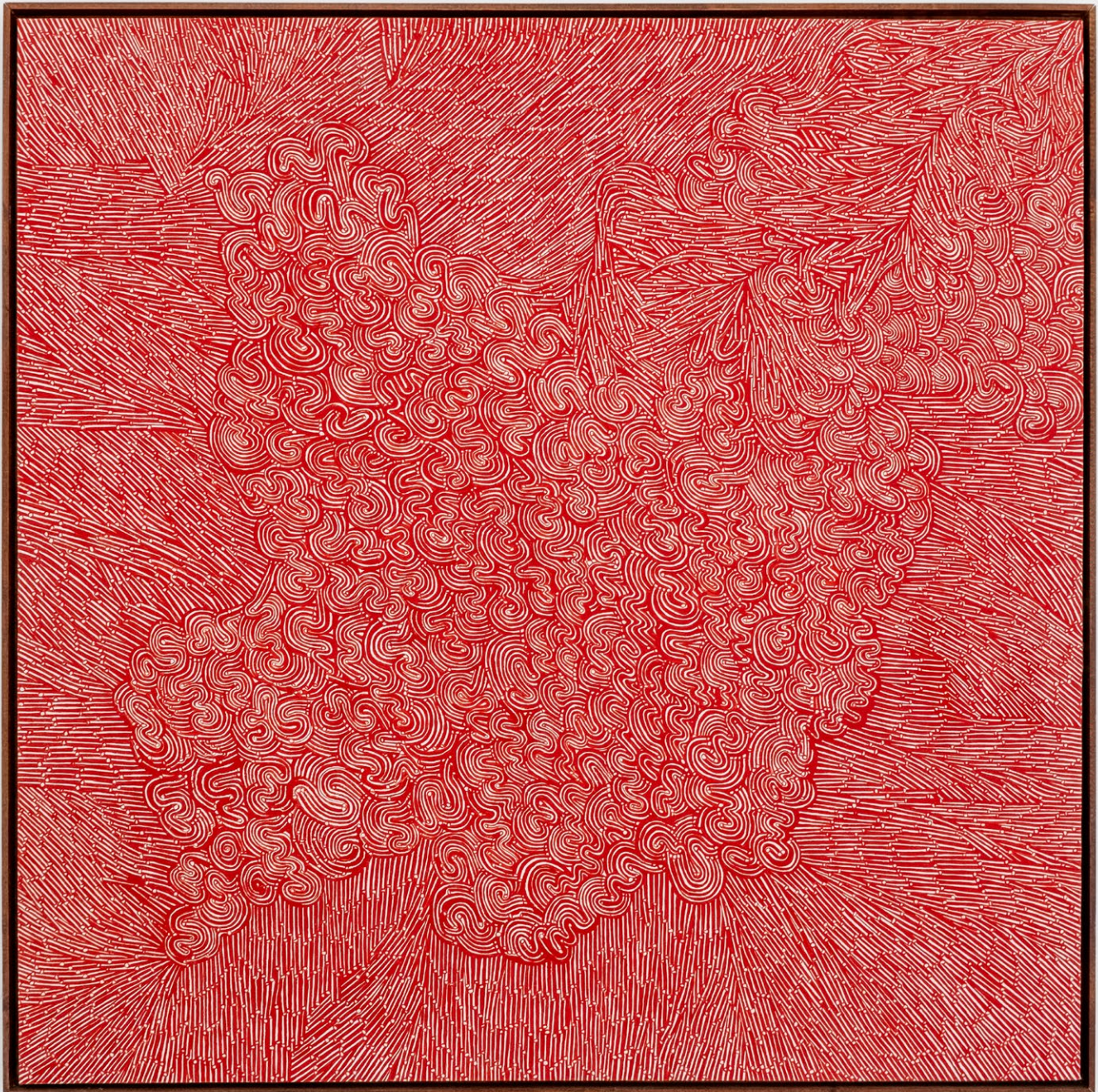
“In the studio Polenghi gets lost in his art, like a storyteller or a reader who becomes totally absorbed in the flow of energy to which he formally gives shape in his painting. When working, he is totally drawn into the creative activity, oblivious to everything outside of his painting.”

David Carrier

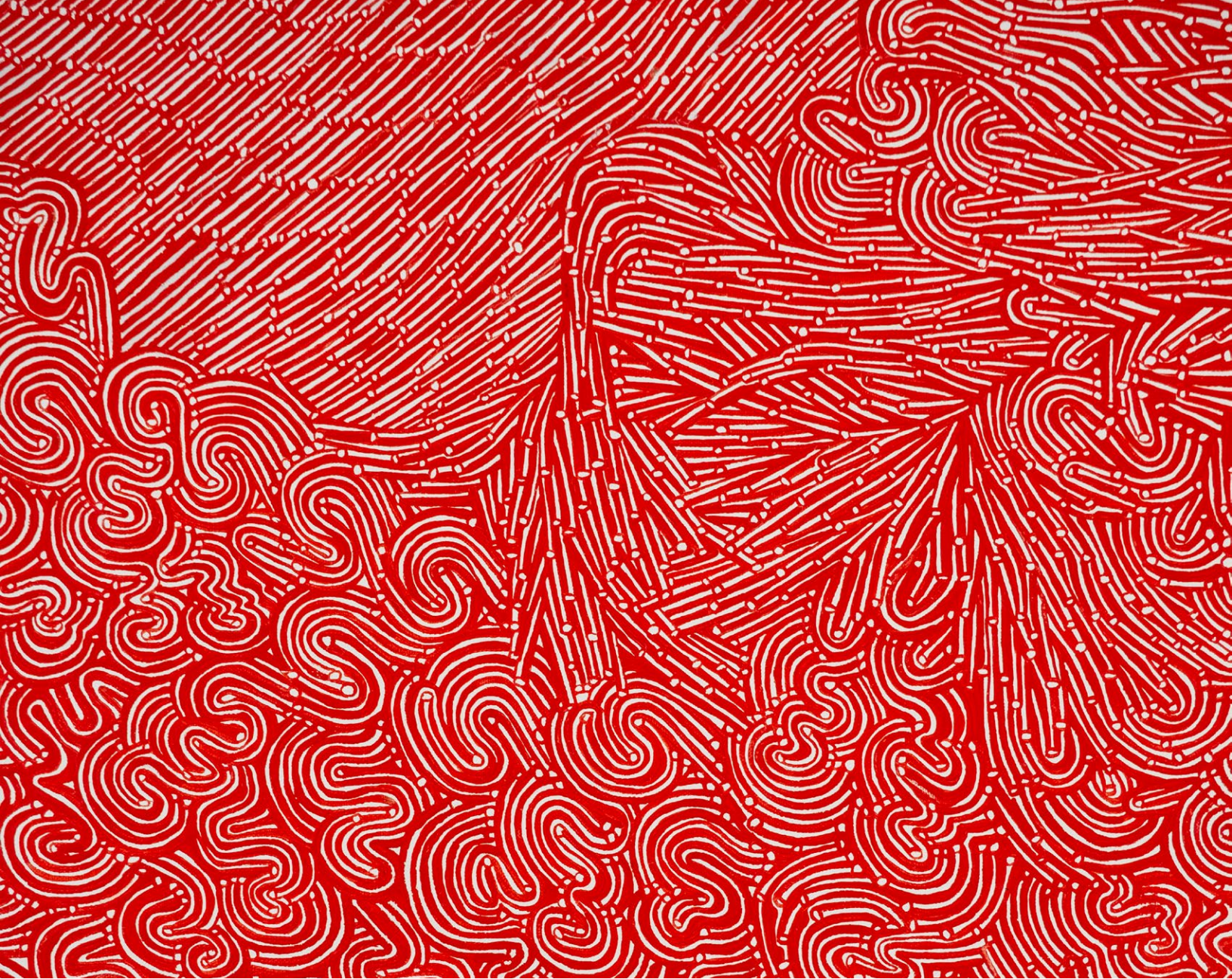


FRANCESCO POLENGHI

Red, 2003
oil on canvas
46 x 46 inches (116.8 x 116.8 cm)
FRP001







“Polenghi's all-over paintings are composed of small tubes, which he calls signs. When you step close, you become aware of these meticulously painted structures, which look oddly like the waters in the famous drawings of another artist who worked in Milan: Leonardo da Vinci.

But when you step back, you see Polenghi's larger structures. A form will thrust into the center from the left-hand corner; push its way upwards from the left and right edges; or, emerging from the lower left cascade in the painting, swamping all the background signs. Working with a narrow range of colors in each painting, Polenghi creates immensely complicated pictures.”

David Carrier

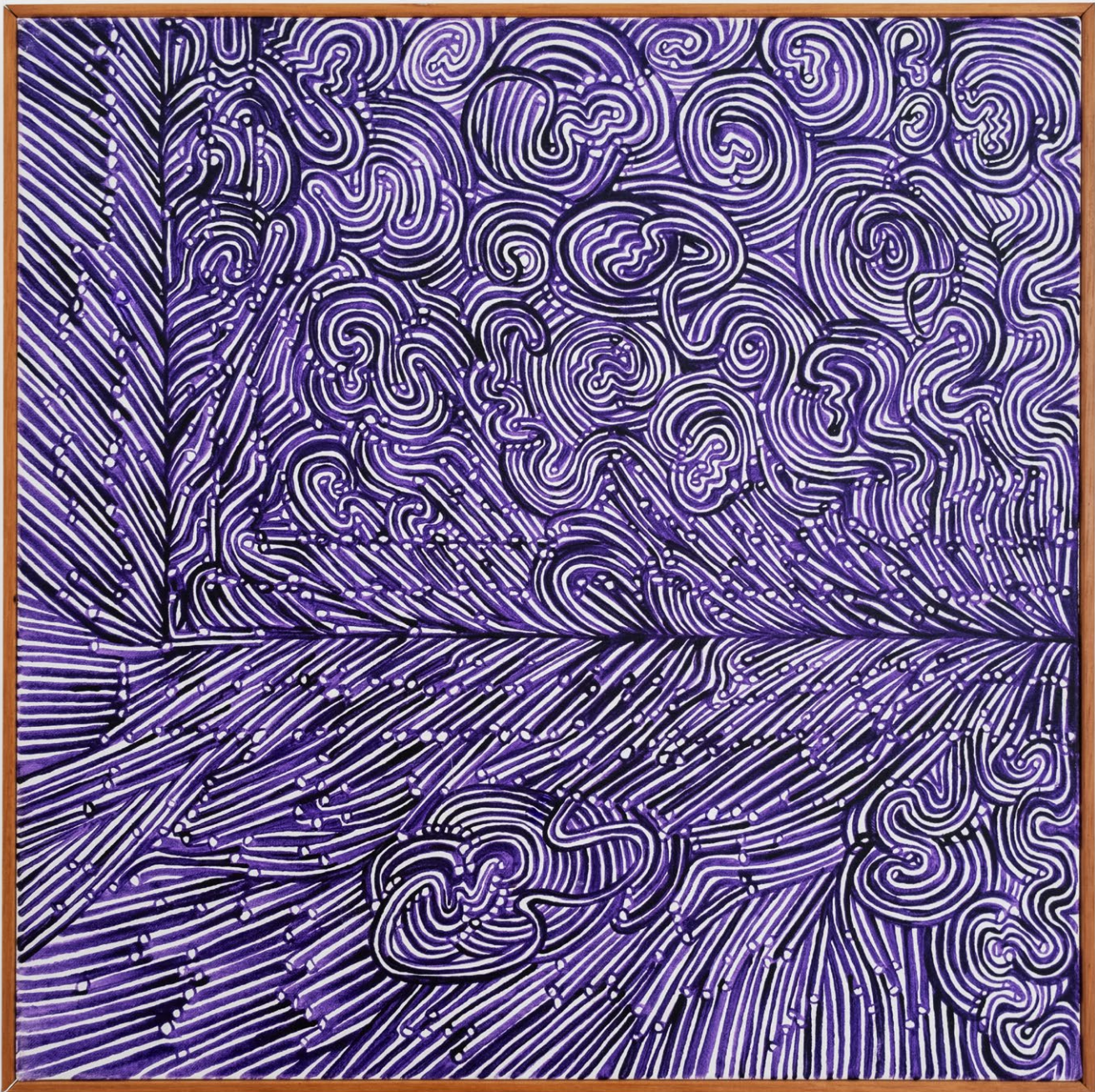
FRANCESCO POLENGHI

Purple Fantasy, 2003

oil on canvas

16 1/4 x 16 1/4 inches (41.3 x 41.3 cm)

FRP007



FRANCESCO POLENGHI

Untitled, 2003
oil on canvas
16 1/4 x 16 1/4 inches (41.3 x 41.3 cm)
FRP006





FRANCESCO POLENGHI

Awaiting Ecstasy, 2011

oil on canvas

78 3/4 x 79 inches (200 x 200.6 cm)

FRP002

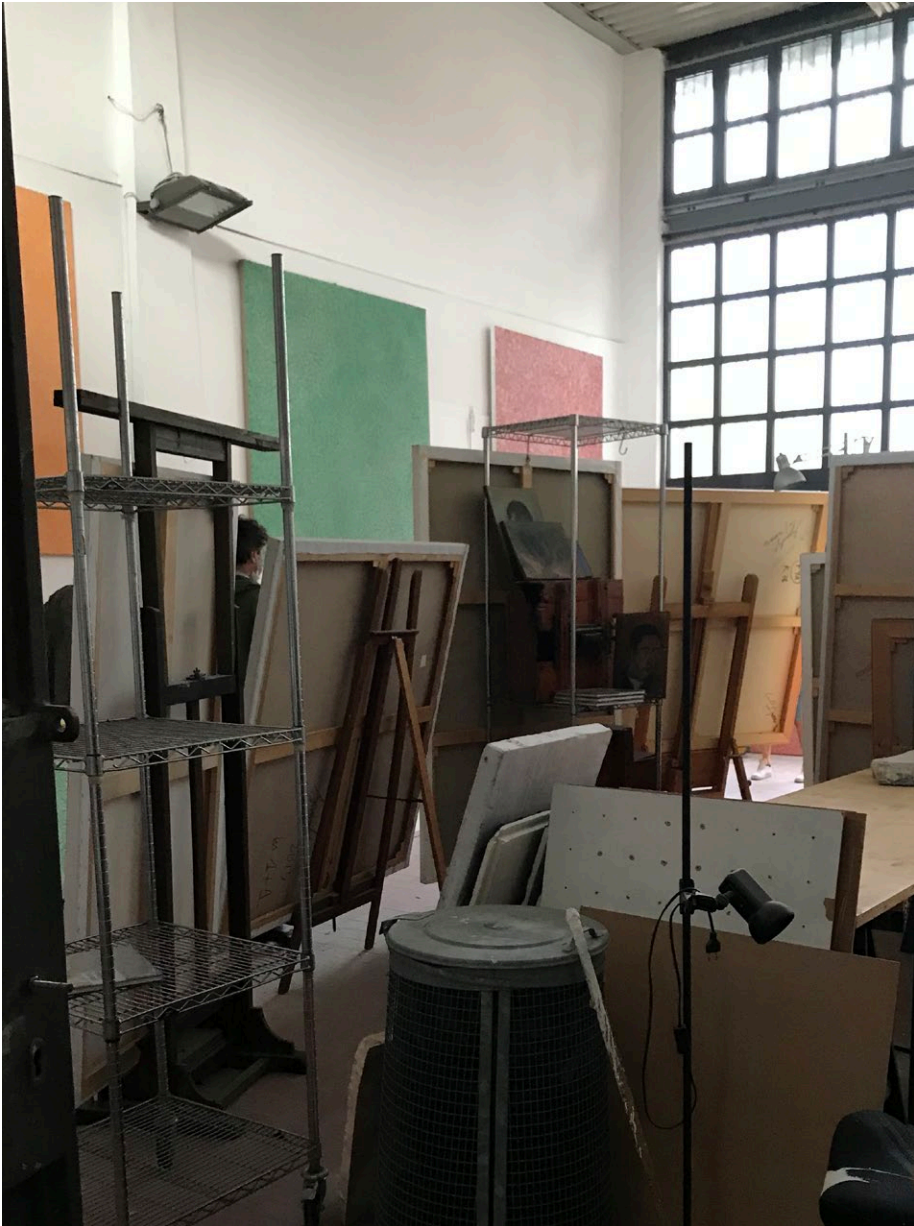






“Polenghi makes his marks like breathing—not like just anyone breathing without having given thought to it, but like someone who understands his breathing as a conscious activity and does it with clarity and naturalness... There is no figure, no ground in these paintings—just this incessant bustle of matter set in motion by an invisible breath.”

Barry Schwabsky



Francesco Polenghi (1936 - 2020)

CV

Solo Exhibitions

- 2023 *Francesco Polenghi: Ocean of Peace*, James Barron Art, South Kent, CT
- 2017 *Conceptual Labyrinths*, Galleria Zanuso, Milan, Italy
- 2017 *Maestro Francesco*, City Hall, Trieste, Italy
Tenart Gallery, Milan, Italy
Kunstlaboratorium, Vestfossen, Norway
- 2015 Ulrich Stein Die Villa, Berlin, Germany
- 2011 Novalis Contemporary Art, Turin, Italy step
- 2011 Galleria Peccolo, Livorno, Italy
- 2010 Palazzo Salis, Tirano, Italy august
- 2003 Galleria Mudima, Milan, Italy

Group Exhibitions

- 2018 *The Divine Joke*, curated by Barry Schwabsky, Anita Rogers Gallery, New York, NY
Art Walk, Frankfurt, Germany
- 2012 *Space Oddity*, S Cube Gallery, Laguna Beach, CA

Bibliography and Publications

- 2017 Burattino, Rossella, "Yoga, canvases, and labyrinths: the other Polenghi reinvents himself as a painter," *Corriere Della Sera*,
- 2011 *Francesco Polenghi*, Skira, 2011; essays by Demetrio Paparoni, Barry Schwabsky, and David Carrier
- 2010 "Francesco Polenghi on show at the Palazzo Salis Tirano," *Latitudes Life*

Education

1961 Economics, New York University

Interview / Dara Polenghi

November 2023

James Barron: Dara, let's start with the small red painting. There is almost an apex at the bottom, which feels like a vortex of energy. Is that something he might have been thinking about in his meditation?

Dara Polenghi: I think so, especially because none of his other pieces start in the center and then expand outward. I think he started in the middle here, which is not common for him at all. It's almost like he shot out and exploded.

JB: I saw one photograph where he has glasses on. Were they magnifying glasses?

DP: I bought him the kind they would use for surgery, attached to a band with a light, almost like what miners use. I would send him boxes of those from the States.

JB: How long would it take him to paint a small painting like this?

DP: Probably three hours, nonstop. The large paintings could take days or weeks, and we would sometimes come back to them later.

JB: And he meditated while he was painting?

DP: Yes. The whole time, he chanted a mantra inside his own mind.

JB: Where did he learn the mantra? At an ashram in India, or in Italy?

DP: At an ashram in India. He first went to India a year or two after we left Italy. He was distraught when my mother moved us to the States.

JB: So the meditation was a way of healing himself and opening up his world visually?

DP: Yes.

JB: Maria [Polenghi's studio manager of 35 years] told me that he would paint very late into the night. She would have to tap him on the shoulder, and he would say, "Oh my God, I can't believe what time of day it is." Is that accurate?

DP: Yes.

JB: What do you think he was after in his art?

DP: I think art was his spiritual connection.

JB: Did he want to impart that spiritual experience to those who looked at his art?

DP: I am not sure that he was concerned with people looking at his paintings. It was about his relationship to his art. When we went to the beach as a family, he would paint constantly, and my mother got mad that he wouldn't talk. He would just be gone for hours and hours.

JB: It's interesting for us to show your father's work right after Sol LeWitt, whose work has a mesmerizing quality as well. I know LeWitt worked on gouache after gouache, listening to music in his studio, almost in a state of meditation. Did your father listen to music while he worked?

DP: He didn't allow music. You couldn't even listen to music in the car.

JB: Why would he not allow music?

DP: He grew up during the war, and he was sent to a religious boarding school on an island in a lake in Switzerland. The priests there were very strict. He would run away, steal a boat, and find his way back to Milan.

JB: It's interesting: he started with priests, then gravitated to meditation in an ashram in India. Perhaps that felt more open-ended?

DP: The way he was raised in this boarding school was very regimented. He was expected to get up at a certain hour and go to sleep at a certain hour—not like the world he created for himself in his studio.

JB: Did your father have system or a preconceived notion for what he would paint before he started?

DP: It just came out of him. I don't think anything was premeditated. It was a natural flow of his meditation. On the back of his monograph, there is a photograph of him halfway through a black and white piece. I said to him, "Why don't you stop there?" and he said "No, I can't do that."

JB: There are two wars going on right now, and the world has become polarized. What do you think we can gain from your father's art? What is the spiritual takeaway?

DP: Peace. You can sit and look at his art for hours and you will never stop seeing something new.

