

# HYPERALLERGIC

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## A MID-CENTURY PAINTER SHOWED A WORLD OUT OF KILTER

by Albert Mobilio



Luigi Zuccheri, "Paesaggio con viandante e farfalle" (Landscape with wayfarer and butterflies) (1950–55), tempera on canvas applied to board, 9 7/8 x 11 3/4 inches (all images courtesy Karma Gallery)

Luigi Zuccheri's moody landscape paintings, now on display at Karma gallery, radiate an unnerving allure. In his impressionistic rural scenes a farmer carry stalks, fishermen edge toward the banks of streams, rambler clutching walking sticks make their way on roughhewn paths. Typically these figures might betoken pastoral equanimity but Zuccheri, born in 1904 in the Friuli region of Italy, has introduced disruptive element — a menagerie of oversized creatures, plants, fruits, and vegetables that dwarf the humans with whom they share the canvas.

While the presence of grasshoppers, snakes, pears, and snails of near-monstrous proportions might hint at Surrealist motifs, a surer influence on Zuccheri would be the *ex voto* or devotional paintings by local Italian artists that he would have seen growing up or when studying painting in Venice. These folk paintings often depict the Virgin Mary's intercession in the lives of common people; the image serves as a commemorative token, one commissioned by the person whose prayers were answered. The paintings, done in tempera, can be crude and lacking in perspective yet they stand as powerful emblems of emotion and faith.

Zuccheri trained in oil painting but in the 1940s he switched to tempera; all works in the show are tempera on wood, most dating between 1950 and '55. The technique requires mixing pigment with egg yolk and water and was employed for centuries to paint the walls of tombs and churches. Almost as if he were one of the solitary figures in his own paintings, he collected stones from riverbanks to grind for pigment. He shared his tempera techniques with his friend Giorgio de Chirico, and in turn appears to have adopted the Metaphysical painter's inclination to infuse the quotidian with disquieting shifts in scale and perspective.

In one canvas (all of the show's works are untitled), a lone traveler, an expansive, Breughel-like landscape unfolding ahead, treads toward a distant town unaware of the massive tortoise trailing behind or the outsize bird above. Even as it recalls votive images marking a miraculous event, the scene suggests a world out of kilter, a slightly sinister realm where the uncanny may not be welcoming, and may in fact be menacing.

Zuccheri's dark palette, rendered in thick brushstrokes that color the land a muddy ochre, the turbulent skies gun-metal gray and blue, amplifies this brooding effect. A figure perhaps struggling against the wind grips a broom beneath a glowering sky while impossibly large grasshoppers skitter at their feet; a house-size primrose flowers while people go about their tasks unfazed. The disproportionate relations between humans, fauna, and landscape spark, it seems, little alarm in his figures. In Zuccheri's rustic domain the fantastical is domesticated; oddity is reality's baseline, so a colossal crab is merely a generous feast soon to be consumed.