

Interview with Andrea Gualandri



by Enrico Maria Davoli

Andrea Gualandri (Reggio Emilia 1978) started out as a graffiti artist and cartoonist before completing his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna in 2005. A painter, sculptor, and illustrator with a keen eye for the reality of the media, with its rhetorical communication and thematic intertwining, he loves to seek out new combinations between collective memory and entertainment, the public and private spheres, styles and fashions. Gualandri has held solo exhibitions (Sketchbook in Tour, Biennale Internazionale dell'umorismo nell'arte, Tolentino 2007; Colpevole e innocente, Galleria del Carbone, Ferrara 2016, and FforFAKE. Il cinema inesistente, Fondazione Dozza Città d'Arte, Dozza 2024), as well as group exhibitions (L'Arte del gol, pittura, scultura, fotografia e il gioco più bello del mondo, curated by Luca Beatrice, Chiostri di San Domenico, Reggio Emilia 2019). He is also a professional in the field of visual education and leads workshops aimed at the younger generations. Through his responses to the nine questions in this interview, Gualandri provides an autobiographical account that chronicles the past few decades amid youth cultures, technological transformations, and increasingly cynical and aggressive infotainment. But his words are also a passionate reaffirmation of rigor and technical expertise, which are indispensable to an art that truly wants to measure itself against the culture of artifice and persuasion in which we are all immersed. The images accompanying the interview are taken from the artist's website and Instagram profile, whose links are provided below: www.andreagualandri.it

Your first approach to painting dates back to the 1990s, when the focus on images filtered by the media took a sudden leap forward in quality, comparable to today's levels. At the time, you were studying at the Istituto d'Arte "Toschi" in Parma, one of the most fertile environments in the Emilia-Romagna region where you trained. Can you recall anything about those years and the general atmosphere around you?

The mid-1990s saw the historic decline of heavy metal. Leather jackets, studs, and Gibson Flying V guitars were giving way to flannel shirts and grunge. All I had in my headphones was *Metallica* and everything that came before. At school, I studied graphic design, but perhaps decoration would have been a better choice. I would have liked to paint, but I always loved drawing. I bought Marvel comics because the characters' anatomy was more interesting than the stories: anatomy has always been my only bastion, obsession, and pleasure. I was crazy about Franco Bruna's caricatures in the "Gazzetta dello Sport", then I was struck by Todd McFarlane, with *Spiderman* and *Spawn* above all. A certain exaggerated and caricatured style of drawing has always prevailed, as have disorder and disproportion, and so I moved on from small caricatures to painting graffiti and murals for a while. Graffiti artists with their tags didn't understand what I was doing, and comic book artists were too nice to tell me that my work was unpalatable. Behind the scenes, Draw Struzan and his posters, every time I saw them it was like entering a temple: you contemplated them and were partly admonished. To complete the work, I needed the contributions of Will Eisner and Magnus [Roberto Raviola, ed.], who, with his *La valle del terrore* [special edition "Tex" no. 9, June 1996, ed.], told me everything. Frenzied research and movement, many passions and few breaks to understand them, I was in a place and always had the wrong tools. I have always sought drawing as a cultural mediator between myself and other things; drawing is a place and a dimension that I needed to reconstruct and expand. Around me, the world, my family, and school were strongly gutenbergian, made up of artisanal processes, lots of manual labor, lots of ink and smell, and little digital technology. At school, the classrooms were like laboratories, and this intensely practiced form of knowledge was the constant in my way of learning: doing.



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TRAGEDY

JOHN CAPPELLETTI

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Then you attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, an environment that was highly hostile to painting at the time, especially when linked to a referential imagery. What is your assessment of that experience?

The academy was an important, decisive part of my education. I found disciplines that helped me develop and engage with different languages and artists I didn't know. Subjects such as Artistic Anatomy (all-encompassing and incredible), Engraving (a constant laboratory of research and discovery), and Art History (the fundamental backbone of all disciplines) were indispensable. Painting, on the other hand, the main course, was a fluctuating and at times inconclusive experience, due to my own shortcomings and gaps in teaching. I, who based everything on figuration, found myself with a teacher who was lazy, enigmatic and unpredictable (and I am being kind in my assessment). It was only in my final year that I found a professor who, despite admitting me to his course partly by chance and partly due to bureaucracy, stimulated me by showing me what I had abandoned in my painting, namely comics, illustrations, and cinema. My thesis was about Will Eisner, one of the undisputed masters of world comics, and my paintings were abstract, weak, and defeatist. He didn't understand the connection. So he asked me what I really knew how to do, I brought him the pages of my comics from that time, and he simply said: look, you speak this language (pointing to the pages) and not these random marks (but the word was not "random"). That was the turning point. I took my imagination and questioned it with the language of painting. It was my last year, but I gathered everything I could and, above all, the pleasure of standing in front of the canvas. The academy was over, but not my desire to paint.

At the time, there was no school of comics in Bologna Fine Arts Academy. But your connection with that language (and with related languages such as cinema, advertising, and TV) remained strong nonetheless. Today you are a painter and not a comic artist, but those logics, those tricks, those rhetorical figures are still very much present in your work. What can you say about this?

Comics have long been a kind of ambition for me. I wanted to do just that: illustrate stories and create characters. Comics are an all-encompassing discipline. The way I see it, you have to know how to do many things, from drawing a shoelace to a cityscape, or a close-up of a mouse, or a spaceship, and much, much more. Above all, comics take up many hours of daily work, and my results in the field have never allowed me to live up to my ambitions. So much time, so many sheets of paper, so many drawings, so many pages, so many

mistakes, so few satisfying results. But some insights. Painting allowed me to focus on them through a tool that has always fascinated me greatly: the movie poster. A more manageable product and the idea of painting posters for non-existent films allowed me to combine and condense the entire comic book journey, that is, to tell a story through images, within a single format. The poster became a container in which to insert car chases, wide shots, close-ups of villains or flawless heroes, texts, bombastic titles, and compelling protagonists. Cinema and comics are siblings, and the poster is devoted to comics because it could be considered a slightly larger cover. At the same time, the poster is a place where classic themes of the pictorial tradition such as portraiture, landscape, nature, abstraction, and much more are experimented with and addressed. It is a medium that gives space to the artistic skills and imaginative delusions that are dear to me.



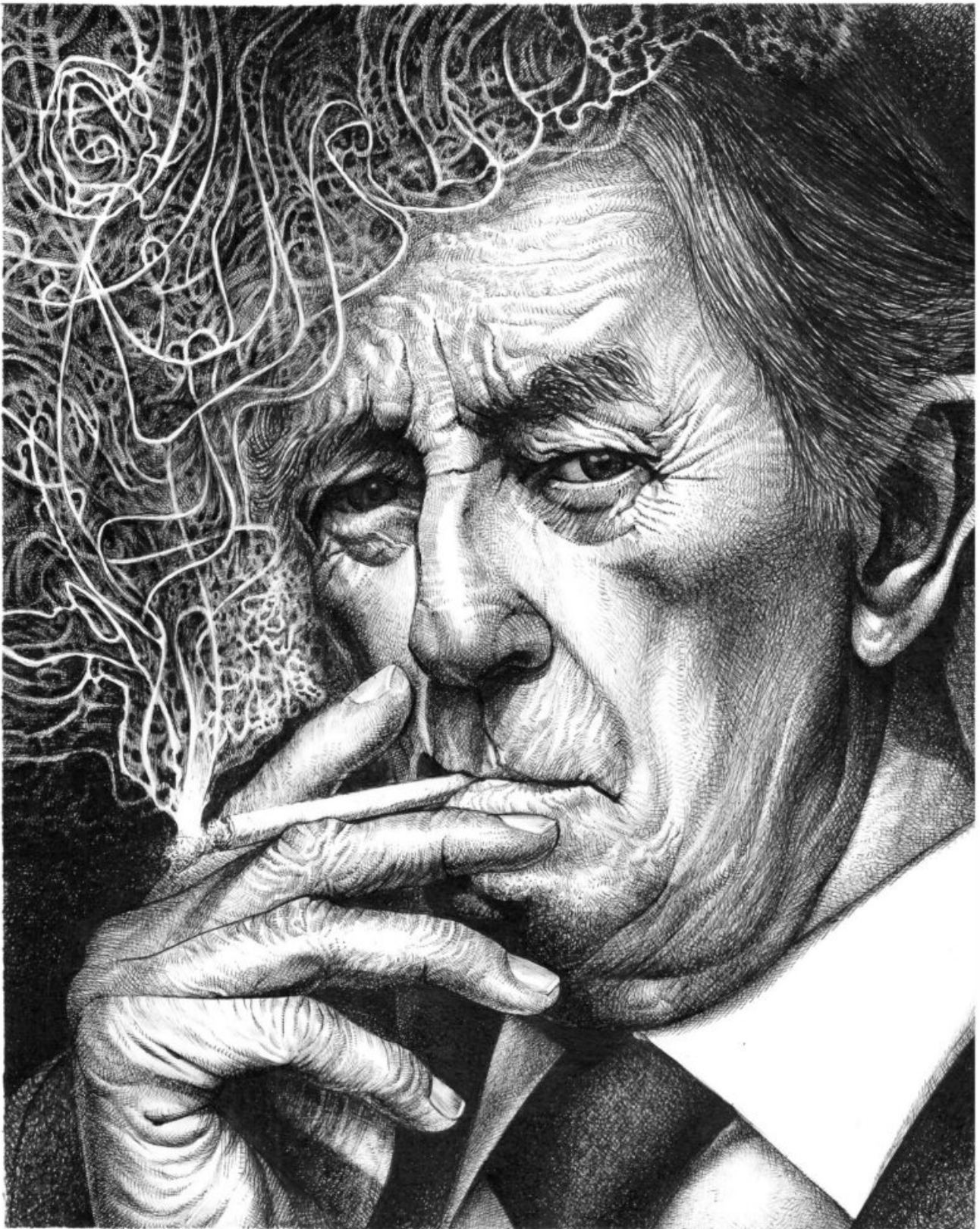
Andrea Gualandri, Two works from the series "Nazional popolare," 2020, acrylic on panel, each 42 x 29 cm (photo credits Andrea Gualandri).

Gradually, pop imagery stylistic elements have taken on a universal significance in your work, like a basic handbook used to stage the collective unconscious. The impression is that this culture plays the same role for you that historical and mythological culture, with its ancient iconography, plays for other iconic painters. Is there any truth in this?

I completely agree. I like the culture that runs mainly along the topline of the 70s-90s, without wanting to exegete it but rather drawing inspiration from it. This period gives space to my curiosity, with creative ambitions on the one hand and recreational ones on the other. In search of new heroes, assuming that the old ones have really fallen, because their achievements still dictate the direction, to be translated with the tools and languages that have accompanied my growth: cinema, television, music, figurines, toys, comics. Traditional, analog materials and iconic beings that breathed the same air as me on summer afternoons, especially the hottest ones. A pindaric reconstruction, through that past, ranging from afternoon cartoons to late-night American cinema, crossing the nomenclature of sportsmen with unlikely names and beyond. That trace often has to do with the unfinished, the suspended, just as if it were a flight, and it is this aspect that fascinates me, imagining how many other races Jack Burton, the protagonist of John Carpenter's film *Big Trouble in Little China*, could have run, always thinking of it as a half-finished story, not out of economic laziness but to stimulate the imagination of the viewer. To take this flight, the concept of fake becomes a launch pad, which in my project has nothing to do with certain aggressive journalism of today. The idea of fake as a hoax is, however, the cornerstone of my playful and evocative aims. I modify reality not to determine a new truth, but to deliberately disorient the eye and open up crazy and unexpected scenarios.

Now, it is reasonable to ask you which figures from the artistic and extra-artistic culture of the past and present you feel close to, either because they have inspired and influenced you, or simply because they are congenial to your way of working.

A list, strictly in no order of importance. Magnus for his attention to detail. Will Eisner for his storytelling and splash pages. Drew Struzan because every one of his posters has always made me want to go to the movies. Tod MacFarlane for his exaggerated style and mind-blowing panel layouts (*Spawn* above all). Walter Hill because *The Warriors*, but not only that, is a cornerstone. John Carpenter for his visual grammar and ability to tell stories on a shoestring budget. Hayao Miyazaki because he is one of those who held my hand during my childhood and introduced me to *Lupin III* (the one with the green jacket). Sergio Toppi, his name alone would suffice, but his refinement and elegance are matched by few and surpassed by none. Angus MacGyver because he is one of the greatest creative geniuses, despite being a fictional character. David and Jerry Zucker and Jim Abrahams because their films still make me laugh and make me want to think of new characters to invent. *Spinal Tap* because otherwise my posters would not exist. Obviously, there are many others.



Andrea Gualandri, Robert Mitchum, 2025, ink on paper, 29 x 21 cm (photo credits Andrea Gualandri).

In every layer of mass culture that you incorporate into your paintings, from soccer player figurines to movie posters, one senses that, on the one hand, there is a starting point that you cannot ignore, and on the other, an

irrepressible urge to create a parallel reality, sometimes subtly deceptive, sometimes openly false. How do you integrate these two planes?

The process varies depending on the characters in question. Some have what they can be used for written on their faces, almost lombrosian-style, while others need to be turned upside down to see if they have potential. When I see a face or a person, I like to build a story around them, almost like a screenplay, and this narrative helps me give them a name. Naming things and people means knowing them, and this story, as if it were a narrator's voice in a film or a novel written in third person, allows me to get to know the characters and incorporate the narrative planes. Mass culture provides me with a platform for lexical and formal acrobatics. In my early works, I exaggerated a lot, using bombastic names. It was fun but excessive. Now, thanks to valuable advice that made me reflect, the names are more credible but still evocative. I leave it to the synopses (which accompany the posters or biographies for soccer players) to continue the dream or deception. I am fascinated by telling potentially plausible stories, creating in the viewer the suspicion that they are looking at something mythological, just like the old movie posters, which, without revealing the plot, made you dream of a grandiose story, often more beautiful than the film itself.

As a sculptor, you are one of the most unusual artists one could encounter. Your assemblages could be mistaken for toys or nativity scenes, but also for portable monuments, somewhat like Bruno Munari's poetics. There seems to be a cult following for discarded and second-rate materials (wrappers, shells), but then you realize that your treatment ennobles them, making us forget their humble origins. Can you give us some insight into this?

I like to see objects in a way that differs from their intended use (I am attracted to clothespins, which are beautiful objects with unlimited aesthetic potential), just as I like to romanticize people's faces, giving them a new identity and a new role. Here too, my passion for a certain genre of 1980s *anime* [japanese cartoons, *ed.*], populated by giant robots, is a great source of inspiration. Robots, armor, and anthropomorphic design are the starting points for my sculptures. Working with everyday materials such as clothespins, bottle caps, wall plugs, and much more, all strictly made of plastic, should not be seen as a propensity for environmentalism (which is nevertheless relevant, but in everyday life). The design of these objects evokes that imagery for me: I see a colored spoon and I already know that it is suitable for a pectoral or adductor muscle, the cap of a marker pen is functional for a knee, and so on. Over the years, I have realized that my passion for anatomical drawing has allowed me to create very realistic and complex volumes and shapes, and drawing finds its purpose in these sculptures. My anatomical sketches are not designed to become paintings, but are the backbone of all my sculptures. Plastic has proved to be a more

malleable material than others (such as iron or wood) and allows me to structure very complex situations by bringing characters (mostly heroes or warriors or anatomies in epic positions) into dialogue in different and unexpected positions. What amazes me is that the original object is only a distant memory, it has taken a completely different direction, and that is what I am trying to develop now.



Andrea Gualandri, *Trashformers* #1, *Trashformers* #12, 2024-25, sculptures-assemblages of plastic materials, height 30 cm (photo credits Andrea Gualandri).

Your familiarity with the human face is clearly evident in your pencil and ink drawings, which mostly depict famous actors, musicians, and fictional characters. Looking at them, rather than simple portraits, one might think of them as critical reviews or cover notes in which, instead of words, you use graphic stylizations. How do you approach your subjects?

My approach to the subject is generally inspired either by my admiration for them or by the morphological peculiarities of their face. Portraiture is the figurative genre that fascinates me most, and I approach it with a meticulous technique, drawing on the academic heritage of engraving, so much so that my works are always in black and white. Thanks to them, I rediscover an almost meditative attitude that does not exist in my painting, thanks to the endless repetition of small, sometimes tiny marks. The formats I work on tend to be modest (usually 20×30 cm), and this allows me to conduct an almost

microscopic analysis, with a attention to detail that can only be achieved with ink.

Your presence, with a painting from 2017 and one from 2025, in the context of the Biennale del Muro Dipinto in Dozza (not far from Bologna), is very useful in taking stock of how, today, it is possible to create monumental and decorative art, using linguistic devices in step with the times. How do you adapt the format of the movie poster to the architectural and urban context?

The poster finds its definitive home on the wall, like a painting or a drawing. But only the poster requires an external wall. The poster has become public art involuntarily, out of communicative necessity. Years have passed since posters, due to technological developments both inside and outside the cinema itself, were no longer attached to walls. Reproducing a poster on the wall of a building or house is like returning home, to the place of origin where it all began; it is the right location. Since mine is an artistic intervention and not an advertising communication, I use different criteria from those of a billboard operator when choosing the location. It is necessary to carry out field surveys, tests, and hypotheses, taking into account the surrounding environment, in order to enhance it and not alter it, after which the painting can take place. The intervention is, to all intents and purposes, site-specific, as art, and especially public art, has always been throughout the ages.

Homepage: Andrea Gualandri, Vicky Vale (detail), 2025, ink on paper, 29 x 21 cm (photo credits Andrea Gualandri).

Below: Andrea Gualandri, Tragedy (FforFake #6), 2010-16, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 100 cm (photo credits Andrea Gualandri).



BLACK NIGHT

ZORANA GEE **FRED HAYABUSA** **PERRY WEEKEND** **PIKE PRAMPOLINI**
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