

ON  
LOCATION

Alberto Burri has a studio in Città di Castello, a small historic town in Umbria, in central Italy. Converted out of a large industrial building which was once used for drying tobacco, the space is huge, truly imposing in its bare simplicity, and almost overwhelming in terms of human scale. Its ordered neatness corresponds not at all to the cliché of the artist's atelier as a place of "torment and ecstasy"; rather, this is a platonic space, in which ideas are cast on a flat white wall, about 130 feet long, constructed against the building's frame. Burri, now 71, executed most of the paintings he has shown in recent years in this ascetic yet quite theatrical structure. Here, too, besides working on sculptures, he has tested out the instal-



Above: Alberto Burri, maquette of Orsanmichele, Florence, with models of paintings from *Orti (Gardens)*, 1980–81, wood, ca. 4 × 6 × 4'. Photo: Silvia Massotti.  
Right: Alberto Burri's studio in Città di Castello, Italy. Photo: Aurelio Amendola.

lations of his more important shows with a precise dry run.

During the past ten years, a number of painting cycles, conceived as single works, have run in a counterpoint through Burri's art: the series first shown in Assisi, in the Convento di San Francesco, in 1975; *Viaggio* (Voyage,

1976), ten canvases exhibited in the Città di Castello studio in 1979; the *Orti* (Gardens) of 1980–81, nine paintings on Celotex and one sculpture created for Florence's Orsanmichele, a 14th-century warehouse which was once a grain silo; and *Sestante* (Sextant), 17 paintings and one sculpture that were exhibited in Venice, in the old naval shipyards of the Giudecca, during the summer of 1983. All these buildings save the first are secular, connoting no mysticism, but rather lay ideals. And all are linked to each other by the thread of human labor. In Burri's work, antimemorial by nature (even if often of large dimensions), the human being is always at the center. The artist's cultural roots are embedded in the Italian humanist tradition that began with the Renaissance. Like 15th-century Florentine art, his paintings seek transcendence through an arduous alchemy: a meditation on the earthly condition, effected through a razor-sharp intellect, confronts and combines with an absolute spirituality.

Burri's experiments with media have always been audacious, sometimes disruptively so. Burlap, wood, iron, plastic, and Celotex have been fluent tools in his hands, even though they are not traditionally associated with the practice of painting. But to focus solely on the symbolic and structural significance of the different media and colors that Burri's art invokes would be reductive, missing its overall meaning, for much of that meaning is supplied by the work's extension through space. Burri immerses himself deeply in the environments that will house his paintings. Often, he orders the building of wood maquettes of the space—miniature sets, which he uses to calculate precisely their arrangement. The model of the Orsanmichele building, reproduced here, is about 4 feet high, 4 feet deep, and something over 6 feet long. Resting inside are small copies of the paintings, in the scale of 1:20 (where the originals measure, say, 100 by 140 inches, the reproductions are about 5 by 7). In the vast expanse of the old tobacco warehouse, also shown here, full-sized paintings appear more diminished than the tiny copies do in the

model environment; clearly, space can alter a viewer's perception of a painting—make it look small, large, well proportioned, iconic. The crucial clues that distinguish the paintings from the miniatures are the tiny forms of the human figures watching and working in Burri's studio. They give us a sense of scale; almost unconsciously, we compare the paintings with the sense of our own bodies that we project into the space. And we feel how grand a painting can be, compared to us. The hand-sized pictures in the maquette, though, give us a comforting sense of our size. Yet they occupy their space as unashamedly as their larger relatives do the artist's studio. The two photographs, taken in and of different spaces, and at different times, show works conceived with the same precise balance of formal proportions and reflecting the same concerns. Together, they demonstrate that the humble and the grand can be the same thing—it's we who distinguish between them.

Usually, these installation projects and maquettes are jealously guarded in Burri's studio, but they were shown in Rome last December for the first time in public. And they have helped us better to understand the artist's process. The "dubbing" of the paintings within the space represents a necessary passage for this art. Burri never leaves the relationship between art and environment to chance; the positioning of each piece follows strict laws of order and harmony. He works within the space rather than assaulting it, and his regulation of individual pictorial structures accompanies a vision of their rhythmic modulation within a larger whole. Burri subjects the emotional pleasure of creation to a crystalline logic. He challenges the space through the force of nonsymbolic materials and pure, nonmetaphoric colors. He conceives his painting cycles like large, complex moral frescoes within which each piece has its own specific weight and quality, unique and unrepeatable. If the medium is the protagonist in Burri's work, the space is the plot.

—IDA PANICELLI

Translated from the Italian by Meg Shore.