Hirshhorn Presents “Salvatore Scarpitta: Traveler”
Focus Exhibition Surveys Work of American Artist
Who Linked Worlds of Racing and Art

“Art has no particular resting place…it travels where it is needed,” said Salvatore Scarpitta (American, b. New York City, 1919–2007), describing a career that spanned the Atlantic Ocean and more than half a century, moving from the avant-garde cultural circles of postwar Rome to the banked dirt oval speedways of rural Maryland and Pennsylvania. “Salvatore Scarpitta: Traveler,” on view at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden July 17, 2014 through January 11, 2015, is a focus exhibition of 19 works that surveys the wide-ranging oeuvre of an artist who escapes easy categorization and who endeavored to “introduce into the art experience the life experience.”

Although he is at times viewed as a figure linking American Pop and Italian Arte Povera, Scarpitta cut his own trail through the 20th century, as seen in his four main bodies of work: the so-called Extramurals, the car-part paintings, the racecars and the sleds. Part of a series of exhibitions that in the Hirshhorn’s 40th anniversary year highlight strengths of the museum’s collection, including its in-depth holdings of works by key art-historical figures, “Salvatore Scarpitta: Traveler” is built on the recent acquisition of five major works—including the only two examples of the full-size racecars outside Europe—augmented by a number of loans.

“This will be the first solo presentation of Scarpitta’s art at an American museum in over a decade, and the first ever on the East Coast,” said Hirshhorn assistant curator Melissa Ho, curator of the exhibition. “It will illuminate for audiences the themes that unify and animate an exceptionally adventurous, diverse body of work.”

Raised in Los Angeles, the son of a sculptor father and actress mother, Scarpitta acted in films as a child, joined a flamenco dance company as an adolescent and in the meantime developed a love of...
dirt-track automobile racing. At the age of 17, he traveled to Italy to enroll in the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, where he received traditional academic training. He remained abroad for two decades. During World War II, he became involved with Italian partisans, having escaped from an internment center after 18 months. He later joined the U.S. Navy and finished the war as one of the Monuments Men charged with safeguarding cultural treasures. Following his discharge in California, Scarpitta returned to Rome, establishing himself in an Italian avant-garde scene that included figures such as Alberto Burri, Piero Dorazio and Lucio Fontana. In the 1950s, he exhibited at La Tartaruga, a gallery known for its program of advanced art that later helped launch Arte Povera artists such as Jannis Kounellis and Pino Pascali.

Partly in response to the trauma of the war, Scarpitta created his Extramurals, bandaged and distressed three-dimensional “paintings” that violate the integrity of the picture plane and offer both an image and an object. The monumental “Moby Dick (Extramural-Composition n. 3)” (1958) consists of jutting, skinlike swaths of mottled white. Works of this period were stained with household dyes such as tea, coffee, wine or iodine.

A studio visit by New York gallerist Leo Castelli prompted Scarpitta’s return to the United States in 1958. He would show with Castelli for 40 years, alongside artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Lee Bontecou and Frank Stella. And yet he remained something of an outsider, driven by his own unique passions.

Back in the U.S., Scarpitta rekindled his childhood obsession with car racing. He began incorporating car parts—some scavenged from fatal wrecks—into his paintings. Appointed with straps, buckles and pipes, car-part paintings such as “Sundial for Racing” (1962) and “Racer’s Pillow” (1963) are slashed and bound, but unlike the Extramurals their colors are often bright and bold, signaling both the danger of the track and the bravery of the men who drove it.

His art intensified by his love of racing, Scarpitta soon abandoned abstraction for a radical, vernacular realism. Between 1964 and 1969, he created six full-scale vehicles in the style of cars he adored as a child. “Sal Cragar” (1969) was the last of these works and the only one he deliberately left “unfinished,” an elegiac, austere shell of a car. Although he made several of his cars fully functional, Scarpitta’s intention was not to glorify the machine as a technological marvel so much as to give new life to the drivers who had risked, and sometimes lost, everything in pursuit of victory.

In 1986, with Castelli’s backing, Scarpitta established his own competitive sprint car team. Dangerous, highly aggressive and indigenous to rural America, sprint car racing has been comparatively free of the corporatization that has turned NASCAR into a multi-billion-dollar industry;
its culture remains insular, artisanal and blue-collar, its races not regularly televised. For more than 15 years, Scarpitta’s cars competed in as many as 60 races a season. Racing is “pure function,” Scarpitta explained. “Which can be so pure that it becomes very akin to art, which is not about function. Art is about desire, it’s about dreams, it’s about making them congeal into some sort of reality. And racing instead is reality that gets so real that it becomes a dream—it just comes from the opposite end.”

Vital and vibrant where “Sal Cragar” is funereal, “Trevis Race Car (Sal Gambler Special)” (1985) is a once-functioning winged sprint car that Scarpitta purchased, retired from the track and appointed with a Pop-style paint job. It was never raced by Scarpitta’s team, functioning instead as an emblem of the artist’s devotion to the sport and of the continuity he felt existed between racing and art.

The exhibition closes with what Scarpitta called “recreations of the concept of the Northern sled.” Quasi-primitivist objects such as “Cot and Lock Step n. 2 Cargo” (1989/2000), fashioned by hand from found objects such as hockey sticks, skis and broken furniture, represented to the artist solitary, nomadic travel, in contrast to the rough-and-tumble hurly-burly of the speedway. “Snowshoe Sled” (1974) pairs a sled with a painting made from obstetrical drapes. In this long-running series of works, Scarpitta returned, as he did throughout his career, to themes of risk, movement, death and rebirth.


“Salvatore Scarpitta: Traveler” is organized by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. The exhibition is made possible in part by the generous support of the Estate of Frank B. Gettings in memory of Nancy Kirkpatrick and Frank Gettings, C.P. Beler, the Holenia Trust, and the Hirshhorn Exhibition Fund. The exhibition brochure is generously underwritten by Kristin and Howard Johnson and the Italian Cultural Institute on the occasion of Italy’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union from July 1 through December 31, 2014.

**Related Programs**

The Hirshhorn offers a range of interactive educational experiences designed to engage people of all interest levels in contemporary art. A free public opening takes place Thursday, July 17, from 7 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. Galleries open at 7:30 p.m., providing the public their first opportunity to view
“Salvatore Scarpitta: Traveler.” A competitive sprint car will be parked on the Plaza, where Scarpitta driver Greg O’Neill talks about racing at 8 p.m. Ho leads an exhibition tour at 9 p.m. The documentary “Art & Racing: The Work and Life of Salvatore Scarpitta” screens continuously throughout the evening. Barbecue and beer will be available for purchase on the Plaza. The other exhibitions on the museum’s lower level, “Black Box: Oliver Laric” and “Directions: Jeremy Deller,” will also be open.

“Scarpitta in Context: Germano Celant and Paul Schimmel in Conversation” takes place Wednesday, October 8, at 7 pm in the Ring Auditorium. Co-curator of the 2012 retrospective “Salvatore Scarpitta” at the Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Turin and a personal friend of the artist for decades, Celant is artistic director of the Prada Foundation and senior curator of contemporary art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Schimmel is former chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and organizer of “Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962,” which included early works by Scarpitta. He also knew the artist well, having first met Scarpitta in the 1970s.

Also available on the website is the museum’s archive of podcasts, which makes gallery walk-throughs and interviews with artists accessible internationally.

About the Hirshhorn

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Smithsonian Institution’s museum of international modern and contemporary art, has nearly 12,000 paintings, sculptures, photographs, mixed-media installations, works on paper and new media works in its collection. The Hirshhorn presents diverse exhibitions and offers an array of public programs that explore modern and contemporary art. Located at Independence Avenue and Seventh Street S.W., the museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). Admission to the galleries and special programs is free. For more information about exhibitions and events, visit hirshhorn.si.edu. Follow the Hirshhorn on Facebook at facebook.com/hirshhorn, on Twitter at twitter.com/hirshhorn and on Tumblr at hirshhorn.tumblr.com. Or sign up for the museum’s eBlasts at hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/social-media. To request accessibility services, please contact Kristy Maruca at marucak@si.edu or (202) 633-2796, preferably two weeks in advance.

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