

2 April 2026 > 20 September 2026

Tragicomica

Perspectives on Italian art from the mid-20th century to today

curated by **Andrea Bellini** and **Francesco Stocchi**

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Rome, 1 April 2026. “**lo sono un santo**” (*I am a saint*), reads the inscription in cursive on a canvas-backed paper, its surface torn by a series of cuts. It is one of the earliest examples of the unmistakable artistic gesture that would make Lucio Fontana famous.

The reverse, however, bears the phrase “**lo sono una carogna**” (*I am a scoundrel*).

This forms an ironic self-portrait, an irreverent take on the rhetoric that sees the artist capable of elevating both himself and the viewer through art.

The work is the starting point of **Tragicomica. Perspectives on Italian art from the mid-20th century to today**, the largest exhibition on the history of contemporary Italian art by the National Museum of 21st-Century Arts.

Produced by **MAXXI** in collaboration with the **Centre d’Art Contemporain Genève**, the exhibition – curated by **Andrea Bellini** and **Francesco Stocchi** – brings together over 130 artists and 300 works to explore the ironic element that runs through Italian culture, which the philosopher Giorgio Agamben defined as a “stubborn anti-tragic intention” (*Categorie italiane*, 1996).

More than a mere attitude, it is a genuine national sensibility that finds its first and highest reference in Dante’s Comedy: the revolutionary approach of tackling the most complex themes through a tone rooted in everyday life, weaving ‘high’ culture and popular culture in a continuous and fertile exchange.

The exhibition spans over eighty years, from the post-war period to the present day, focusing on artists who have made this tension between the tragic and the comic the centre of their poetics and their view of the world.

What emerges is an alternative narrative of Italian art—one that disrupts the canon, expanding it and offering a layered and alternative reading of the history of national art.

In line with this spirit, the works on display are not presented in chronological order but engage in dialogue with one another, in a continuous and unprecedented juxtaposition of iconic works and others less frequently explored.

Among the artists featured: **Gianfranco Baruchello, Elena Bellantoni, Mirella Bentivoglio, Tomaso Binga, Alighiero Boetti, Monica Bonvicini, Maurizio Cattelan, Adelaide Cioni, Roberto Cuoghi, Gino De Dominicis, Luciano Fabro, Lucio Fontana, Chiara Fumai, Silvia Giambrone, Nicole Gravier, Piero Golia, Piero Manzoni, Liliana Moro, Valerio Nicolai, Paola Pivi, Giuseppe Penone, Carol Rama, Lorenzo Scotto Di Luzio and Gilberto Zorio.**

Tragicomica is also an interdisciplinary project. Thanks to the contribution of a **scientific committee**—Andrea Cortellessa, Davide Oberto, Annalisa Sacchi, Elettra Stimilli, and Giovanna Zapperi—it extends to various areas of contemporary creativity. These include cinema, literature, philosophy, theatre, design, and architecture.

The exhibition is complemented by a **catalogue**, published by Marsilio and designed as a study tool, and a comprehensive programme of **public events**.

Maria Emanuela Bruni, Fondazione MAXXI President: 'Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot' This is how Charlie Chaplin captured and summed up human existence, where happiness and suffering alternate. Sixteen years after its opening, it seemed only right for the National Museum of 21st-Century Arts to take on the responsibility and honour of recounting the last seventy years of cultural production and critical thought in Italy. The hundreds of works on display explore a complex theme whose inextricable dualism explains the variety and depth of the extensive research presented in the museum's galleries.'

Francesco Stocchi, MAXXI Artistic Director and curator of the exhibition: 'To recount Italian art from the second half of the 20th century onwards means attempting to make sense of a subject that is inherently resistant to fixed categorisations; it means engaging with a diversity that constitutes one of the defining features of its vitality. Choosing the tragicomic as a narrative filter represents, first and foremost, the adoption of a broad perspective to trace the evolution of Italian art over time, emphasising in particular its consistent approach to the negotiation of the tragic and the use of irony as a paradox and an ambivalent deviation.'

Andrea Bellini, Director of the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève and curator of the exhibition: 'The hope is that Tragicomica will help to outline a more nuanced and complex vision of our cultural output, enabling the public to engage with lesser-known works and, at the same time, to adopt a renewed way of interpreting what is produced in Italy, not only in the visual arts, but also in cinema, architecture, design, theatre and literature. From this perspective, the exhibition aims to convey the richness of a national imagination which, through its plurality of languages and modes of expression, continues to redefine the very coordinates of the contemporary world.'

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