IN HONOUR OF PIERRE CASÈ.
OPEN DAY AT THE PIERRE CASÈ ATELIER
MAGGIA, SUNDAY 4 OCTOBER 2026

TRANSCRIPT OF MARIA WILL'S ORAL PRESENTATION

Even a brief and cursory review of Pierre Casè's life makes one thing abundantly clear: the absolutely central role he plays in our cultural – and artistic, in particular – landscape. And this is not so much due to the well-known official and institutional roles he held – from the cantonal and then national presidency of the SPSAS (the Society of Swiss Painters, Sculptors and Architects), to the directorship of the Casa Rusca Art Gallery in Locarno, to his participation in important federal-level committees.

No, the reasons for his centrality lie elsewhere. They lie in his intelligence or, if you will, his innate instinct for developments in the art world, for the genuine, vibrant artistic hubs he encountered along his path and towards which he demonstrated a remarkably quick ability to respond.

Locarno and the Locarno area during the early years of Pierre Casè's career as an artist – a career which began at a very early age – provided an ideal breeding ground, made fertile by the presence of international artists gravitating towards Remo Rossi's studios at Saleggi, combined with the no less distinguished presence of local artists who were consciously and intimately connected to the area, starting with Bruno Nizzola, whom Casè regarded as his spiritual mentor as well as the painter from whom he had, as he readily admitted, 'stolen' the craft to some extent. And through Nizzola, Casè's artistic and moral lineage extended to Filippo Franzoni and his independence of thought.

It is also significant that Pierre Casè held his first solo exhibition in 1964, at the age of just twenty, in Ascona, at Gisèle Real's Galleria La Cittadella. Real was a cultured, non-conformist enthusiast of international contemporary art who introduced such works to our region through exhibitions of truly groundbreaking nature.

From the outset, therefore, Pierre Casè is confronted with two seemingly opposing issues: internationalism, with its impetus towards the new, and 'localism' – a term with a bad reputation, but one I use for want of a better word – 'localism' (in inverted commas), with its references to roots and authentic values. In short, two poles – internationalism and localism – between which the entire culture of our country oscillates and which, in their dialectic, represent

the first and most vexing unresolved issue in our cultural debate, from which we have been unable to find a way out for decades, perhaps even a century.

To put it more bluntly: the question is: ‘Are we, or are we not, provincial?’

Well, here in Maggia, with this veritable monument that is the Atelier Pierre Casè, in my view Pierre Casè has provided a decisive and courageous answer to this question, one that sweeps away any sense of inferiority.

It does not matter how remote the place is where one is born, lives and works; what matters is the pursuit of universal human values. Indeed, the more one explores and delves into them, the more one becomes aware of one’s own origins and the closer one comes to authentic universal values.

This, it seems to me, is the message conveyed by the story of Pierre Casè. And this is precisely what Pierre Casè has been doing, with growing determination and commitment, ever since he came to live in the 1970s in an old stone-walled house in the centre of Maggia, his mother’s home village. He has done so by immersing himself in the valley’s landscape and in nature, contemplating its beauty and ruggedness, and its formidable power: a power we can recognise in the overhangs, crevices and veritable ravines that open up in his most imposing compositions. He has done so by tracing the material traces left behind by the rural civilisation that had to coexist with and come to terms with that very nature. And so these relics of the past, which Casè treats with profound respect, find their way into his works and become their central focus.

But curiously, as the material and object-based dimension of the structure grew, a spiritual, sacred dimension became increasingly evident in tandem.

Now that, with kindness and generosity, the artist’s family – following a labourious process of reorganisation – has opened the doors to the place where Pierre Casè’s works were created from the early 1990s onwards, spanning some thirty years, we can see at close quarters his array of tools and a selection of objects – potential compositional elements.

But whilst it is true that the craftsmanship involved in a body of work such as Pierre Casè’s must rightly be recognised for its importance, it certainly does not exhaust its meaning; out of modesty, Pierre Casè liked to call himself a craftsman: this does not detract from the fact that he belongs to the category of intellectuals – and indeed among the most refined of them.

Indeed, it is not difficult to see that Pierre Casè held and nurtured within himself a precise vision of art and of his own place within it. He certainly did not play it by ear: on the contrary, he aimed high and far.

The three solo exhibitions held in Venice – which, even if one considers only the scale of the works on display, amount to a titanic undertaking – would suffice to demonstrate the scope of his vision. But this very studio, built in 1991 (architecturally remarkable, I would say, poetic in its functional forms, and bespoke-designed by his friend, the architect Edy Quaglia, together with his colleague Emilio Bernegger), this very studio, with its assertive significance as a visual and tangible testament to the radical choice made by Casè when he decided to move from the city to the valley, forms part of a broader design.

Just as part of his vision is the recognition of the importance, for the artist's work, of a well-founded body of documentation – the importance of investing in exhibition catalogues, books, films and videos: not out of mere vanity but as a reflection of faith in one's own work, which in Casè's case coincides with the desire to preserve the memory of a world of the humble and the voiceless, whom he recognised as his – and our – predecessors.

This brief survey of works by Pierre Casè – which the family has thoughtfully arranged in the space set aside for the creation of the studio – offers a clear insight into the gradual shift in Casè's artistic exploration towards aspects that transcend his own individuality, bringing together and composing what is almost a chorus of voices. This process culminates in the various series of ex-votos, all of which are deeply moving.

And the comparison – made possible by this small exhibition – between the paintings from the second half of the 1970s – a period in which Casè likely reached his first, resolute maturity – and his later works, which are perhaps better known, is highly revealing of the internal continuity within Casè's oeuvre. That is to say, the comparison between, on the one hand, a collage-style painting of an abstract-lyrical nature – though already characterised by bold, gestural marks and complex execution, including textural inserts – and, on the other, works characterised by an extreme use of texture that transcends the boundaries of the canvas and becomes a stele, almost a sculpture. In both phases, which might be considered distinct, there is, however, a marked affinity in terms of forms and marks.

In addition to the storage and utility areas, the studio features a spacious gallery- or gallery-like area with a more intimate atmosphere, intended for moments of reflection and study. Just

as in the rest of the studio, here too almost nothing – or only the bare essentials – has been altered in the arrangement of the furnishings compared to when the artist used it on a daily basis; and it is a great privilege and a moving experience to come face to face with the objects that Pierre Casè loved to have within his sight throughout his days.

Works of art, miscellaneous objects, artefacts bearing witness to a lost craft, snapshots of loved ones, books. Not merely a collection of things or an art collection, but the records of a life richly filled with relationships and friendships centred on art.
One also finds works—not merely minor ones—by many of Ticino's finest artists and beyond; all of them highly accomplished, from Alberto Salvioni to Sergio Emery, Pierino Selmoni and Rafael Benazzi, as well as works by many of whom few, if any, speak of today, such as the great Emilio Maria Beretta, who, amongst other things, created delightful, harmonious little abstract stained-glass windows right here in Maggia, in the oratory on the small square in the centre of the village.

There are also numerous works dedicated to Casè by distinguished artists; equally noteworthy are various objects relating to his brother, the writer Angelo Casè; the two shared a significant artistic and literary collaboration, beginning with their joint management, between 1970 and 1977, of the Galleria Pannelle 8 in Locarno, in which other artists also participated.

The trauma of the tragic loss of their father, who died in a fire whilst on duty as a firefighter when Angelo was sixteen and Pierre just eight, also unites their respective works, imbuing them with a theme of grief.

Pierre Casè's personality, which remains preserved and palpable within the walls of his studio, is defined not least by a need to convey his life story without reservation, whilst recognising its potentially exemplary human significance.

With this in mind, a few months before Pierre Casè's death in 2022, Martino Giovanettina's book on the artist's life was published, based on Pierre's own personal accounts. A truly beautiful work, destined to remain over time a source of prime importance for weaving together not only the threads of the Casè family's history – and Pierre's in particular – but also the threads of a wide-ranging artistic narrative that forms part of the heritage of the Maggia Valley, Ticino and beyond.