



Title

Marcia Hafif: Roma 1961–1969

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About the author(s)

is a painter and a professor in painting at University of the Arts London. He is curating a retrospective exhibition on the work of Carmengloria Morales, which will coincide with the symposium *Crossing Over: Women Artists, Abstraction, and Travel in Postwar Rome (1950s–1970s)* at the British School at Rome in late 2024.

Cover image:

Marcia Hafif: Roma 1961–1969

by Daniel Sturgis • 31.07.2024

This exhibition gathers together, for the first time in an Italian museum, the paintings, photographs and collages that the influential American artist Marcia Hafif (1929–2018) produced while living in Rome.¹ Although it is not large, occupying just one room of the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma, the exhibition serenely demonstrates the development of Hafif's painting during the eight years that she lived in the city. The artist moved from California to Italy in 1961, initially staying in Florence before settling in Rome. She was beguiled by the city's Classical and Renaissance art and architecture as well as the thriving community of artists – the so-called Scuola di Piazza del Popolo, who used to meet around the Piazza del Popolo, at Caffè Rosati and the gallery La Tartaruga.

It is easy to detect the influence of Renaissance art on the paintings and collages exhibited here. The particular colours Hafif employed, the Classicism of her compositions and the modulation of her painted surfaces all seem to connect, or point towards, aspects of its iconography. It is also evident – perhaps less directly – that Hafif's paintings were in dialogue with the discussions that so engrossed the Rome-based painters she knew. Artists such as Pietro Consagra (1920–2005), Tano Festa (1938–88), Franco Angeli (1935–88) and her close friend Carla Accardi (1924–2014) sought to reinvigorate painting by relating the medium to both contemporary popular culture and its Mediterranean history. Hafif's Roman paintings attempt to do the same.

Roma 1961–1969 is arranged broadly chronologically and begins with four small, square canvases [FIG.1](#). As is the case with all of Hafif's paintings, the works are unframed and the composition continues onto the sides, top and bottom of each box-like canvas. This emphasises the 'objectness' of the paintings, a quality that is further enhanced by their scale as well as the flat, unmodulated acrylics and materiality of the industrial paints with which they were made. Although these small canvases are abstract – or 'concrete', as Hafif had started to refer to her paintings even before she came to Italy – their titles hint at observations of the real world. More accurately, the descriptive elements of Hafif's titles can be considered as subtitles as they are placed within brackets after a more analytical numbering system. *52, juillet (Yellow Steps)* (1964), for example, shows a progression of thirteen small, identical yellow forms that resemble the treads on a staircase. They are rendered using stencils and industrial precision on a deep-blue lacquered gloss. The shapes appear to

horizontally climb the canvas, and align – very satisfyingly – with the painting’s top and bottom edges, so as to be able to continue their journey over the painting’s periphery and lip.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Marcia Hafif: Roma 1961–1969* at Museo d’Arte Contemporanea di Roma, 2024, showing, on the far left, *52, juillet (Yellow Steps)*, by Marcia Hafif. 1964. Lacquer on canvas, 25 by 25 cm.; and on the far right, *67 (The Wave I)*, by Marcia Hafif. 1965. Acrylic on canvas, 100 by 100 cm. (Photograph Michela Pedranti).

While these small works are geometric in composition and employ crisp, straight lines, the other paintings in the exhibition are more typical of Hafif’s output in Rome. They are also square but much larger, and they have a biomorphic quality, with curved shapes or lines that divide the painting’s surface into flat areas of colour. In *67 (The Wave I)* (1965), an elegant pale blue is separated from a stark lemon yellow by a horizontal line, which has a swift, central upwards curve that reaches for the top of the canvas. Through its colours, title and composition, the painting evokes the presence of sea and sand. However, unlike the earlier paintings displayed to its left, here such a pictorial description seems tangential. The materiality of colours and the handling of the paint sensuously override any representational aspects of the work: the sharp yellow has an industrial quality, which is countered by the opaque, fresco-like blue.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Marcia Hafif: Roma 1961–1969* at Museo d’Arte Contemporanea di Roma, 2024, showing, in the middle, *167*, by Marcia Hafif. 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 140 by 140 cm. (Photograph Michela Pedranti).

The three other large paintings are titled numerically and by date. Each again contains a division between two areas of colour. Although compositionally different, they are united by the inclusion of a crisp, curvaceous form, which sits on or emerges from the bottom edge of the canvas. The forms themselves are not specific but rather seem to suggest aspects of the body.² Although hard-edged, there is somehow a softness here. Hafif applied the colour by hand, and the thin layers of acrylic paint have absorbed into the lightly primed or raw canvases. The artist also experimented with the surfaces of these three paintings: from resolutely clean and uninflected in the earliest, *167* **FIG.2** to a uniformly dappled plane of colour in the latest, *193* **FIG.3**. This variegated quality was achieved by overpainting, with a spray or diffuser, thin blue paint onto an orange base colour. In the progression of these three paintings one witnesses Hafif’s nuanced restlessness in relation to the potential and material composition of paint.

This series points forwards to the works that Hafif would make after leaving Rome, when investigations into the fundamentals of painting would take centre stage, as she sought to, in her words, ‘begin again’.³ When Hafif relocated to New York, she chose to rebuild her paintings as self-referential monochrome art, which would address ideas relating to colour, surface and structure. This approach, and her promulgation of it, would unite the so-called New York Radical Painting Group of the 1980s, the members of which would hold frequent discussions in Hafif’s studio and found radicality in the extreme, fundamental roots of their medium.⁴



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Marcia Hafif: Roma 1961–1969* at Museo d’Arte Contemporanea di Roma, 2024, showing, on the right, *193*, by Marcia Hafif. 1968. Acrylic on canvas, 100 by 100 cm. (Photograph Michela Pedranti).

Hanging in between Hafif’s canvases – and fully in tune with them – are a number of small works on paper **FIG.4**, which also utilise dual colours and curved symmetrical forms. Made with sheets of overlaid coloured acetate, they exude a playful and more provisional feel than the slowness and fragile Classicism of the canvases. More interestingly, the central wall in the gallery is dedicated to four groupings of small black-and-white photographs, which document aspects of Rome **FIG.5**. In *Roman Windows* **FIG.6** Hafif turns her attention to the views through, and reflections in, shop windows. Another grouping, *Roman Sunday* **FIG.7**, comprises a grid of twenty-one photographs, each of which shows a different individual leaving the same gelateria with an ice cream. The photographs are similarly composed, probably taken using a tripod, so that one’s attention is paid both to the repetition in the images and their very human content. It is these qualities, more than their location, that truly resonate with Hafif’s paintings from this period.

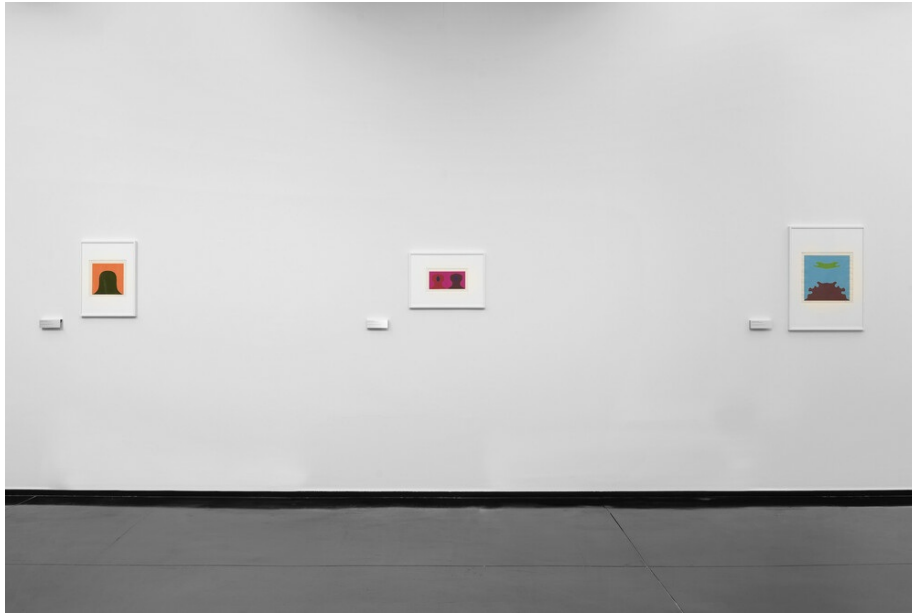


Fig. 4 Installation view of *Marcia Hafif: Roma 1961-1969* at Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma, 2024. (Photograph Michela Pedranti).

By foregrounding these photographic works and displaying them between two walls of colour, the curation gives the viewer insight into the ideas that are embedded in Hafif's Roman paintings, and indeed, her subsequent career. The photographs – which should be understood as a parallel, rather than a central, artistic activity – help to attune the eye to the idea of seriality in her canvases, but also to their emotive qualities: the ways in which sensitivity and corporeality are held, remarkably, in a hard-edged abstraction. After leaving Rome, Hafif continued to explore these ideas, working with the fundamentals of painting, as well as text and photography, to complicate and enrich what one might consider to be the inside and outside of the discipline.⁵



Fig. 5 *Roman Shopkeeper*, by Marcia Hafif. 1968. Black-and-white photographs, 9 parts. (Courtesy Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna; photograph Michela Pedranti; exh. Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma).



Fig. 6 From the series *Roman Windows*, by Marcia Hafif. 1969. Black-and-white photograph. (Courtesy Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna; exh. Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma).



Fig. 7 *Roman Sunday*, by Marcia Hafif. 1968. Black-and-white photographs, 21 parts. (Courtesy Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna; photograph Michela Pedranti; exh. Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma).

Exhibition details

Marcia Hafif: Roma 1961-1969

Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma
(MACRO)

30th May-25th August 2024

Footnotes

- 1 Although Hafif exhibited her Roman paintings in Italy in the 1960s, it was not until 2010, when Éric de Chassey curated an exhibition of her work in Geneva, that they were seen again by a contemporary audience. See E. de Chassey, ed.: exh. cat. *Marcia Hafif, La période romaine / Italian Paintings, 1961-1969, précédé d'un entretien avec l'artiste*, Geneva (MAMCO) 2010.
- 2 See *ibid*, pp.275-87.
- 3 In 1978 Hafif stated that it was necessary to 'begin again', as 'painting appeared to be no longer relevant, not quite right, and yet the only possible activity for one who has been or is a painter' not because 'everything had been done, but rather that the impulses to create which had functioned in the past were no longer urgent or even meaningful', see M. Hafif: 'Beginning again', *Artforum* 17, no.1 (September 1978), available at www.artforum.com/features/beginning-again-209211, accessed 23rd July 2024.
- 4 See T. Krens and L. Wei: exh. cat. *Radical Painting*, Williamstown MA (Williams College Museum of Art) 1984. This group exhibition featured the work of Raimund Girke, Marcia Hafif, Anders Knutsson, Joseph Marioni, Carmengloria Morales, Olivier Mosset, Phil Sims, Howard Smith, Frederic Thursz, Günter Umberg and Jerry Zeniuk.
- 5 One celebrated and rare example of Hafif combining text and painting in a single installation was her contribution to *Rooms*, the inaugural exhibition at MoMA PS1, New York, in June 1976. Here, below painted monochrome panels, Hafif displayed in cursive script a long, sensual and erotic text. It is interesting to consider this work in relationship to Carla Accardi's solo exhibition *Origine* at the Cooperativa Beato Angelico, Rome (May 1976), which likewise drew together a reduced minimalist vocabulary with a personal and feminist-informed biographical reflection.

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