



MARIO GIACOMELLI

FIGURE | GROUND

VIRGINIA HECKERT

J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

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PLATES 30–36

**Young Priests/I Have No Hands
That Caress My Face
(Pretini/lo non ho mani
che mi accarrezzino il volto)**

1961–63

Among Giacomelli's most memorable images are those of pretini (young priests) in the seminary of Senigallia, whom he captured playing in the snow or relaxing in the courtyard. Once again juxtaposing the distinctive shapes of black-clad figures (this time, seminarians in cassocks) against a white ground (snow-covered or sun-drenched settings), these photographs suggest a more lighthearted mood than is evident in many of the photographer's other series. Although they appear to have been choreographed, the images are the result of the priests' unbridled joviality as they run, throw snowballs, or play ring-around-the-rosy, and of Giacomelli's foresight to let the scenes unfold as he recorded them from the building's rooftop.

After Giacomelli had won the trust of the seminarians over a number of visits, his reportage was brought to an abrupt end when he provided them with cigars for photographs he intended to submit to a competition on the theme of smoking. The seminary's rector denied him further access. Giacomelli later applied the title *I Have No Hands That Caress My Face* to this series, from the first two lines of a poem by Father David Maria Turoldo (Italian, 1916–1992) about young men who seek solitary religious life. This title lends poignancy to the moments of exuberance and camaraderie that accompanied study for such a calling.



PLATE 30

Young Priests, No. 71 (*Pretini, no. 71*)

Negative 1961–63; print 1981

Gelatin silver print
40.3 × 30.1 cm (15 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.)
2016.179.6.5



PLATE 31

Young Priests, No. 72 (*Pretini, no. 72*)

Negative 1962–63; print 1981

Gelatin silver print

30.1 × 40.2 cm (11⁷/₈ × 15¹³/₁₆ in.)

2016.179.6.6



PLATE 32

Young Priests, No. 70 (*Pretini, no. 70*)

Negative 1961–63; print 1981

Gelatin silver print

30 × 40.2 cm (11¹³/₁₆ × 15¹³/₁₆ in.)

2016.179.6.7



PLATE 39

Landscape, Scapezzano
(Paesaggio, Scapezzano)

Ca. 1960

Gelatin silver print
20.2 × 38.8 cm (7¹⁵/₁₆ × 15¹/₄ in.)
2016.179.23



PLATE 41

Landscape, Flames
on the Field
(Paesaggio, fiamme
sul campo)

Negative 1954; print 1980

Gelatin silver print
28.6 × 39 cm (11¹/₄ × 15³/₈ in.)
2016.179.62

In addition to his association with various local and national camera clubs, Giacomelli actively participated in photography competitions. A print of this image was one of several photographs he entered in the 1955 National Exhibition of Photography (Mostra nazionale di fotografia) in Castelfranco Veneto, for which Paolo Monti (Italian, 1908–1982), one of the country's most celebrated photographers at the time, served as juror. Monti awarded Giacomelli the top prize and proclaimed him "the new man in photography" ("il nuovo uomo della fotografia").



PLATE 69

Awareness of Nature, No. 327
(*Presa di coscienza sulla natura, no. 327*)

Negative 1977; print 1981

Gelatin silver print
40.2 × 30.1 cm (15¹³/₁₆ × 11⁷/₈ in.)
2016.179.5.16



PLATE 67

Awareness of Nature, No. 38
(*Presa di coscienza sulla natura, no. 38*)

Negative 1977–78; print 1981

Gelatin silver print
30.1 × 40.3 cm (11⁷/₈ × 15⁷/₈ in.)
2016.179.5.14



PLATE 70

Awareness of Nature, No. 471
(*Presenza di coscienza sulla natura, no. 471*)

Negative 1979; print 1981

Gelatin silver print
40.2 × 30.1 cm (15¹³/₁₆ × 11⁷/₈ in.)
2016.179.5.17

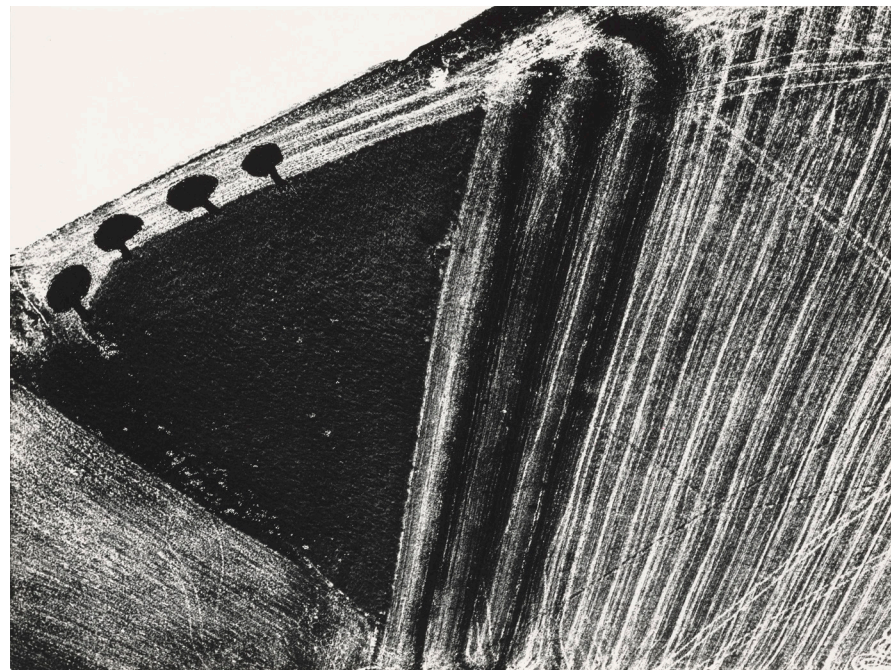


PLATE 71

Awareness of Nature, No. 171
(*Presenza di coscienza sulla natura, no. 171*)

Negative 1980; print 1981

Gelatin silver print
30.1 × 40.3 cm (11⁷/₈ × 15⁷/₈ in.)
2016.179.5.15



PLATE 78

The Theater of Snow
(Il teatro della neve)

1981–84

Gelatin silver print
24.2 × 31.2 cm (9½ × 12⅝ in.)
2016.179.2



PLATE 77

The Theater of Snow
(Il teatro della neve)

1984–86

Gelatin silver print
28.9 × 38.4 cm (11⅜ × 15½ in.)
2016.179.22

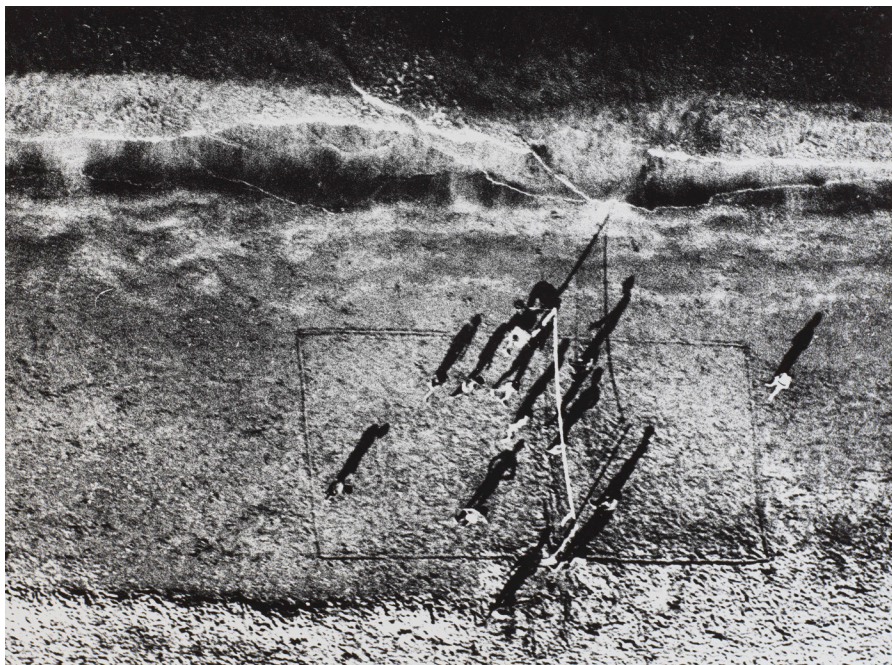


PLATE 83

The Sea of My Stories
(Il mare dei miei racconti)

Negative 1986; print 1992

Gelatin silver print

29.4 × 39.4 cm (11⁵/₁₆ × 15¹/₂ in.)

2019.176.6



PLATE 85

The Sea of My Stories
(Il mare dei miei racconti)

Negative 1984; print 1990

Gelatin silver print

30.3 × 40.3 cm (11¹⁵/₁₆ × 15⁷/₈ in.)

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It wasn't until February 1978 that I contacted Mario and said, "You know, I'd like to come and visit you again." And I did. I got to see more of the recent work. I became very familiar with his work habits. He basically would be full-out at the Tipografia, the print shop, for six days a week. And on Sundays, he would be out photographing.

VH: I found it fascinating to learn that Giacomelli was a "Sunday" photographer. He was so prolific!

SB: I agree. It was amazing because the amount of work was so vast, even by, say, the late '70s, at which point he had been working for twenty years. I was able to see some of the very early work, the still lifes. He was really influenced by artists like Giorgio Morandi. He had a limited knowledge of the world of art. The Italian artist Alberto Burri was someone whose work he was very, very fond of.

He began making portraits of his mother [plate 1]. He portrayed her as she was, as a *contadina*, which is the word for "worker," also sometimes translated as a kind of peasant. It's an endearing term, a local term. His mother was very near and dear. She lived in his home, which stood out in the town; it was a magnificent house, a very modernistic structure, just outside the historic center of Senigallia. It occurred to me that Mario came from the tradition of *contadini*, workers. He was a very simple man. He prospered with the print shop when he took ownership, and it changed his life in a big way.

When I met Mario in 1975, he was fiftyish. I had expected to find a decrepit old man, but he was still very vivacious. He was the epitome of *la bella figura*—the way the Italian people carry themselves, with great pride, and the way he dressed: the portraits I made of him, the open shirt, jewelry, and his own prideful stance [fig. 2]—even the flashy car that he had at the time.

Mario's generous, kind nature was something that impressed me early on, because he spoke with pride about his town, about his people, about his community. He took so much time talking about these kinds of things, as opposed to his photography, which wasn't really his priority at that point, in terms of getting the work out. . . . He was always active in making his art, even if it had to be done on that seventh day of the week. I know he spent late nights in the darkroom as well.



Figure 2
Stephan Brigidi (American, born 1951). Portrait of Mario Giacomelli, Senigallia, 1978. Gelatin silver print, 35.9 × 36.2 cm (14 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.). Courtesy Stephan Brigidi

He was a prolific printer. You couldn't believe how primitive his darkroom was and the amount of work that he was able to churn out.

VH: Upon returning to the United States, you began to make efforts to introduce, if not re-introduce, Giacomelli's work to an American audience.¹ Among the projects you organized were a monographic exhibition at RISD's Museum of Art in 1980, a lecture that you delivered at the annual conference of the Society of Photographic Education [SPE] in Philadelphia in 1983, and an essay that you co-authored with Claire Peeps for a 1983 publication for the Friends of Photography, the nonprofit organization based in Carmel, California. Why was it so important for you to gain broader appreciation for Giacomelli's work here in the United States?

SB: I felt privileged to have direct knowledge of the vastness of his *opera*—his body of work. I saw facets of his work that the world hadn't seen. He had done a great deal, not only with the landscape, but with the people of the south, from