

The Golden Door Gaia Vincensini

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Date

28.09.2023
29.10.2023

Location

Fondazione Sant'Elia
Palermo

Istituto Svizzero

Category

Art, Exhibition

istitutsvizzero.it

The Golden Door

Gaia Vincensini

For *The Golden Door*, Gaia Vincensini presents a new video and a series of wall sculptures, developed especially for the exhibition in Palermo. The video work (with a soundtrack composed by sound artist Tobias Koch), also titled *The Golden Door*, follows vaguely the literary tradition of the Gothic novel in its narrative style and tells us the story of the young Swiss banker Piero who must meet a mysterious client in Rome. Piero's character is inspired by the melancholic clown archetype of Commedia dell'Arte. The film follows him on his surreal journey in a city of magnificent palazzi and grotesque masks.

Through this bizarre story, Gaia Vincensini delves into the concept of value, particularly regarding gold and its role in capitalist system, exploring themes like alchemy, wealth, and the power dynamics of the Catholic Church in the 15th century. The presence of artificial gold objects—both as props in the film as well as sculptures in the exhibitions space—highlights the constructed nature of value: a critical view on Switzerland's banking history, luxury watches, and the commodification of time, while offering a female gaze on a patriarchal world. *The Golden Door* often blurs the lines between reality and imagination, encouraging viewers to question their perceptions of the world around them, frequently incorporating elements of surrealism, symbolism, and abstraction to create a sense of wonder and curiosity.

Gaia Vincensini

The Golden Door
Golden Classics: Tempus Fugit
La Bugia

Duration: 22'

Vault (4 pieces)

Acrylic on engraved wood panels,
clay, gold leaf, 70 × 90 cm

Credits video

Director: Gaia Vincensini
Director of photography:
Paolo Scarfo
Assistant Director of photography:
Anouk Chambaz
Production manager and editing:
Colin Ledoux
Sound Design: Tobias Koch
Make up artist: Chaim Vischel
Assistant make up artist:
Valentina Musa
Decors: Gaia Vincensini
Maquette and giant puppet:
Costanza Solari

Gaia Vincensini (1992) lives and works between Geneva and Paris. In 2016 she graduated from HEAD-Genève. In her work, she creates narratives that explore the value systems shaping both art and society. She won the Manor and Kiefer Hablitzel I Göhner art awards in 2021 and completed a nine-month residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris in 2020. Her work has been exhibited at MAMCO and Forde in Geneva, at the Swiss Institute in New York, at Maison d'Art Bernard Anthonioz in Nogent-sur-Marne and, more recently, at Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, at Swiss Art Awards in Basel and at confort moderne in Poitiers.

With the support of:
République et canton de Genève
Fonds cantonal d'art contemporain

Characters

Gio Ventura: Piero, the banker
Dressed and accessorised
by Gaia Vincensini
Cellphone by Youri Johnson

Colin Ledoux: the alchemist Client
Aiki: the alchemist cat
Accessorised by
SiTenne vintage shop
In his office, the painting is by
Christopher Page, sculpture by
Thomas Hutton and curtains
by Adelaide Cioni. Book de Magia
by Giordano Bruno

Natalia Olsen: Spirit of gold
Outfit by sense of truth
Armor bra by Natalia Olsen

Alessandro Troiani: the clock-man
Veronica Garillazo: the smoking
woman
Beatrice Tabacchi: the wristwatch
Andrea Mauti: the public clocks
Costanza Solari: the hands

Special thanks to

Vittoria Bonifati and Villa Lontana
Eva Maleen
Stefano Torres
Molly Ledoux
Renan Mendes
Alaide Pinto
Nawfal El Alkaoui
Inner Light
Alice Brygo
SiTenne
Spazio Chirale
Keter
Carmelo Morello
Elisabeth Barbey

The Golden Door

Gaia Vincensini

Gioia Dal Molin, September 2023

In the video work *The Golden Door*, which Gaia Vincensini produced specifically for the exhibition in Palermo, there is a scene where the protagonist—a young banker named Piero—enters a large, almost empty nave in a church. As Piero's gaze sweeps up to admire the magnificent, coffered ceiling decorated in gold, the music by composer and sound artist Tobias Koch becomes restless, even dramatic. During my visit to her studio near Rome's train station, Gaia explained that the golden ceiling of Santa Maria Maggiore (the most important Marian church in Rome) fascinated her and served as inspiration for her film project. Thus we encounter the church's golden ceiling, loaded with symbolism—as an object of alchemical desire, the ultimate symbol of wealth, and a material with a colonial history linked to political authority. The gold used for the coffered ceiling in Santa Maria Maggiore was originally brought from Peru to Spain by Christopher Columbus. The Spanish king then gave it to Pope Alexander VI, who commissioned the artist Giuliano da Sangallo to design the ceiling. That was in the 15th century, when the Catholic Church held immense power and old Europe was enriching itself with goods from the recently 'discovered' parts of the world. The gold of the Incas in Peru and the gold in the vaults of the Western world.

In the exhibition *The Golden Door*—which features the video work of the same name and a new series of wall sculptures entitled *VAULT*—Gaia, who has Peruvian roots, interweaves various themes that recur in her art: alchemy, processes of valuation (of art, gold, money), and capitalism as a dominant global system without apparent alternatives. At the same time, the film serves as a condensed representation of her distinct visual style, showcasing the variety within her artistic practice. *The Golden Door* is Gaia's second major film project following *RESYLENT* from 2021. Nearly all the objects and costumes in the film were designed by Gaia herself: a suitcase, boxes, a bizarre ATM, jewellery, and figures and puppets in various sizes—the latter created together with her mother Costanza Solari, a puppet maker. The ties to the tradition of puppets and puppet theatre in Palermo are obvious. In *The Golden Door*, Gaia tells us the story of Piero,

a young Swiss banker (referencing the melancholy, naive clown from *Commedia dell'Arte*). Piero is in Rome (the Rome of grand churches, grimacing masks, ostentatious palazzi and the flowing blue-grey Tiber River). He has come to meet a mysterious client (based on Massimiliano Palombra, a 17th-century marquis who created the legendary Porta Alchemica in his Roman villa). Piero must deliver a key to the client and in return receives a watch. This watch becomes an inescapable presence, propelling him into a visibly surreal and fantastical realm. Music plays an important role in the film. Composer Tobias Koch explains that given the incredible visual world of the film, he worked with baroque music but in an exaggerated, hyper-stylised manner. For his compositions, Tobias utilised techniques and chord progressions from the Baroque period but used digital instruments to simulate and imitate them. The outcome is a sonic journey that ventures into the realm of the artificial and the imaginary. For the narrative style of *The Golden Door*, Gaia drew inspiration from the literary tradition of the Gothic novel. At the same time, she sees the story as a template for a universally relatable form of storytelling. The banker and the client are archetypal figures familiar from films or books. However, Gaia distorts them by portraying them through a deliberately female gaze, she explains, meaning her perspective as a female artist depicting male characters in a patriarchal world, in contrast to the typical male gaze seen in many films. Piero appears as a passive golden boy working for the bank *Synchaos* (yes: synchronised chaos, as written on his safe-like suitcase). Unlike the diabolical, wolfish bankers from films like *American Psycho* (2000) or *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), he is more of a 'figure on a chessboard', as Gaia explains. Meanwhile, the artist envisioned the client as an alchemist with a penchant for the occult who criticises prevailing social power dynamics, though from a distanced, moralising, and depoliticised standpoint. *The Golden Door* serves as a reminder of the logic and mechanisms behind the capitalist world order. Piero, wearing an oversized suit emblazoned with the company logo, appears visibly confused as he wanders through the city. Motivated, perhaps, by the allure of gold, he is drawn to the omnipresent *Compro Oro* shops (meaning 'I buy gold' and referring to shops dealing in gold and jewellery), the displays of watch retailers and an opulent table where hands adorned with weighty gold jewellery offer him a pomegranate. This imagery conveys both

temptation and promise, but also a nearly libidinous greed for gold and goods that (spoiler alert!) eventually leads to literal self-destruction—evoking Marx’s notions of estrangement.

As I mentioned earlier, Gaia personally designed and crafted all the golden objects in the film, as well as all the other props and costumes. These golden objects shimmer and shine, yet they are unmistakably fake in appearance. This artistic gesture makes me smile: the solid, precious gold is clearly crafted from modelling clay. It also makes an ironic nod to the pursuits of alchemy and a reflection on value-making mechanisms in the capitalist system. Value is attributed to an object (whether gold or money), and an entire economic and governing system is built upon this concept. In this context, the financial market is often (mis)understood as a competent, determined entity, ignoring the fact that it consists of greedy, speculative bankers who knowingly take risks. Gaia is especially intrigued by the connotations of gold, which even today is considered one of the safest investments, carries ideological significance, can be melted down at any time, and, in this way, can be purged of any (dirty) traces from the past.

The references to Switzerland, where the artist grew up, are obvious. Switzerland is renowned as the ultimate banking hub, and there are long-standing rumours about vast gold reserves beneath Zurich’s Paradeplatz (the heart of the city’s banking scene). Switzerland has also gained notoriety as a sanctuary for gold stolen from Jewish people during the Second World War and for the wealth of various unsavoury dictators and millionaires. Last but not least, Switzerland is where a major troubled bank was recently bailed out with government funds because it was deemed ‘too big to fail’—all while cutting funding for cultural initiatives.

Another significant element in *The Golden Door* is the presence of clocks, dials and the theme of time itself. ‘Time is money’, as the saying goes, and the invention of time measurement (particularly through train station clocks) coincided with the establishment of the capitalist world order. Weekly working hours and punch clocks set the pace of life and keep it in sync. In Gaia’s film, the cityscape abounds with clocks (which often do not display the ‘right’ time, as I’ve observed in Rome and Palermo), clock dials with visages, and a figure with a clock face painted on its face. Like gold, the wristwatch is a luxury item that can be passed down from generation to generation and worn as a valuable status symbol. Gaia alludes to an advertisement for

a luxury watch brand headquartered in Geneva (her hometown)—‘You never actually own a Patek Philippe. You merely look after it for the next generation’—and to the declarations of the Geneva-based reformer Calvin, who made banking sinless for Protestant Christians and permitted wearing watches as the sole form of jewellery. Like gold, these watches were stored in secure vaults. Notably, Gaia names the four wall pieces in the exhibition VAULT, which were created from golden objects that also featured in the film. They shimmer with golden hues in the light.

As mentioned above, Gaia draws particular narrative inspiration from Gothic novels of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These novels, in contrast to the rationality of the Age of Enlightenment, often explored a dark and fantastical world of the unconscious, the psychic and the supernatural. They provided an alternative and imaginative perspective on the world order in the real-world context of industrialisation and the social and economic upheaval that came with it. For this very reason, I think *The Golden Door* exhibition also resonates with our current times. With the masks and grimaces, a latent eerie and gloomy atmosphere, a mysterious key and gleaming golden objects, Gaia underscores the parallels between the heyday of gothic novels and our contemporary world. I agree with her perspective, but I also believe we should think about the world with a greater sense of seriousness and concern. We have long since outsourced the work that defined industrialisation to other parts of the world, where exploitation of people and the Earth continues (including the extraction of gold but also other rare metals essential for our cell phones). Meanwhile, in the West, we eagerly discuss the Anthropocene (an age shaped by human activity—but by which humans exactly?) and seek enlightenment and solace through spiritual practices and healing crystals. Ultimately, we might just melt away (like Piero, the banker) over a flickering candle flame—whether we possess a golden wristwatch or not.