

Light and Colour at the Theatre in Paolo Bini's Works for Francesco De Gregori

Maria Letizia Paiato¹

¹ *Academy of Fine Arts of Macerata, Macerata, Italy. ml.paiato@abamc.it*

Corresponding author: Maria Letizia Paiato (ml.paiato@abamc.it)

ABSTRACT

In March 2019, the Italian singer-songwriter Francesco De Gregori sang at the Teatro Garbatella in Rome in front of an audience of 230 spectators, according to a choice that has privileged aspects of intimacy and listening. This stage offered the artist Paolo Bini an experimental place for the study of an original and unusual set design. In fact, the environment work *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile* (Emotional Chromatism in Variable Rhythm), enhanced the involvement of the spectators and free expression of emotions, using bright and iridescent colours.

This contribution is an evidence of how contemporary art - exploiting certain technical rules of theatre performance, through the colour that interacts with light - has cooperated in theatrical communication by enhancing music and sound. More and more in recent years, the sets of concerts are a meeting place between various forms of art and techniques, between music and visual art and where set designers have more and more space to express themselves by appealing to the use of technology. In this case, Bini has not resorted to any technological support, simply leaving to the work/backdrop of a stage the task of creating dynamism to the entire show. Finally, aspects related to the artist's research were also highlighted, placing him in continuity with the history of art and the abstract poetics of the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS Francesco De Gregori, Paolo Bini, Garbatella, Colour, Chromatism, Painting, Abstractism

RECEIVED 10/11/2019; **REVISED** 20/11/2019; **ACCEPTED** 05/12/2019

1. Introduction

From 27 February to 28 March 2019, the Italian singer-songwriter **Francesco De Gregori** sang at the Garbatella Theatre in Rome in front of an audience of only 230 spectators, according to a choice, desired and sought after by De Gregori himself, who privileged intimacy and listening. This choice concentrated the tone of "confidentiality" that characterizes the twenty concerts in the programme in its title *Off The Record*. The concerts were not recorded and were therefore transformed into a series of unique and unrepeatable moments: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water, said John Keats. Well, these concerts are written on the water", said Francesco De Gregori who, with his band formed by Guido Guglielminetti on bass and double bass, Paolo Giovenchi on guitars, Alessandro Valle on pedal steel guitar, mandolin and guitars, and Carlo Gaudiello on piano and keyboards, evening after evening played an ever-changing lineup. In addition to his most famous mainstream songs (*La leva calcistica della classe '68*, *Titanic*, *Alice*, *La Donna Cannone*), he proposed a repertoire of rarely performed songs such as *Festival*, *I Matti*, *Quattro Cani*, as well as *San Lorenzo* or *A Pà* dedicated to Pier Paolo Pasolini. This stage and this concept were offered to the artist **Paolo Bini** as an experimental place for the study of a set design, an original and unusual site-specific environment work. In fact, if normally for a musical concert at the theatre the tendency is to enhance the few instrumentalists on stage and the singer, through colour differences between the mixture of mainly gray and blue light shades, the environment work *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile* has enhanced the involvement of the public and free expression of emotions in the use of bright and changing colours. Distinctive bright and iridescent colours are in the work of the Italian artist who, since the beginning, has been interested in a research between matter, light, and colour, where the landscape is the subject and privileged object of his work and is reorganised by virtue of the expressive-abstract dictation, which is typical of the experiences of twentieth century art, according to a current and contemporary vision. This vision never disregards the value of painting as an infinitely living language, let alone a "doing" that unwinds in a typically traditional action - if you like.

This contribution is proposed as part of the 15th Conference of Colour, held from 5 to 7 September 2019 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Macerata, and is therefore an evidence to how contemporary art, using certain technical rules of show performance, has cooperated in theatre communication enhancing music and sound with great simplicity and naturalness, in this specific case, although for the lighting of a stage space there are not always valid

scientific precepts, through the colour that interacts with the light.

2. Paolo Bini. The landscape, colour, and environment work *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile* in the interaction between light and colour

Paolo Bini was born in Battipaglia, in the province of Salerno, in 1984. He studied set design, graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Naples in this discipline, and in 2007 he joined the set designer Gerardo Viggiano at the Cinespettacolo del Grancia in Brindisi Montagna, as his assistant. From the very first steps in the world of art, the theme of landscape and colour are at the centre of his interests, investigated first of all from the observation of both environmental and urban nature, and both in terms of landscape and view, to extrapolate, and then emphasize, the colour entities that make it unique and extraordinary, but also particularly attractive to man. As is well known, the landscape in Western artistic culture became a subject of specific interest from the seventeenth century onwards. Think, for example, of extraordinary works on the ideal and classical landscape such as *The Flight into Egypt* by Annibale Carracci, or those by Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, although previous examples of interest for this iconography - however never the subject - can be found in artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, to whom we certainly owe, with the study of the nuance, one of the first investigations on the nature and perception of colour. Still, think of how nature and colour have always been evaluated by artists as an indissoluble pair, in the proofs of the natural sublime, or in categories such as picturesque, peculiar to the eighteenth century. Finally, consider the Impressionist nineteenth century totally dedicated to the study of light, up to the first experiences of expressionist and then abstract avant-garde, which we can summarize by citing names such as Vasilij Vasil'evič Kandinskij, Paul Klee, Kazimir Malevič, or Piet Mondrian when he says: "Nature (and what I see) inspires me". About colour, we cannot but remember Matisse, one of the first artists to claim that it was the relationship between colours, in a painting, not forms, that gave it a structure: "Composition is the art of arranging the various elements available to the painter in a decorative manner to express the painter's feelings... The main aim of colour should be to serve expression as well as possible" [1]. This expressiveness is not so much deduced from the theories of colour, but instead from observation and feeling, unlike other artists who, in the same period of time, took into account primarily the novelties introduced by science. Think of Gaetano Previati who, in 1906, published *Principi scientifici del Divisionismo* [2] (Scientific Principles of

Divisionism), a text that certainly influenced the entire Futurist movement and in particular the research of Umberto Boccioni. Think of Delaunay, of the Orphism and his studies on Chévreul, but especially look at the already mentioned Paul Klee, works such as *La luce e molto altro ancora* (The Light and Much More) of 1931, where the main interest of investigation of the artist is clear. It is no coincidence that Klee found himself with Vasilij Vasil'evič Kandinskij, who was undoubtedly a pioneer in his studies of light, form and colour, and in his research into the constant comparison of music and painting, to teach at the Bauhaus where, together, they codified a concept of art that was not only synaesthetic but also symbolic. With a leap through the twentieth century, the abstract approach with the real, with the world, and again with the landscape, is found in the new wind of the Informal and in the very origin of expressive action, and then again, in those experiences, so-called analytical painting, that developed from the 1970s where, having abandoned the discourse on nature, everything focuses on the analysis of the material components of painting, first of all the colour, which thus loses the last referentiality with reality and expressiveness. Paolo Bini faced all this heritage of research and poetry and carried out his own artistic path along the links of expressionism and lyrical abstractionism to finally arrive at the codification of his own personal language which, as we have just said, starts from the initial observation of the landscape, or more precisely from the horizon. This also gives rise to a reflection on the compositional structure of his paintings. Bini visualizes this reflection in the synthesis of vertical or horizontal lines, a sort of grid, in essence, which becomes in his poetics the rhythm of real narrative spaces, intervals characterized only by colour aimed, not only to suggest the residual colours of the landscape, but to solicit empathy and emotional experiences in the viewer. This research was carried out as a result thanks to a first experience in South Africa in 2013, the place where a new consciousness of nature and colour matures, has now become its distinctive feature, but also the ground for a continuous evolution that, in the most recent works, has been pushed into ever more daring and spectacular chromatic experimentations. Although always faithful to his own system of verticals and horizontals, the recent flexion towards thinner lines and the use of fluorescent and brighter colours, is leading the artist to new frontiers of research. On the one hand, the image itself is exasperated and the idea that it is formed according to the unity of the pixel is exaggerated; on the other hand, the increasingly obsessive concentration on colour, on its psychology and on the reactions of people to chromatic frequencies, makes his work something extremely contemporary. The interest of the critics in his work is shown by the numerous and important personal and collective exhibitions and awards that enrich his

career. Among the most prestigious awards in 2016 is the Cairo Prize, 17th Edition, while his works are kept in Italy at the Fondazione Donna Regina Museo MADRE in Naples, in the Collection of the Cairo Prize in Milan, and in the collection of the Luigi Di Sarro Centre in Rome. Abroad, at the Leeu Collection of Franshoek in South Africa and in the same country, at the Public Works Collection of Cape Town. Finally, the performative work *Trovo Luce* was presented in July 2019. This work was created for a public space and as part of an exhibition dedicated to the artist's performance at ISCP - International Studio & Curatorial Program in New York, confirming the artist's interest in the search for light-colour interaction.

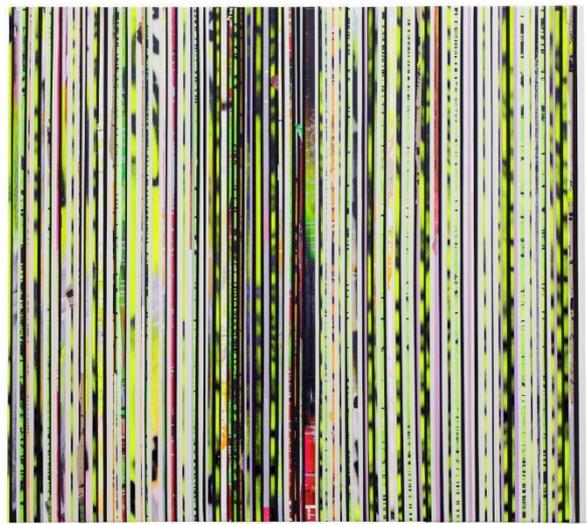


Fig. 1. Paolo Bini, Astrazione introspettiva con varco centrale, 2017. Acrilico su nastro carta su tela, cm. 120x120.Ph. © Carlo Ferrara.



Fig. 2. Paolo Bini, Eden, 2017. Acrilico su nastro carta su tela, cm. 120x120.Ph. © Carlo Ferrara.

The environment work *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile*, a set backdrop created for the concerts of Francesco De Gregori's Garbatella in Rome, held between February and March 2019, is based on these concepts, in perfect continuity and consistency with the artist's own poetics. However, the artist has challenged himself with this work, not only because it is a large work, but also with the concreteness of a real set backdrop consisting of one cotton cloth of the size of 496 x 950 cm, as well as with the specific needs of a theatre and a specific music performance, deliberately arranged by Francesco De Gregori to create an intimate and confidential atmosphere with the spectators. Past experiences, similar but not equal, of environmental works are not unusual to Paolo Bini. Here we recall, for example, the large wall painting created for the exhibition *Left Behind* at the Royal Palace of Caserta in 2016, a real example of installation painting and with purely scenic sequels where, however, the artist acted

directly on the wall. *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile* imagined by Bini, whose general poetics, as already mentioned, moves essentially around the concepts of emotion and sensation that generate colour, has found, at the Garbatella in Rome, first of all, a semantic correspondence with the concept of the show itself designed by Francesco De Gregori, to be configured, later, not as a traditional work, but as a series of elements capable of embracing the spectators.

The work/backdrop, made with acrylic painting, was therefore crossed by vertical coloured segments of abstract mould that, in the alternation between white and various mostly fluorescent colours with an iridescent character, however affected by black spots, with a wide chromatic scale including red, orange, pink, green and fluorescent yellow, reacted in an extremely pervasive way in the interaction with the stage lights.

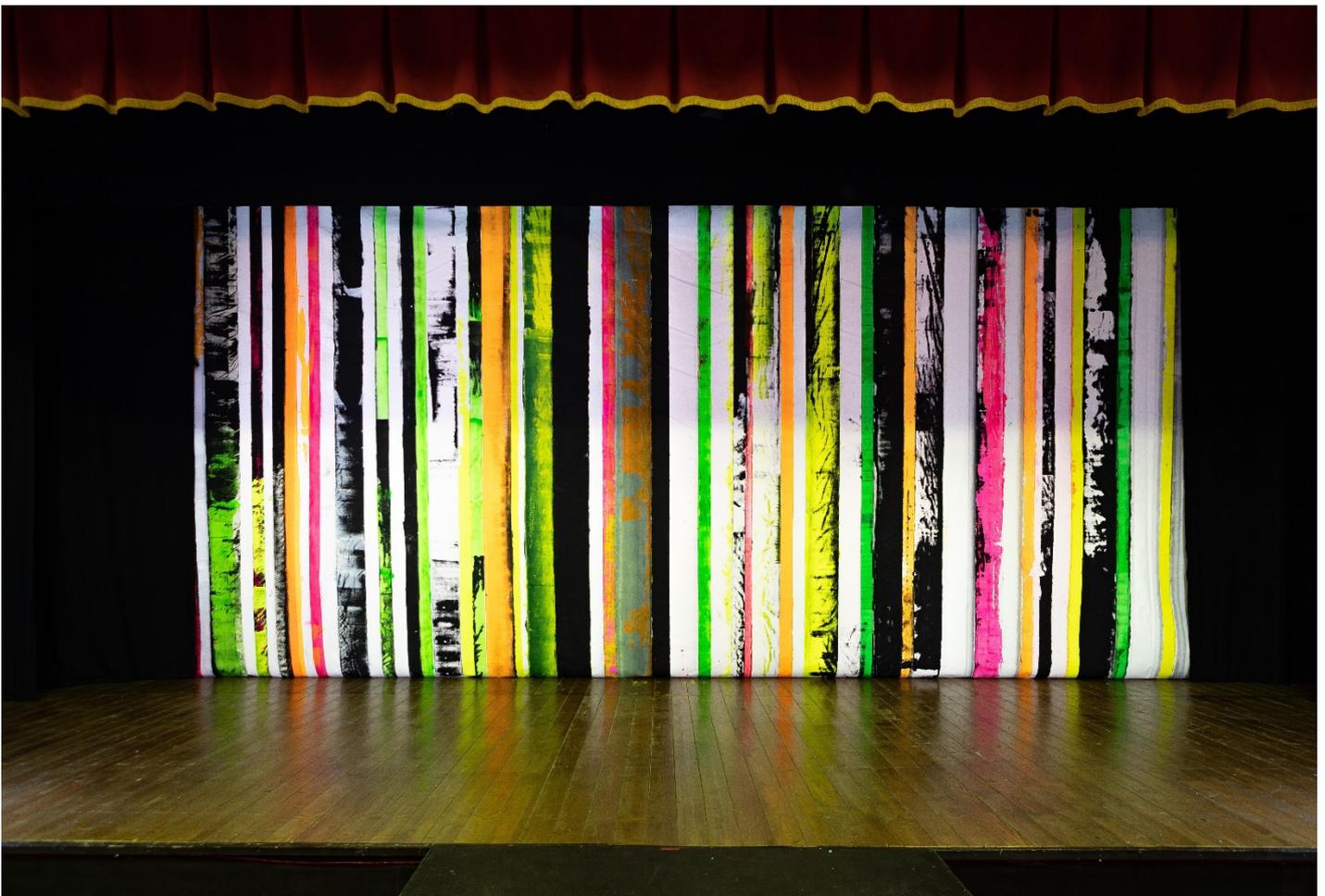


Fig. 3. Paolo Bini, Cromatismo in ritmo variabile, 2019, Teatro Garbatella Roma.

More and more in recent years, the sets of concerts are a meeting place between various forms of art and

techniques, between music and visual art and where set designers have more and more space to express

themselves by appealing to the use of technology. In this case, Bini has not resorted to any technological support, simply leaving the task of creating dynamism for the entire show to the painting and the scanning of coloured vertical segments hit by light beams.

Taking into consideration some of the possibilities underlying the role played by the lights, i.e. visibility, revelation of forms, vision and creation of an atmosphere, *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile* has shown itself properly in its form of a painting, supporting the same proscenium but managing at the same time to subvert the traditional set relationships and frontality with the spectators. In fact, the possible degree of flattening of the scene has been cancelled out by the performance characteristics inherent in the work, thus contributing in the interaction between colour and light, to restore depth to the place of action, generating three-dimensionality also to the stage presence of the musicians and to space.

As can be seen from the sketches - renderings that describe the three-dimensional scene, in *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile*, Paolo Bini has composed a sequence of very precise colours, taking into account the background because horizon, or the infinite where the eye and imagination move. All this, harmonizing and dialoguing with the lighting design by Andrea Coppini, light designer of Francesco De Gregori who, at Garbatella in Rome, used mainly lead lights from above, so as to obtain a strong contrast, albeit with some compression effect, side lights to enhance the shadows of the musicians on stage, so as to rebalance the effect of crushing and encourage a sort of three-dimensional modelling but also encourage an emotional atmosphere, and grazing lights, or beams very tangent to the subjects, in order to enhance their presence. In addition, sometimes to support the silhouette effect and return a fascinating halo in the contours and depth of the scene, a light from behind was used to help detach the subject from the background. Finally, to meet specific theatrical needs, warm and cold lights were used, once again to give prominence to the objects and create enveloping atmospheres or to make the contours - in this case of the musicians - clear and precise, taking into account, in the final analysis, the fixity and the very few moments of mobility by the nature of this show. It is precisely in the interaction between the lights and coloured backdrop that we have obtained an even more spectacular emphasis than that which the lights alone or a black backdrop would normally have given back. Through light, in fact, *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile* is activated.

Under conditions of natural radiation, in fact, the work has the characteristics of a classic painting of the artist, but it is in the reaction to light of fluorescent colours that it changes features, amplifying every aspect of the atmosphere and environment. *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile* reacted to the presence of white lights by showing its dominant colours, obviously as a result of reflection and crossing, to that of coloured lights (blue, green, purple, red) absorbing and intensifying the dominant colour of the light itself. Consequently, the lights produced by point sources, in meeting the environment work of Paolo Bini, due to the effect of reverberation, have transformed it into its own source of light. A diffused and soft light source where the chromatic surface responds to opaque hues, mirrored where there is a dominance of fluorescent colours and which, in their combination, have chromatically influenced all the space around, including the floor.

The artistic literature on colour, and that on colour and light, as is well known, is vast. It is certainly to it that Paolo Bini looks, and it is through it that one can see the motives behind his research and consequently those of *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile*. Certainly, the use of colours by the artist makes in any work, so the intense introspective value he assigns to it, becomes an interpretative of a "rhythm" or an "out of rhythm" mirroring that which accompanies the individual throughout his life. His works, in general, are always portions of space that welcome the lights and shadows of the surrounding, but it is in an environmental dimension, such as that of the Teatro La Garbatella precisely, in the study of colours to the reactions of theatrical lights, then and in this case, in the interpretation of a show, which shows how this research, like contemporary art, can be a convincing grammar at the service of music and emotions. Bearing in mind that light is communication, since in a performance it is that element capable of mediating the relationship between space and the spectator's perception, it could be said that, by interacting with *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile*, it behaves, in this case, more than like a brush. This environment work, which never loses its pictorial character, precisely because of this shows the full potential of how different knowledge and languages, respect and amplify the symbolic matrix that has always accompanied the theatre. *Cromatismo emozionale in ritmo variabile*, therefore, highlights this aspect, suggesting how tradition can be innovative despite a future marked by virtuality.



Fig.4. Paolo Bini, *Cromatismo in ritmo variabile*, 2019, Teatro Garbatella Roma. Ph. © Daniele Barraco

3. Conflict of interest declaration

The undersigned Maria Letizia Paiato declares that the contribution *Luce e colore a teatro nell'opera di Paolo Bini per Francesco De Gregori* of which she is the author is not subject to any actual or potential conflict of interest, including financial, personal or other relationships with other persons or organizations within three years from the beginning of the work presented and that it could influence inappropriately or be perceived to influence their work. Nothing has affected my objectivity. Therefore, there are no potential conflicts.

4. Funding source declaration

The undersigned Maria Letizia Paiato declares that no funding or research grants have been received in the course of study, research or collection of the manuscript nor to have received any financial support for the conduct of the research and/or preparation of the article.

5. Short biography of the author

Paiato Maria Letizia - Art historian and critic, she teaches Art History at the Academy of Fine Arts in Macerata. Ph.D in History of Contemporary Art, she is interested in visual experiences and communication both of the early twentieth century and of contemporary artists. He is constantly involved in publishing as Director of Segnonline and Editor-in-Chief of the magazine *Segno* of Pescara. She is the author of the book *L'illustrazione Uморistica fra Otto e Novecento a Modena. Satira, immagini e ricerche* (Humorous illustration between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Modena. Satire, images and research).

Notes

[1] The citation is from Barr Jr A.H., *Matisse: His Art and His Public*, New York 1951, p. 119.

[2] Previati G., *Principi scientifici del Divisionismo*, Fratelli Bocca Editori, Turin 1906.

References

- Ball P. (2004) *Colore. Una Biografia*, Milano: Bur Rizzoli.
- Brusantin M. (1999) *Storia dei Colori*, Torino: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi.
- Cherchi P. (1978) *Paul Klee teorico*, Bari: De Donato.
- Goethe J.W. (1810) *Zur Farbenlehre*, Tubinga; trad.it. (1988) *La Teoria dei Colori*, Milano.
- Itten, J. (1961) *Kunst der Farbe*, Ravensburg: Otto Maier Verlag, trad.it. (1965) *Arte del colore. Esperienza soggettiva e conoscenza oggettiva come vie per l'arte*, Milano: Il Saggiatore.
- Mancinelli S. (2005), *Illuminotecnica teatrale. Dipingere con la Luce*, Libera Accademia della Luce.
- Kandinskij V. V. (1912), *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, München; trad. it. (1993) *Lo spirituale nell'arte*, Milano: Bompiani.
- Kandinskij V.V.(1982) *Complete Writings on Art*, 1, Boston (MA): G.K. Hall & Co; trad. it. (1989) *Tutti gli Scritti*, vol.2, Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Klee P. (1920), *Schöpferische Konfession*, Berlin; trad.it. (2004) Saba Sardi F. *Confessione creatrice e altri scritti*, Abscondita.
- Prevati G. (1906), *Principi scientifici del Divisionismo*, Torino, Fratelli Bocca Editori.
- Schopenhauer A. (1816), *Ueber das Sehen und die Farben*, Leipzig, trad. it. (2002) *La vista e i colori. E carteggio con Goethe*, Montinari M. (a cura di), Abscondita.
- Arensi F. (2018), *Lo Specchio di Paolo Bini*, Roma: Editalia.
- Battarra E. (2017) 'Il Mattino', *I colori di un mondo fantastico invadono la Reggio*.
- Beatrice L. (2018), *La pittura, giorno dopo giorno*, catalogo della mostra, Galleria Alberto Peola, Torino: Il Cavallo Alato.
- Beatrice L. (2017) (a cura di), Baldoni A., Mazzarella V., Villani A., *Paolo Bini. Left Behind*, catalogo della mostra, Appartamenti Storici Retrostanze del Settecento (Ex Terrae Motus), Reggio di Caserta, Caserta: Il Cavallo Alato.
- Beatrice L. (2017), 'Il Giornale', anno XLIV n.23, *Nel bene e nel male Artefiera vale Sanremo. Ma la musica cambia*.
- Beatrice L. (2017), 'FlimTv', *Italian Factory (Roberto Cuoghi, Alek O., Paolo Bini, Gian Maria Tosatti)*, pp.16-17.
- Bonuomo M. (2017), 'Arte Mondadori', *Paolo Bini il vincitore del XVII Premio Cairo ripercorre il suo rapporto con la pittura e la storia dell'arte come immersione totalizzante*, Editoriale Giorgio Mondadori.
- Buonomo M. (2016), (a cura di), *La forma di una nuova generazione*, anno XVII, Premio Cairo, Palazzo Reale, Milano.
- Bucci, S. (2016), 'Corriere della Sera', *Colori tra l'Italia e il Sudafrica. Paolo Bini e la sua arte saranno famosi*, Milano.
- Catricalà V. (2018), *Naufrazi Rosso e Oro nell'opera di Paolo Bini*, in *Mediterraneo Rosso e Oro*, catalogo della mostra, Polo Museale Regionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Museo Riso – Cappella dell'Incoronata, Palermo.
- Deho V. (2016), (a cura di), *Paolo Bini. Astrazione Modulare, catalogo della mostra*, Fornace Falcone/Spazio delle Esposizioni, Eboli, Salerno.
- Paiato M.L. (2018), 'Segno', *Paolo Bini, Mediterraneo Rosso e Oro*, n.269, pp.48-49.
- Paiato M.L. (2017), 'Segno', *Paolo Bini. Left Behind*, n.261, pp. 34-35.
- (2016) *Paolo Bini. Spazi Immensi*, catalogo della mostra Spazio Intesa San Paolo Miart – Milano: Marsilio Editore
- Quaroni I. (2016), (a cura di), *Principio di indeterminazione*, catalogo della mostra, ABC-Arte Geneova, Genova: ABC-Arte Editions.
- Raddi S. (2017), 'Sofà', *Notizie – Mondo dell'Arte*, anno XI n.28, Roma: Editalia
- Trione V. (2017), (a cura di), *Atlante dell'Arte Contemporanea a Napoli e in Campania 1966-2016*, Milano: Electa, Milano.
- Troncone A. (2016), *Frammentare (e Deframmentare) il Paesaggio / Fragmenting (and Defragmenting) the Landscape*, catalogo della mostra, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town.