

THE BASE

OF

THE

ICEBERG

ATELIER DELL'ERRORE



On the third floor of the Collezione Maramotti building in Reggio Emilia, Italy, above the exhibition halls dedicated to the collection of modern and contemporary art, resides a one-of-a-kind collective, its name: Atelier dell'Errore (AdE). The story of this Atelier of Mistakes, a collective of neurodivergent young artists, is not an edifying fairy tale but a complex, at times arduous, narrative about the transformation of life through professional artistic practice.

“This is a collective born by chance,” says Luca Santiago Mora, artistic director and head of the initiative. It all began 23 years ago, out of necessity, establishing itself through its tenacious, obstinate vision. He traces a creative adventure whose genesis is worthy of the collective’s name. The year was 2002. He was an artist whose practice ranged from photography to video; he had no particular interest in drawing, nor did he possess any specific knowledge in the field of neurodivergence. An artist friend of his, who ran workshops in the child neuropsychiatry department of a hospital in Reggio Emilia, asked him to substitute for her one afternoon a week while she was in Spain.

“I am perhaps the greatest mistake of Atelier dell'Errore,” he says with self-irony. That few-hour assignment flung open the doors to an unexpected universe. What struck him was the previously unexplored expressive power of these young people: “The marks they made, the stories that came from these encounters.” That error, that substitute position, became a permanent commitment. From one afternoon it grew to two, then three, until it expanded into daily work groups that dozens of children and young people passed through.

No theoretical manifesto was ever drafted, but two fundamental principles emerged — pragmatic responses to concrete problems. The first was the concept of error, linked to the choice to ban the eraser. “I didn’t want to replicate the school experience,” explains Luca Santiago Mora. The goal was to deconstruct the figure of the teacher, the one who defines what is right and what is wrong. By eliminating the possibility of erasing, the very concept of a technical error was eliminated. “If you start by drawing an ant, and after four marks on the paper it doesn’t look like an ant but a dragon, well that’s fine.” The creative process becomes an uninterrupted flow, a continuous metamorphosis. “Going forward to the point where you say, ‘But I don’t understand what this thing is.’ That’s where the doors opened for me. That was the whole purpose: to go to the limit, where you no longer recognise what you are doing because you have no goal, and in the exercise of looking you suddenly learn to see, which is the poetic faculty that differentiates a poet, an artist, from an ordinary mortal.”

Amon Sinaitica, 210 x 160 cm, 2024  
Photo © AdE\_BIG, courtesy of Atelier dell'Errore



The second principle was to overcome any waste of time that undermined the workshop’s energy. “Out of the 60 minutes available, we had been wasting 55 on: What should I draw? A ball, my grandma, my aunt, the moon? The solution was drastic and ingenious. A boy proposed: ‘Let’s do animals, okay?’” And ever since then, that was it. “Our motto could be: The Atelier dell'Errore has been drawing animals stubbornly, incessantly, without erasing, for 23 years.”

These animals, though, are not simple zoological illustrations. They’re more like totemic creatures. “Because all the young people of the Atelier dell'Errore have experienced bullies, and bringing these gigantic creatures into the world allows them to create figures of protection. They are their ‘Guardian Animals’, sworn protectors in a world that often rejects them.”



Errant Psalms, Galleria Continua San Gimignano, 2024 (top)  
Stills from the video 'PINK! Is the Warmest Colour', 2025, 8'40" (above)  
Photos © AdE\_BIG, courtesy of Atelier dell'Errore

The hospital workshop grew; it participated in calls for projects, exhibited in events like the Art Verona fair, but the real turning point came in 2015. Three girls who were among the oldest participants, had just turned 18. With their transition to adult psychiatry, they could no longer officially access the hospital workshop. “Their parents phoned me and said, ‘Sorry Luca, but now that you’ve made exhibitions and books with them, you’ve lit a light, so what are you going to do now — turn off the light and leave?’”

That appeal could not be ignored. It was then that Luca Santiago Mora knocked on the door of Collezione Maramotti. “Within ten days, we were in.” The first exhibition, *Men as Food*, was held the same year. It depicted animals eating humans. This marked the official birth of Atelier dell'Errore as an autonomous entity. The second crucial step in the history of the Atelier occurred in 2018, when the non-profit organisation became a cooperative art studio. With this, all the families were now members of the cooperative, while Luca Santiago Mora and the other 11 artists became working partners. “This was a decisive step that made us unique,” he emphasises. “It meant that, contractually, our salary must be earned from the things we do — collaborations with architects, designers, fashion studios — but above all, from working with galleries, museums, and collectors.”



*“You no longer recognise what you are doing because you have no goal, and in the exercise of looking you suddenly learn to see.”*

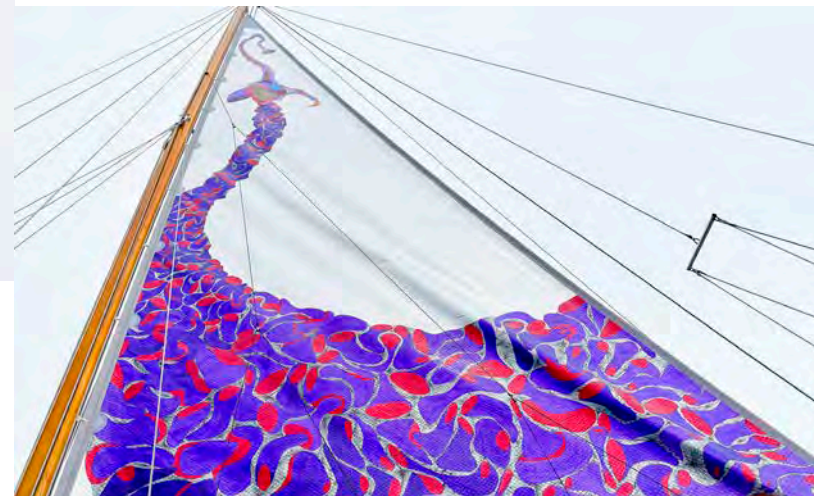
Over the years, the Atelier has exhibited in Milan, London, Rome, and New York. It has also worked with Migliore+Servetto Architects at the Procuratie Vecchie in the Piazza San Marco. And during the latest edition of Milan Design Week, the group exhibited at Alcova at Villa Borsani. The support of Collezione Maramotti, which provides a 400 square metre studio free of charge, is vital, but the challenge to sustain the Atelier is titanic: finding the resources to pay twelve salaries for fourteen months a year. The goal is not to achieve fame for its own sake, but to affirm that these young people have changed their lives; they have become professional artists. “No one has been cured of their condition, but today they are different men and women from who they were before, because they have an awareness, a new self-esteem. Art is not a miraculous cure but a tool for redemption and identity construction.”

Atelier dell'Errore is not just a collective of artists. “It’s a living organism, composed of many organs, each with its own specific function.” The beating heart of this organism is the daily assembly. Every afternoon begins with a meeting of variable duration, where projects are discussed, moods are shared, and stories are told. It’s a space of radical democracy and pure sociality. “Their lives reopen, they bloom again when they cross the threshold of the Atelier,” exudes Luca Santiago Mora, aware that for many of the young people, life outside of that space is often marked by loneliness and marginalisation.

There’s been an evolution from drawings on paper to increasingly ambitious projects. “The Atelier’s fuel is challenge. It’s no longer about saying ‘come on, let’s draw something’, but about responding to commissions and invitations that require innovative solutions.” For example, the Massimo De Carlo gallery exhibition in 2021 was inspired by Maurizio Cattelan’s use of duct tape in his installation ‘A Perfect Day’, the collective invented a new material: by applying red duct tape to cotton, they created a shimmering fabric, christened AdETex, using it to create three-dimensional works and installations.

Last year, the collective was tasked with designing a sail for Pier Paolo Pasolini’s boat, Edipo Re (Oedipus Rex). Fashioning such a sail was perhaps the most emblematic challenge of all. Instead of printing a motif from a drawing, the group started drawing directly on gold and silver isothermal emergency blankets, creating a double-sided original work. In parallel, they had been commissioned to make a site-specific, multi-panelled frieze for the Palazzo Torlonia in Rome: Die Goldkammer, a 22 metre-long permanent installation that took a full year to produce.

One of the most recent and courageous of the Atelier’s chapters is an exploration on the theme of sexuality in the series Unknown Pleasures, presented at the Kaufmann Repetto gallery in New York in early 2025. This body of work originated when a fellow artist with Tourette syn-



drome began seeing and naming sexual attributes everywhere. Instead of repressing this tendency, Luca Santiago Mora decided to explore it as a path, understanding that, as they are immersed in the same society of desire as everyone else and are therefore bombarded with messages containing sexual content, the young people in the Atelier possess an extremely rich erotic imagination but often have no opportunity to experiment or live-out that sphere of life.

“Where else can they talk about these things, about their preferences, about what they would like, about what they imagine, if not here?” From this emerged a series of explicit and powerful works depicting hybrid, zoomorphic, and humanoid creatures, projections of repressed desire. These are “figures of protest, figures of denied desire.” This work, tackled without hypocrisy, gave voice to a deep need, changing the attitude of many and demonstrating once again how the Atelier is a place of truth, not consolation.

Die Goldkammer, 150 x 2000 cm, Palazzo Torlonia Roma, 2024 (facing page)  
Hypnos+Thanatos, LabOratorio degli Angeli, Bologna, 160x110 cm, 2024 (top)  
AdE\_Vela Rapido, 1000 x 5000 cm, 2024 (above)

Photo © AdE\_BIG, courtesy of Atelier dell'Errore

*“Art is not a miraculous cure but a tool for redemption and identity construction.”*

Luca Santiago Mora is categorical in defining the collective’s positioning. The Atelier dell’Errore strongly rejects the label ‘outsider art’. “We don’t ask for discounts, we don’t ask for do-goodism, we don’t ask for political correctness.” The goal is to be judged for the quality and strength of the work, not for the origin of its authors. “These artists want to earn authority and esteem in the world of the so-called normals.”

The metaphor Luca Santiago Mora uses to describe the Atelier’s work is that of an iceberg. The visible, glittering part is the work that fascinates the public in galleries and museums. “But beneath the surface lies a huge, submerged mass, composed of labour, effort, time, but also of beautiful things — sharing, friendship, relationships that make the above-part float.” Today the Atelier dell’Errore is a mature and complete organism. It does not accept new members because the process takes years, and its economic structure, based on the sale of works and collaborations, is already difficult to sustain.

This story is a testimony of how art, when practiced as a life choice and not as consolation, can build parallel worlds of dignity, beauty, and meaning. /

@atelier\_dell\_errore\_

TEN, a retrospective exhibition by Atelier dell’Errore of the most significant bodies of work produced over the past decade, is on show at GAMeC gallery in Bergamo until 18.01.2025 / gamec.it