

INTERVIEW

Atelier dell'Errore by Claudia Steinberg

A collective of neurodivergent artists exhibits
work internationally.

NOVEMBER 19, 2025



Installation view of Atelier dell'Errore, *TEN*, 2025. GAMeC Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea Bergamo. © AdE_BIG.

On the outskirts of the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia, near a roundabout swirling with traffic but behind a tall metal gate in a garden, sits the Collezione Maramotti with its grand trove of art from 1945 to the present, amassed by the family that owns Max Mara. For a decade, the fashion house has also hosted, in an elegant space on its premises, the intriguingly named and now internationally famous Atelier dell'Errore (Atelier of Mistakes), a group of twelve neurodivergent artists. Founded in 2002 by the photographer and video artist Luca Santiago Mora as a branch of a therapeutic after-school program that was initiated after World War II, the Atelier dell'Errore became an independent collective once the children had aged out of the pediatric neuropsychiatric healthcare system. They are now between seventeen and thirty-one years old.

Because animals and insects may look bizarre and behave strangely but are admired and loved nevertheless, this heterogeneous group chose them as the subject of their art. Some of the creatures display fanciful wings, while others show off menacing claws, but all obviously relish their power, as perhaps Atelier dell'Errore member Nicole (aka Niki Baxter) enjoys hers. She not only knows how to apply gold leaf flawlessly but is at home in the ancient Greek underworld. She furthermore excels at delivering powerful ad hoc performances summoning Aphrodite, some of which are occasionally interrupted by a string of curses dictated by her Tourette syndrome. Baxter is also the master gilder of the group, which has exhibited from Venice to New York City its hypnotic images of surreal, elegantly drawn, delicate, somehow deeply endearing, but also provocative beings with names like Medusa Dragon or Earth Shredder. Baxter and her eleven co-artists are in constant conversation with Mora, the Atelier dell'Errore's director.

Claudia Steinberg

How did you get involved with a city-run art therapy program for teenagers with—in some cases—dramatic neurodivergencies?

Luca Santiago Mora

I started, of course, by mistake: I agreed to replace a friend who ran a workshop meant to foster self-esteem and socialization skills among neurodivergent children and teenagers, and I immediately realized that I didn't know anything! But I was curious about the children's stories; I listened to them and to their parents, and eventually I felt at home with them. Then I got rid of the institutional furniture and created a clean, bright space.

CS

The creatures that the Atelier dell'Errore make are radiant, strange, seductive beasts created with an almost obsessive degree of perfectionism. Where does this fantastical imagery originate, and how did it develop into an instantly recognizable style?

LSM

What I need to clarify from the very beginning is that we don't want to be confused with outsider art, mostly for the simple reason that these artists always work as a collective; there is not one drawing that was created by a single individual. The members of this group met each other when they were children. None of them had thought of becoming an artist, and there was no art on the walls at home. There were also many other difficulties. However, some members of the group discovered inside themselves the kind of creative attitude we can recognize and appreciate.



Atelier dell'Errore, *AdE portrait*, 2024. Reggio Emilia. © AdE_BIG.

CS

What enabled these young artists to express what they discovered inside themselves?

LSM

They all recognized their ability to draw when they were about twelve years old, and it was not because I told them, "This is a good drawing." The recognition of their own abilities came when they had their first exhibition and they saw how people were reacting to their drawings. They finally felt seen, as opposed to those many times when they brought a drawing to school and it was not considered any good by their teachers because it didn't fulfill the conventional expectations of figurative realism.

CS

Beyond honing their skills and trusting their talent, these very individualistic members of the group also had to learn how to cooperate and to create a collective aesthetic.

LSM

Yes, it is important to note that our collective does not only consist of the crew, but that there is also an artistic director—me. Usually, an outsider artist is a person with a rather rigid view of the world. He can't change his perspective, and he doesn't care as much about what is around him as what is inside him. Potentially, our group could consist of a dozen outsider artists, except for the fact that they all work together. There is the artist Giorgia (aka GB7), for example. If I don't tell her, "You have to stop; this drawing is finished," she will never stop applying her ultra-fine lines to the paper, just like in Balzac's novella *The Unknown Masterpiece*, which tells the story of a painter who keeps working on a portrait until he has completely obliterated his subject. So there are some people in the collective with the potential for problems that are typical of outsider artists. However, there is also an artistic guidance. This is why we don't accept invitations to participate in outsider art fairs. And when I initially mentioned outsider art fairs to the group, they told me, "We come from the hospital. We don't want to return to the hospital. We work hard all day until we are tired because we want our artwork to be known by normal people. We want it to be seen in the world of normal art." Giorgia (aka GB7), by the way, is revered by the group for her infinite dedication, as well as the finest lines of any artist.

CS

What has been your selection process for including someone in the collective?

LSM

I don't make the selection; everyone chose to join the group because they wanted to be part of it.

CS

So they came to you, but what are the criteria for integrating someone into the collective?

LSM

Everyone is welcome, and we don't conduct a formal interview. We are speaking with the kids, and we talk to their families because they are very important in this process. Throughout all these years, we've had some artists with great potential, but in some cases the families didn't trust the process. They did not understand what we were doing, and they simply thought it was too strange. I'd hear things like, "I'd rather send my boy to clean houses than have him come here." I've lost at least twelve if not twenty artists with great potential because the families didn't get it. Only if the parents have trust in the process can we go on. That's why there are twelve and not twenty-five members. Twelve is the capacity, and it's already a high number, because you must work closely with each of them, recognizing and respecting their individual needs and gifts. I'm usually alone with the group; there is not enough money for an assistant. Not all twelve members show up every day; today there will be just nine. Their ages range from seventeen to thirty-one; two are twenty-five. And they all can stay until I die.

CS

In other words, the group is very tied to you.

LSM

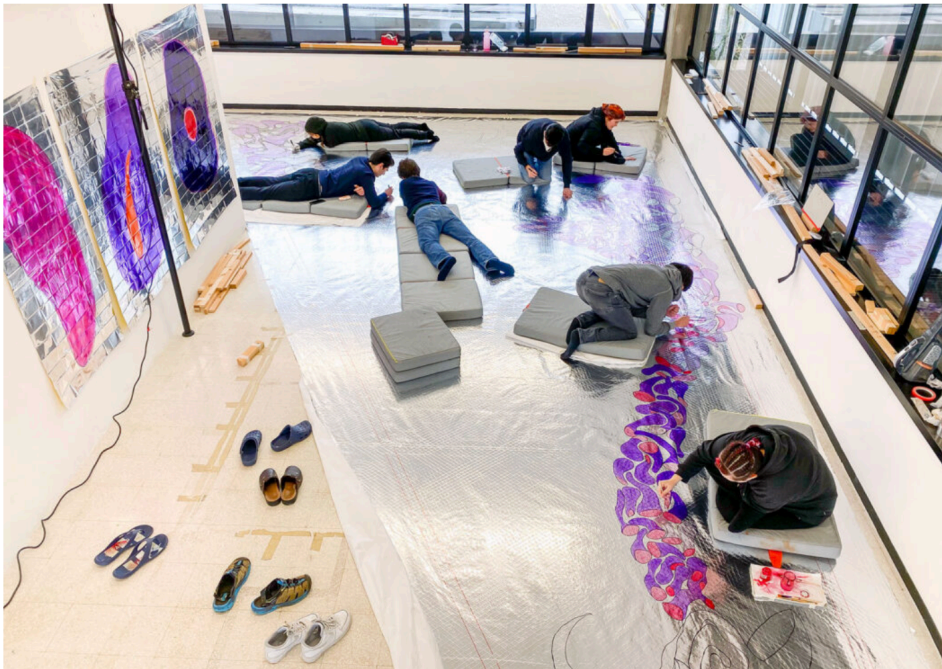
Yes, and that's why I have declined many requests from art associations to write a method, which cannot be done because a method would have to be based on a scientific approach. We, on the other hand, have chosen an artistic approach, which is based on a process, which means that you never know where you will end up. The scientific method aims to arrive at its goal in the fastest as well as the safest way. The artistic process, on the other hand, doesn't have a predetermined goal. I didn't imagine, twenty-two years ago, that I would arrive here. But at this moment I can't make decisions about my personal life because I have the responsibility for the group.

CS

You stress the difference between the artistic and the scientific process; however, you also became very familiar with the complex medical and psychological aspects of neurodivergent conditions.

LSM

I acquired that knowledge by living with the group and by working with its very diverse members: a process of learning by doing. When I first worked with the group, all its members were still children, and I felt rather inadequate to the situation I was confronted with. I realized that I didn't know anything about Laretta (aka Smeagol), for example, until I eventually found a way to reread the world through her eyes. Only then did I understand that—being an artist myself—I had the responsibility to let these astonishing things appear and to introduce these amazing, completely unknown worlds to a wide audience.



Atelier dell'Errore, *AdE portrait*, 2024. Reggio Emilia. © AdE_BIG.

CS

In retrospect, what surprised you the most?

LSM

To have lunch with you, to talk with a journalist from New York City coming to ask questions. It's also a great surprise to have participated in the Venice Biennale. To have traveled with some members of the group for a show in Manhattan.

CS

Do you impose a strict schedule?

LSM

On a perfectly normal day, I start out by myself in the morning and set up everything for the group in the afternoon. It is a moment to think of the previous day because the artistic process of the Atelier is rather fluid. You need the flexibility to let things happen intuitively. However, on the following day you try to understand and analyze what happened the previous day and what it might lead to. Once the artists arrive, they change their shoes to mark the transition: we step into a different world. Everyone is grateful to be working in such a beautiful place, but at the same time they also know that they deserve to be here. We always begin the afternoon with a group meeting, where everyone can say what is on his or her mind, not only about the current project but also about the news, as well as personal matters. When the war in Ukraine began, some of them said, "We are very lucky to be here in a place where no bombs are falling." Although not all of them will talk about such things, I'm sure most of them do know what is going on in the world. At the same time, there is one guy in the group who wants to talk about nothing else but soccer. Eventually we all decided that we were going to have a soccer team so he can talk about the championships and all the related things that are so important to him, and that also became important to all of us once we had the team.

“Erasers are forbidden in the studio because every mistake leads to something new, and that’s how our process is essentially metamorphic: by starting out with one creature that becomes another.”

CS

So the daily group meeting strengthens the spirit of the collective.

LSM

Yes, only after that conversation do we start the actual work where everyone has a designated, unique task to figure out. We all work together on a project, dividing the difficult tasks into a series of steps. We begin with a little drawing on a small sheet of paper; then we progress to a larger image without ever correcting anything; and if we run out of space, we just add more paper. Erasers are forbidden in the studio because every mistake leads to something new, and that’s how our process is essentially metamorphic: by starting out with one creature that becomes another. An ant may turn into a bird and perhaps into a dragon. Eventually you arrive at a point when you don’t recognize anything. This is the moment when a door opens and a hitherto invisible creature of the atelier appears, and that is the beginning of the artwork.



Installation view of *Atelier dell'Errore*, TEN, 2025. GAMeC Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea Bergamo. © AdE_BIG.

CS

Has the work of the Atelier had any influence on your own art? Did it perhaps teach you to get in touch with other inner states?

LSM

At this point, I'm not creating art anymore because I'm just too involved in this operation. And I enjoy working with these artists so much; I so admire their way of expressing themselves, their way of performing. We have become a kind of organism with eyes, and a brain, and hands and feet; and one must take care of the whole organism because if you feel pain in your feet, you can't think.

CS

You've mentioned that the Atelier "had been waiting" for you. What kind of art did you do before you got involved?

LSM

I made videos, and I also drew, but not professionally. If we had founded a video workshop, the group would have produced the kind of videos I like, and they wouldn't have liked anything that they had created on their own terms because they would inevitably have measured it against my videos. Instead, I wanted everyone to depart from the same starting line.

The work of Atelier dell'Errore can be seen in the [15th Kaunas Biennial: Life After Life in Kaunas, Lithuania, until November 23](#); their work can also be seen in the exhibition [TEN /Thinking Like a Mountain #5: The Orobie Biennial at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Bergamo, Italy, until January 18](#).