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**AND
THEN
THERE
WAS
LIGHT**

Arcangelo Sassolino is looking for the meaning of life.
FEATURE *by* ALISON KUBLER

**ARCANGELO
SASSOLINO**



Known internationally for his works that fuse engineering precision with raw elemental power, Italian artist Arcangelo Sassolino creates sculptures that test the endurance of the materials with which he works – oil, molten steel, glass, timber – to ask big questions about life: what is time? What does it mean to be alive?

His first solo exhibition in Australia at the Museum of Old and New Art, *Arcangelo Sassolino: in the end, the beginning* (until April 6, 2026), takes its title from the key work, an extraordinary installation of fire and molten metal. Reimagining Sassolino's piece for the 2022 Venice Biennale, *diplomazija astuta* – a nod to the master of chiaroscuro Caravaggio (1571–1610) and his painting *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* – *in the end, the beginning* is a 'sculpture' made of liquid steel heated to 1500°C, that drips from the ceiling in bursts of flame and volcanic glow, as an evocation of time in motion.

The exhibition includes five major works that collectively explore ideas of entropy, the passage of time, and the violence of chance. These include a sculpture called *violenza casuale* (2007), made of wooden beams wrapped in steel cables that begin to splinter and break under continuous hydraulic pressure; a glass sheet strained beneath a large boulder that teeters between collapse and calm in *the paradoxical nature of life* (2018); a car tyre stretched to breaking point in *marcus* (2018); and two large discs spinning drip-

coloured industrial oil endlessly – like two monochromes in dialogue, in *no memory without loss* (2023).

VAULT spoke to Sassolino about his work at Mona, the possibility of failure and Italian tradition.

Hello Arcangelo. It's delightful to meet you. You are back in Italy now? What a contrast to Hobart!

Hobart is fantastic. We had a week in Basel in between, as we went directly from Australia to Art Basel (where the artist showed *everyday life*, 2025), but now I'm finally back in Italy.

I love the contrast of Hobart, Basel and now Italy. The art world gives us a crazy schedule that makes sense to us, because we live in this world, but to anybody else it would seem like madness. You've literally gone to the bottom of Australia and then all the way back up!

I completely agree with you. And it is actually the magic of art that brings people from different geographies and backgrounds together. It is like art is a land where we can have a dialogue with people from all over the world. It is fantastic, really.

Congratulations on the show at Mona. It's just beautiful. When I first went into the room to see *in the end, the beginning*, I had to suspend my thought process

because I kept thinking "How did he do it? How does it work? Where's the mechanism?" Because when you work in museums and galleries, you are literally always thinking, how did they do it? I had to put that aside and just be with the work. And obviously, the first thing is that in those dark moments, it's very, very dark. I wanted to ask you, where does the energy go? And I don't mean just a literal thing, as in this steel is coming down, and then where does it go? What are you thinking when you are making this endless stream of energy?

I like the idea of a sculpture that dissolves itself, that becomes energy, as you say. And in this, becoming energy for me is like an attempt to transform time, to capture time. That is why it cannot stop dripping, falling, coming down. It is constantly going because the energy and time are not something that you can grab; it's not something that can be stopped. Everything is in transformation. Everything is changing. Every moment is becoming something else. I suppose I'm obsessed with this. I'm constantly in my head thinking, "What is the meaning of life?" Being alive is like winning the lottery! We are here, we have this window of time, with all of the daily little things that we have to solve in order to go forward. It's such a wonderful thing, this giving, this possibility of being here. And I am constantly asking – without an answer, of course – who are we as individuals? The

idea of *in the end, the beginning* is exactly that idea of grabbing, showing, something that is not there but *is* there, that keeps transforming. It's like trying to be a witness to the flow of your life in a sense.

And in order to do that, I always try to find a new technical solution. Basically, if you think about steel, metal as part of art history forever, but it is also part of who we are as a society, because everything is metal. I like the example that many people have a ring on their finger that is a metaphor for love. But, at the same time, there are bombs in the world dropping down somewhere that are killing people, and we cannot take an aircraft, a train, or a boat without metal. We eat with metal, with a fork. So, it's a fundamental material in our life and our society. I think that by melting it, it can become something that is no longer brutal, solid steel, but it can become like energy, light and time, the dissolving of the particles, transforming the metal into a liquid that explodes into like, 10,000 little drops each time. For me, it was an attempt to dissolve the sculpture *into* the space and transform it into light.

I had a friend who, when he entered the room, started crying. If you know him... I'm not saying he's macho, but to see him tearing up in front of the piece was very touching in a sense, and I got the impression the work went through somehow for him.

Regarding the technical aspect, I would say that when I make a piece, I have an eye on art history and an eye on, "What do I want to say with my work?" Both are important. *in the end, the beginning* used the same technology as when we showed it in Venice, in a different context. We used an induction system; it's like a magnetic field that is created with electricity, and that goes inside the spiral of copper that also has to be cooled down with water. It sounds complex, but actually it's not that complex! But the magic for me is that, usually, to make a piece of art, somehow you have to 'touch' it with a tool. It can be a brush, it can be a spatula, it can be anything, a grinder or whatever. However, in this case, the steel that passes through the magnetic feed doesn't contact anything. It's like this energy, invisible energy, that transforms the steel from zero to 1500 degrees in zero time. And that, to me, is very interesting in the context of art history: creating a piece that's untouched by a tool. It's something that the viewer cannot see. But it is interesting that you ask, "How did you do that?"

It's like magic. You can't see the artist's hand; it feels like magic. Something's happening right before your eyes, and it's so sleight of hand and incredible to watch. I kept trying to catch the moment it disappears or is repelled, but you can't, which is beautiful in itself. You'll mostly see the aftermath, which is amazing. It's like watching time pass, isn't it? Yes, that is the goal basically.

Top to bottom
Portrait: Arcangelo
Sassolino
Photo: Jesse Hunniford

Portrait: Arcangelo
Sassolino
Photo: Jesse Hunniford

Opposite
Installation view
in the end, the beginning, 2025
Photo: Jesse Hunniford

Previous page
Installation view
ARCANGELO SASSOLINO
in the end, the beginning
(detail), 2025
Photo: Jesse Hunniford

Courtesy the artist and
Museum of Old and New
Art, Nipaluna/Hobart



Bottom
ARCANGELO SASSOLINO
marcus, 2018
Photo: Jesse Hunniford

Opposite
ARCANGELO SASSOLINO
*the paradoxical nature
of life* (detail), 2018
Photo: Jesse Hunniford

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ARCANGELO SASSOLINO
violenza casuale, 2008–25
Photo: Jesse Hunniford

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ARCANGELO SASSOLINO
*no memory without
loss* (details), 2025

Courtesy the artist and
Museum of Old and New Art,
Nipaluna/Hobart

How much does the form influence the concept? Because clearly, you have this idea – did you think to yourself, “I want to work with molten metal”, or did you consider making something about this intangible passing of energy? I’m interested in how you arrive at something so beautifully complex, but make it look so simple.

It’s not a rational decision that happens in the mind. I have an idea come to mind. I feel like I am a witness to my mind. There is no specific reason why, at a certain moment, I decide to use melted steel or work with oil. I guess that the mind is trained to observe the world in a certain way, and I think that there comes an awareness. I feel like a sponge. I go through life, and I see things; I’m very curious about them.

Are you a big reader?

Yes, I read a lot of newspapers, and I read books to inform myself of what is going on in the world. I try to grab the context of our life. I try to understand who I am as an individual in this society at this particular moment in life. So, I think all of this, plus my curiosity about materials, sparks an idea in my mind. I’m not sure how to explain it, but suddenly, there’s an idea in my mind. Of course, after that, you start thinking about evolving it, you become rational about it but, at the beginning, everything happens like a sparkle, very quickly, like intuition.



I don’t know exactly when I decided to have melted steel coming down from the ceiling, but now it seems like it has been there forever! But one second before, it was not there.

There is a thread that runs through the exhibition at Mona, concepts of time, entropy, and other profound ideas. But each time you’ve realized it in a very different way. Did you study physics or mechanics? Is this something that you just naturally have taught yourself, or read about?

I realised that I think in 3 dimensions; everything I see, I turn around as if it were one of those 3D computer modelling programs. At some point, while I was completely lost in life, I enrolled in a mechanical engineering program in Italy. However, life took a different turn, and I was fortunate enough to skip university. I ended up doing something in the United States, and that opened up a new possibility for me. And, while I was in New York, I discovered art. But before that, since I was a child, I have had the pleasure of working with my hands, putting things together, something that has always been in me. I work with many different engineers, including mechanical, structural, chemical and electronic engineers, and I understand them easily. It comes easily to me. I feel like I have an empathy for materials.

You’ve mentioned your interest in the work of Caravaggio. With *in the end, the beginning*, you’ve somehow transformed painting into something 3-dimensional. I found it interesting that, after Pope Francis died, they mentioned his favourite painting was Caravaggio’s *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1600). I thought that, for many people, the first time they heard of Caravaggio might have been when they read that the Pope liked this particular painting. And of course, there are those of us who think about these things quite a lot. I found it interesting to consider what he appreciated in that painting, going back to look at it, and wondering what it was he liked. But what does Caravaggio mean to you?

When you try to approach an artist as extreme as Caravaggio, it is very easy to become rhetorical. So, when I was given the opportunity to create the Malta Pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 2022 and, faced with him, I thought I needed to do something radical to make sense of trying to have a conversation with him. And I thought that the light, or actually the energy created by the melting steel that becomes light – because what we see is a ‘dripping’ of light – could be a new approach. Caravaggio is recognised as the genius of light. I wanted to create a ‘new’ light in some way. That was the first approach.

The other thing, and I don’t want to sound arrogant, but there are some artists throughout history whose work, especially when viewed in many pieces and studied, is as though you have entered their psyche.



I keep thinking about how the work is like a sculpture in the process of becoming; it never really finishes. It keeps evolving, which is beautiful. That ongoing change, a constant state of flux. That is the idea. And it is not like showing a kinetic sculpture, where you see the machine, as it has been done magnificently by Jean Tinguely (1925-1991), for example, where he showed the movement of the machine. The machine gives me the opportunity to show the flow of material, which is what I’m interested in.

You definitely are not choosing easy things to do. I think there’s a degree of difficulty that it’s quite clear you enjoy. I do! You cannot escape who you are! And I know that sometimes I complicate my life. Sometimes you need people like David Walsh, who are very radical, in order to show the work. I believe that making art is closely tied to that idea of difficulty. You cannot take a shortcut.

Your works also touch on ideas about failure and risk, and naturally I’m curious to know – does the work ever fail? For example, with *the paradoxical nature of life*, does the stone ever fall through the glass, or are you more interested in creating the illusion or suggestion that might happen? Or does it fail, and would that be okay? Would that be the ultimate outcome? Ultimately, it is destined to fail. Definitely. Of course, we do many tests in our studio

before saying, okay, this is going to be displayed, and it’s not my intention that the stone will collapse during the show but, if the show lasts 50 years, 100 years, maybe 150 years, it will probably happen. So there is the possibility. Even if you turn off the lights of the museum, and the museum is empty, the glass is always trying to hold that stone. Therefore, the possibility of failure is indeed a reality. We have a margin when we make it, knowing that we can load a little bit more onto the glass before it explodes, but the conflict is still there. We are presenting a work like that at Art Basel now for Art Unlimited, slightly larger than the one we have at Mona. And I was surprised by how many people see it as a metaphor for their life, for society, for what is going in the world. I would say they have empathy with the poor piece of glass.

When I was standing in Mona, I felt like if I was to breathe too much it might go. And that is a really wonderful thing because it’s an unknown, and you don’t get that a lot in art, that kind of unknown. Like, how might this story end? It could end quite badly, but that might be the perfect ending for this story.

Well, I like that a piece, before becoming a metaphor or triggering the imagination of the viewer, became an allegory for something. Before that, I like that the piece in itself is *already* the subject. I like that it is somehow in the moment that we start



to show it, in the moment that we load the stone onto the glass, it's as though a countdown starts clicking. The piece is activated, and then the future is open to any possibility.

Until that point, there are two elements, and then they come together, creating tension between the beautiful and the hard and the soft. It's like how you learn as a child about opposites. We learn about breakable things and hard things. You pick up on these opposites and how we interact with them. You mentioned people's responses to the work. I'm keen to know if you see yourself as a political artist or if that's something you're even interested in. Are you drawn to those sorts of allegories, or is it more cerebral for you? Something more philosophical than a direct comment or commentary? This is really a beautiful question. I think that if you decide to be an artist, somehow it is already a political act, from the beginning, because it is a way to approach life and society. It is a political act to be an artist. Saying that, there are for sure artists who are very direct in what they do. They choose, I would say, images and subjects that are very connected to our moment in time. They translate that into images or installations. In my case, it doesn't work like that. My approach to work starts from my intimate way of seeing the world, seeing life, and I work for myself.

So, you're not thinking about an audience? Is that what you mean when you say you work for yourself, you're thinking about the thing?

For me, making art is a way of reconciliation, creating peace between the awareness of living and the rest of reality, by combining those elements together. But as I always say, I think the mind of an artist is like a filter. Since we live in society and the contingency of what's happened out there is attached to our minds, even unconsciously, we transform that into something that has to do with our world. And in answer to this question, yes, I'm not directly political. I realise that much of my work is interpreted as political; this idea of fragility, the possibility of failure, this fact that everything is extremely complex, confusing, like that oil that keeps dripping and dripping ...

I think you understand scale in such a beautiful way. Some works are very large and others are smaller, like the tyres.

How much do you think about scale and how important is it to you in what you're creating? How do you perceive scale, the size of an object, and whether it should be scaled up, scaled down, or whatever else. Also, what might you be working on next?

Well, there are some works that cannot escape from their own size. They're conceived, they're made and, if you try to enlarge them, they don't work. There are other works that actually can shrink or

be larger. For example, *no memory without loss* at Mona, the discs slowly rotating on the wall, trickling industrial oil, have a diameter of 3 metres. For the Islamic Arts Biennale in Jeddah (January 25 to May 26, 2025), we made *memory of becoming*, which is 8 metres in diameter. When I saw the space in Saudi Arabia, I understood that it could work well. I mean that the architecture, the building, and the room have a lot to do with the scale of the installation. It is dependent. I would say each work has its own history, and there is also work that I made that I call more domestic. They're quite small.

What was it like to work with the team from Mona to realise that? Was that an interesting experience for you?

We've been working with them back and forth for a year and a half, mostly over Zoom. I saw many pictures of the place on Google. However, once I arrived, I realised that the place was extraordinary. The team was the most professional you could ever meet. It was amazing. It was a lesson. I kept telling my team during the weeks I was there that we should bring staff from Italian museums to see and learn what a new kind of museum could be – because behind it are extremely skilled and professional people. And again, like I said at the start, about Basel, Tasmania, and Italy, up until three years ago, Tasmania was just a word on a map, a shape for me. Now I feel like I have a new group of

friends there. My team is in touch with the Mona team. One Sunday morning, they organised a soccer match. It's a beautiful life – you meet people and keep discovering how little we know about the world.

We have several things coming up, but all I am trying to do is keep a block of time for myself inside the studio and finally work and experiment on a new thing that I have in mind. That is what I'm looking forward to.

We are talking about sculpture, but do you think about it as performance? Are you interested in your work as performance? Is that how you think of them sometimes?

Well, a friend of mine once described my work as inorganic performance. In a way, that's what I do – my performances are inorganic. But I always see myself as a sculptor. For me, this is a way to expand the possibilities of sculpture. Utilising physics and natural phenomena, such as speed, pressure, heat and gravity on materials opens new avenues for the medium. That's how I perceive myself, and perhaps it's because I feel a strong connection with the Italian tradition. I can see myself within that context without delving too far into the past. If I think about the early part of the century, Futurism, then Arte Povera, and Art Informel – I feel I come from all those traditions. I aim to take that approach to material and image and push it further. For me, pushing forward means incorporating the physical properties of the material. We're living in an era when science and medicine delve into the realm of DNA and atoms. It's a way to uncover the truth about how materials are made and, in a way, I try to adopt a similar approach to how I use materials.

It's so interesting that you say that about the Italian tradition because I wasn't thinking about it like that. But it makes complete sense. I can see how you fit into that trajectory, which is fascinating.

It's such an absolute delight to meet you online, and thank you so much.

I know I'll be going back to Mona to see the work again and thank you for bringing it to Australia. It's very, very special. We hope you come back.

Can I say something? I really think that, because your questions were so beautiful, that we could have talked the entire day.

We could have. I'm so grateful. Thank you. V

in the end, the beginning is at the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), Nipaluna/Hobart until April 6, 2026

Present tense is at Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy until September 7, 2025

Arcangelo Sassolino is represented by Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy
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arcangelosassolino.it
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