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We don't throw anything away

Naima Morelli reviews Piero Golia's exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, Rome.



While the paper invitations at Gagosian are getting thicker and thicker, the art is getting flimsier and flimsier by the day. It's way too easy to poke fun at contemporary art these days. Artists know it, so they make sure to be ahead of the game by striking an ironic pose. Irony makes you Iron Man. You are invincible, impregnable, because you're not serious. You're making fun of the establishment so well the establishment can't help accepting it. The real fools are the gallerists and the collectors, not the artists themselves, not them. The winner is not even the wittiest humorist. It's the quickest.

Piero Golia is no rookie. The Naples-born, Los Angeles-based artist has built a career out of subverting contemporary art conventions. The very few conventions left in contemporary art. Even so, he doesn't consider himself an ironist. He swears his art is damn serious, but you suspect his statements are part of the game. After all he was the one who in 2006 vanished from New York, leaving no trace of his plans or whereabouts. He then resurfaced weeks later at the Royal Academy of Arts in Copenhagen to give a lecture on his own disappearance.

And here I am, standing in the large oval room of Gagosian Rome - eavesdropping on the bullshit the *gallerina* is telling two collectors. Apparently Golia's 'Intermission Paintings' are a by-product of a sculptural performance trilogy, called 'Comedy of Craft'. For the first act of this performance series Golia made an exact-scale replica of George Washington's nose from Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. He carved the nose in foam block - polyurethane foam being such a fashionable material in contemporary art nowadays. In the second act students from New Orleans created a plaster mould from the foam replica. In the third act a bronze cast will be made from the plaster mould. "We can only speculate on the link to Gogol's famous story 'The Nose', a satirical look at the castration complex..." the *gallerina* says emphatically. I roll my eyes.

Name-dropping Gogol aside, this is what the most high-end art gallery in all of Rome has to offer us: offcuts. Very expensive offcuts. Golia took them from the initial phase of the Washington nose, embedded them in a layer of polymer and painted them with iridescent nano-pigments. "The same pigment used in security ink for marking bank notes", specifies the *gallerina* in an allusive voice, as if it's up to us to find the mysterious connection between money and the work on show. If anything, the problem is that the connection is way too clear.

Then there is the recession, which we might forget about entirely on entering that glamorous contemporary art temple which is Gagolian Rome, tucked in the posh Barberini area. These guys might not be suffering the recession in the same way as others. But they know damn well there are some individuals who would sell their grandmothers to get their hands on a handkerchief covered in Kurt Cobain's snot.

Now Piero Golia is well past the 27 mark, and the contemporary art world certainly isn't as popular as the music industry. But the rule "don't throw away anything", which we learned from our grandmothers force-feeding us pasta with ham and béchamel, is true now more than ever. And this is clear not only from the works in the oval room, but also from a tiny model called 'Comedy of Craft', exhibited at the entrance. This small model shows the curatorial setup of the exhibition at Gagolian. It is a cute little model, so why keep it for yourself when you can sell that too?

The thing is that in contemporary art you can justify pretty much everything. I'm sure that if I were to go to Piero Golia's studio, he would tell me this series of work is about revealing the process behind the craft, tackling the essence of an exhibition setup, or something along these lines. In an interview he once said the work should include as little information as possible. "I think it works only if the viewer has space to expand what is significant. I think art should be evocative and not descriptive."

In that he succeeds. His 'Intermission Paintings' are irregular slabs of polyurethane foam, which from a distance look like glittering stones. These slabs are iridescent and they change colours according to your position and the light. They do evoke. For example, they reminded me of a souvenir I bought in the Republic of San Marino when I went there on a school trip. The souvenir was made of a peculiar sugary-looking stone that would change colour with the heat. Golia's works ooze the same attraction a kid might feel for a Sailor Moon sceptre.

Then as always happens, different viewers will see different things according to their experiences. The rippled surface of the slabs might remind an adventurer of the desert. It might remind the sailor of gentle waves, the lover of rumpled sheets, the geologist of rare fossils. A baker will see moulds for biscuits; a fashion designer will see elegant fabrics. To a make-up artist, they will be big blocks of eye shadow; to an old lady, a gigantography of the saggy skin on her thighs. But Piero Golia is from Naples, and we all know what it is that his mother will see: "Good boy, he hasn't thrown away anything!"

Intermission Paintings runs until July 30 at the Gagolian, Rome.
www.gagolian.com