

Sunday, April 3, 2016, 00:01

A door into our liquid modernity

Naima Morelli immerses herself into an exhibition in Rome by Faig Ahmed, one of Azerbaijan's contemporary artists.



Change is the only permanence and uncertainty the only certainty. Our modernity is liquid, namely deprived of any point of reference, whether religion, ideology, nations or the community. This idea – first formulated by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman – re-emerged in my mind while visiting Faig Ahmed's show *Point of Perception*, curated by Claudio Libero Pisano at museum Macro in Rome.

I have to be honest, when I first saw Ahmed's work in a magazine, I thought it was quite gimmicky. I mean, melting carpets? Very cool for a Juxtapose cover or for the stand of an art fair, but not really suitable for a museum show. It took only one work – an outstanding wave/skate-ramp/installation made of prayer carpets – to instantly change my mind.

Ahmed creates sculptures distorting the traditional patterns of Azerbaijani rugs. Regular carpet colours disintegrate, liquefy, or turn fluorescent, like icons of a drugged modernity. The once ordered, traditional society has melted. To go with Bauman's definition, if a 100 years ago to be modern meant to chase the final state of perfection, now it means an infinity of improvement, with no final state in sight and none desired.

Of course, you can also look at *Point of Perception* simply from a formal standpoint. The unexpected rearticulations of traditional carpet designs can be seen like exercises of style, conducted by a Photoshop-savvy artist. If you stop at a superficial level though, you will miss the best part.

As poet William Blake put it: "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite." When I was seventeen I made a poster out of this quote in a psychedelic Fillmore East-like font, and stuck it to the door of my room (where else?)

I look at Faig Ahmed's show as more than a single point of perception, as the title suggests. It is rather as a cleanser for our senses – namely our doors of perception. Art can shed light on the true nature of modernity as well as on the contradictions of one's own country.





Ahmed is part of the new wave of Azerbaijan contemporary artists, reconfiguring craft and exploring the meaning of traditions in our hyper-technological world. Of course, knowing that the artist is from Azerbaijan makes everything more interesting.

While just a few years ago most people were unable to point Azerbaijan on a map, today the country is making every effort to be noticed. For the 2013 Venice Biennale, Azerbaijan's government rented an entire building Palazzo Lezze, Campo San Stefano for its national pavilion. It was the first time for the country to participate to the Biennale, and it did so focusing on the theme of 'Ornamentation'.

'Ornamentation' was a good pavilion, with evocative and well-presented work. The show was commissioned by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, who also commissioned the last Azerbaijan Pavilion for the 2015 Venice Biennale.

In 2015 Azerbaijan not only kept its pavilion at Palazzo Lezze, but also rented another majestic building in the centre of Venice, housing the exhibition Vita Vitale, focused on environmental conservation and Azerbaijan culture.



Both shows were supported by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, whose vice-president happens to be Leyla Aliyeva, the daughter of Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev. Once you start reading about Azerbaijan, you realize the Aliyev family owns almost the whole country. They are also putting a huge amount of money in the promotion of contemporary art as a vehicle for conveying their national image to the world.

As a general rule, investing in art is an excellent thing. It would definitely be, if only Azerbaijan wouldn't be one of the most censored countries in the world (according to a 2015 list of 10 Most Censored Countries), dwarfing Iran and China. When you

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seek the spotlight, be prepared to also have your shady corners revealed.

As Azerbaijan national pavilions and Faig Ahmed's show proved, the contrast between modernity and tradition is always a safe way to go for artists who can't talk politics. To be fair, perhaps Faig Ahmed is not interested in talking politics at all. It might simply not be his poetic, and it definitely wasn't the curator's aim.

Just because an artist is from a country with a repressive government, this doesn't mean he must talk about politics. I saw too many Iranian or Tunisian artists saying enough. We want to simply express ourselves, and to hell with the political pigeonholing! It's an artist's right to do so and not to hold up to our expectations. At the same time, promoting art while hiding the politics is precisely the magic trick Azerbaijan is trying to perform. I feel you can't really walk in an exhibition of an Azerbaijani artist living and working in Baku, pretending the current political state of the country won't have any effect on the state of contemporary art – for better or worse.

This ex-USSR country is worth keeping an eye on for its evident contradictions. Azerbaijan has good artists that can help us read the issues embedded in this complex time we are living. It's not only about questioning the role of traditional culture. It is also about asking if contemporary art will still be able to thrive, when it's pulled between lavish government support and the lack of freedom of expression.

In trying to ask this question, we must remember that art has never been completely subservient to power. At the same time, it has never been completely disjointed by it. In its lack of overt political content, Points of Perception can still be a cleaner to our doors of perception to get insights into our ever-changing, uncertain, liquid modernity.



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