

MAURO PERUCCHETTI: POP'S GILDED AGE

By Peter Frank

Clever as it is, the moniker given Mauro Perucchetti's "figurative" sculpture, "Hip Pop," does not rest lightly with the artwork attributed to it. It ties Perucchetti's objects and object-filled structures participate not only in the vast sea of contemporary consumer culture but in the late- and post-modernist critique of that culture. "Hip Pop" bespeaks Perucchetti's link less to Michael Jackson than to John Lennon, less to James Franco than to Dennis Hopper, less to Damien Hirst (though Hirst's arch spirit skims across the glistening surfaces of Perucchetti's work) than to Andy Warhol. At a time when too many artists working in Pop art and Pop entertainment use their work to declare, "Look at me!", Perucchetti takes inspiration from those Pop artists who have urged us to "Look at this!"

The revival of Pop art practice in which Perucchetti participates, a revival taking many forms and taking place around the world over the last two decades, not only pays homage to one of the 20th century's most enduring sensibilities, but recognizes that its concerns are aesthetically, politically, and even morally vital and enduring. Pop has encouraged artists to think symbolically and reflectively about the society around them, and to participate in it by giving back to it critically. The Pop voice, as its name implies, speaks beyond the rarefied confines of a self-defined "art world" (although it often speaks to and about that same art world) and welcomes the attention of a less specialized, less sophisticated audience. But the best Pop, post-Pop, and neo-Pop artists recognize the native intelligence of such an audience, and, while they may seek to provoke and confront, they do so urgently rather than arrogantly. The new Pop – again, at its best, at its most substantive – is as much Popaganda (to use Ron English's portmanteau) as it is Popularism (to coin another), presenting not just a reflection but an evaluation of contemporary life – an evaluation that, understandably, does not tend to the sanguine.

Indeed, in the hands of an artist like Perucchetti, the neo-Pop evaluation becomes not snarky or brittle, but intense and even furious. An oeuvre like his that jumps effortlessly between jelly babies and hand grenades, monuments and machine guns, religious icons and drug paraphernalia, even making formal connection between such disparate phenomena, certainly casts a wide view of modern life, a view that seems at first disparaging but quickly reveals itself as despairing. Perucchetti regards our world with humor, to be sure; but, for all the candy and candy color, his humor is dark.

Quite deliberately, Perucchetti displays little emotion in his formal structures or materials. His wit relies on a deadpan delivery. His objects assume the same allure, the same inert pose, as that high-end consumer goods themselves do; hence, his consistent, if not quite continuous, reliance on molded, injected resin, as self-effacing and yet piss-elegant a substance as pervades our commercial environment. But embedded in these deceptively passive concatenations are readily recognized signals, objects that embody or symbolize flash points in contemporary civilization, and that in repetition, scalar distortion, or other forms of transformation inculcate the viewer and the viewer's society in ignorant, corrupt attitudes and delusional, self-destructive behavior.

Perucchetti's juxtapositions of objects articulate a social commentary as pointed and plangent as those exercised by assemblage artists – Nouveau Réalistes in France and Italy, for instance, or proto-Pop artists in London, New York, and California – a half century earlier. But while the recycling of detritus into commentary by the likes of Arman or Kienholz spoke to a postwar world awakening in a pile of rubble from an existential nightmare, our more gilded age demands a cooler approach. Understandably, Perucchetti feels compelled to fabricate all his disparate objects out of the same very few, very recognizable, very artificial and very readily recognized substances, dense, glistening, and perfect. But different substances infer different things. When he works in bronze, he does so with an even greater layer of irony than when he works in resin; bronze, after all, imparts an ancient durability, a connection with a line of history going back millennia, which resin, if anything, argues against. But by passing the same caustic judgment on contemporary foibles in bronze that he inveighs in his more “modern” materials, Perucchetti manifests a further level of critique, one that diminishes today's preoccupations as insignificant in the eye of time but also casts them as the rueful behavior of humankind from time immemorial.

The works produced and gathered under the “Hip Pop” rubric clarify the attention the artist pays to things and their contemporary inferences. But they betray as well Perucchetti's love of surface, color, weight and sensuality for their own sake. Commentators have often cited the playfulness of his work; but those who do not simply fixate on his use of candy figurines or comic strip characters as tropes note his willingness to be excessive in his sensuality and odd, perhaps even silly, in his scalar distortions. Neither of these gambits, of course, is original with, much less unique to, Perucchetti; they are contextualizing methods inherited from original Pop art. From time to time he pays evident homage to Oldenburg or Manzoni or Hamilton; he is nothing if not a neo-Pop artist, and works very consciously in a formal language that practically demands he honors his forebears. But, no less an artist than they are and were, he is motivated on an aesthetic level not just by imagery but by material, and is devoted to conflating imagery and material equally into artistically as well as narratively persuasive objects. Perucchetti indulges his taste for the shiny, the hefty, and the transparent even more directly in other series (notably the Abstracts), but produces his Hip Pop pieces with no less elegance and no less sense of sensual perfection – or, if you would, perfect sensuousness. He is, after all, appealing to our taste for such material-driven transcendence. Such transport, however, comes with a dose of harsh reality. Perucchetti's present aesthetic was forged in the last decade's money-driven social orgy, and in the wake of that wave's recession his art has taken on added vigor – and vinegar.

Mauro Perucchetti's Hip Pop objects cannot be reduced to playtoys or souvenirs, political cartoons or high-end consumer merchandise. They may mimic and even encompass such things, but they cannot become them. Their uneasy formulations and dissonant material and scalar relationships quickly reveal them as ironic dissemblances, not quirky counterfeits. Odd and disquieting, as much surreal as Pop, Perucchetti's sculptures distort the meaning of the things they reflect – the better to prompt us, too, to reflect on those things, and the present-day circumstances they embody. These are beautiful objects, but they are not kind to their subjects. They do, however, speak eloquently to their beholders.

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