

MAURO PERUCCHETTI: NEO-POVERA

By Peter Frank

Arte Povera, the first artistic tendency to emerge wholly from Italy after World War II, constituted a powerful statement about rebirth, rebuilding, making solid what had been myth, making concrete what had been metaphor, and making reality out of what had been poetry. Exploiting base materials once foreign to the atelier, the artists of Arte Povera responded to art informel, nouveau réalisme, Pop Art, and kineticism with an art more lyrical and yet more abject than the aggressive late modernism of these imported styles could permit. Arte Povera helped lead the international avant garde out of Minimalism, but it remained a quintessentially Italian expression – which is why it helped bring Italy back toward the center of contemporary art a half century ago, and why it inspires Italian artists even today.

Working at some distance from his native land, Mauro Perucchetti has still allowed himself, mid-career, to fall under the spell of Arte Povera. Perhaps it is his very removal from Italy, from the soil that generated the gritty but dreamlike inventions of the Arte Povera artists, that has inspired Perucchetti to re-examine what was considered vanguard practice when he was a boy. In his current series he pays an apologetic homage to the spirit of the Povera movement, its reliance on attenuated symbolism and on materials found in mundane contexts – the streets, cheap shops, supermarkets, recycling bins, etc.

In Arte Povera's heyday, of course, there were no recycling bins. The ethos of that era, if anything, believed that discarded newspapers and meals could perhaps be recycled as art (a nouveau réaliste gambit), but not as more meals (for, say, farm animals) and newspapers. Implied in Arte Povera's praxis was a nascent awareness of ecological imbalance. The scarcities of the War still haunted the generation of the 1960s, to be sure, but in the midst of the economic boom there was a growing sense that the human race could be deprived once again of life's staples – simply because we were and are exhausting them, using them up without replenishment.

The mid-century critique of consumerism, passed by the nouveaux realists and Pop artists to their Arte Povera inheritors, did inflect Povera's understanding of the world as alchemical discourse. The movement's philosopher's stone, you could say, was environmental stability, inside as well as outside homo poeticus. Fifty years later, in an urgent era not of Earth Day celebrations but of melting ice caps, Perucchetti returns to the environmental theme, quite firmly and quite overtly. His art is already known for its fretful skepticism about our ability to replenish our garden and our troposphere (not to mention our intellects). It is a skepticism Perucchetti has here to fore conveyed with a cool, nasty brittleness manifested in mementos mori that taunt us with their glister, consumer bombs that scorch our spirit with their elegant disdain and bloodless despair. Here, however, warmed by the delicate romantic strain running through the original Arte Povera, Perucchetti's objects valorize the remains of the day with a charming and lustful, if still comparatively restrained, visual appetite, an appetite that translates from, but never quite leaves, the gustatory.

Following Arte Povera's lead by giving body to the metaphorical, Perucchetti presents us with the things we consume – literally, as with his spaghetti tableaux, and inferentially, as with the relief she composes from plastic packaging – and would have us re-consume them, the second time as art. Indeed, he proposes that we regard anything, from a gaudy piece of furniture to a planet, as artwork. But he also proposes that the re-purposing of the universe not stop at making Duchampian Readymade designations. The packaging reliefs suggest arid architectural elevations, perhaps the first crude buildings of an off-planet colony or even of a non-planet settlement in a once-uninhabitable zone. He has turned plastic flowers into crumbling walls, bemoaning the destruction of human habitat through war and negligence – or, to read it a very different way, softening the sense of barrier so strongly conjured by the

current xenophobic climate, but hardening the living organism. Elsewhere, faux poppies present themselves as ominous bonbons and a cube of nails begins to disintegrate – oblique but unmistakable references to the scourge of narcotics and to the strains in Islam that would erode the religion (embodied in the cubiform Kaaba) and turn its tenets into weapons.

At least for the moment, Mauro Perucchetti has put aside the frightening cheeriness and extravagant production values of his previous work in favor of a more nuanced and tender critique. The memory of Arte Povera's salad days has clearly whetted his appetite for homemade pasta. (Clearly he did not cook it al dente. But, curiously, he did seem to make it so that it looks like – well, like Italian late modernism, Fontana's pierced surfaces, Manzoni's achromes, Alviani's patterns, etc.) But every bite, every disentanglement of that hearty fare, slathered as it is in lush monochromes in place of marinara, is a multi-pronged comment on consumption. As Perucchetti warns we take it in today, we take more in tomorrow, and pretty soon we are running out not just of pasta, but of art...and worse.

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