

Mauro Perucchetti **CLONING AND RELIGION 2004**

This is Perucchetti's first, one-man show. He has exhibited at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition and the Islington Art Fair where his work attracted a lot of attention and was bought by international collectors. He comes to his art from long experience of design and architecture. Having made things all his life, he is truly a master-maker; fascinated with the way things are constructed. His experiments with resins put him at the cutting edge of contemporary art and he is one of very few artists confronting some of the most fundamental issues of our day. Issues of cloning, religion and violence – subjects which the church and governments perennially find uncomfortable.

Perucchetti's use of quotidian objects refers back to the artists of the 60s. To Warhol's Brillo Boxes and Jasper Johns Targets and Beer Cans. His work shifts away from the commercialism of Pop Art, employing a process that is more oblique; moving the object from a functional role into that of a work of art. In this way he also has links back to the commodity artists of the 80s such as Jeff Koons. At the same time the sparseness of form and the repetition of modular elements in his work seen especially in his abstract piece 'Nothing stands still', places him firmly in the tradition of minimalist sculpture with an emphasis on the symbolic value of objects.

His work also has parallels with the YBA's, Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas, in the way he uses common place objects to such dramatic effect. Lucas employs Pizza delivery flyers and cigarettes to transform objects. In 'Christ You know it ain't easy', Lucas perverts the traditional image of the crucified Christ by covering the body with cigarettes, much as Perucchetti transforms his images of the cross by embedding condoms within them or his skeletons in designer logos. Hirst's fascination with component parts, pills, butterfly wings and cigarettes, systemically arranged in neat patterns are echoed in Perucchetti's use of rows of jelly babies and brightly coloured M and M's. Perucchetti responds to the bright attractive side of Hirst's work, its formal rhythms and vibrant colours and, more obliquely, to its darker streak. As with both Hirst and Lucas, an ironic sense of humour runs through his work, but whilst his humour seems lighter it avoids their destructive, gritty, visceral element by deliberately maintaining impeccable aesthetics and a sense of clinical order that belies something colder and impenetrable.

The late 1960s saw artists rejecting the restrictions of canvas and conventional sculptural practices and have since come to work with a huge variety of media but Perucchetti's use of polyurethane resins is pioneering. It has taken him years of experimenting to get to the stage where he can make this volatile liquid stable enough to use on such a large scale. Resin has an innate instability and is even more difficult to control when foreign materials are embedded within it. Like prehistoric insects captured in the sticky ooze of the amber resin that killed them while preserving them, Perucchetti entraps his objects for all time.

His work is totally beguiling. It is high-tech, of our time, bright, clean, and utterly original. It uses beautiful colours and sensuous shapes and forms. Like jars of brightly coloured sweets in an old fashioned shop window, it seduces and calls us nearer. The pieces are intrinsically beautiful which makes their sting all the sharper. Dozens of brightly coloured jelly babies float, suspended in a clear resin cross, the work is so simple, yet it encapsulates, in a nutshell, one of the gravest intellectual crises confronting mankind; the seemingly irresolvable tension between traditional theology and science; the ultimate horror of human cloning.

His three giant jelly babies are heavyweights. What child has not delighted in these chubby little sweets, pausing only to debate whether to bite off the head or the feet first? Scaled to human dimensions, they hint at the unpredictable consequences of cloning, they become threatening and menacing. Seen from the side, these giant babies no longer have smiling faces, but now bear an uncanny resemblance to the sinister features of the great white shark. Another work, Jelly Baby Factory, has serried ranks of jelly babies lying supine on resin shelves mounted on a polyurethane base. Every so often, one of the babies stands up precariously on the edge of his shelf as if he is about to throw himself off, leaving the factory. We may have made him but we do not control him we have no idea what is in his head or what he will now do.

Perucchetti believes that a deep message can be presented in a light-hearted form. There is no place in his methodical, ordered, rational world for the blood, guts, dismembered animal parts or other shock tactics of the YBA's. Risky Business sets brightly coloured, differently packaged, condoms from all over the world into a transparent cross. It is as attractive as Damien Hirst's butterflies but expresses Perucchetti's horror at the abject poverty and misery of third world women worn out by child birth and/or HIV whilst often still in their teens. This feeling was corroborated for Perucchetti on seeing a documentary in which missionaries in third world countries were making public bonfires of the condoms earlier handed out by the Red Cross. He has anxieties about the way that religious teachings have been distorted by the manipulative and deceitful, inciting individuals to mindless and even violent behaviour. Notre Dame (in the exhibition but not illustrated) featured massed ranks of jelly babies in the pattern of the rose window of Notre Dame. These represent the people who follow any religion blindly; though unenlightened the light still gets through. Fanaticism and inauthenticity lie at the root of so much of the world's turmoil and conflict.

Like the alchemist he is, transforming the inanimate into the animate, Perucchetti can turn an image of evil and destruction into something alluring and seductive. Target is a transparent disc containing a spiral of spent bullets. It is a familiar image formerly appropriated by artists like Jasper Johns and Peter Blake. On the reverse the bullets are capped with brightly coloured sweets like M&Ms. If you look closely the bullets are different calibres, 38 specials, 9mm and 45s, which are used by the police and armed forces around the world. The cartridges are all spent - they have a history - for all we know

they may have killed or maimed, but yet our response is one of pleasure. We are beguiled by their shiny metal surfaces in contrast to the brilliant coloured sweets and the alluring pattern they form, seemingly afloat within their transparent resin medium.

If Perucchetti is concerned with the slavish following of religion he also addresses the issues of society's absurd preoccupation with branding and the commercial and political power of corporations. Two female skeletons recline in their high-tech Perspex chairs gossiping like a couple of 'it' girls. One is coated in tiny delicate crosses resembling a designer logo; the other has Louis Vuitton silicone breast implants. The macabre and horrific become appealing and beautiful. His unique skill is that he does not labour his point. An image of worldly vanity that will inevitably lead to decay and destruction - reminding us pointedly that just as we bring nothing into this world, so we take nothing away - becomes in his hands something light hearted, amusing and extraordinarily attractive.

Elsbeth Moncrieff, art critic, 2004