

MEETING MAURO PERUCCHETTI

By Richard Cork

Talking with great energy and an irrepressible sense of enthusiasm, Mauro Perucchetti behaves like a man liberated after decades of irksome confinement. Now, at the age of 60, he feels so relieved about his decision to become an artist just over a decade ago. 'Before then I was hiding somewhere, and then at last I came out of the woods', he tells me with a wry smile, revealing the sense of humour which plays such an enlivening and acerbic role in the work displayed around us. It is surely significant that Perucchetti's breakthrough coincided with the advent of a

new century. The imminent arrival of the millennium had a galvanising impact, making him realise that it was time to become an artist and focus, at last, on what really mattered. The excitement he felt can still be heard in his voice when recalling how 'in 1999 I was working in Munich and met a long-suffering artist — a lovely, clever soul — and we went out for dinner. I seized a café card and wrote: "Tonight I am starting my own art movement: Apocalyptic"'. As this witty title suggests, Perucchetti's idea for a new movement for the twenty-first century is underscored by an abiding awareness of Pop art. But his work cannot be described as backward-looking: on the contrary, it is informed by a wholly up-to-date awareness of life today. 'I'm a news junkie', he confesses, emphasizing just how intensely critical his vision of the contemporary world really is. The strong vein of satire coursing through Perucchetti's work is underpinned by his uncompromising determination to 'deal with all this death and war'. Hence the disturbing impact of the first images he produced as an artist: the jelly baby figures, which sprang from his awareness of the debate about the moral implications of cloning. That is why Perucchetti decided to 'use jelly babies as an impersonation of cloned mankind — all chubby, transparent, smiling and, at the same time, inscrutable'. The alarming resonance of these figures was intensified by his decision to use pigmented urethane resin. It proved a daunting technical challenge: 'I found that nobody could make with resin something as perfect as I wanted, especially in the size I wanted, so in the end I came up with a pioneering system myself'.

Although Perucchetti's latest work has moved on from jelly babies, he is still obsessed with the notion of cloning. In *The Garden of Eden*, urethane resin is used with Swarovski crystals to create 30 glistening images of an apple, each capped by a beckoning leaf. 'Temptation comes in many different colours', he says, before adding that 'there's a lot more choice in Eden nowadays'. On one level, Perucchetti explores a fantasy world dominated by the lure of bling. In *Sex and the City* 20 shoes with dramatically high heels and hearts at the back are ranged in rows, as if displayed on a fashionable shop wall. 'The shoe symbolizes superficiality, and also objects of torture', explains Perucchetti. 'When you see a woman at a party, you see the cool shoes. They're a boom-time status symbol, pursued by Cinderellas looking for a consumerist fantasy lifestyle.' Similarly the figures in Perucchetti's *The Bitch Club*, stand next to each other inside a glass box as if dressed up for a celebrity A-list

party. They look trapped, despite the gleaming splendour of their attire. And when I ask him about the underlying melancholy in his art, he explains: 'I care about the world — there's a serious message at the bottom of my multi-layered work'. With satirical relish Perucchetti shows me a cartoon from the Internet called *Disney's Desperate Housewives*. Here, Disney's cartoon heroines sip wine in a fairy-tale castle while complaining that 'my husband is an animal' and 'I just pretend I'm asleep'.

In Perucchetti's world danger festers everywhere: in *Love Serum*, where passion waits to be injected through a needle as it thrusts up aggressively from a black granite base, or in a seductive yet alarming work called *The Power of Love*. 'I made a piece called *Blast* where hand grenades have become all glossy and beautiful like perfume bottles', says Perucchetti, 'so I couldn't resist making them into hearts. They are copied completely from real hand grenades, with fuses and rods at the ready. There are 30 of them here, and a lot of love or damage. But you can't take them off or hurl them across the room. And I don't know anyone who's had his heart broken 30 times!'

The longer I scrutinise Perucchetti's new work, the more I realise that anything might be possible. *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder* is the challenging title of a sculpture where a bizarre encounter occurs. Two prehistoric creatures — one blue, the other red — gawp at each other in open-mouthed astonishment. 'I started off with fossils', says Perucchetti. 'These two are in love. The blue one is the bloke with horns and an apparently thicker armour, the red one is the girl. She's more delicate and feminine, with feathers flying out behind her. But she also has a horn because she's a dinosaur.'

Walking round this extraordinary piece, I become increasingly aware of the role played by light in Perucchetti's art. He tells me that 'it takes ages to rub, grind and polish when you get it out of the mould. But then the light plays with it, and staring at my work is like looking at an abstract painting. As the sun moves around during the day, the resin acts like a sundial. It changes a lot, provided you keep the work's surfaces very pure and geometric'.

Although he never went to art school, Perucchetti admits that 'there were a few artists in my family tree and I made all kinds of things while growing up in Milan. Not long ago I discovered, in my father's home, a little skull which I had made with transparent resin when young. But I was not a very happy chap. I felt frustrated and desperate to escape. Then, at the age of 18, I had a terrible car crash in the fog and spent many months in a wheelchair. Even when I moved to Rome and got involved with modelling, acting and the movie business, it was a crazy scene and I was still terribly unhappy'.

Before settling in London, Perucchetti also spent time in New York in the early 1970s. So, when Barack Obama entered the White House decades later, he knew how significant this was. 'Some people were saying: "how can we have a black President?" And some were saying: "about time!" The poor guy inherited such a screwed-up situation. He tried to make everyone happy.' In *Feeding the 5000*, Perucchetti has turned Obama into a sweet dispenser, dominated by an engaging face and the ubiquitous grin which helped him gain electoral success.

Obama's very personal blend of ingredients may have helped him to win the presidential race, and he must have been acutely conscious of the news media's power in shaping such an outcome. So too was Perucchetti; hence the ominous, baleful force of his *Press Cuts*, where five swords hang on an acrylic panel and sparkle in the light. These chrome steel weapons look expectant, as if waiting for fighters to seize them and deliver fatal blows. Words are printed with silkscreen on their blades, conveying Perucchetti's belief that 'the press is lethal in Britain. They are quite refined, and everything they do is so planned

and calculated. Even when they get sued for libel, they make a big story out of it'. Why did he decide to choose swords as the image of newspaper power, rather than selecting another kind of weapon? 'Because the press is double-edged: it can be good or it can destroy. So the people who are written about end up feeling like Damocles, with a sword forever hanging over their heads.'

Now that Britain is engaged in so much controversy over tabloid journalists' willingness to eavesdrop on our private phone lines, *Press Cuts* could hardly be more painfully topical. Yet newspapers are by no means the only force capable of invading our lives. Perucchetti has also made a work containing six naked women mounted on horses, and he gave it the provocative title *Trojan Virus*. Why? 'A couple of years ago they discovered in Whitehall that all their computers were being hacked into. It turned out to be clumsy attempts by the Chinese at low-level espionage. The British government treated it lightly, even though the problem of cyber-warfare is real. My response was to produce this small group of Chinese entrappers. Repetitive and toy-like, as in the terracotta army, these are girls working for the military forces and coming to steal our secrets. They have armed themselves with breast enlargements. And their animals are golden and hollow, like the Trojan Horse.'

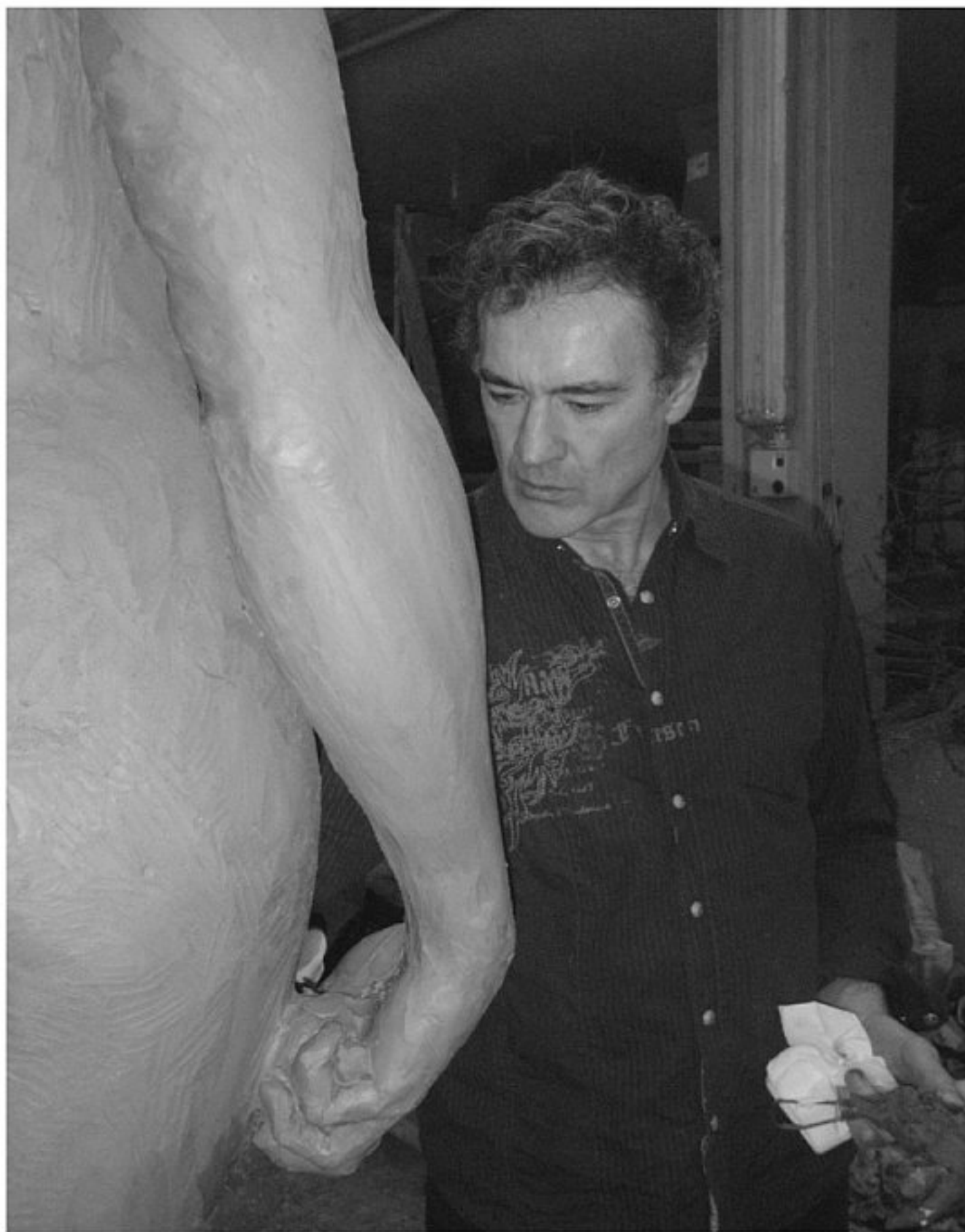
Wherever I look in Perucchetti's work, everything seems to be ensnared by the sinister, manipulative machinations of a world obsessed with greed. At first glance, the dog in *A Theory of Evolution* may appear harmless and sentimental. But Perucchetti has no time for the idea that the animal is innocent. 'He has just emerged from a hut covered in sparkly bling. He's trying to get street credibility by swathing this hut in trendy camouflage, and he looks expectant. His frisky tail and shiny body reveal just how much he wants to become a handbag accessory.'

Perucchetti does not allow anyone to indulge in revelry without delivering a warning. Like artists of the past who transformed their still-life paintings into *vanitas* meditations on mortality, he makes us aware of human transience. *Widely Abused* is the stern title of a work dominated by an hourglass and pillars of gold-leaf skulls. As our eyes travel down, it changes from Swarovski crystals representing 'diamonds and the preciousness of life' to black sand representing 'dust as they expire'. When I ask Perucchetti to summarise his intentions here, he declares that the work deals with 'the passing of our life on this planet as we know it. I had a very raw life and saw a lot of very raw things. But I'm not a head-butting artist, I'm more of an English gentleman. I don't want to do cheap shock in my art and make people go "urrgh!" I would love to shock people with my skills, and make them feel that they want to take my work away with them'.

Perhaps the most surprising new development, for an artist so closely associated with resin, is his decision to experiment with marble. Travelling to Pietrasanta, near the Carrara Mountains where Michelangelo obtained his carving materials, Perucchetti has produced several provocative pieces. In one large statue, *Michelangelo 2020*, he transforms Michelangelo's *David* into a woman. She looks stern, strong and manly, yet Perucchetti insists that 'this person is not a gay woman. She is basically a tribute to women:

having been oppressed for so long, they have come through. I could have chosen a movie star, but *David* is perfect. He is the underdog, and also the most recognisable sculpture of the Renaissance. At first, you look at my marble and think you see *David*. Then you realise it's a woman — she is athletic and beautiful. I'm using Bianco P marble: perfectly white, without any veins, and completely faultless. I wanted it to look totally contemporary'.

Working with an expert team of craftsmen at Pietrasanta was a revelatory experience for Perucchetti. 'The Bianco P marble comes from a place 1,300 metres above sea-level, so you need special passes and hard-hats to get up



there. When the guys cut a piece out of the mountain, I was blown away. They're amazing technicians, and they can do anything: one guy there is 92 and still chiselling. They were shocked to begin with when I showed them my model for the Michelangelo woman. But they love a challenge and doing things a bit different from the norm. I also think they respected my hands-on approach.'

As well as subverting the gender of Michelangelo's *David*, Perucchetti has turned his attention to other icons of masculinity. In one large marble, *Modern Heroes*, we can all recognise Batman and Superman. But no one expects to see them involved in an openly gay relationship. Reclining languorously on what Perucchetti describes as 'a chaise-longue', Batman 'looks like an old Roman'. Superman stands erect

and bares his chest to arouse Batman's erotic appetite. The latter stretches out an admiring hand to touch Superman, the gesture a reference to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, and the sculpture Perucchetti's celebration of changes in contemporary society.

In the most mysterious of these new monumental figure pieces, Perucchetti employs fibreglass and stainless steel rather than marble. Although it is life-size, *There is Something About Mary* ends up emphasizing the essential unknowability of the Virgin. Reinforced to take the formidable 70-kilo weight of the chain mail swathing her, from head to toes, Mary seems removed and isolated. 'She is pregnant, but the wonderful non-rust chain mail protects her vulnerability', Perucchetti explains. 'That's why the chain mail is such an essential part of the piece. She is mystical, she is Zen, and she is very self-contained. I also want to celebrate her as a transcendental figure and, at the same time, introduce something feminine into the mystique of Mary. We live in different times, so the idea of the Virgin who gave birth seems strange. That's why I wanted to make a modern image of this mystical figure, and try to put a bit of femininity back into her. But she is still inscrutable.'

There is Something About Mary is a wholly unexpected development in Perucchetti's work, and shows that his future as an artist cannot be predicted. After a decade of intense activity, his urge to experiment is stronger than ever. 'I turned the downstairs part of my London mews house into a workshop. My wife lives with me there, and she says: "When are we going to have a home?"' He shrugs and laughs. 'I love making things, and I am now in a very good place.'

Richard Cork is an award-winning art critic, historian, broadcaster and exhibition curator. After beginning his career as Art Critic of the *London Evening Standard* and Editor of *Studio International*, he became Art Critic of *The Listener*, Chief Art Critic of *The Times* and, more recently, Art Critic of *The New Statesman*. He now writes for *The Financial Times*, *The Independent on Sunday* and a wide range of international art magazines. A frequent contributor to BBC radio and television programmes, he has curated major exhibitions at Tate, the Hayward Gallery, the Royal Academy including *Wild Thing* in 2009, Barbican Art Gallery, the Serpentine Gallery and elsewhere in Europe. He has acted as a judge for many leading art prizes and commissions, among them the Turner Prize. His books include a ground-breaking study, *Vorticism*, awarded the John Llewelyn Rhys Prize in 1976; *Art Beyond the Gallery*, winner of the Banister Fletcher Award for the best art book in 1985; a major monograph on *David Bomberg* (1987); *A Bitter Truth: Avant-garde Art and the Great War*, winner of The Art Fund Award in 1995; *Jacob Epstein* (1999); and four acclaimed volumes of his critical writings on modern art, published by Yale in 2003. His last book, *Michael Craig-Martin*, was published by Thames & Hudson in 2006. His new book, a pioneering history of western art in hospitals, will be published by Yale in 2011.