

# MAURO PERUCCHETTI

By Sue Hubbard

The signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other.

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

**T**here is an irony at the heart of the Italian artist Mauro Perucchetti's work, for it is both a critique of the late consumerist society in which we live, yet part and parcel of it. This is not a dichotomy that he denies, but one which is central to the character of his work. Essentially a Pop artist he seduces the viewer with his playful, jewel-like substances, the sweetie colours of his market-inspired objects. Beautifully made, his work is opulent and kitsch yet, like the iron fist in the velvet glove, it delivers a far greater punch than the apparent froufrou character at first suggests.

Ambivalence is at the centre of his work. The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has argued that postmodernism is not something separate from modernism but is bound in a dialectical relationship to it. There is art, he suggests, which caters, on the one hand to a nostalgia for an unattainable wholeness and a sense of presence; and other art, which we call 'postmodern', in which the very impossibility of this attainment is what is served up to the viewer. Where modernism was dominated by production and industrial capitalism, postmodern culture is an era of 'simulations' expressed in new forms of technology and multi-faceted experience. Modernity was distinguished by its expansion, energy and forward movement, along with various idealistic projects that sought to represent and reinterpret ideas of the real, whilst postmodernity has been distinguished, as Jean Baudrillard writes, by 'implosion, de-differentiation, reproduction of models of the hyperreal and inertia'.

When Marcel Duchamp made his 'readymades', he paradoxically alerted the viewer to the challenges posed to art by the artefacts of industry and mass communication. The question became, not 'what is beautiful?' but 'what can art say?' The work of Mauro Perucchetti lies between these two poles. Conceptually and intellectually it belongs to the ideals of modernism, in that it is replete with moral and sociological questions born from the oppositional utopian values of the 1960s, particularly the Italian Arte Povera movement, whilst visually it drapes itself in the glitzy catwalk attire and consumerist spangles of the postmodern — colourful resin, gold and glitz — gaudy enough to bedeck any perfume counter or jewellery store. For Perucchetti there is no tension between his surfaces and content. As he insists, when we meet at the Halcyon Gallery, ideas alone are not enough. Concepts are what make a philosopher, not an artist. For him art has to be 'beautiful', to have a strong element of craft, as well as being meaningful.

Resin is his chosen medium and one that he has, through painstaking experimentation, made his own. It was a material he first used as a young man at the age of 17, long before his decision to become a professional artist and after a successful career as a designer and architect. Then, later, when searching for a material with which to make his *Jelly Babies* — brightly coloured, bulbous little human forms without faces, in which he highlighted the issues of cloning — he alighted upon it again. At the time he was told it would be an impossible substance to work with on any scale. But like an alchemist he beavered away, refining its clarity, removing bubbles and fissures, to produce a glowing transparent resin as clear as Venetian glass.



His influences are eclectic. There are numerous playful references to other artists including Jeff Koons and Andy Warhol, but perhaps the most obvious is his ironic take on Piero Manzoni's famous tins of *Artist's Shit*. Piero Manzoni was an Italian artist best known for his ironic Conceptual art, influenced by a group of Italian artists brought together by the critic Germano Celant in the first Arte Povera exhibition held in Genoa in 1967. Manzoni's series of artworks called into question the nature of the art object, eschewing traditional art materials, instead using everything from rabbit fur to human excrement in order to 'tap mythological sources and to realize authentic and universal values'. In May 1961 he created 90 small cans, sealed with labels that said *Artist's Shit* [*Merda d'Artista*]. Each 30-gramme can was priced by weight based on the current value of gold. The content of the cans has remained a much disputed enigma; for to open them would be to destroy their value as artworks, surely an irony Manzoni intended. A critic of the mass production and consumerism that was changing Italian society, Manzoni seemed to be suggesting that like King Midas, the clever contemporary artist could turn even his own excrement into gold. In his version, *Art Market*, Perucchetti has created yet another layer of irony. Recalling Andy Warhol's series of tomato soup cans, and Damien Hirst's medicine cabinet *Pharmacy* (1992), he has made replicas of Manzoni's tins, covered in 24-carat gold plate. (The tins are made from brass; the original supermarket ones exploded in the process of gold-plating.) Copying Tesco's tuna can labels he has printed them, instead, with sharks. The reference is, of course, to Hirst's ubiquitous image. Perucchetti deliberately highlights the blurred boundaries between Manzoni's original protest and the appropriation by the art market of any such oppositional objects, which turns them very quickly into sought-after commodities. Artefacts of protest quickly become objects of desire and commercial exchange.

Surface and meaning are the binaries that give muscle to Perucchetti's work, though meaning is often deliberately veiled. He is not keen on artists who shock as a form of protest. He would rather seduce his viewer with the visual glitter of his work, letting them imbibe his message in their own time. (He accepts that some viewers will never get past the seduction.) One such piece is *There is Something About Mary*. Here the most famous woman in history, the Madonna, is presented in a costume of chain mail. Part Lady Gaga outfit, part burka, the image mirrors the complex roles of women that lurch between Madonna and whore and still prevail in a supposedly post-feminist society. Faceless and ghostlike she becomes everywoman: a projection of male, female and consumerist fantasy alike, a blank canvas onto which we can write our dreams. In *The Bitch Club* a row of Barbie dolls shut in their glass case, like so many sleeping beauties waiting to be kissed into life, emphasize the pressure on young women to conform to stereotypes of beauty that breed competition, narcissism and neurosis.

Myth and fairy tale run through Perucchetti's work. The symbolic and erotic significance of the shoe has been explored by Bruno Bettelheim in his study of fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment*, and is implicitly taken up in Perucchetti's *Sex and the City*, where rows of 'glass' slippers, covered in coloured rhinestones and hearts, are displayed fetishistically on individual shelves like props from the wardrobe of some Miss World or drag queen. As Marina Warner points out in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, the slipper in Perrault's *Cinderella* was originally made of *vair*, that is fur or ermine, which Perrault mistakenly read as *verre* or glass. This Freudian slippage became a perfect metaphor for the taming of female nature. 'The glass slipper', Warner writes, 'works to dematerialize the troubling aspects of [female] nature, her natural fleshiness, her hairy vitality, and so give a sign of her new, socialized value'. The glass slipper becomes the perfect mirrored surface in which the cleansed image of Cinderella is reflected back to her from society: the hirsute, lascivious woman transformed into a waxed, preened and sanitized version of womanhood. For Perucchetti his rows of 'fuck-me' shoes suggest the commodification of the sex industry, as well as the demands on ordinary women to conform, often through cosmetic surgery, to pre-ordained norms of beauty. *A Theory of Evolution* (which, he claims, was inspired by Paris Hilton with her chihuahua) plays with notions of interbreeding. An animal lover, Perucchetti is commenting on the freakish way that fashionable dogs are inbred, often to the point of handicap, to satisfy



consumer desire. The perky little mutt, covered in Swarovski crystals, might also stand as a symbol for a certain type of celebrity female whose only value is judged to be as some sort of glittering pet to be wooed by the public and suitors alike. His respect for women can, alternatively, be read in *Michelangelo 2020*, his hand-carved marble sculpture based on Michelangelo's famous *David*, a work that, here, has been metamorphosed into a woman of power. This is Perucchetti's paean to womanhood, to the downtrodden of the female sex. It acts as a companion piece to the marble of Batman and Superman in *Modern Heroes* (Superman is somewhat ironically modelled on a self-portrait of the artist) in which these icons of ultimate malehood mimic the placement of the *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel.

In much of his work Perucchetti uses multiples beloved by both Pop artists such as Warhol and minimalist artists like Donald Judd and Carl Andre, and later taken up by Damien Hirst with his butterflies and vitrines of prescription medicines. This is particularly effective in a piece such as *Press Cuts*, where a row of two-handed Celtic medieval claymore swords is decorated with the names of daily newspapers (newspapers, themselves, being created in multiples.) These colourful Swords of Damocles hang there reminding us of the vulnerability of free speech and democracy, of how easy it is to cut and censor information and hack away at the truth. Jonathan Aitken's infamous words, uttered at his trial for perjury, about the 'simple sword of truth' spring to mind. Multiples are, again, used in *The Garden of Eden*, where a row of 30 apples covered in crunchy coloured crystals ironically elide notions of Eve's temptation with those of the seductions of modern-day shopping. These ideas are taken even further in *By Prescription Only*. Here, in a series of highly coloured medicinal capsules filled at one end with 'diamonds', Perucchetti seems to be offering a sedative for society's addiction to consumerism and luxury.

*Trojan Virus* also makes clever use of the multiple. Evoking China's famous terracotta army, Perucchetti creates his own postmodern version that makes reference to commercial espionage. His sweetie-coloured babes, with their pert silicon-enhanced breasts, sit astride their golden steeds conjuring the practice of major companies, particularly those from China and Russia, to plant pretty girls to act as lures and spies at trade fairs, in order to discover new technological secrets and information. Cyber-warfare is, after all, the new battle zone. A Trojan horse virus (named after the mythological wooden horse with which the Greeks finally entered and defeated the besieged city of Troy) can infiltrate and jam computer systems, bringing international companies and government departments to their knees.

An ironic sense of humour runs through all Perucchetti's work, but it deliberately avoids the visceral, gritty elements that have characterised the work of the YBAs — the blood used by Marc Quinn, the carcasses of Hirst or the bedroom clutter of Tracey Emin. Perucchetti likes his deconstructions of the ills of western society to be accompanied by a degree of Italian style. In *Feeding the 5000* he illustrates, with comic-book wit, that he can address the most serious of issues. Here a totemic bust of Barack Obama, part Christ-like figure, part Disney cartoon, appears on top of a huge red American Pez sweet dispenser. The title, of course, suggests the impossible expectations imposed upon Obama who, like some latter-day Wild West sheriff, was expected to ride into town to put the world to rights with instant Messianic miracles. Dispensable sweets, dispensable presidents, dispensable freedoms and democracy, this is a suck-it-and-see culture. For there is always another brand or flavour to choose from in this packaged, commodified world when the going gets tough and we don't want to face up to uncomfortable truths such as those that Mauro Perucchetti's work playfully, yet unapologetically, continues to reveal.

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