

## ARTS

## What the cross will bear

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Basic questions of life and morality are refracted through Mauro Perucchetti's controversial materials

A TALKING point of last year's Royal Academy Summer Exhibition was a crucifix-shaped sculpture by an unknown artist, Mauro Perucchetti. Titled "Jelly Baby Cross: Cloning and Religion", it was immaculately cast from transparent urethane, trapping a rainbow shower of jelly babies in its resin like flies in amber. It was the sort of pretty, eye-catching exhibit one might have dismissed as a clever bid by a new kid on the block for some critical attention. But something about it didn't fit: it was too well made. It didn't look like a stunt, but an artistic statement built to last.

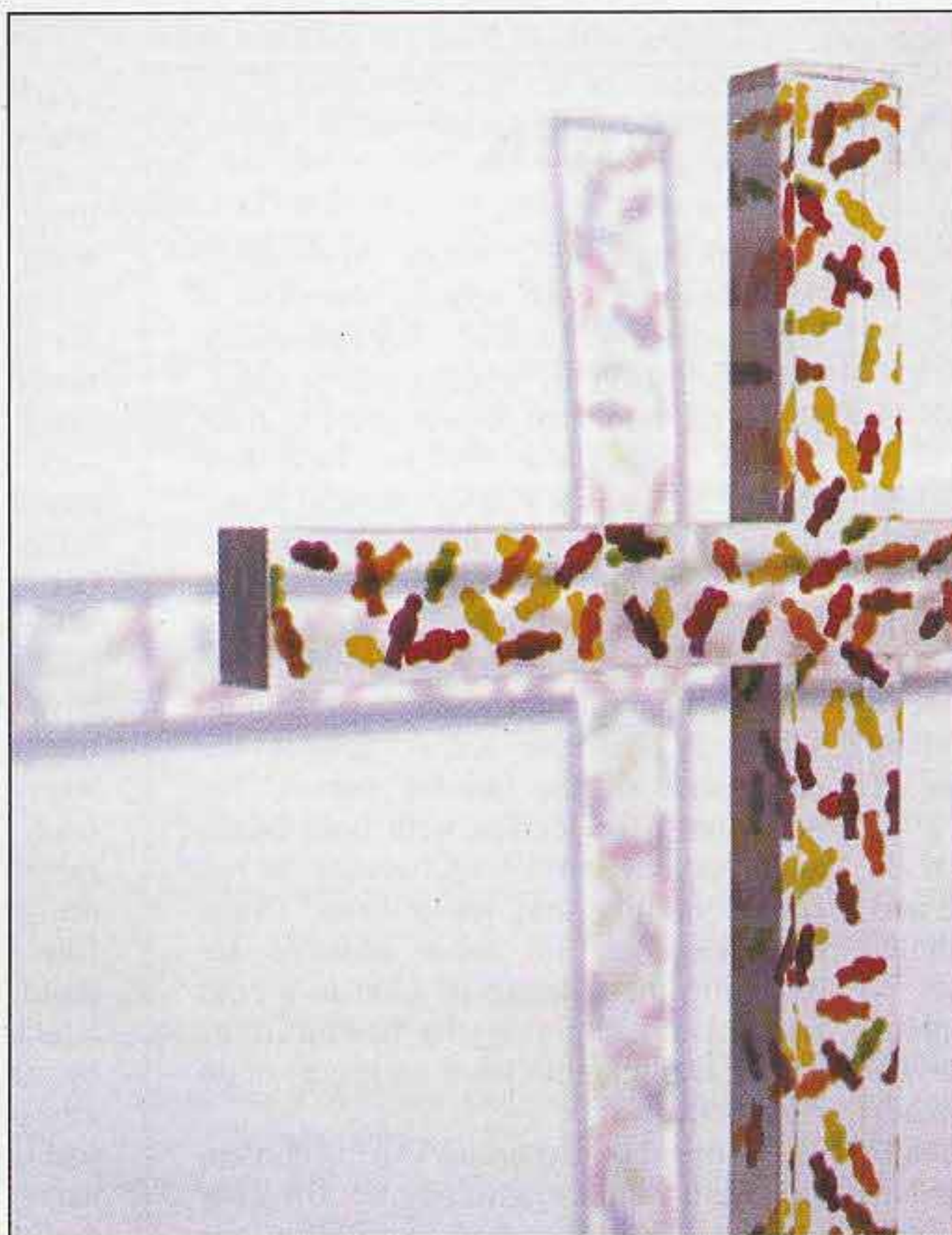
In fact, its maker was a London-based Italian making a late debut as an artist. Predictably, it provoked a mixed reaction. While some reviewers failed to see its "fun side", the artist received a letter from the Revd John Searle hailing his cross as a powerful expression of "the clash between traditional religious thinking and modern molecular biology" and asking permission to reproduce it on the frontispiece of his book, *Life in Our Hands: an extensive examination of molecular biology, genetics & Christian ethics*.

In recent weeks, that clash has come to a head with the decision in August by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority to grant Newcastle University the first UK licence for therapeutic cloning of human embryos for stem-cell research – a move welcomed by scientists, but denounced by Jack Scarisbrick, chairman of Life, as "trivialisation of human life of a most frightening kind".

One wonders what both sides of this pressing debate would make of Perucchetti's current exhibition at Cork Street's Beaux Arts Gallery (until 2 October). For this, his first one-man show, the *Jelly Baby Cross* has been joined by a host of other jelly babies, large and small, dancing provocatively at the crossroads between cloning and religion. There are jelly babies set out on shelves awaiting collection in a *Cloning Factory*; jelly babies forming the letters of an illumi-

nated shop sign spelling "COPY"; and 7,500 jostling jelly babies packed hugger-mugger into the pattern of a stained-glass window in Notre Dame.

Attractive as these pieces are to look at, they lay themselves open to the obvious charge of prettification, if not trivialisation, of serious subjects. But that does not bother the artist. There is no "fun side" to his work, he maintains simply. What we are seeing here may be not just a conflict of ethics, but a culture clash between a British audience conditioned to expect political art to be angry and grungy, and an Italian determined that life should be beautiful.



Mauro Perucchetti, 'Jelly Baby Cross: Cloning and Religion', 2002, detail

Perucchetti is not an angry man. He is a happy man because finally, in middle life, he has traded in a commercial career in interior design for the creative freedom to be an artist. That freedom has been hard won. He operates, astonishingly, out of a tiny mews house in Knightsbridge where he runs what he calls a "cottage industry" performing technical miracles with a material as unstable as nitroglycerine – though fortunately not as lethal. There have been mornings when he has come down to find months of work splattered over the studio walls and ceiling; when

I visited during the August heatwave, the humidity had turned *Notre Dame* into a "bubble bath" overnight.

Having bought his artistic freedom at a price, Perucchetti is not unnaturally concerned with issues of individuality and conformity. Two new pieces, *Louis Vuitton 1* and *2*, comment on our society's slavery to branding; others touch on the more inflammatory topic of the Catholic Church's position on birth control. In a new urethane crucifix, *Risky Business*, brightly coloured condom packets have replaced the jelly babies; in *Red Cross*, a cruciform first-aid box contains condoms and an emergency hammer on the wrong side of the glass. These works were made in response to a BBC documentary on teenage mothers in the Third World – including footage of African missionaries making bonfires of contraceptives distributed by the Red Cross.

"I'm not criticising the Catholic Church," claims Perucchetti. "I'm not telling them that what they're doing is right or wrong. I wouldn't dare to be so big-headed with any religion. All I'm saying is it doesn't make much sense in practical terms..." Neither piece, he stresses, is "disgusting or offensive. This contraceptive cross is very pretty."

To Perucchetti, the gruesomeness of some contemporary art seems gratuitous. Does he feel that sugaring the pill makes it easier to take? He has not thought about this consciously; it is just that as an "aesthetically oriented person" he likes to be surrounded by beautiful things. Paradoxically, in the current artistic climate this may count against him. While his work's message may ruffle the feathers of the faithful, its elegant understatement may not get through to a generation grown up on the gruesomeness of

Damien Hirst.

Art is a risky business. In a dramatic gesture before the Beaux Arts gallery took him on, Perucchetti shouldered his *Jelly Baby Cross* and carried it up the steps of the White Cube Gallery in Hoxton which features work by Hirst. When he reached the reception, he asked to speak to a curator, and was told they were all busy upstairs and couldn't come down. "So I did all that to show the cross to a receptionist," he told me. It may have only saved him from disappointment. They might have just responded: "What? No blood?"