



Giulio Paolini at Whitechapel Gallery

By Rachel Spence (July 11, 2014)

Any uncertainty that Giulio Paolini was a seminal artist were quashed at the Venice Biennale in 2013. There, in the Italian pavilion, the 73-year-old Turin artist was paired with his co-national Marco Tirelli. The latter served up a buffet of miniature figurative drawings on one wall. Paolini responded with a trompe-l'oeil of an exhibition hung with empty frames in front of which crouched a sculpture of transparent geometrical planes. The result was a mute yet riveting quarrel about ways of seeing. What makes a table more than the sum of its straight lines? If the artist makes no image, does the object exist? Without the image, is it actually the artist whose being is in doubt?

In person, Paolini embodies the whimsical intrigue of his work. When I step into his Turin studio, he greets me with the words: "In as far as I am able, I am ready to respond to your every curiosity." The archaic elegance of his diction is in keeping with his timeless aura. With silky grey hair flopping over a fine-boned face and brown eyes twinkling behind round glasses, he cuts a judiciously stylish figure in shirt and tie, jeans and black lizard belt.

His workspace is an equally droll enigma. Immaculately tidy, it is virtually empty save for a contemporary, glass-topped worktable underneath the long windows, a filing cabinet, an empty easel and an eccentric array of antique furniture in the centre of the room on which are propped oddities such as a Borges poem and a bottle of Ballantyne's whisky.

That blend of awe, scepticism and mischief in the face of history has made Paolini a big name on the European contemporary scene. A retrospective of his work has just opened at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Such a prestigious venue bears witness to a 24-carat career that took off in the late 1960s when Paolini, on the invitation of critic Germano Celant, became part of Arte Povera, the radical Italian movement that included Michelangelo Pistoletto, Giuseppe Penone, Jannis Kounellis and Alighiero Boetti.

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Detail from 'Alpha (An Author without Name)' (2004)

Given that their *raison d'être* was, ostensibly, to reveal the poetry within humble materials – Kounellis made sculpture out of coal sacks, Pistoletto from scraps of cloth – it's not surprising that Paolini felt that he never fitted in.

“Arte Povera is essentially made of physical situations,” he says now, glancing for confirmation – as he will throughout our conversation – at his long-time collaborator Maddalena Disch. (Benign yet alert, always ready to proffer whichever image we are discussing on the iPad she holds in her hands, Disch is clearly essential to Paolini's equilibrium.)

“Even then,” he continues. “I was always more interested in the destiny of the artist, so I was not entirely suitable, but I was [Celant's] friend and I was in Turin at that moment, so I became part of the group.”

Paolini's deconstructive gene was whirring by the time Celant spotted him. Yet his early years were marked by the simple desire to represent the world around him. At the age of eight, he won a national drawing competition. At 16, influenced by his father who worked in the commercial office of the Italian Graphic Arts Institute, he was studying graphic design at college in Turin. Those years, he recalls, really opened his eyes to the visible world. “I began frenetically visiting exhibitions in the city. I wanted to see everything: beautiful, ugly, everything. And from this *vedere* [by using the Italian infinitive of the verb “to see” he gives his experience a mystical nuance], and an excess of faith in myself, I began to believe that I too could be an artist.”

At just 19, he made the picture that would mark his sensibility forever. Entitled “Geometric Drawing”, it comprises a canvas covered in white tempera and squared geometrically with a pencil. Essentially identical to the design into which Leonardo fitted his Vitruvian Man, today its expression of pure abstract proportion no longer looks radical. But in 1960 it was strong stuff.

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'Big Bang' (1997-98)

This was an era when artists such as Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni – inspired by Clement Greenberg's assertion that modernist painting was essentially about flatness – had taken to binning the image entirely and just focusing on the surface. But Paolini's effort sprang from his own imagination. "I hadn't seen anything by Klein or Manzoni," he recalls. "It was like a hallucination. I made it in a trance."

In 1964 his first show, at La Salita gallery in Rome, stamped him as a militant. "Lots of my friends told me they didn't dare come in." Nervous of disturbing the artist mid-set-up, they hadn't realised that the blank canvases, many with their face to the wall and some still on the floor, were the finished work.

Today, as four decades of his efforts reel across Disch's iPad, it is hard to credit that Arte Povera ever claimed him as its own. Assembled from faux-classical sculpture, wall-drawings of perspectival lines, a bank of photographic imagery that arcs from old masters to his own spectacles, and the odd prop – a chair, a table, picture stretcher – his installations are far too sophisticated to meet the movement's criteria of abjection.



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Furthermore, his formal purity rescues his work from the trap into which so much conceptual art falls: that of a bright idea masquerading as a half-baked image. “I have faith in the code of the image,” he explains to me. “I have faith in symmetry. I try to compose in the classical mode.”

We are peering on the iPad at “Copia del Vero” (1975). A photograph of three empty squares drawn like a triptych over the photograph of the back of a wooden stretcher which itself is framed by a wall drawing of shaded rectangles, this Russian doll of images within images – that aren’t really images – leaves me vertiginous.

Paolini laughs at my confusion. “It alludes to the total potential that these images might be. But it leaves us out of the scene completely because we can’t see them.”

Is there, I wonder, an unspoken suggestion that the image is too ideal to be shown? Is Paolini secretly a Platonist in post-structuralist clothing? He laughs. “Certainly I am interested in the things that transcend material reality. That come from the space which is beyond us.”



‘I See (Fragments of the Decoding of My Visual Field)’ (1987)

As the years progress, his faith in the work has been matched by his doubt about the role of the artist. “I am not sure that the work comes from the will of the author.” He sounds a little embarrassed at the fey turn his thought has taken. “He is simply a witness to a work that was already there, which he gathers and sends to us.” His voice drops as if whispering a secret. “I would like to think that the artist is a priest who assists at the arrival of something. A privileged witness.”

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At the Whitechapel gallery, works on display include “The Author Who Thought He Existed . . .”, which was made in 2013. “Look, there he is, in the middle of a pasticcio,” he chuckles, pointing to the iPad and using charming Italian words for “big mess”.

And there indeed is a cut-out photograph of Paolini, with a real pencil in his hand, lying on a heap of other images on a glass-topped table. Is he drawing them into existence? Or is he no more than a random sign himself?

There’s no help from the slideshow running across the gallery wall. It shows empty frames, blank canvases and Paolini’s eccentric studio furniture rendered in monochrome silhouette as if it were all no more than a chimera. On the floor, surrounded by discarded pictures, an overturned chair does not bode well.

“What’s happened?” I ask.

“The artist’s run off. He couldn’t take any more.” Paolini replies with a wry smile. Yet I suspect that he will be cloistered in his studio for many years to come.

Photographs: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Luciano Romano; Lisson Gallery, London; © Giulio Paolini.

‘Giulio Paolini: To Be or Not to Be’, Whitechapel Gallery, London, July 9-September 14.
whitechapelgallery.org