

Giulio Paolini: To Be Or Not to Be review – fizzing with riddles and jokes

By Laura Cumming (July 12, 2014)



'Jokes that detonate': Big Bang, 1997-98 by Giulio Paolini at the Whitechapel. Photograph: David Parry/PA

Whitechapel Gallery, London

Giulio Paolini's quizzical, mischievous work delights in evasion. Catch it while you can...

The coolest show in London this summer by some way is the terrifically humorous and intelligent Giulio Paolini retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery. Paolini was the great wit of the Italian 1960s *arte povera* movement and remains so at 73. His meditations on artists, pictures and the relationship between them, particularly his own false starts and rueful evasions, as presented at the Whitechapel, amount to a narrative fizzing with riddles and jokes.

Paolini is arguably most famous for an early musing on those traditional eye-to-eye portraits in which the sitter appears to return our gaze. In 1967 he displayed a black-and-white copy of Lorenzo Lotto's 1505 Portrait of a Young Man showing a beautiful youth staring very candidly back at the viewer – or so it had always seemed. But Paolini killed that illusion at a stroke simply by retitling the picture Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Lotto.

Common sense tells us this can only be true, that the sitter's eyes were only ever on Lotto; but common sense is exactly what we naturally suppress when looking at portraits. It is our willing suspension of disbelief, and if the man is no longer looking at us then this personal connection is thwarted.

The Lotto portrait becomes the record of two long-dead people looking at each other. It is a deflation – you feel it keenly at the Whitechapel – and an exclusion that most portraitists, and self-

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portraitists, aim to avoid; although not Paolini himself. The Italian sidesteps his own self-portraits every time; he is there, but does not wish to impose.

Here he is in 1965 photographed behind a window, face concealed by the crossbeams and further obscured by Ray-Bans. In fact the window is an empty frame for which Paolini clearly hasn't managed to produce a painting. Such as he is – nothing much – the artist is the picture.



delfo (delfi) paolini Delfo (Delphi), 1965 by Giulio Paolini. Photograph: © Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

And here he is again, photographed in his studio, arms outstretched like the fisherman with the catch that got away. It would have been this big, he seems to say, if only he'd painted that picture.

Now here's an actual canvas bearing a photographic sequence: the artist leaning forward with a brush and then making his mark. But what is this mark? On top of both is a turquoise flurry that seems to cancel him out, as if Paolini had passed right through the canvas and disappeared behind his own picture.

These are not works of dry theory but gorgeously graphic, quizzical and precise. Considerations that might be oppressively dull in another artist's work – are pictures more like windows or walls; are artists inevitably present in their works; how do ideas actually emerge as images? – come alive.

There is a most piquant twist on theory, in fact, in a big multimedia installation where two guys are clearly trying to work out how to make a picture from first principles – the floor all around them strewn with ludicrous diagrams. Nothing comes of nothing. And as for the death of the artist –

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Paolini prefigured Roland Barthes's famous Death of the Author essay by two years – there is white canvas in this show cut in the shape of a man, brush in hand; a pale ghost. Stand before it, however, and you have an immediate sense of Paolini's physical presence.

There are clues everywhere if you only look – shadowy hands, photocopied feet. His shoes are here (you might stand in them); his pencil is here – flung down, rolled aside, or standing upright as if about to make a point with its sharpened tip – but the artist is not. Paolini is always edging out of the picture.

To Be Or Not to Be is the show's title, and upstairs is a dilemma fit for Hamlet – literally, what to do. Inside a Plexiglas box is a miniature studio: an empty seat, an easel bearing a sheet of glass – not just blank but transparently so; and all around are rejected ideas, screwed up as rubbish, each paper ball echoing a crystal globe inside the studio. The artist had the world at his feet and still couldn't come up with a decent idea!



Installation view of Giulio Paolini: To Be or Not to Be at the Whitechapel Gallery. Photograph: David Parry

But of course he has and does: a more modest clown one couldn't imagine. His recent works – involving glass pictures, blank pictures, and very beautiful pictures (drawn by Paolini, of course) emerging like rays from a brain – are sprung with jokes that detonate delightfully in one's head.

Most enchanting is a Plexiglas gallery within the gallery, featuring life-size footmen holding up pictures, or at least picture-shaped holes. The artist is only making a beautiful frame through which we may contemplate life. The revelation is just how brilliant the actual world looks through each hole.

On the floor is a faint handprint... the artist really has been here. And how good it is to see Paolini's art in Britain for the first time in a generation in this effervescent show.