

Michelangelo Pistoletto, Serpentine Gallery, London

An Arte Povera pioneer reveals the miracle within cheap materials – and gives us a vision of our wonderful selves

Reviewed by Charles Darwent
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Arte Povera, like Christianity, is all about the little guy.

In the case of poverists such as Michelangelo Pistoletto, this means making work out of cheap materials – cardboard is a favourite. It also means involving the man in the street in the process of making, elevating people like you and me to the status of artists. It will be 50 years next year since Pistoletto first painted on a mirrored surface, the resultant part-static, part-changing image being shaped by the movement of the viewer; every man his own Pistoletto.

Looked at another way, Pistoletto's brand of Arte Povera – "Poor Art", a term coined in the days of Italian student riots in the mid-1960s – is about transubstantiation. Priests take wafers and turn them into the body of Christ. Pistoletto takes cardboard and turns it into things which are normally too grand to be made of cardboard.

In his new show at the Serpentine Gallery, he has magicked his unpromising material into architecture. Rolls and rolls of corrugated card have been stood on end so they reach up to your chest, and then arranged into a jigsaw of interlocking loops and squiggles: seen from above, they might look like the tracery on a Gothic stone-carving. The bulk of this is massed against the walls and in the gallery spaces of the Serpentine, forming a new building-within-a-building, pushing you this way and that, diverting your normal route along well-trodden paths.

Religion and religious architecture are also about revelation, the telling of some secrets and the hiding of others, about glimpses of God half-seen through screens and in gated side-chapels. Pistoletto's new Serpentine Gallery, too, fulfils this function. At the end of each cardboard-lined path is what feels like a sacred space, one of them with a prayer-mat on the floor, one with a Victorian Gothic prie-dieu, one with a twice-life-size stone standing Buddha. We come across these clearings as in a cardboard jungle. Except, of course, not quite.

Pistoletto's corrugated-paper architecture only comes up to your chest – you can't help but catch glimpses of what lies ahead, and in any case, despite its stony colour, cardboard isn't stone. If you were willing to risk arrest, you could easily kick down the walls of *The Mirror of Judgement* – the title of this new installation – to get to the clearings. The fact that you don't means that you are electing to go along with what Pistoletto is doing, choosing to play by his rules. Put another way, you are agreeing to join in some form of communal make-believe, acting as though this structure really were a catacomb or maze when, for all to see, it is merely a bunch of cardboard. How different this is from colluding in seeing the architecture of churches or mosques or stupas as in some way inherently divine is a question Pistoletto's new work raises.

For no good reason, all this put me in mind of the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II reached its conclusion in 1965, just as the critic, Germano Celant, was giving Arte Povera its name and the New York gallerist, Ileana Sonnabend, was arranging for Pistoletto to have his first American show. The Council famously took the Catholic Mass out of Latin and into vernacular languages, previously seen as religiously *infra dig*. Just as

Pistoletto and his kind were discovering that art could be made out of cardboard, so Catholicism in Italy was discovering that God could be made out of Italian, ecumenicism and lay participation.

I only rabbit on in this way because *The Mirror of Judgement* is so clearly about the difference between mysticism and belief. Pistoletto's temple in Kensington Gardens is not about the worship of God, but about the worship of cardboard. In its disposable way, cardboard is a great act of creation. Yet, here, we see it only as a barrier or wall, some incidental thing that pushes us towards a necessarily sacred truth. When we get to that truth, though, everything seems tentative and jejune – the prie-dieu a bit knackered, the prayer rug slightly threadbare, the Buddha oddly vulnerable. What we haven't bothered to look at is the thing that led us to the clearings, the rational genius of man; at the overlooked miracle that is cardboard.

Which is to say, at the merely man-made, or at ourselves. On the wall of each of Pistoletto's clearings is a mirror, or sometimes two. Removed from all the jiggery-pokery of worship, what we are left with in *The Mirror of Judgement* is a vision of ourselves, self-doubting, self-believing and wonderful. This is a really good show, marking a return to the good old days when the Serpentine was less a container for art than a constantly changing artwork. Hurrah.