

## A different kind of paradise

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Bathed in hazy July sunshine, with buddleia in full bloom, Hyde Park is at its summery zenith even before I wander through the Serpentine's new pavilion. Designed by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, the forbidding, barn-like exterior shields a glorious, informal profusion of grasses, shrubs and flowers while café tables and chairs invite one to linger under a canopied roof.

With difficulty, I resist this beguiling haven and hurry on to my appointment in the gallery with Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, whose new exhibition, *The Mirror of Judgement*, is due to open the following day. Though Pistoletto, now 78, is close to a household name in his native country, this is his first public show in the UK. "London is a fantastic city, so dynamic," he enthuses. Dressed in his signature uniform of black shirt, braces and trilby hat, the grey-haired patriarch exudes the alert, intellectual vigour of a man 20 years younger. Yet he is also blessed with a thoroughly Mediterranean charm, expressing perplexity with the workings of the cafetière – "I am not sure what that is exactly" – and asking courteously if he may remove his jacket.

I compliment him on the show – of which more later – and he smiles graciously, well aware that the Serpentine is a felicitous setting. The gallery's diminutive yet light-flooded rooms, their panelled windows gazing on to the greenery of the park, are the perfect counterpoint to the bold, material statements that have been his trademark since the early 1960s.

Then he was an angry young man who rejected abstract expressionism as too sentimental, pop art as too commercial and minimalism as too cold. Instead, alongside peers such as Pino Pascali, Alighiero Boetti and Jannis Kounellis, he became a founder of *arte povera*, a pivotal conceptual movement that made art out of found objects, industrial and natural materials. "*Arte povera* was a search for roots – in time, in nature, in matter, in energy," he recalls. "It wanted to eliminate the superfluous, while pop art wanted to emphasise the superfluous."

The puritan streak in postwar Italian art springs from a tortured rapport with the country's fascist past. Pistoletto, who grew up in Turin in the 1930s and 1940s, grimaces as he remembers the shame of wearing the black *divisa* (uniform) to school. Equally vivid is the trauma of seeing the bodies of men hanged for insubordination when he and his family were evacuated to Susa in Piedmont.

"I was denied the possibility of understanding life as a young man," he explains. "There was this injunction to 'believe, obey and fight' that came from both religious and political systems and it made me enormously mentally frustrated."

Modern art, which he first came across while working for a leading graphic designer in the 1950s, offered an escape from these rigid orthodoxies. "Picasso, Mondrian, surrealism – these were the gateway to a new vision for me." Yet Pistoletto's own father was himself an old-fashioned figurative painter and a restorer of icons. "He taught me drawing and perspective and an awareness of antique art," he says.

Perhaps this explains why his practice has always been a fusion of tradition and innovation. Indeed, he admits that his first artistic breakthrough – portraits of himself and other figures photographed, traced and then hand-painted on a reflective, oxidised steel surface – were "born out of the golden background" of his father's icons.

Conceived in the early 1960s, the so-called Mirror Paintings heralded Pistoletto as a major talent. A precursor of contemporary photorealism and conceptual painting, they wrested representation from subjectivity. "The image in the mirror is objective; there is no interpretation," he tells me, still sounding proud at what was, in those pre-Richter days, a revolutionary achievement.

Pistoletto also possesses a Joseph Beuys-like faith in art as a catalyst for social change. Yet unlike the German's often harebrained projects, he realised his dream. In 1998, he set up Cittadellarte, a foundation in Biella, near Turin, where multidisciplinary programmes range from artist residencies (enjoyed, for example, by winners of the prestigious Max Mara Art Prize for Women, organised in association with the Whitechapel Gallery) to waste recycling schemes and the Mediterranean-wide community project Love Difference, which debuted at the 2003 Venice Biennale, where Pistoletto received a Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement.

"In the 1960s, I worked with people from different disciplines by going into the street to get away from institutions," the artist says now, remembering his glory days as a fiery performance artist who, rather than participate in the 1968 Venice Biennale, published the *Manifesto of Collaboration* instead. "Today, it's about creating new institutions through art."

Thus speaks an elder statesman of the contemporary art world, a man whose essentially temperate character allowed him to survive the libertarian excesses of his age while wilder peers strayed too close to the edge. Yet there is one institution whose destruction is still firmly in his sights. "Monotheistic religions place the truth outside the world, beyond the control of scientific proof. This is an absolutism which is anti-democratic," he declares. "From religion, you move towards fascism."

His London show is essentially a manifestation of that anti-ecclesiastical fervour. A multipart, site-specific installation, its conceptual heart is a secular utopia – "The Third Paradise" – proffered as an alternative to sacred belief. But the exhibition's real triumph is the play of materials within the space.

Crucial to its success is "Labyrinth", which consists of waist-high coils of corrugated cardboard that flow through the galleries like a rugged, brown-paper river, wrapping themselves around various works en route. The anchors are the four elements that comprise "Time of Judgement", an installation that confronts religious artefacts – including an Islamic prayer mat, a wooden Buddha, a prie-dieu and two arched mirrors designed to evoke the Tablets of the Law – with their own reflections in vast mirrors.

Also present are "Trumpets of Judgement" (1968), a pair of aluminium horns of the type blown by angels in countless Renaissance paintings, and a glass obelisk whose point pierces the centre of three linked circles. Entitled "The Third Paradise" (2011), its symbolism is explained by Pistoletto as follows: "The first paradise is one where we are totally integrated into nature. The second sees us come out of nature into artifice," he laughs drily. "We arrive at pop art if you like. This artificial paradise has brought great benefits for humanity but also a total crisis: social, physical, functional.

"At this moment, there must be a reunion between nature and artifice. That is the third, central circle in the symbol," he explains, adding that it is actually a modification of the existing symbol for infinity.

In our postmodern age, Pistoletto's perceptions – that religion is a creation of man that must take responsibility for its own failings, that a new ecological harmony is essential – are hardly revolutionary. Yet the sheer scale of this exhibition's physical expression bestows a power beyond the reach of its concepts. Soaking up every image in the vicinity, from the opaque torrent of cardboard to the emerald-leaved chestnut trees in the park and the portentous trumpets, the enormous mirrors transform the galleries into secular chapels. Visitors are left uncertain as to the object of worship – art? nature? the human spirit? – yet are awed by the still, resonant equilibrium of the space and its infinite reflections.

Just before I leave, Pistoletto adds a corollary to his theory. "Originally you know, paradise was not a religious concept. It comes from an ancient Persian word meaning 'protected garden' – a place where you live well, defended from the desert all around. We should see our planet as a garden which we must defend."

He shakes my hand warmly and strides off towards waiting photographers with his customary verve. Meanwhile, I decide there is, after all, time for tea in the secret garden.

*'The Mirror of Judgement'* continues until September 17, [www.serpentinegallery.org](http://www.serpentinegallery.org)