

Michelangelo Pistoletto: The Mirror of Judgement, Serpentine Gallery, review
Michelangelo Pistoletto's cardboard labyrinth is a richly symbolic spiritual journey, but why must he be so maddeningly obscure? Rating: * * * *

Two years ago, the name Michelangelo Pistoletto was barely known in this country. But since rolling a huge ball of newspaper over London's Millennium Bridge during Tate Modern's Long Weekend mini-festival in 2009, this septuagenarian Italian conceptualist has become established as a modern master, his name tripping off art world tongues more frequently than that of his 16th century namesake.

As a lynchpin of the 1960s Arte Povera (Poor Art) movement, Pistoletto was using cheap, sustainable materials – rags and old newspapers – nearly half a century before it became fashionable. While “immersive environments” are currently very much the thing – see Martin Creed's gallery full of balloons currently showing at Tate St Ives – the one Pistoletto is re-employing here first saw the light of day in 1969.

Yet if Pistoletto has been ahead of the game on many fronts for many decades, the casual visitor is likely to be initially befuddled rather than bowled over by *The Mirror of Judgement*, his new exhibition at the Serpentine gallery.

Endless numbers of upended rolls of corrugated card stand chest high throughout the gallery, all unravelling to form to form a sea of whorling patterns. Paths form a very simple labyrinth, dotted through which are symbols of the four major religions. A prayer-mat represents Islam; a rather lumpen ready-made statue Buddhism; a wooden kneeling bench, Christianity; while a pair of large arched mirrors stand in for the Jewish Torah. All are placed against large mirrors, so that the passing viewer becomes part of the action.

In the gallery's central room, three black ovals, one large, two small, clearly symbolic of something, hang over a mirrored obelisk – an ensemble that feels imbued with some quasi-Masonic mystical message.

So far it all feels like just the sort of attractive but rather opaque installation we've come to expect from the Serpentine. Yet while it has become the norm for contemporary art to take on big themes in a generally inconclusive way, there is nothing vague about the intentions behind Pistoletto's imagery.

A mirror placed on the floor directly below the skylight in the first gallery, and circled by yet more card, provides an artful glimpse of the glowing heavens in which we see ourselves reflected, as the entry-point to an exhibition which is both a personal meditation on the concept of judgement, and a kind of summation of the artist's career.

Pistoletto has been preoccupied with mirrors since painting photorealist portraits on them in the early Sixties. The Trumpets of Judgement, a trio of enormous aluminium horns first exhibited in 1968, refer to the loudspeakers that broadcast Mussolini's speeches through his village when he was a boy.

While the four great religions speak of judgement in the future, Pistoletto – as far as I understand it – believes we are facing, or should be facing, judgement right now. But in contrast to the main religions, which for him are as rigid as the fascism that traumatised him as a child, he proposes the Third Paradise, represented by the floating ovals and obelisk in the central gallery. In Pistoletto's

self-created eschatology, the first garden or paradise – Eden presumably – was natural, the second man-made, the third will be (you guessed it) a reconciliation of the first two, and accessible through art.

Pistoletto has much in common with the great German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys. Both are – or in Beuys's case were – utopian teacher figures; socially conscious and ecologically motivated products of the turbulent Sixties. Like Beuys, with his symbolic obsession with felt and fat, Pistoletto attributes properties to things which the viewer either does or doesn't take on board. His objects don't interact with each other. His trumpets and oval symbols don't express anything – except in the vaguest sense – until animated by his philosophy.

Yet there's an engaging warmth behind the battiness. Where Beuys's work was inspired by Nordic mysticism, Pistoletto's is more expansive and Mediterranean in feel, informed by his childhood experiences assisting his father, a restorer of icons – his interest in mirrors harking back to handling all that burnished gold. Beside this folklore background sit a whole range of idealistic projects designed to draw ordinary people into art.

None of this essential background is available through the exhibition itself, and it's difficult to imagine how it could have been without creating a rather dull and didactic show. The fact that so much that is central to a body of art isn't intrinsic to what you see is simply a factor of a kind of art that has played a dominant role over the past few decades – of which Pistoletto is an intriguing, if sometimes maddening example.

Michelangelo Pistoletto: The Mirror of Judgement is at the Serpentine Gallery 12 July- 17 September