

Michelangelo Pistoletto is the second artist to be honoured with a retrospective at the MAXXI, Rome's new 'National Museum of the 21st Century Arts'. The show's curators are at pains to point out that this is an exhibition of works by an 'internationally trendsetting' contemporary artist, exonerating the museum from the criticism it received last year when it opened with a retrospective of the late Gino De Dominicis, who died in 1998. And who could fault them, given that the septuagenarian Pistoletto, a founding member of the Arte Povera movement, has had – and still has – such a visibly strong influence on contemporary art?

It could further be said, in defence of the temerity with which the MAXXI has so far programmed its major shows with older artists, that there is an element in the selection of works for *Da Uno a Molti* (*From One to Many*) that nods subtly towards Italy's current social concerns. Pistoletto's mirror paintings, which fill the first of three galleries dedicated to works from the first 18 years of his career, invite participation, as the audience see themselves reflected alongside the figures depicted upon their mirrored surfaces. Meanwhile, his 'rag works' (1968 onwards), fundamental to the development of Arte Povera, incorporate mundane objects – ie, the cloths Pistoletto used to clean his mirrors – so as to challenge the established social and artworld orders of the time. *Venus of the Rags* (1967), a copy of which can be seen now at Tate Modern, admixes classical imagery with lowly materials: an elegantly poised, human-scale marble Venus is positioned face-first in a pile of discarded rags, her rear facing the public. Together with the mirror pieces, these works – including walls and tables incorporating waste textiles – are bound to capture the audience's attention over the performance props and early Perspex works elsewhere on display, which, while functioning as a welcome historical aside, struggle to claim the attention.

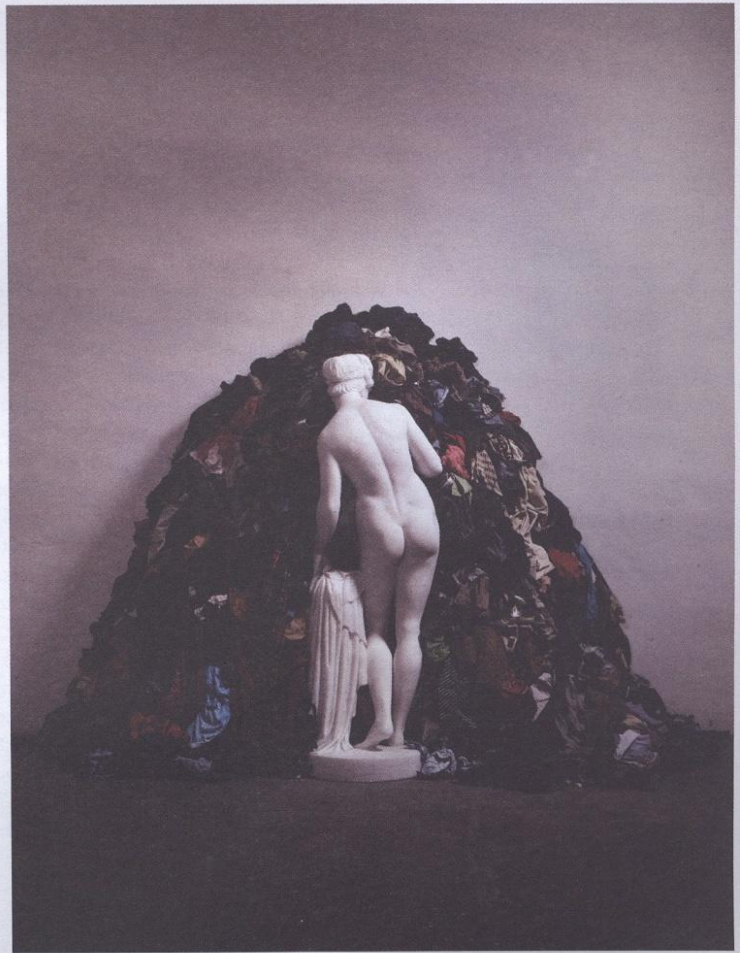
Keen to avoid the association with the mirror as a motif, Pistoletto emphasises how the mirrored surface presents endless visual possibilities. In pieces from 1963 to 74, the background is 'filled in' by the institutional surroundings as painted figures, captured in banal domestic or work scenarios, appear alongside reflections of the public, the gallery and the museum's attendants, contributing to the ever-changing form of the works. Such interplay is encouraged by the MAXXI's ample undulating spaces, which incorporate the full range of Pistoletto's mirror experimentation. His turn towards depictions of demonstrations on his mirrors – in 1965–6, a time of upheaval in Italy – invites the viewer to imagine real political participation, while the painted figures themselves remain anonymous enough to avoid proselytisation.

With a move into screenprinting allowing for greater graphic impact, one late mirror piece portrays a lone woman squatting to defecate, as if on the gallery floor (*Donna che fa la cacca*, 1973). Others of the same period, underscored by the contemporaneous leftist terrorist violence in Italy, present a simple noose (*Cappio*, 1973) and a man shooting (*Uomo che Spara*, 1973). Opening shortly after Rome's mass demonstration of women against Berlusconi, this then is a show that subtly taps into the movement towards an inclusive and less closed Italian society. That understated message, which masterfully treads the line between direct political engagement and artistic autonomy (Pistoletto prefers not to explicitly take sides) will soon be ported to London's Serpentine Gallery (from June). There, too, it could not be more timely. *Mike Watson*

Michelangelo Pistoletto

Da Uno a Molti, 1956–1974

MAXXI, Rome
4 March – 15 August



Venus of the Rags, 1967, marble and rags, 190 x 250 x 140 cm, Cittadellarte - Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella. Photo: Paolo Pellion di Persano