

## Art Review:

### Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956 – 1974

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*Rosa bruciata (Burnt Rose)*, 1965. Michelangelo Pistoletto, Italian, born 1933. Corrugated cardboard and spray paint, 55 1/8 x 55 1/8 x 39 3/8 inches (140 x 140 x 100 cm). (Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, Italy) © Michelangelo Pistoletto. Photo by Paolo Bressano.

Michelangelo Pistoletto: *From one to Many, 1956 – 1974*  
Philadelphia Museum of Art

**By Joshua Mack**

It's surprising that no major museum or gallery, particularly the latter, has undertaken a show of Michelangelo Pistoletto since the one-person exhibition Germano Celant organized for P.S.1 twenty-two years ago. Aside from being a progenitor of Arte Povera, Pistoletto was an early and ardent advocate of the performative in art – the idea that the viewer participates in creating and completing the work – an idea which has become a byword of historical investigation and a major thrust of art today. As the forward to the show's catalog has it, he also pursued, "a rigorous interrogation of the nature and function of art in contemporary society..." again a topic which has immense currency these days.

Then there is the shiny, Pop-art handsomeness of his mirror paintings. You'd think that one of the galleries known for somewhat slick historical shows would have organised something by now, although, for the record, Pistoletto was not a Pop artist – some the pieces in Philadelphia contain sly references to painters like Johns and Dine to underscore the point. But when does that sort of quibble stop the market these days?

In any event, this is the first major show of Pistoletto in the US since 1988. It doesn't make a strong case for the artist's importance nor a coherent whole of his admittedly disparate work. It does, however, bolster the suggestion in the catalogue forward that the magpie nature of Pistoletto's work may have caused curators trouble (not that this should be the case now that concept driven art and curatorship have deep traction).

Between 1956 and 1974, the years the exhibition examines, Pistoletto (born 1931), who was raised and who worked in Turin, eschewed a single, recognisable style, in part as a way of resisting the market's tendency to brand and commodify similar looking things. It's concept and attitude not formal development per se that connects his activities – images affixed to reflective stainless steel panels, visually diverse groups of sculptures, and, at the end of the 60s, participation in the experimental theatre group, Le Zoo.



*Sacra conversazione* (Anselmo, Zorio, Penone, 1973) in Pistoletto's house on via Cibrario in Turin. Courtesy of Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, Italy

Ironically, given their conceptual underpinnings and so called anti-commodity stance, Pistoletto's pieces are laid out here in tight chronological order and in circumscribed typological groups reflecting the way the artist first showed them and the fact that he thought of them in series.

The show begins with a selection of somewhat conventional paintings on canvas from the late 1950s in which Pistoletto was working through powerful influences like Francis Bacon and Jean Dubuffet. In a series of self-portraits, he presents himself, dressed neatly in suit and tie – a testament to just how conventional Italy was – isolated on monotone, somewhat shiny backgrounds.

His use of long, scumbled brush strokes, slightly blurry figuration, and sartorial formality give his canvases the feel of British Pop akin to early Hockney. But what really comes through is a sense of existential isolation. The artist's interest in the relationship between figure and ground becomes a means of investigating the artificial nature of painted representation and as a visual expression of the tension between individual and public identity.

In 1962, having noticed the mirror effect produced by the black varnish he was applying to one of his paintings, Pistoletto began making his signature *Quadri Spechiati*, or mirror paintings. In these, he applied images based on photographs onto stainless steel panels. The way these images are isolated on the shiny surfaces recalls the tension between figure and ground explored in the earlier paintings. But because their reflective surfaces pull viewers into the work, pictorial space and perspective no longer exist solely within the dimensions of the "canvas". Instead, they include the space in which they are shown. The fiction of the artwork and the photograph as frozen moments is smashed.

The creation of the original source image, its transfer onto the reflective mount, and the so-called present in which one experiences and enters the work, become interdependent. Creating and looking are shown to be a continuous and continuing social and interactive process.

Pistoletto's subject matter enhances this impression. His first mirror paintings (the show is meticulous in outlining the evolving techniques he used to create them) often depict people in conversation or quotidian objects like hanging light bulbs or house plants. The former clearly refer to the *sacra conversazione* of Renaissance painting and depict, of course, scenes of social intercourse. The latter have a humble straightforwardness which suggests that the everyday is as important as the grand subjects of past creative epochs.

That the next series of *Quadri Spechiati* are based images of protests over local issues like a rise in the tram fare, or, farther afield, the Vietnam War, roots his work in timely political, social and economic issues. These crowd scenes also set up equations between participation, everyday experience, artistic composition, and the social and political order, between the ways in which people bond with others, how they perceive their social standing through interpersonal exchange and how such interactions reflect back on self image.

Because the experience of Pistoletto's mirror paintings are time-based and fluid – they change depending on how individual viewers interact with them – they are less about fixing or recording imagery than about creating possibilities for experience. A parallel interest in contingency underlies the *Oggetti in meno*, or Minus Objects, made in 1965 – 1966. In these Pistoletto eschewed the ideas of seriality posited by Minimalism, creating a remarkably diverse group of paintings and sculptures. These include *Rosa bruciata (Burnt Rose)* (1965), a large corrugated cardboard flower painted red and slightly charred in the center and *Mappamondo (Globe)* (1966 – 68), a sphere of compacted newspaper.

(In 1968 the artist placed it inside a circular metal structure which resembles the longitudinal and latitudinal lines inscribed on a globe.) A film projected in a nearby gallery shows the artist and his friends carrying the rose and rolling the ball through the streets of Turin. Reversing Duchamp, art becomes everyday rather than the everyday art.

A, to me, overly dense essay in the show's catalog suggests that these works are called 'Minus Objects' because once they had been made and used, each exhausted its possibilities. The implication, considering the interactive nature of the mirror paintings, would be, I suppose, that once you do something, it's done and you can't go back and do it again. Or as the Eagles once sang, "Time keeps on slipping, slipping, slipping, into the future." There is a philosophical tension here between the idea that opening possibility means closing it off. Once something is done it no longer remains to be created.

As amusing and at the same time conceptually pithy as the Minus Objects seem to be, and as much fun as Pistoletto and his crowd appeared to have had with them, the show leaves them somewhat orphaned, displayed in a crowded gallery and dominated by the sheer number of mirror paintings on view. Even more lost is Pistoletto's involvement with experimental theatre. Four films screened one after the other showing goings on in his studio and at some of his shows do not adequately convey Le Zoo's interest in, to quote a wall text, breaking free of restrictions – social and artistic.

The relatively small amount of ephemera, programs and broadsides in the same gallery as the film does not reveal much about Le Zoo's performance apart from Dadaesque gambits. A text in which Pistoletto invites public participation in the 1968 Venice Biennale is displayed without an English translation and remains, therefore, inaccessible to most visitors.

Le Zoo disbanded in 1970, and Pistoletto began producing a new series of mirror paintings. Made with brightly colored ink silkscreened directly onto steel, these are slicker than those from earlier series. Their imagery, a noose, a workman who appears to be North African behind metal bars, a woman squatting to defecate, has a more sharply political tone than evident before, reflecting, in part, the kidnapping for profit and politically motivated violence which plagued Italy in the 1970s. But their hard-edged look and aggressive imagery seem over-determined in comparison with the more open-ended subjects and the lighter touch of earlier mirror paintings and the playfulness inherent in the Minus Objects.

By this point the mirror paintings have become an overbearing presence. There are simply too many in the show. They lend a sameness to work which is notable, in actuality, for its diversity. Their mirroring effect ends up seeming repetitive and formulaic. Although much catalog and gallery space is given to elucidating the technical and thematic development of these works, from pieces in which the artist affixed hand-painted paper images based on photos to steel sheets to silkscreens made directly on the metal, these analyses seem overly technical. They become deadening.

One or two galleries of mirrors showing the evolution of technique, subject, and attitude to image would far more clearly and effectively have elucidated the complex issues Pistoletto was exploring in them, while also demonstrating the stunning change in Italian Society in the years in which they were made worked: from suits and ties to bell bottoms as daily wear and protests over tram fares to the Red Brigades. A lesser emphasis on the mirror paintings – which don't in the end come off as that innovative – might also have allowed a more holistic understanding of Pistoletto's engagements, as opposed to the current show which makes work which is interactive and diverse, seem staid.

*Michelangelo Pistoletto: From one to Many, 1956 – 1974 is on view at Philadelphia Museum of Art until 16 January, 2011*