

Private view

Michelangelo Pistoletto

Michelangelo Pistoletto's life-sized figures on mirrored steel – in which people float between our world and the painted realm – are among the stand-outs in the Hayward's show 'The Painting of Modern Life' as well as being some of the earliest works, dating from 1960. He didn't stop there, because 10 new mirror paintings are now on show in the West End, this time featuring groups of figures, chatting, protesting or dancing.

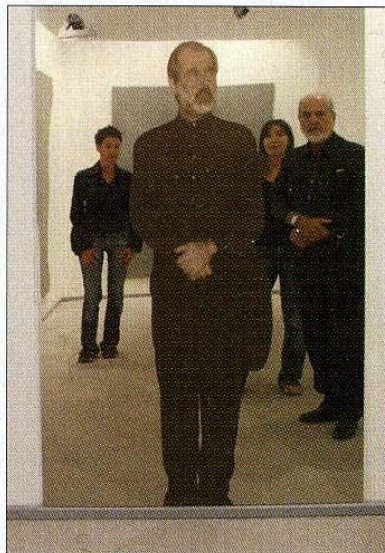
'The origin of all this was the self-portrait,' says the Italian, who first took photos of himself in big hats or posed as a religious icon, 'but the mirror painting is the gold line through my work.' Unlike other painters of the '50s and '60s, Pistoletto had no 'absolute sign' or style

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and didn't fit into either abstract or pop pigeonholes. Instead, he became one of the principals of Arte Povera and the great daddy bear of European concept art: 'I was looking for the meaning of existence; I wanted art to solve my spiritual problems, not just the aesthetic ones.'

In 1964, Pistoletto attached a square of Plexiglas to frame a bit of wall, finding that, 'One thing is not art, but the idea of the same thing *can* be art.' He also created a series of 'Minus Objects', seemingly unrelated sculptures that represented 'infinity minus one'. 'The universe, like the mind, is an enormous container of possibilities,' he explains, 'and the moment I make one object I have all those possibilities less one; I don't need to repeat it, it's done.' He also rested a marble nude against a mound of old clothes, producing the stunning cultural mash-up the 'Venus of the Rags'. Yet, contradicting his own monastic 'Minus Objects', Pistoletto still returns to the reflective surface. 'The



mirror is a stupid instrument used to portray yourself, but it's also universal – all that exists past, present and future can be reflected – it's the fourth dimension.'

To hear an artist talk earnestly about science, time, social responsibility and politics is rare, and it's rarer still for any of it to make sense or offer solutions. This infectious vision is what drives Pistoletto's foundation, the Cittadellarte (or 'City of Art') in his hometown near Turin, where students, artists and architects trade ideas and philosophise at the UNIDEE (the University of Ideas). 'We're living in an artificial world in which art is the guide of creativity,' he says. 'literally *arte* is the *factum* of society.' Surprisingly he's never shown in a commercial gallery here before, although he's in talks to stage a retrospective at a London museum in the near future. 'I will stop putting images on the mirror when I die,' jokes the big man, but we'll carry on reflecting our own images and thoughts in these works long after that. *Interview: Ossian Ward Michelangelo Pistoletto shows at Simon Lee Gallery until Jan 26 (see West End).*