

# PALADINO

Galleria Christian Stein  
Corso Monforte 23, Milan

23 February – 13 May 2023

**Mimmo Paladino** (Paduli, 1948) returns to exhibit at the Galleria Christina Stein in Milan four years after his last solo exhibition on Corso Monforte. Exhibited once again are his archaic compositions that engage in perfect dialogue with geometric and glyphic modernity, the formless and surreal, with the rhythms and contrasts of southern Italy, creating a physical and mental landscape full of fragments more than definite images. Paladino pursues a complex constructive strategy allowing him to condense and reorder symbols and figures of various origin and extraction without ideological constraints, honouring a sense of harmony and remote beauty, conveying qualities that are at times lyrical, at times dramatic, for a polyphonic concert of high notes and low notes, bright colours and deep blacks, voids and luminous spaces, leaps into the darkness and the negative. Paladino has always leaned toward the perfectly concerted organization of a flow of images and the recovery of a current of fragments that would otherwise remain buried under the surface of the present. He has loosened the hold of chronological time in his art, freed it of the separation of day from night and that unidirectional travel away from the past that tends to bury the cultural origin and magic of art under heaps of linguistic rubble.

Six new works now hang on the walls, one of which is of large dimensions (*Treno*, 2022), like a horizontal frieze populated by black figures, anthropomorphic silhouettes in hieratic positions, shreds of objects, and cut-out forms suggesting sleeveless bodices or vests. The three totemic figures rest on tar-like, rectangular patches that might be the bases for an altar. As if wanting to stress his defection from mimesis, in these images of bodies with their legs practically glued together, Paladino re-evokes magical Egyptian statues known as *choanon*. Jean-Christophe Bailly writes: “While the immobile body of the *choanon* was considered to possess a certain power, an authentic incarnation of the god [represented], the ‘resembling’ statue in the Classical period ceased being able, and especially wanting, to be an idol”. This means that these immobile figures by Paladino are like the Baconian *idola* of a ritual whose meaning and traces have been lost. By a strange mechanism of our deepest imagery, we might say that these human forms have risen vertically from a horizontal position, as if from a sarcophagus. In some way, the black bodies, like petrified wood, dialogue with neolithic images painted on the walls of a cave, with warriors and divinities at the centre of a camp of nomads or a necropolis. The flat silhouettes of two black spheres are used by the artist to give a spatial-temporal rhythm to the composition and formally counterbalance the bodiless heads. They impose order and reference points on the composition, halting the diaspora of glyph and figure.

Paladino’s painted art is neither two- nor three-dimensional. Renaissance perspective is banished and the elements have equal value, whether figurative, abstract, symbolic, or decorative. More than making some statement about reality, they open our eyes onto the

world of reminiscence and figurative archetypes, the geometrical nature of the world, the surreal and eloquent side of dreams. All together and as single units, the forms and figures help call forth the most remote memories, those of the origins of art, restoring the magical and sacred function of visual language. It is as if art were an instrument wielded by a shaman who seeks to establish a connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead, the unconscious and imagination, anthropology and metaphysics. This large wall canvas is resolved with humble materials and a radical choice of colours, limited to black, white, and ochre. It is useless to seek an explicit narrative, one that can be made intelligible by applying rationality. Painting, says Paladino, is an instrument bequeathed to human beings since prehistoric times, arising in the hands of our progenitors when they fell from the trees to save us from angst and the desperation to live, recognizing neither god nor rationale, to exorcise the terror of death and nothingness, to speak with the non-living and with those presences, those shadows that visit us when we close our eyes to reality and open them again behind the screen. The history of Italian art moves on rails strewn with fragments, sinopias, dusty casts, charred wooden sculptures, thousand-year-old gashes and cracks, *disjecta membra*, ruins and splendour, light and shadow. And oftentimes, this track meets the perfect geometry of a tangent sphere, a monochrome plane that appears to be a threshold or railing, in a landscape where time has stopped and reality seems able to transcend the ephemeral nature of existence and present itself anew in the guise of a more enduring metaphysics.

Five other works enrich Paladino's new solo exhibition. They are paintings which, as we were saying, travel on the double rails of metaphysical art and archaic imagery, works constructed with the rigour of an artist staying true to the most orthodox abstract language, running from Paolo Uccello to Malevich, paintings that look like they have emerged from a catacomb or a crypt where time has seared the colours, as in a fresco by Cimabue. Monochrome bands – black, red, lemon yellow, sea blue – frame the shadows of human figures, mannequins. Two of these mannequins appear to climb onto a podium in robot fashion (*Senza titolo*, 2021). They too are paintings/theatrettes like those of de Chirico or Carrà. And in this dramatic scene Paladino's figures can communicate in their own way with unsettling muses, or pass the time in conversation with some metaphysical divinity. In three cases the anthropomorphic figures seem to be a relic of a sacrifice (*Dissolvenze*, 2021). They assume the figural substance of a burial shroud, the imprint of a sovereign body, of a man-god who left an earthly trace before being reborn as an angel. Like traces of burned bodies they seem to lie, decompose, turn to dust. Perhaps they have belonged to the earth for millions of years as they do to the unconscious, it doesn't make a difference. They now rise again for us to perform symbolic gestures, as if to remind us of a holy ritual. Hence, if the painting is still a space for the sacred and paint is its symbolic language, the gallery may be the enclosure for a collective rite which by some sort of inversion and opening up directs us toward the origin of art, its eternal necessity and fundamental function.

Mimmo Paladino's career dates back to the avant-garde movements of the 1960s-70s, when he exhibited in Caserta, Florence, and Naples. Since then, every one of his works has been a layering of figurative, non-figurative, decorative, and symbolic images. For years his practice moves freely between painting and sculpture, installations and scenographies, theatre and cinema, in pursuit of the dream of a total art, a total folk art, that has characterized the Western adventure from Giotto to the present day. Of central importance is the relationship the painting establishes with the space beyond its frame, out

of which the artist escapes many times, incorporating three-dimensional projecting forms, or placing bronze or wooden elements on the floor in front of it. Thus, starting in 1990, Paladino has ventured into the public space, such as Piazza Plebiscito in Naples, where he built his famous mountain of salt, or in Florence, where he created the massive marble cross in Piazza Santa Croce in 2012. Over the past decades he has developed a special relationship with architecture and music, recognizing their bases in mathematics, given that the beauty or harmony of a painting or a single image always depend on the golden ratios, solid geometrical proportions. For example, Paladino's "horse" is a product of geometry, it hews to proportion: the monument is constructed of blocks and portions with mathematically related dimensions. The work is built like a house, and the horse is sculpture/architecture, like a bridge or an arch. Golden measures and archetypical relations organize the arrangement of the markings on the surface or in space in such a way as to charge every symbol and hieroglyphic, every figural archetype, even the most abstract or decorative, with "earthly" or "heavenly" energy. So it will not seem arbitrary to talk about paint and paintings relating them to the theatre, particularly Mediterranean theatre, a place where music, architecture, and poetry have always intertwined, and then make reference to the sacred enclosure of the village and to the magic circle of the shaman, where society transcends its human limitations to be reincarnated in other forms of life, visible and invisible, natural and supernatural. Starting from the avant-garde but heeding his origins, Paladino succeeds in recomposing what has broken, that which is adrift, that which has belonged to the grand ancient and archaic tradition of art, even using obsolete materials and instruments without ideologically excluding any act of recovery, any "appropriation", any material or instrument from tradition, whether Western and not. Linguistic archaeology and cultural nomadism are his response to ideologies and globalization that have, in different ways, severed the ego from its origins and inner self. The reference and turning point with respect to the second avant-garde wave, the conceptualists and minimalists, is thus subjectivity, meant as the realm of sensitivity and imagination. It is the moment when – as stated in the title of a 1977 work – the artist withdrew to paint in solitude, incorporating fragments and scraps, contemporary and past figures and symbols (Giotto and Matisse, Gauguin and Piero della Francesca), and to give as much to painting as he does to sculpture, an unlimited and cyclical expressive and communicative power. In this sense, with Paladino, art (painting, sculpture, or installation) has regained its mythical or sacred, cultural and storytelling function. He brought together in the painting or sculpture an uninterrupted tale – *epos* – whose iconographic threads were broken in modern times. Every work by Paladino is like a landfall of Mediterranean culture and in turn a place for the encounter of languages from the most distant shores and ports in space and time. Each one of his works can be considered a pool of water, from whose rippled surface emerge the buried fragments of ancient civilizations and earlier beginnings, which then drag us back into the depths of their most original meaning.

In recent decades, major Italian and international museums have organized Mimmo Paladino solo exhibitions (Museo Pecci of Prato, Cà Pesaro in Venice, Capodimonte in Naples, New National Museum of Monaco, Palazzo Reale of Milan, Lenbachhaus in Munich, Kunstmuseum of Basel, and also museums in Lyon, London, and Los Angeles). His works are found in the world's most important public and private collections. Paladino has taken part in a number of editions of the Venice Biennale, where he had his own personal room in 1988. We must also mention the retrospective at Forte Belvedere in Florence (1993) and the installation *Montagna di sale* in Piazza del Plebiscito in Naples (1995). His installation of the work *Dormienti* at the Roundhouse in London dates to 1999,

with music by Brian Eno, and in 2011 there was a major exhibition in Milan at Palazzo Reale. His works have been exhibited at various locations in the cities of Brescia and Arezzo in two solo exhibitions in 2017 and 2020. Mimmo Paladino is the first contemporary Italian artist to have had a solo exhibition in China (National Gallery of Fine Arts, Beijing, 1994). He currently lives and works in Paduli (Benevento) and Rome.

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