

A Gift of Duration – Mimmo Paladino's Exhibition at the Givon Gallery, Tel-Aviv

By Nurit David

Here, (in Israel), where time is a tyrant that accelerates the heart beat by the dictate of the newspapers' titles, an exhibition of **Mimmo Paladino** is a gift of duration. Paladino opens for us a door to a time container of so vast dimensions that our present local troubles, receive their appropriate scale – they seem to be so petty. He teaches us a lesson in a sane assessment of our importance, and we are reminded of our debt towards others: others were here before us and around us, and we are asked for a bow of respect.

In Paladino's world everything touches everything - all are in close proximity: man, home animals and wild animals, old objects as new ones, nature and history, each has a debt towards the other; an old debt which forces us to take our fellow man seriously and induces on our existence a veil of sadness which awakens us towards responsibility and work.

Paladino, as other Italian artists of his generation - Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Sandro Chia and others, had their prime here, in Israeli art schools in the eighties, when they came bursting into the consciousness of young students - mainly via the mediation of the art theorist, *Achille Bonito Oliva*, who coined the term "**Transavantgarde**", to describe the Italian version of the big return to figuration in the nineteen eighties.

Yet here, not only the past is being constantly erased, but even those eighties, came to be stale history. In the face of the rich oeuvre created by Paladino since then up to the present, what stands out is the injustice of categories imposed from the outside for the sake of classification and sectioning. He spreads before us a vast personal and cultural scope in which as *Enzo di Martino* defines it "organic shapes and symbolic signs, natural and anthropomorphic figures, archaic imagery and culture of the contemporary, play an equal role in expressing an intense, personal and poetic world."

Man is the center of this world, yet not as a ruler and a destructor. Man's role is to imbue the world and all its dwellers with a wide spectrum of emotions and thoughts. Yes indeed, in Paladino's world, even horses and sheep do think. In his sculptures and paintings, we find often human figures with long arms spread out to embrace with compassion all that exists. It seems that these outstretched arms, are a creation of time, and they encircle not only nature around them, but also historical periods all the way back to Antiquity, and they are granted with a long term memory.

Such long arms are attributed to the windmills in Don-Quixote, a film version of which, directed by Paladino, is the center poll of this exhibition. Don-Quixote mistakes them for the arms of giants worthwhile fighting against. In the same time we will find in Paladino's works a representation of the past and of the misdeeds of time by showing figures whose arms are amputated, similar to those of antique sculptures. The stumps and the cut off heads, a repeated motive, are a representation of the Act of Creation, as they are the products of permutations and metamorphoses as well as the ones to define borders, intensify and create a focus to concentrate our look on, and they seduce us into a long observation.

Man is the one who leaves marks behind him, and Paladino uses every surface as a writing board. He chisels on the skin of people and animals, on their body and face, on the surface of tools, masks and objects, and of course on canvases. Turning the figures into writing surfaces, allocates them the status of tombstones; death is indeed an honorable guest in the artist's territory. It seems he has a deep attachment to the culture of mummies and painted signs of Ancient Egypt.

For one who sails in this manner on the seas of historical periods, death is not the end of matters. Paladino seems to dig into a source of rich humus from which he pulls out his images, a place where cultures had been submerged and others have grown to replace them. And the Christian culture, of which the resurrection is one of its foundations, is not one of his lesser sources of inspiration.

The film "Quijote" (2006), is Paladino's brave act to rewrite (like Borges's Pierre Menard?), Cervantes's famous novel about the nobleman who spends his days and nights reading, up to the point where his mind dries out and his thoughts get confused leading him to a hallucinatory journey for the protection of high values like honesty and loyalty, in the guise of a medieval knight, whose figure emerges as rising out of a book.

Rewriting, since Paladino's Don-Quixote is different from the novel by Cervantes. No chatter here and almost no reminder of the spirit of accidental adventures, as in the picaresque novel. At last, the ludicrous knight created by Cervantes, deserves his honorable title "The Knight of the Sad Countenance". As somewhat there is a feeling that this Don-Quixote, saturated with the pathos of a Greek tragedy, was written by Sophocles (via Pazolini?!), and not by the sober and ironical Cervantes.

With this Paladino not only brings the novel closer to his work, but his whole artistic work, in the light of the film, receives by it a different reading as if it had just been rewritten. This, in similarity to Pierre Menard, who had lived four hundred years after Cervantes – in spite of his word by word rewriting of Don-Quixote, identical to the original, the readers receive a different work of art, since the world of associations and connotations has changed and became wider. One can consider at present the entire oeuvre of Paladino, as leading towards *DON QUIXOTE, THE MAN OF LA MANCHA*, in his own very special interpretation.

In the film, Paladino's entire oeuvre becomes a place and the plot with all its characters, its animals, the tableau of nature and culture, are all revealed and spread out in this world - the world of his art. The film ends with a small clay figure, of which a similar one is shown at the exhibition, floating in the heart of a lake, like that Imaginary Island promised in vain to Sancho Panza.

Translated by Claude Aviram

