

Giulio Paolini

Fondazione Prada

Milan

29 October - 18 December 2003

On 29 October the Fondazione Prada inaugurates a major retrospective devoted to Giulio Paolini (born in Genoa, 1940) in its space at Via Fogazzaro 36, Milan.

Curated by Germano Celant in collaboration with the artist, the exhibition comprises around fifty works executed between 1960 to 1972: coming from various public and private collections, these are displayed together for the first time.

The historical and theoretical basis of the exhibition may be found in a project for an installation entitled *Ipotesi per una mostra* ('Hypothesis for an Exhibition') conceived by Paolini in 1963. This retrospective focuses on the artist's output from his solo show in Rome in 1964 until the one in New York in 1973, when the first monograph providing an in-depth analysis of his work was published.

"It should be pointed out that the works in this exhibition date from the earliest period of my long career" — Paolini has to say — "but this doesn't mean that the installation simply reflects what has already been seen: some of the stylistic features underlying this show seem to be outside time (or out of place). In particular, while, on the one hand, these works seem to find their voice here, on the other they seem to arrange themselves around the silence and void of a central primary nucleus. The works on display really rotate round something that doesn't exist or seems not to exist yet: I'm referring to the project for what was to have been my first solo show, *Ipotesi per una mostra* in 1963 (a project that at the time, for practical reasons, wasn't realized and that has now been made visible here)."*

Ipotesi per una mostra is located in the centre of the exhibition space so as to become a continuous point of reference for visitors as they walk around it. Like a sort of kaleidoscope in which the images surrounding it are reflected, this work — composed of four large transparent surfaces on which human figures dressed in black are reproduced with the silk-screen technique — continuously, as if by magic, attracts the spectator's attention. The surfaces surround an empty space, interposing themselves between the visitor and the 'central nucleus', which is, in any case, inaccessible: "The object is there, but it's not visible, we're not allowed to see it: certainly we can look at it, draw it, make our comments... but we're guests, not judges of what we confine ourselves to observing [...]"**

Around *Ipotesi per una mostra* a series of works are placed, in chronological order, in a sequence of spaces disposed radially that define what Paolini calls the 'enchanted castle' of the exhibition. The first work to appear, *Disegno Geometrico* (1960), is a seminal work for the artist, who invests a procedure of signs with a value that it does not have, but traditionally possesses: the squaring of space. For Paolini, *Disegno Geometrico* consists in the "decision to copy on a canvas, in the correct proportion, the preliminary step of any drawing — that is, the geometric squaring of the surface".***

The consequences of this rigorous and absolute formulation are to be found in a number of works executed in the early 1960s, as in the three *Senza titolo* (1962), in

which the interest of the artist is focused on the primary elements of the creative process: materials such as paper, canvas, brushes and stretchers become the structural elements of his artistic language. While the works mentioned are intended to investigate the preliminary orientation of the practice of art, other works, such as *Senza titolo* (1960), in which there is a tin of paint, or *Senza titolo (Plakat Carton)* (1961), in which coloured pieces of card are inserted, indicate that the significant entity forming the focus of attention immediately afterwards is colour.

In *E* (1963), Paolini places a portrait by Bronzino, *Eleonora of Toledo*, on a stretcher from which the image is slightly detached. This is the first work in which the artist addresses the problems associated with the theme of representation and the importance of this in the history of art. Through the use of reproductions and fragments, art is analysed, starting from its history, with reference to such artists as Lotto, Poussin, Bronzino, Ingres and Watteau. They are the source of inspiration for such works as *Giovane che guarda Lorenzo Lotto* (1967), *L'ultimo quadro di Diego Velázquez* (1968), *L'invenzione di Ingres* (1968) and *Poussin che indica gli antichi come esempio fondamentale* (1968).

Since 1965 the artist's figure has formed part of Paolini's output: the work 'detains' the artist and the investigation cannot be separated from his human form. Both coexist in a historical whole, so that osmosis is created between the work and the artist, as in the case of *Hi-Fi* (1965), in which both the outline of the artist at work and the canvas he is painting are covered with thick black paint, or in that of *Monogramma* (1965), consisting of a canvas shaped according to the form of the artist at work.

Since 1965 his interest in the artist's figure has often led Paolini to use photography, as in the case of *Diaframma 8* (1965), *1/25* (1965) and *D 867* in which, once again, he is present in the foreground: "With photography I am able to expand the fixed language to include in my inquiry the gestures and the figure of the artist".****

Paolini's works are characterized by a sense of enigmatic quietude and apparent simplicity that, in reality, conceals complexity of thought that cannot be easily or immediately interpreted. One of his most mysterious works is *Delfo* (1965), a self-portrait executed life-size in which the artist's face is partially hidden by a stretcher. The result is a disturbing work because impenetrable; in it, a series of transparencies establish a subtle link between canvas, stretcher, artist and spectator.

In 1966 Paolini had a solo exhibition at the Galleria dell'Ariete in Milan. In this case the field of inquiry regarded space perceived as an absolute entity. The works consisted of white canvases mounted on wooden stretchers that were adapted to the spatial borders of the room; the canvas was positioned according to the direction of the spatial inquiry, to the extent that it was concretely identified with the space. For example, *Ut-op* (1966), consisting of three identical square surfaces distributed according to the coordinates of a corner and placed on the floor of the exhibition space, appears to be a general spatial parameter.

Linked to the theme of perception and vision in general is the work *Quattro immagini uguali* (1969), consisting of four identical canvases displayed in the centre of the four walls of the room so that each canvas 'reproduces' the image of itself with regard to the others. However, the identity of the canvases and their specular correspondence allude not only to the reciprocal focalization of a datum with the same datum, but also to the infinity of the phenomenon of vision.

Like *Quattro immagini uguali*, the work *Early Dynastic* (1971) — four identical columns on which another four half-sized columns stand, placed at equidistant points along the diagonals of the room — also represents the infinite repetition of the process of investigation. The choice of the image is, as always, symbolic: “Neoclassicism meant the absence of a ‘new’ style, it summed up a past mode, renouncing the new form”.*****

The last work in chronological order to appear in the exhibition is *La visione è simmetrica?* (1972), one of the works on show at Paolini’s solo exhibition held at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York in 1972. With a reference to *Disegno geometrico*, in this case, too, the artist presents a visual perspective formed by a complex of nodal points converging metaphorically on the infinity of the artistic context.

The book, published by Progetto Prada Arte, considers Giulio Paolini’s artistic career from 1960 to 1972. The works, arranged by the artist into thematic groups that are not strictly in chronological order, are accompanied by a critical text by Germano Celant (first published in *Giulio Paolini*, Sonnabend Press, New York, 1972), which examines Paolini’s activity in this period. The book also contains a range of critical essays, reviews and interviews from the same period, as well as the artist’s own texts, his unpublished writings and comments on other works. The period taken into consideration is also documented by a series of illustrations of works and drawings, in addition to photographs relating to the more personal aspects of Paolini’s life.

* Giulio Paolini, *Ipotesi per una mostra*, exhibition catalogue, Fondazione Prada, Milan 2003.

** Ibid.

*** Giulio Paolini, interview with Germano Celant, in *Giulio Paolini*, Sonnabend Press, New York, 1972.

**** Giulio Paolini, interview with Carla Lonzi, in *Autoritratto*, De Donato, Bari, 1969.

***** Giulio Paolini, interview with Mirella Bandini, in *Prospects* no. 1, Milan, March 1972.

Exhibition info

<i>Title:</i>	Giulio Paolini
<i>Dates:</i>	29 October – 18 December 2003
<i>Venue:</i>	Fondazione Prada
<i>Address:</i>	Via Fogazzaro 36, Milan
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<i>Admission:</i>	free
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