

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Francesco Vezzoli *Teatro Romano*

Samuel Feldblum



Francesco Vezzoli, "TRUE COLORS (A Marble Head of the Resting Satyr, circa Late 1st century A.D.)," 2014. Ancient sculpture, pigments, casein, wax, varnish. Courtesy Prada Collection, Milan.
Photo courtesy of MoMA PS1.

MOMA PS1 | OCTOBER 26, 2014 – MARCH 8, 2015

Francesco Vezzoli is an artist whose work telescopes time. His needlepoint pieces starring actresses and models as Madonna with child, created in Italy in the late '90s, collide classic tropes with a more familiar, dynamic modernity. His short films, advertising movies that will never be made, *Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal's "Caligula"* (2005); perfumes that will never be worn, *GREED, A New Fragrance by Francesco Vezzoli* (2009); and politicians who will never run for anything, *Democracy* (2007) foretell a future that will never come and exists only in the present. *Teatro Romano*, currently on view at MoMA PS1, raises the stakes of this temporal toying. For the exhibition, Vezzoli acquired five statuary Roman heads and painted them as they may have been in their own time. Although the artist consulted classicists and art historians, catalogue essayist Clemente Marconi does not "think academic discussions matter to Vezzoli very much."

Vezzoli sometimes courts controversy, but Marconi's point is well taken: here the artist aimed for historical accuracy but does not need to hit his mark. The project is not about educating the viewer so much as reconstructing the way that we normally encounter history. This starts with the space: the heads, encased in glass, rest atop a series of plinths arranged in a receding V that invites the viewer in, an effect enhanced by a central colonnaded walkway. The room is dimly lit, with spotlights trained on the pieces, casting spindly shadows behind them and reflecting squares of light in front. The pieces are the actors in

this Roman theater, but we too are bathed in their glow. The viewer feels as though he has entered a temple, worshipping a suddenly contemporary past.

Unlike the gaudy, cartoonish colors of the concurrent *Transformations: Classical Sculpture in Color*, on view at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen—which also lays claim, plausibly but conflictingly, to historical fidelity—Vezzoli’s hues are mostly neutral and understated, giving a roughly life like appearance to the figures. Some of the heads sport scars from their journey through the ages, which remain unpainted—time is notoriously hard on noses. The color adds a dimension of vitality. The white marble relics to which we are accustomed advertise their dead-and-goneness even as we encounter them in real time; as a youthful blush is breathed back into these cheeks and white hair regains its pigment, we are reminded that these statues, like every ancient artifact, once existed in their own dynamic present moment. So did their sculptors, their models, and their public. History, of course, is nothing but a long series of such moments.

Not only does the color add vivacity, it likewise allows us to be more aesthetically discerning, as each work takes on particular characteristics. Romans, we are told, were captivated by the exotic strangeness of Egyptians; “TRUE COLORS (A Marble Head of Isis, Eastern Mediterranean, Roman Imperial, circa 1st Century A.D.)” (2014) sports an Egyptian complexion distinct from those of the paler busts surrounding it, especially the fairer features of a Roman woman—perhaps a goddess—set directly across the V. “TRUE COLORS (A Marble Portrait Head of a Man, Roman Imperial, Antonine, circa Mid 2nd Century A.D.)” (2014) stares dolefully back at the viewer, the hint of a smirk turning up the corner of his bearded mouth. If perched atop a living body, he could easily be found in Brooklyn today, or perhaps even curating shows at PS1. Careful coloration reveals asymmetries in clearer detail, peculiarities allowing for greater personality. Removed from what Marconi calls the “dreaded white army of Greek and Roman statuary,” the works become vessels that transport us to the time of their creation.

This transportation, though, depends on the purchase and subsequent alteration of a historical heritage often treated as a public good. Is Vezzoli’s work restoration, or is it desecration? Perhaps both. Those academics that aim for verisimilitude in their encounters with history may not rejoice to see such personal interpretations literally stamped on the objects of their study. But this is not Ai Weiwei dropping a Han Dynasty urn, realizing its current relevance by breaking it. Instead Vezzoli juxtaposes the ages by bringing us into the time of these statues rather than bringing them into ours, contemporaneity asserted through revival rather than through destruction. Even classicists could surely find value in the project of resuscitating the objects of their study. And they ought not worry—if they wait another two millennia, the heads will again fade to their more familiar hues.

Whether or not we paint our historical artifacts, we are always stylizing the features of history to fit some narrative or another—seeing these brushstrokes physically applied emphasizes this fact. We never encounter epochal snapshots truly on their own terms, unmediated; their very historicity ensures that they embody a story. Perhaps attempting to collapse temporal distances is then as close as we can come to a raw viewing experience. As Vezzoli’s heads stare at their own reflections in their glass houses, they must be more shocked than anyone to have regained their original vigor, to again be actors in our space-age theater, vibrantly reborn in this once-incomprehensible future.