

Patrizio Di Massimo *The Lustful Turk*

Gasworks, London 3 October – 1 December

In *The Lustful Turk (Harem)* (2012), four naked blonde ladies are stacked on top of one another, plump pink bottoms perfectly aligned. They are sitting on what appear to be old-fashioned balance scales, as if literally being weighed up for someone's delectation. There are lots of bottoms in Patrizio Di Massimo's recent paintings and objects. Entitled *The Lustful Turk*, the series was inspired by the eponymous late Georgian novel (published in 1828, just before the dawn of the Victorian era, but not widely known until its 1893 edition) that tells the bawdy tale of an English virgin abducted by an Algerian (the so-called Turk) and forced to join his harem – which she loves, much to the horror of her best friend back in England.

It looks as though Di Massimo had a lot of fun parodying nineteenth-century prudishness and moral hypocrisy. Crass innuendos abound, like the girl apparently giving a candle a blowjob or the painting of a pile of cushions with a pair of legs poking out, the shapes of the soft furnishings – erect bolsters, soft scatter cushions, snaking curtain tassels – mimicking the human orgy below. Knobbly toes and cheap puns make this more *Carry On* than Marquis de Sade.

Di Massimo heavily exploits the Freudian association of furniture and furnishings with

the female form. He has made two phallic sculptures, one tower of flesh-coloured cushions (bottoms or breasts, according to your fancy) interlaced with pompoms and more tassels, and a taller tower of deep purple cushions, the kind on which you imagine concubines reclining. The exhibition is dressed like a stage set, with wallpaper – black-and-white illustrations depicting oversize cushions, a candle, tassels and other fetish symbols – covering one wall, and a satin curtain in boudoir-pink with black pompoms lining another wall. Indeed, curtains appear in many of the paintings as a motif for revealing and concealing erotic fantasies, and as a reminder of the fictional basis of these works.

Di Massimo's films have previously dealt with the status of immigrants in his native Italy and also explored Italy's colonial legacy in Libya, one that was complicated by the fact that the country was only fully unified in the late nineteenth century. British colonial attitudes are an easier target, and Di Massimo doesn't hold back. The painting *The Lustful Turk (Bang Bang)* (2013) features a motley assortment of anthropomorphised, primitive sculptures in a museum, all unmistakably phallic and bunched together as for an erotic encounter.

The work neatly conflates the colonial fantasy of the well-endowed native with the lust for collecting trophy objects for collections back home. But for all the send-up of Britishness, Di Massimo allows some Italian elements to creep in: some echoes of de Chirico's neoclassicism, for example, or a section of a building that recalls the fascist architecture of Roman suburb EUR. If the British are constantly trying to repress their sexuality, the Italians must strive continually to keep their classical and fascist past at bay.

This is the first exhibition in a series of five at Gasworks, in which artists are asked to respond to Norbert Elias's 1939 seminal study of Western European manners and tastes, *The Civilising Process*. Di Massimo's contribution reminds us, as Freud did a century earlier, that the cost of Western civilisation is the repression of our basest desires and fears, while pointing to how the white, male, colonial violation of the 'dark races' ends up inverted – and excused – by tales of oriental males seducing white women. In an age of Internet porn and overt sexualisation, is the West more or less civilised than before? And are the British really any less repressed, or have we just forgotten to laugh at our insecurities and reserve? *Jennifer Thatcher*



The Lustful Turk (Haberdashery), 2013, oil on canvas, 200 × 270 cm.
Courtesy the artist and T293, Naples & Rome