

# Patrizio Di Massimo

IN CONVERSATION  
WITH JOÃO MOURÃO  
& LUÍS SILVA





The Lustful Turk (Blow), 2012, oil on paper, 30.5 x 22.9 cm Photo Roberto Apa  
previous page: The Lustful Turk (Mum The Turks Are Coming),  
2012, oil on linen, 152.5 x 112 cm Photo Roberto Apa

**Luís Silva/João Mourão** As we're writing this, sitting in our office, your show *Me, Mum, Mister, Mad*, is still on, and from where we are sitting we have a partial view of two of the three pieces that make up the exhibition, *Mad* and *Mum*. From where we sit, *Mister*, the third piece, isn't visible, but we know it's there. We would like to use this exhibition as an entry point to this conversation and ask you what led you to think of an exhibition as a family portrait.

**Patrizio di Massimo** I started using elements of decor in *The Lustful Turk*, a project composed of diverse works inspired by the infamous erotica novel of the same title published anonymously in England in 1826. In this body of work, cushions, tassels, tie backs, curtains and trimmings were treated as repositories of figurative evocations, allowing me to portray the body, and eventually some of the characters in the book.

The human figure has always been at the centre of my work but for some unknown reason I like to pay tribute to a sort of apologetic way of dealing with its image. I felt that the replacement that happens when domestic objects become substitutes for parts of our body was allowing me to be both figurative and abstract, and that it was more apt to suggest something rather than to simply illustrate it.

In between the presentation of *The Lustful Turk* project in Villa Medici (2012) and the one in Gasworks (2013) *I made Monologue for Two* (2013), a work in which the elements of furnishing were already thematised as mental burrows. More recently a similar process happened with *Inside Me* (2013), a work in which cushions embodied a rather psychological state and the body itself became an imaginative presence where only its extremities were visible.

When you invited me to think of a project for Kunsthalle Lissabon I was in the right moment to shift everything towards the portraiture of those constitutional elements of myself as a being – my family and the memories I have of them. I also must admit that the architecture of Kunsthalle Lissabon's space really inspired me in this sense. I felt that its domesticity would become part of my work if inhabited by such characters, since while occupying the space they would also render it. I abandoned their physical presence and arrived to define them as a combinatory system of elements in which the decorative meets the performative and the physical meets the virtual.

**(L.S./J.M.)** Biography plays a fundamental role in this exhibition. As you mentioned before, the show presents a portrait of your family, but by presenting a psychological depiction of each of your family members, through your memories of them, you seem to be tracing your own self-portrait. Would you say that your family defines you as a person and, consequently, this show depicts you?

**(P.d.M.)** I see this exhibition as a “neuro-furnishing” installation, in the sense that the space is induced by multiple synapses and their impulses are generated by a whole realm of abstracted memories. I don't really mean to portray my family members according to their visual or emotive features, but rather to get to a point where archetypes arise and everybody might feel a connection with those representations.

With the father (*Mad*), for example – I wanted to recreate the feeling when you are a kid and you see your father naked for the first time; that sort of embarrassed disgust mixed with physical questions that remains unexpressed inside the mouth.

The sister (*Mister*) is actually more similar to my childhood bedroom, in light blue denim and navy, than to hers. This portrait plays with that slip of genders that occurs in many phases of





The Lustful Turk (The Green Room),  
2012, oil on linen (109) Photo Roberto Apa  
opposite page: The Lustful Turk (Bang Bang), 2013, oil on canvas,  
200 x 270 cm Photo Matthew Booth



The Lustful Turk (Wallpaper), 2013, wallpaper, dimensions variable

growing up and is very defined by the relationship between brother and sister.

The mother (*Mum*) is simultaneously the most abstract and the most figurative of the pieces. I wanted to pay homage to her figure and depict it as an incumbent messenger, a blown trimming, a growing organism, a solid transparent object that ends up being more virtual than real. I don't know if all this together depicts myself, as you suggest, but I know that after executing the three portraits I didn't feel the need to make a fourth one. The exhibition certainly plays a lot with the Lacanian definitions of the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real so I could answer that my own self is still that desire to please my parents and to be that fully satisfying love-object that lives in them, inside them.

(L.S./J.M.) Besides exploring the subjective and intimate relation established with your own biography, and how that relation can be enacted (or performed) publicly, you seem to be addressing also one of art history's most established tropes, that of family portraiture. Portraits, self or otherwise, seem to be a recurring topic in your work, wouldn't you say?

(P.d.M.) Yes. I have made several self-portraits so far.

This has to do with the fact that my work has always been related to figuration, since the very beginning. I fell in love with painting when I was a teenager. I bought a book about Modern Art and I stared at paintings by Picasso, de Chirico and Dalí for years. Portraiture is of course the main genre in figurative art and in a way it is the genre that keeps questioning human nature extensively, despite the times. I believe that what I found in the paintings of those artists is also what I look for in my own work, keeping in mind that society, technology and our concerns have changed.

If you consider all this when thinking about my work it becomes evident why I emphasise so much objects that aren't as used in our society as before (like tassels, curtains, etc.) but that have defined, for many years, the relationship between people and their surrounding space, until they became claustrophobically traditionalist. They are a burden and if there is a touch of luxury fetishism in the use I make of them, they also conceal the possibility of self-expression, of being free, of being under the sunlight... and therefore of being eventually portrayed.

(L.S./J.M.) Going back a bit, both in time and in this conversation, you mentioned *The Lustful Turk*, a project that kept you busy for a fairly long time. We would like to discuss it a bit further because it seems to us that it signals a turning point in your practice. One in which those elements of furnishing and decor acquired a specific significance. What interested you in *The Lustful Turk*, and how did it serve as a catalyst for your recent work?

(P.d.M.) I first came across *The Lustful Turk* while reading Edward Said's *Orientalism*. In its introduction, Said makes reference to *The Lustful Turk*, which he describes as the "black book" of Western Orientalism<sup>(1)</sup>. Intrigued, I bought a reprinted edition. When first flicking through, I found it to be a very curious document. American academic Steven Marcus lucidly describes it as something like "a condensation of the stereotypes that the West produced about the Orient."<sup>(2)</sup> But its erotic, Oriental staging also fascinated me – you could say that I participated in the writer's fascination. And I did this despite having originally encountered the book through Said, knowing therefore that it was deeply rooted in the ill-informed authority of Western "knowledge" about the Orient.

I also remember that I could barely finish reading it because, with some notable exceptions,





Mister, 2014, cushions in denim, cotton and raw canvas, piping, trimmings, tassel, live performance, variable dimensions  
*opposite page:* Installation view of Me, Mum, Mister, Mad at Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon (top) Mad, 2014,  
 bolster in green wool with piping, bolster in pink suede, bolster in brown velvet with rabbit fur, birdcage, canary,  
 fake logs and stones, tassels, variable dimensions (bottom) Photo Bruno Lopes



it's actually quite mundane. The plot is very basic and there is little character development or depth. Formally however, it was the first epistolary erotica ever written and set a precedent for this form of erotic writing in the Orientalist tradition. The story goes that the heroine, an innocent English girl, writes letters back home to a friend about her adventures, with the plot unravelling through her pen. I was also greatly intrigued by the anonymity of the author, which led me to read the book as a kind of collective production of the West.

When I started drawing and painting in relation to the book I slowly started to put together an alphabet of elements. This came quite naturally and was informed by the Orientalist tradition. Imagining the harem interior, I became particularly interested in cushions, curtains, tassels, candelabra, which I began to use in paintings as substitutes for the human figures and body parts. In this way I created a sort of meta-language. There is a reconnection with language through the use of visual "figures of speech". In the same way that you can replace language with an image, I found I could replace a leg with a tassel, for example, or buttocks with a cushion. I also wanted these works unapologetically over-the-top because I don't think there is any reason to be apologetic. Racy as it might have been (or appeared), I had to follow through on my decision to make a project about this thorny subject, and I think, for me, that necessitated pleasure, playfulness and enjoyment. In retrospect I think that *The Lustful Turk* together with Buzzi's *Turandot* project were the basis for what my work is now.

(L.S./J.M.) Buzzi's *Turandot*, however, configures a completely different set of expectations, since it is more connected to ideas of architecture and scenography (or theatre, if you wish).

(P.d.M.) Indeed, but the figure of Tommaso Buzzi (the architect who constructed the architectural folly named Scarzuola) has been incredibly influential for my thinking and gave a precise meaning to the use of pre-modernist elements in my work. Buzzi was himself part of the modernist group as a young architect but refused to take commissions from the fascist party and as a consequence got exiled from high culture. After the Second World War he started being commissioned again and was eventually asked to decorate the interiors of houses made in the '20s and '30s to cover up the original design, which had become by then synonymous with an uncomfortable past. He consciously (and I add with iconoclastic manners) added pre-modern elements like mock eighteenth century curtains or renaissance fireplaces inside those spaces, creating a subtle political comment through a-historical aesthetic synapses. My appropriation of a similar linguistic code is intended to be seen inside this tradition and that's why I suggested that this project plus *The Lustful Turk* defined my current practice and the exhibition at Kunsthalle Lissabon. This become a proposition for the redefining of our relationship with questions related to national identity and possibly to overcome them with the creation of a world that is yet conscious but also extravagantly embedded in our unconscious.

Portrait of the artist as an old man, 2012, HD video, color, sound 11 minutes,  
installation view at T293 Rome Photo Roberto Apa



1. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Books India, New Dehli 2003 (1978), p. 24.
2. Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, Transaction Publisher, Piscataway 2008 (1964).

All works courtesy the artist and T293, Naples/Rome