

of Italian East Africa, about looted artifacts. The looping formula of petition and concession — in which the objects to be returned or kept become increasingly abstract and metaphysical — succinctly articulates the emptiness of political tokenism, and the absurdities of restitution in a post-colonial context, where much of what has been lost cannot be given back.

Homeland is a factor in shaping identity but so, too, is home as a family unit, and much of Di Massimo's work concerns the way in which domestic and political structures replicate one another (European colonialism itself being a deeply paternalistic, father-knows-best enterprise). The tongue-twisting title of his most recent body of work, 'Me, Mum, Mister, Mad' (2014) with its marauding capital 'M', points to an absent but omnipresent self at the centre of a familial cluster of three sculptures. In the paternal *Mad*, three enormous, sausage-finger bolster cushions in fleshy pink, brown and green slump over one another, lethargic and post-coital. *Mum* is a human-height curtain tassel, postbox red, attached by means of a snaking cord to a translucent veil of curtain with an ivy-draped pelmet. Curvily anthropomorphous, she seems to hover, watching warily on. *Mister* re-stages a similar sculpture, *Inside Me* (first shown in 2013 but taking its cue from the earlier painting *The Lustful Turk* [*Mum the Turks Are Coming*]), in which a pile of cushions, here in a palette of tomboy denims and clean whites, conceals a hidden performer, whose splayed limbs poked through for various periods of the exhibition's installation. Eyebrows are raised; Freudian and Lacanian inferences about family desire abound.

In Di Massimo's 'The Lustful Turk' series, domestic symbols like the cushion or the candlestick reflect something of the banality of the eponymous novel and the simplistic terms that we are often reduced to when trying to relate to what is foreign or alien (a 'domestication' of sorts). Here, uncannily animated by their outsize proportions, these familiar objects remind us that the darkest secrets are often found closest to home.

*Patrizio di Massimo lives and works in London, UK. Following a solo show earlier this year at Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon, Portugal, his exhibition at Rowing Projects, London, runs until 19 July. His work is also included in the group shows 'Don't You Know Who I Am - Art After Identity Politics', which runs at M HKA, Antwerp, the Netherlands, until 14 September. Last year, he had solo shows at Gasworks, London, and T293, Rome, Italy, and performed Monologue for Two at Fiorucci Art Trust, London, in December.*

*The artist courts our familiarity with certain historical tropes: you feel guilty for seeing — or being allowed to see — clichés played out so extravagantly*







Patrizio di Massimo

## Guilty pleasures at home and far away

by Amy Sherlock

*The Lustful Turk* is a slim, anonymous volume of orientalist erotica, published in Britain in 1828, just shy of a decade before Queen Victoria ascended the throne and commenced a period of empire-building on an unprecedented scale. The book tells the story of a kidnapped English girl's sexual awakening in the harem of the Dey of Algiers, as related in letters to a friend back home. The De Sadean pleasures that the girl, Emily Barlow, comes to derive from her captor – anal sex, for instance – proved particularly scandalous to the Christian, corseted world of British society. No matter that the Turk in question is not even Turkish, but Algerian. He stands for a generalized Other – the 'lascivious moor' of a literary tradition that stretches back to Shakespeare and beyond – shorthand for the fears of a nascent British imperial class, and its attendant sense of moral superiority. *The Lustful Turk* is a story about guilt and pleasure, and the deep and messy intertwining of the two.

The body of work of the same name that the London-based Italian artist Patrizio di Massimo produced in response to the novel might induce a similar sense of moral disorientation. Shown first at Villa Medici, Rome, in 2012 and subsequently at Gasworks, London, at the end of last year, it evokes a hedonistic fantasy of domestic Ottoman opulence through tactile sculptural pieces, including a stack of fleshy-pink cushions through which snakes a suggestively thick, tassel-headed rope (*Cushion no.3 [Portrait of Eliza]*, 2013), and wall-mounted curtains whose pleated valances evoke frothy hide-and-seek petticoats. The series also includes

giddy oil paintings of fetishistically cropped body parts, plump, rosy-pink stacked bottoms (*The Lustful Turk [Harem]*, 2012) and figures partially concealed behind curtains. In *The Lustful Turk [Mum the Turkes Are Coming]* (2012), tangled hands and legs poke out from a further heap of cushions, this time in an oily blue, as if there were a writhing, orgiastic meld of bodies beneath. The artist deliberately courts our familiarity with certain historical tropes: you feel almost guilty for seeing – or being allowed to see – such clichés played out so obviously, so extravagantly, as if we ourselves were conforming to a particularly ugly, if prettily rendered, historical type.

Di Massimo's work is very available – all confident lines and legible symbols – but it's superficial straightforwardness makes it deeply problematic. Does the use of fabrics and furnishings, both real and represented, reduce the harem to an essentially domestic scenario – albeit one that differs radically from the monogamous, primogenital Western paradigm – casually eliding its repressions, its miserable sexism? Are the confident, supple lines of Di Massimo's sketches and paintings too playful, too effortless, to contain such dense subject matter? He doesn't seem to be taking the moral high ground – if anything, there is a sense that he, too, has been seduced by this orientalist way of looking. You feel this in the sheer indulgent excesses of the imagery: the arch-suggestiveness of a firm red tongue straining towards the indented pucker of a cushion in the painting *The Lustful Turk (Cushions)* (2012) or a stack of black velvet cushions

(*Cushion no.7 [Portrait of Ali, Sultan of Algeri]*, 2013), piled so high that it might topple over.

Di Massimo's work could be read as either refreshingly honest about orientalism's longstanding allure, or hopelessly pessimistic in its surrender to the seductions of tired, ugly tropes. Or both, which is perhaps truer to the complex and conflicted psychology of a 'global' West that is trying, simultaneously, to remember and forget its recent past. In the case of the artist's home country of Italy, recent events in North Africa have forced it into a daily confrontation with its colonial legacy – in the form of the boatloads of asylum seekers who set out from Libya in the hope of washing up on Europe's southernmost outposts. However, at least until recently, there has been relatively little post-colonial discourse dealing with the specifics of the Italian imperial project. Di Massimo's film *Oae* (2009) reflects on this lack. It mingles his own footage of contemporary Libya and its Roman ruins with shots from *Lion of the Desert* (1981) – a fictionalized portrayal of Libyan resistance leader Omar Mukhtar, who was captured and hanged by the Italian military in 1931, which was censored in Italy when it was first released in 1981 – to produce a drifting narrative of schizophrenic imperial identities and national amnesia.

Another work, which comprises a wall text and 120 accompanying drawings, *The Negus said: 'Give Me the Lion, Keep the Stele!'* (2010), begins with an exchange that took place in 1969 between the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and the 5th Duke of Aosta, heir to the last Viceroy

1  
'Me, Mum, Mister, Mad', 2014, installation view at Kunsthalle Lissabon

2  
*The Lustful Turk (Harem)*, 2012, oil on linen, 1.5 x 1.2 m