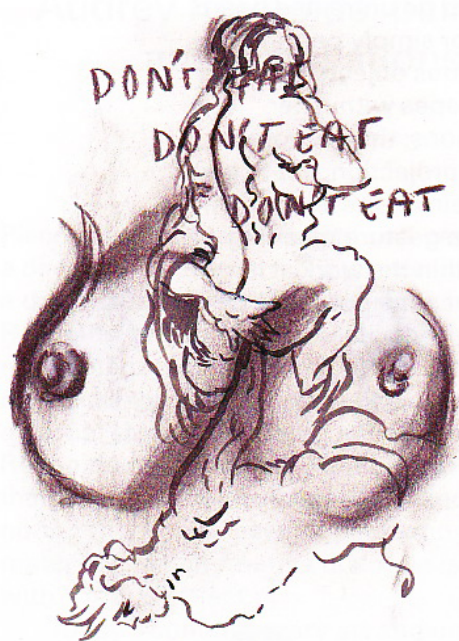


PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO

Rebecca Geldard looks at the work of this young Italian artist



From 'The Negus said: "Give me the lion, keep the stele!"', 2010, 120 drawing on paper, pre-spaced vinyl text

At Art 42 Basel's Art Statements this year, a number of presentations explored political territories and pushed the boundaries of their art fair context. At Neue Alte Brücke's booth, Simon Fujiwara replicated the interior of his parent's Spanish hotel bar (run in the 1970s under Franco's rule), while at Naples gallery T293, Italian artist Patrizio Di Massimo presented a painting-based project concerned with the restitution of ancient African relics taken by the Italians during the fascist invasion of Ethiopia.

This new breed of artist-historiographers appear acutely aware of their conceptual inheritance, whether in terms of the politics of display, the history of framing artifactual data

as art, or cultural memory. Di Massimo, like Fujiwara, has already become an important name in this ever-expanding canon which includes artists such as Marine Hugonnier, Jeremy Deller, Anri Sala who all query the construction of history. A 2009 graduate of the Slade, his Art Basel solo platform suggests there is nothing ordinary about Di Massimo's arrival. His Slade show *Ten Little Niggers* has affinities to the student work of 2003 Royal College of Art graduate Haris Epaminonda. While both artists are concerned with the legacies of their national cultural history, it was the audacious approach to their presentations, in contrast with the more familiar student shock tactics, that offered something new.

Di Massimo's list of recent solo and group projects (at venues such as the Whitechapel, London, Witte de With, Rotterdam and GAM, Turin) is impressive, but also tells a curious curatorial story. Given his investigation into Italy's colonial past, it is interesting to see the different ways an artwork might be interpreted as part of an exhibition strategy, illustrating a mythological perspective on the past perhaps, or showing an anthropological legacy. He recently explored this territory as co-curator (alongside curator Vincent Honoré), of *More Kicks Than Pricks* at the David Roberts Art Foundation, London. But essentially his practice, as several key curators and critics have noted, extends beyond the politics of European conflict, and calls into question the dominance of, and bases for, Western perspectives on cultural production. On paper it can sound difficult to access, or 'worthy', but there is a seductive flipside to the scholarly formality of his film, performance and installation projects; a lightness of touch at odds with the perceived authority of particular representational tropes and aesthetic conventions, from documentary film-making to museum protocol.

'Oae', 2008, is an ambitious three-channel video work of Di Massimo's travels through Libya and forms part of his ongoing research into Italian history, specifically the colonisation of Libya and Ethiopia in the first half of the 20th-century. While he has chosen to confront a period his country would rather forget, he does not seek to draw conclusions, rather, acknowledges the cultural complexity of the situation and the subjective and corruptible nature of facts. Working with documentary, travelogue and cinematic conventions, he creates a fragmented portrait of invaded Libyan sites (Tripoli and Leptis Magna, a UNESCO-protected Roman settlement) that cannot be

shoehorned to fit any single political or historical agenda. Archive footage of Italians executing prisoners of war taken from Mustapha Akkad's 1981 film *Lion of the Desert* (banned by Italian authorities in 1982), contrasts vividly with those of Leptis (a de Chirico realm of Roman ruins with a mind-bendingly complex geo-political history), remnants of fascist rule in Tripoli and the soporific effects of a filmic drive along the coastal road – a parting reminder of the artist's passenger perspective.

Negotiating Di Massimo's dense practice is like reading a loosely connected series of novellas – individual works through which shared motifs, subject areas and trains of thought can be traced. He has commissioned horsemen to gallop between sites of power/knowledge and imperialist equine monuments in several European cities, and has re-scripted museological tours to reveal the subjective anthropological layers of Italy's history. His authorial position is necessarily ambiguous: it's important that the viewer does not fix him in the mind's eye as an authority figure or revisionist mediator, but recognises the inherent non-neutrality of any human narrative. In 'Oae', shaky handycam moments give Di Massimo's ghostly operator's game away to frame what we see; while his Picasso-esque drawings of African men, based on illustrations for an Agatha Christie novel originally published as *Ten Little Niggers* in 1939, appear to be exquisitely rendered signatures of odd intent.

The closest one gets to Di Massimo himself, is via the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo commission 'Duet for Cannibals', 2010, a short film in which he negotiates with an African man

on how far both will go (for art and money) to make a re-enactment of a drawing depicting one man's face inside another's buttocks. Here, the artist's presence is key to the shifting subject-object tension and the resulting work.

Di Massimo, currently a resident of De Ateliers, Amsterdam, is also a prolific writer. These texts might be perceived as another layer of his practice, for they offer curious entry points into his research methods and the theory that shapes them. But they are neither necessary to, nor stand-ins for, his delicate manipulation of images, situations and materials. Printed words in this format do not perform the required intellectual dance between critical and personal perspectives that keeps a subject being thought about, rather than being sunk into an analysis of its making.

Language (and many other constructs for meaning) was pushed to its limits in *More Pricks Than Kicks*, a wry and experimental group show taking its title from Beckett's first book of short stories. The artists (including Di Massimo, George Condo, Bethan Huws), all pursue forms, ideas and material states to points of collapse, giving rise to a sense of crisis or exhaustion with the status quo. The exhibition also marks a turning point for Di Massimo away from the vast body of research that has sustained his practice.

The work, 'The Negus said: Give me the lion, keep the stele!', 2010, is the final one in his recent series. Based on a 1969 conversation between Haile Selassie, the Negus of Ethiopia and the Duke of Aosta, it is likely a reference to the almost comic history of stolen African relics, the Lion of Judah and the Obelisk of Axum (the latter returned in pieces between disputes and reassembled in 2008). The interpretive space between past and present, fact and fiction, opened up by Di Massimo's work, is littered with references to a much wider, defiantly non-linear political history. This polite-looking but irreverent series of witty hybrid motifs, fashioned out of eastern and western iconography, recalls a period of flux between dominant ideologies, post WWI and highly relevant to today. Shown here in full (120 drawings), the work is a rainbow-soaked inventory of the visual languages Di Massimo has incorporated to date.

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Patrizio Di Massimo, Stedelijk Museum Bureau, Amsterdam, Maison Rouge, Paris and solo show, White Fish Tank, Ancona



'Untitled (Thoroughbred)', 2010, performance