

Paolo Consorti – cyberspace mythographer

Australian audiences might be forgiven for imagining that Paolo Consorti is the post-modern incarnation of Sydney Surrealist James Gleeson. Notwithstanding Surrealism's prominent role in his practice, Consorti, however, is quintessentially an Italian contemporary artist, whose antecedents include the filmmaker Federico Fellini, countless Renaissance painters and the poet Dante Alighieri. In tandem with this rich history, Consorti is also quick to declare his desire to construct a mythic framework through which to critique contemporary urban culture. According to the artist, "My creative instinct is to look for a vision of the world, to bring together in a single image the contradictoriness of the present, to tell with irony the chaos of our consciousness, using a language that takes hold of the tools of contemporaneity."

In common with Fellini, Consorti employs a host of naked and semi naked actors, cavorting through bizarre scale-model sets. Yet despite their obvious eroticism, like the characters in Dante's *Inferno*, none of the figures appear to consummate their lusty aspirations. Sex, in Consorti's panoramas is a lost art, replaced instead by its simulacra. At this point, the artist's deployment of leotard wearing clones, who appear as both participants and facilitators in his fleshy festivities, reveal themselves as the neo-humans of a post-internet age. Constructed with the aid of digital technologies, it is easy to locate Consorti's *Inferno* within the abstracted topography of computer generated cyberspace. Indeed, in light of the proliferation of Internet chat rooms and fantasy sites, along with their concomitant ability to evoke a global unconscious, it would appear that Consorti's strange imaginings are not without their significance. Whilst one might naturally ask what relevance they have to the political and environmental challenges facing the world today, as signifiers of disconnection, both from reality itself and from the fulfilment of human desires (as indeed most dreams are reputed to be), one readily comprehends Consorti's intent. In common with Fellini's profoundly excessive 'Satiricon', Consorti's bacchanals are constructed with an eye to catharsis.

Though for many of his commentators, Consorti's fantastical visions contain their own internal logic, on closer investigation, their significance as cultural critique becomes apparent through comparison with what they are not. As signifiers of social discontent, Consorti's work is concerned also with the possibilities of reconnection, not only with the self but also with the rich history upon which contemporary society is created. That Consorti chooses to draw, quite conspicuously, on the canon of Italian painting distinguishes his practice from contemporary arts widespread disavowal of its historical foundations.

On first inspection Consorti's work may appear overwhelming, however, certain early pieces provide some signposting. In *Lovers*, 2002 a man, surrounded by a desolate landscape, copulates with an inflatable doll. In *The Truth*, 2004 a lone clone languidly reclines in a spongy ball of

flowers, hovering over what may be an idealised cloud-scape or simply a bowl of arbitrarily sculpted ice-cream. In a passing reference to Caravaggio's *The Conversion of St Paul*, c.1601, Consorti, in his work *Visione*, 2002 borrows from the structural elements of the Renaissance master's composition, whilst simultaneously obliterating its rich celestial light. Across each of these works, sex, truth and illumination are rendered as unobtainable ideals – their purgatory, and ours, is conjured in the language of a B-grade horror movie, in which the tacky sets are of improbably diminished scale. In works such as *Zoo*, 2003 and *Running*, 2003 – both of which parody the contemporary cult of fitness, we see countless naked figures engaged in sporty rituals of pursuit. As we now come to expect, Consorti's figures are, as Nietzsche first suggested, condemned to an eternal round of hollow and soulless action.

Whilst for the artist, such scenarios may be seen as a “metaphor for reality and the human condition”, his imaginings are not entirely removed from the possibilities of engagement. Alert to the complexities of the traditions upon which he draws, Consorti is keen to emphasise the importance of his direct physical involvement in creating these pieces. In constructing his artworks, Consorti shifts between what has recently been termed the directorial mode – a process utilizing actors in constructed situations, and production techniques involving computer generated collage and surrealist juxtaposition. Following this process, the individual works are then completed with passages of painting, prior to being sealed with a final layer of glaze. According to the artist, “This manual involvement with the work [through painting directly onto the canvas] gives me a almost physical link with the painting; it's a little like giving birth, seeing it come out of your hands...” For audiences, the impact of this detailing can really only be appreciated through viewing Consorti's work in real life, where the presence of the finished piece can be fully comprehended. (Although this should go with out saying, it is unfortunately not uncommon for digitally generated works to be indistinguishable from their reproductions in catalogues and the like. Not so Consorti's!) Here, the work's liminal conditions, between the virtual and the real, the banal and the metaphysical, underlie the artist's position as a commentator of contemporary life in both its conscious and unconscious manifestations and as a keen observer of the fluidity between these separate yet interrelated states.

Damian Smith
January 2007