

SISLEJ XHAFA, FROM NAPLES TO TORONTO

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Madre's museum in Naples dedicated him a (still ongoing) solo exhibition; not only, he will participate in the collective exhibition Rebus from July 21st with a work at Simon Lee Gallery in London and he is now at The Power Plant in Toronto with the Rearview Mirror collective show- New Art from Central and Eastern Europe. Let's talk about Sislej Xhafa, Albanian artist who for years worked on the concept of immigration and social reflection with irony, provocation and much wisdom...



Published on Tuesday, July 12th, 2011. It has aroused much controversy since 2003 with Padre / father / baba / pate Pio, artwork carried out by Sislej Xhafa (Pec, 1970, lives in New York) on the occasion of the exhibition The Nature of Art, a traveling exhibition curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, which took place in different areas of the Campania region. The work of the Albanians was then placed in San Lorenzello (BN), by the side of other site-specific works of international renowned artists who have participated in the project, such as Enzo Cucchi, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Ettore Spalletti and John Armleder. The work, while not being provocative, still made quite a stir, dealing with a religious theme and therefore a very delicate matter. The fulcrum of the controversy lies in the similarity that the gigantic face of Padre Pio would have with an extra-terrestrial, and the place deemed "unfit" to a holy work. Thus, a blasphemy act that some have attributed to Xhafa, who instead would have simply given his interpretation of the portrayed Saint having always had "a direct relationship with reality, with

respect and sensitivity to the locals ... it is the people themselves who make the living landscape so beautiful. " A great responsibility, the one taken by this Albanian artist, who never wanted to offend the people with whom he shared his art, but rather to pay homage and to share his work. A new icon then, a new image of the world's most popular saint, which will arouse controversies about himself up until America. In fact the work flew to Canada and more specifically in Toronto, at The Power Plant, which hosts high level contemporary art exhibitions since 1987. Many artists have exhibited here, including Christian Boltanski, Louise Bourgeois, Tony Cragg, Anish Kapoor and Nancy Spero. Sislej Xhafa therefore will participate in the collective Rearview Mirror - New Art from Central and Eastern Europe, curated by Christopher Eamon focused on works from artists of the "new" generation of Central and Eastern Europe. Some names? Pawel Althamer, Anetta Mona Chisa, Anna Molska, Deimantas Narkevicius and Johnson & Johnson, all gathered in one big exhibition in which past and future are viewed - as the title suggests it- through the "mirror".



Silvia (2010), Sislej Xhafa

All young artists, from which Eamon wants to bring out the vision of those years which were so difficult for Soviet Europe, through the hard faces of the leaders that these youngsters saw on the news - as Gorbachev - and that they learned through the news, one above the one related to the fall of the Berlin Wall. We are in 1989, the year in which American historian Fukuyama regarded as "the end of history." But how was this "end" considered by artists who were teenagers in those years? How did they store and process individually their "end of history" if one can talk about end? The curator responds and presents 22 artists, each with

their own stories, their country of origin among Estonia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Different paths of life and art, as well as the means used to express: video, installations, performance, sculpture and painting. A "fight" against the uniformity of a single thought and a vision embracing a plurality of forms and ideas, where everyone can express themselves freely. Here, therefore, that younger and less known artists will sit next to world famous artists and a few years more experience. What they have in common is the fact that they all leave their mark as a result of geographical and political changes related to the past, either starting from their own personal story or different contexts. It's the case with Sislej Xhafa that chooses to present the work of Padre Pio, the Italian saint that has changed the lives of many



Untitled, Sislej Xhafa

people around the world. The monumental head that the visitor can enter through a back door incorporating the work itself represents a physical proximity as well as a spiritual one. Speaking of the work the artist has repeatedly stressed that it represents "all religious figures that pervade culture, religion and ethnicity ... Padre Pio is the mystical aura that transcends not only spiritual messages, but also social -political-economic ones. "One can not imagine such a work without thinking about the context for which it was intended: a huge open space in San

Lorenzello and later to Suardi Park in Bergamo, during the "Urban Art" project that has seen the integration of other public works of artists such as Mimmo Paladino and Michelangelo Pistoletto.

The decision to present the image of the saint of Toronto in Pietrelcina may seem strange, but it represents the artist's desire to appear without a specific identity, or rather through a "multi-identity," a citizen of the world in every sense. Just remember the Venice Biennale in 1997, to which he participated illegally in order to denounce the absence of an Albanian pavilion. On that occasion he appeared dressed as a football player of the Albanian national team, a radio broadcast of a football match and of course a flag. He would invite people to participate. An ironic action behind which lurks the artist's need to talk about human rights, dignity, and immigration issues related to identity and his past in Kosovo, including the Balkan conflicts and internal wars.

In short Sislej Xhafa in his "mirror" with "his" Padre Pio also saw a little part of Italy.

curated by giulia fontani

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