

THE EYE OF POWER

The works of Giulio Paolini

Paolini's recent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, was an important indication of the emergence of a new approach to the 'image' in the practices of certain contemporary artists. The images Paolini produces are reproductions, copies, assimilations which in fact are the fragmented versions of original art-historical schemata re-assembled under a new law. Paolini is aware of the legacy of perspectival techniques inherited from the Renaissance period.

Art of the Renaissance maintained the franchise on perspective and its subsequent usage today. It is a device which has been used as a framework to determine man's interpretation of perception and of reality. The picture-space is dependent upon man's central position within the universe. The human dimension was always the 'absolute measure'. Perspective is basically the illusionistic device whereby a 3-dimensional world is represented by a 2-dimensional image. 'The impression of a slice of life ... a space through which the mind is free to wander'. (from 'Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space' — John White). A single individualised means of looking bound within the constraints of a framed viewing area. Paolini sets out to challenge man's perception through this 'ideally ordained world' by challenging the abstraction of a pre-ordained vantage point on the world.

Paolini's work links the reproduction of perceived pictorial space with the art-commodity as itself reproducible. His work seems to parallel Walter Benjamin's interests in the essay 'A work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', especially in the idea that the 'historical testimony' of art is affected when the authority of the object is 'jeopardised' by reproduction. For Benjamin the 'aura' of the unique art-object is dispelled by reproduction. Paolini seems almost to evoke the negative 'aura' of reproduction itself. He is questioning the point at which art impinges on our perceived reality. It is here that his images mirror broader cultural tendencies. The fragmentation of the picture space becomes the means of approaching a reality (of contemporary life) which is fragmented by consumer culture. He dramatises the descent of the art-work into commodity — the art work as ready-for-reproduction.

Chimera II (1975) involves 2 adjoining reversed canvases which reflect the perspective of the gallery space. Miniature canvases are with the overall illusionistic space of the piece, primed and perhaps ready for painting on. At first indication *Chimera II* provides not so much an open

window on which a 'view' will be painted, but an open-ended mirror on which a story will unfold. The mechanism is set. The familiar 'perspective technique' predicts the probable utilisation of the interior canvas. Such spatial-arrangements become the 'blue print' and definition of accepted modes of perspective procedure past and present. (A methodology of practice). The philosophy of Michel Foucault (notably the essay 'Eye of Power') has an obvious influence on Paolini's work. Foucault would pronounce here "... the history of space is the history of the forms of power". In one sense the image evokes the initiations of 'universal visibility' as organised around a 'dominating and observing gaze'. Paolini however gives no answers but only analyses the problematic; only the signifying power structure set up by familiar usage of space is looked at. The spectator has to complete, re-conquer and rediscover the spatial language.



Cratilo, 1978

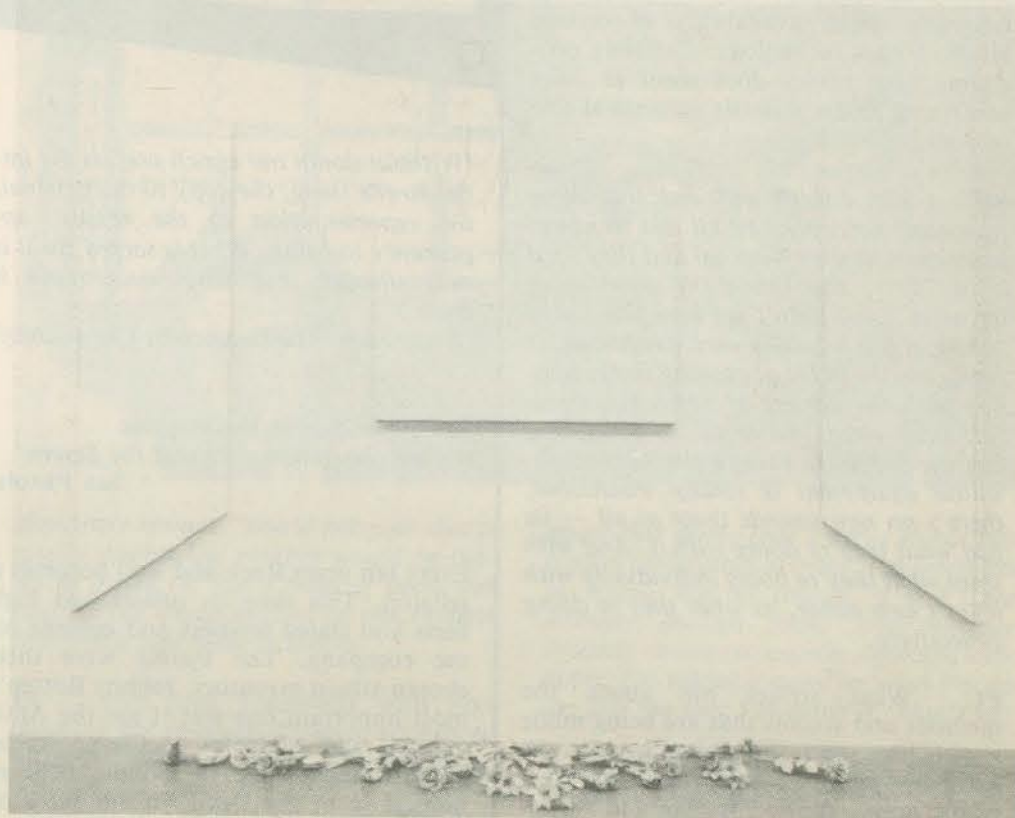
Chimera II, 1975

Chimera II in its action reminds me of a two-way mirror with a hole in the centre — so ultimately there is no difference between the observer and the observed. The presence of the spectator is reflected, while being seen seeing. The statutory mechanism is by-passed. "The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognise in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking" (Eye and Mind, Primacy by Merleau Ponty). Confronting *Chimera II* it is almost as though one is caught within an illusory 'no man's land', a slither of space where the human dimension ceases to dominate the measurement and interpretation of time and space.

The installation work '*Parnasso*' (1979) initially provides 3 blank canvases

herent part of the narrative strategy. Evidence of applied human scale (other than the spectator) is drawn onto the 'back-drop' of the gallery wall. The almost universally familiar image of a classical Greek figure visits the 'landscape' of the installation. The player enters the stage left. The adjacent upright canvases, similar to the wings on a stage, delineate the demarcation zones (arrival and exit) and therefore subsequently the framed positions of the viewing audience as well.

Plastic flowers, ornamentations, spew out into the real world. Free gifts, artificial ornamentations presented to the onlooker courtesy of the contents of the pictorial narrative. '*Parnasso*' perhaps provokes the inadequacies of the viewers' fulfilment. S/He is caught between a



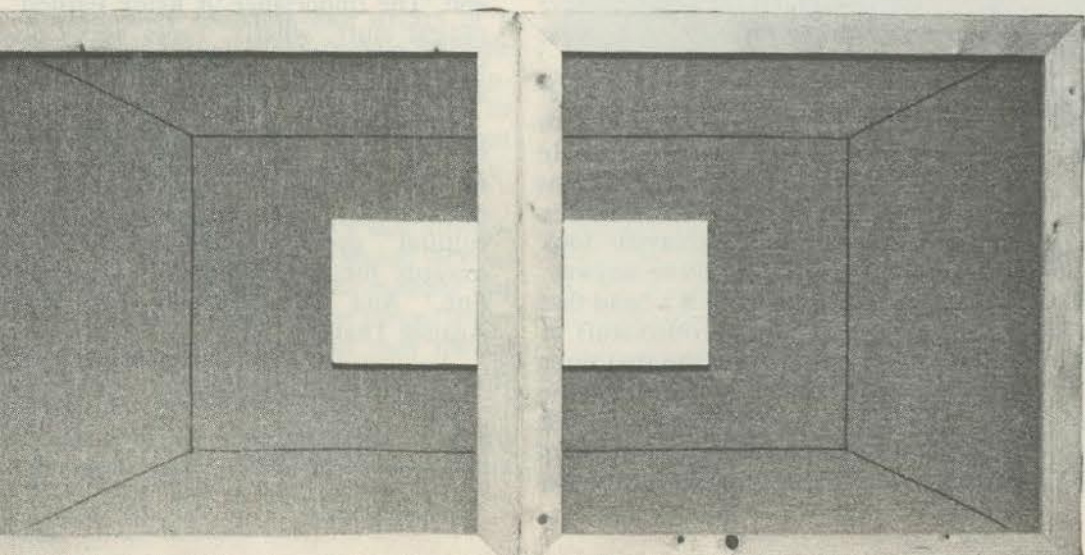
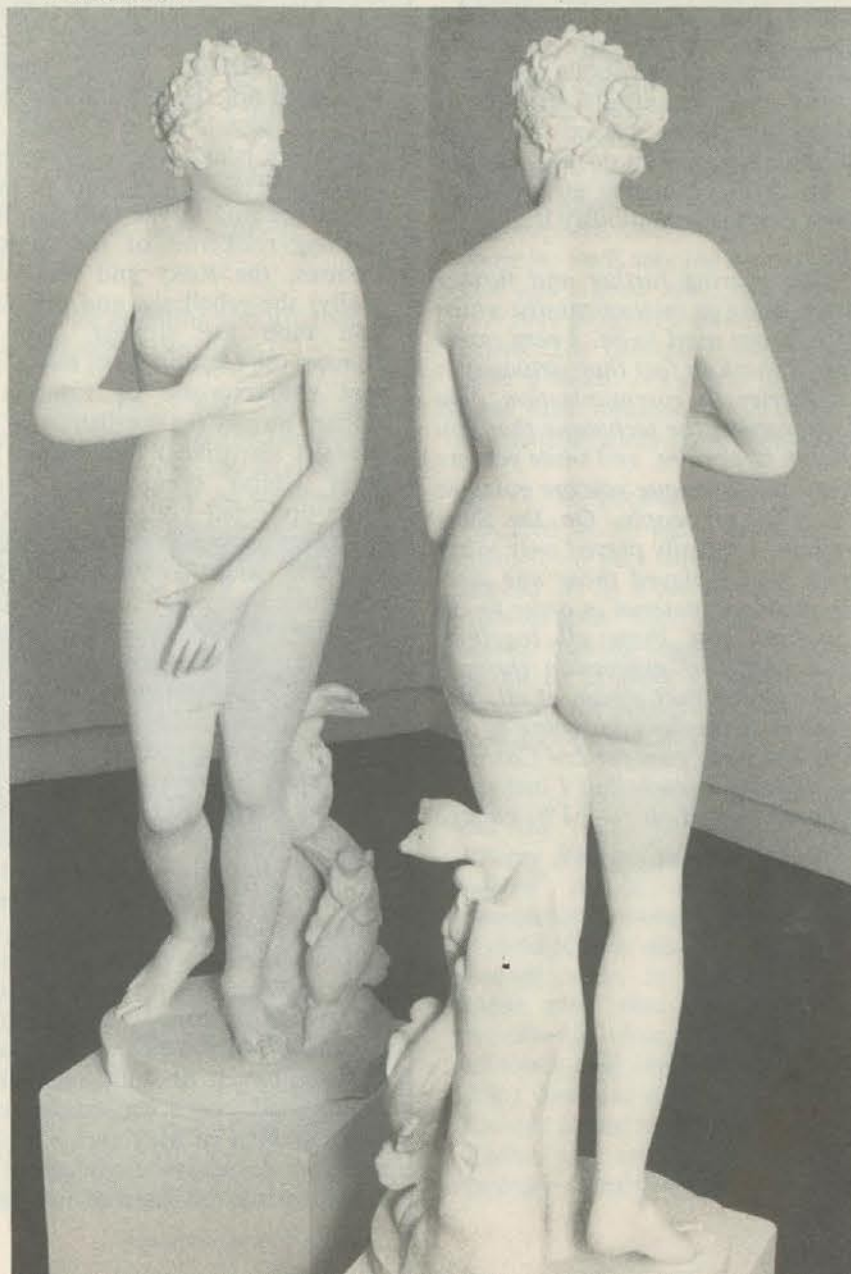
Parnassus, 1979

which mimic the recession of the gallery (room) in which it is shown. This notion of reflected-reproduced perspective is altered however, disjointed and re-arranged. The gallery space immediately becomes part of the 'narrative'. The audience can no longer claim an individualised means of looking at the work, as they too have become an in-

never-ending cycle of reality and perceived reality in which the onus is on her/himself to interpret an escape route from this tautology of indifference.

'*Parnasso*' as event is dissected and unfolded, but there are no real conclusions or revelations. The spectator is placed in the limelight and becomes the guest actor within the field of vision.

Mimesis, 1976



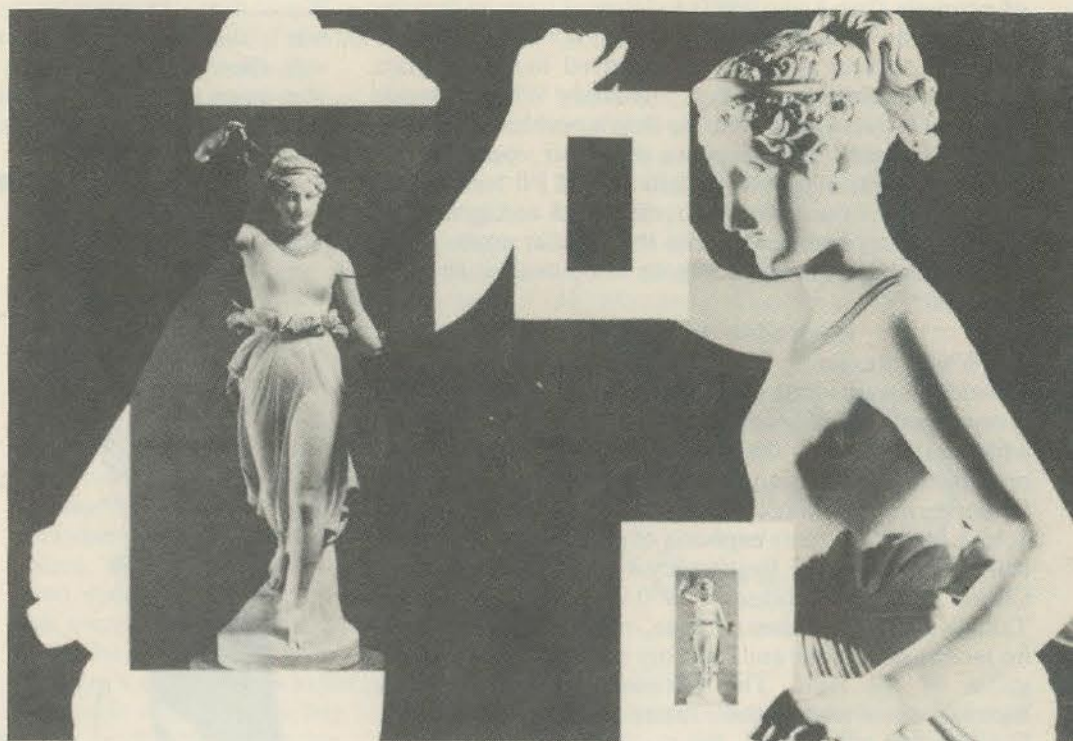
Mimesis (1976); comments by the artist:— 'The illusion that has dogged the artist since time immemorial, namely that of translating his own image into another that has more significance and is thus less precarious, is not all unconscious. The gaze, fixed on a picture of a sculpture, is directed neither at the maker, nor at others; anything else, nor does it allow of one or more viewpoints, but it reflects on itself the question of its own presence'

'*Cratilo*' (1978) incorporates a life-size linear image (again an assimilation of a classical figure) drawn directly onto the gallery wall. Superimposing an artificial gilt frame captures a portrait-like stance. The frame provides a portrait but as a structural device it dislocates the totality of the figure. The elaborate framing seems almost clumsy in its artificial frozenness, against the unframed linearity which still seems to bear some trace of motion, of narrative left behind by the framed space. Inside this picture space, a smaller fragmented collage of the same figure superimposes on the line drawing on the wall. It is at their convergence (at the frame) that the two aspects of the interpretation of the image are brought into conflict. Any interplay of narration between is blocked. As in the pieces of collage, the onlooker's means of access is cut and pulled apart. Perceived aspirations become reflected back to the spectator. The viewer has to re-evaluate his/her own position as 'pourvoyeur' to the given image.

If Paolini re-questions the 'science of painting' as ordained by the Renaissance, then his answers are in the poetics of looking. The integration of various sciences, anatomy, mathematics, which contributed to the adaptation of pictorial perspective during the Renaissance, have today become the elemental forms of social constraint which inter-determine and oversee our means of perceiving reality. This is what at this point in history makes space one of the dominant areas of concern in recent developments in art. To challenge the dominant form in which space is made to unfold subjectively, is to challenge our most deep-rooted orientation to the world. As Foucault points out, it is to challenge power relations of the most all-encompassing kind — those of the power of the eye (of being seen seeing oneself etc). Nineteenth century philosophy dealt dominantly with the issue of time, philosophy is awakening to the problem of space, but, like Bachelard (in his *Poetics of Space*) finds that the articulation of space must finally be with image.

Artists are beginning to think about spatial issues again but from the vantage point of seeing it as part of a whole machinery of production. Rediscovering the image and pictorial/spatial constraints in the technologisation of the image (mass reproduction) is in its cultural fragmentation. This is what makes it radical.

D.A. Williams



Palace of Delusions, 1976

THE BEAT AND BEYOND

'You always learn to dance for yourself on the off beat of the official world'

Vaneigem.

'So its probably better to just keep on dancing. Even if you can't work it all out, then even if its all going to blow up in 4 years time then I'd rather have a good dance while I can.'

The Beat in NME.

The summer of 1980 eeks a living out of stuffy all-nighters in what used to be Left-trendy cinemas, selling apple juice to dissolute punks, mods, youth with nowhere better to go at 3 o'clock on a hot Saturday morning. The menu is a combination of tired *Au Pairs* singing their own numbers well but simulating Janis or maybe Etta James and arriving at neither's brilliance. As dessert there is the compulsive nostalgia of Kenneth Anger's 'Scorpio Rising', seen first in 1967 at the Arts Lab in a thriving bohemian Covent Garden, lying on foam rubber after attending a course at the Anti-University on Underground Communication Theory. The Shirelles sing 'my boyfriend's back' and the leather bikes roar towards death, an apocalypse of shredded male flesh, fetishism writ large on the swastika-ridden card table. A taudry tale come full circle to the obsessions of a youth torn between optimistic idealism and conservative despair.

In the summer of 1980, scanning the music papers, attending occasional gigs, buying the rare L.P., there's no longer the haunting sense that maybe one's missing out on the more intricate, innovative trends in rock or popular music. It isn't there on the scale it was in 1957, 1967 or 1977 — whether commercially or in the cell-like basements of our local pubs.

Cultural Revolt

In '57 there was the rock heyday of Gene Vincent, Little Richard, Fats Domino and the release of Elvis' first film 'Love Me Tender'. In '67 the Stones were psychedelising themselves in Lennon's image of Strawberry Fields. Dylan was in his element with Highway '61 Revisited and above all on the pop scene Procol Harum produced 'Whiter Shade of Pale'. Now in 1980 Mathew Fisher (then keyboard for Whiter Shade) re-emerges, his sales slogan: 'Fisher arrived a long time ago, this new album proves he's here to stay' But to my knowledge he's not here to stay in the popular mind, merely the confined annals of Record Management's sales figures. Finally 1977 was the year of the Pistols, the

Clash, Lewisham and the revolt of the colourful image, the barbaric revolt without tactics, the spontaneous, the Bacchanalian revel of the categories in which not one member is sober.

The potential music revolution of 1987 maybe being cooked up in the back rooms in Brixton, Handsworth, the Gorbols, or little Giggleswick; intimate circles of agitation, sweating it out in airless studios, double-doored and dark, energising their disparate styles into a conglomerate of the best of rock and roll. Maybe. The market place doesn't seem to intimate where this may be occurring.

Now in 1980 have we to resign ourselves to 7 years wait for a re-emergence of a music which expresses more than nostalgia, fetishism, and a fetid imagination? Has the festive consumer ended up consumed by the feast? If its youth who feel the crisis more acutely and have traditionally in the last few decades not merely felt it but given it expression, where is it now when unemployment for school leavers is the highest its ever been in this century; when even the Times Business page can make a joke out of current headlines: 'Shares stagnant! Growth nil! Redundancies! Investment plummeting! Firms going to the wall! in Hoff of Heybridge Heath by the cartoonist Ross.

But the equation crisis = mobilisation is both naive and historically inaccurate; it depends more on the multifarious characteristics of each particular crisis and more importantly the way in which each generation of youth combines tradition and innovation in providing its own cultural revolt. Is it then a question of De Sade's vitriolic call for 'one more effort if you want to be revolutionaries'?

Taking the piss out of men

I think this effort is apparent in one or two contemporary groups, if not in its final version as revolutionary, at least with a consciousness musically articulated which suggests more than either a mere reflection of the past or

an avant-gardism beyond the possibility of mass appeal. Primarily this intimation rests with the Beat's L.P. 'I Just Can't Stop it', a group variously criticised in the music press for sexism in the track 'Hands off She's mine' (Temporary Hoarding interview), for simplistic Andy Williams vocals in 'I Can't Get Used to Losing You', and for murdering Smokey Robinson's 'Tears of a Clown' in their earlier single released at Christmas. Even when sympathetically interviewed in NME in March there is still the question as to whether 'There isn't the danger of the songs being taken the wrong way?' Good for them that there is ambiguity in most of the tracks. The answers to these questions are easy to find.

'Hands Off She's Mine' is an obvious send-up of the possessiveness of men for women, explained by Dave Wakeling (the lyric writer) in both the fact that there are three male voices repeating the refrain 'Hands offff...' to one woman, obviously not in the slightest bit interested in their approaches, and thus not one male vying for a woman's attention but three competing with each other and none succeeding in achieving anything apart from competition amongst themselves. Secondly, and more importantly, the music says it for itself. As Dave Wakeling in his interview in NME again comments: 'That's why we put Roger's toasting in, to take the piss out of men saying all those ridiculous things.' The toasting itself becomes explicit; 'Hands off my daughter wheee...' 'Don't mess around all yer...', ending with a Clint Eastwood 'Brrrrrr'. Not only is the parody linked verbally and musically but the track integrates ska to make the point. Cultural traditions intertwine through this record consciously both parodying and successfully using those traditions, in order to point up the paucity of the contemporary pop/rock scene, and the ideological absurdities of sexism, racism, and conservatism. Similarly in 'Can't Get Used to Losing You' weak vocals, with the inability to get to the top notes and retain the husky romanticism implied in the soppy mood of the words is alleviated, to my mind,