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Paolo Colombo

Nov 26, 2023



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WORKS OF VISUAL POETRY. Paolo Colombo is an Italian artist and curator. Born in 1949 in Turin, Colombo lives and works in Athens, Greece, and is an Art Advisor for the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art. Director of the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva between 1989 and 2000, his works of visual poetry are on show at Olivier Varenne Gallery, rue des Bains 37 in downtown Geneva until March 7th 2024.

You can listen to the podcast of this interview [here](#).

Paolo Colombo, can you please describe for us the works that you are showing in Geneva?

They are watercolours that have a text written on them, and the texts are from poems of mine. All my text-based pieces, which I started in 1975, come from texts that I wrote. There is nothing that is a quote. There is nothing that's a slogan. They are poetical texts.

You have written two collections of poetry: "[Apostolos Michailides](#)", Agra and Qbox, Athens (2014); and "[Not in Sleep Nor in Water](#)", Kiraathane, Istanbul (2021). Are the watercolours

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at *Olivier Varenne Gallery* works with poems that are in these books?

One from the first book, two from the Turkish book, and one which is not published.



Do you write your poetry in Italian?



My poems were written in English and Italian at the same time, and because they have no adjectives there was no risk of linguistic redundancy. I actually saw them as images. I am a firm believer that Poetry is image and song. You can say things in poetry which you could not say in prose. There is a poem in the Greek book which in English says: “At night the blind women of Athens / mend clothes and speak of angels.” In Italian, it would be “Di notte le cieche di Atene / rammendano e parlano di angeli.” The English and Italian have roughly the same amount of syllables, and they were written in both languages because it’s true I am Italian but it’s also true that I have lived most of my sentimental and professional life in English and in Greek.

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“I am a lover of
crafts, artefacts,
and in particular
embroidery, and
Greece has an
incredible tradition
of textiles and
embroidery.”

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PAOLO COLOMBO

OLIVIER VARENNE A LE PLAISIR DE VOUS INVITER AU
VERNISSAGE DE L'EXPOSITION EN PRÉSENCE DE L'ARTISTE.

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RSVP: INFO@VARENNE.ART
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NUIT DES BAINS



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OLIVIER VARENNE
ART MODERNE & CONTEMPORAIN

Paolo Colombo's works of visual poetry are on show at Olivier Varenne Gallery, rue des Bains 37 in downtown Geneva until March 7th 2024.



Paolo Colombo, you studied in Geneva, graduated in literature in Rome, went to live in America and then came back to Switzerland. Why did you choose to live in Athens?

Athens is the city where I lived most in my life, now sixteen years and four and a half years during the 70s. Greece because of what Greece gave me in terms of literature, in terms of love, in terms of beauty, in terms of habits, in terms of a world that contained the images that nurtured me. I am a lover of crafts, artefacts, and in particular embroidery, and Greece has an incredible tradition of textiles and embroidery.

These poems that you exhibit are written as if they were in a fabric and painted as if they were embroideries?

It's a very long process and I like the concept of time to be infused in my work. It's a process that I do all alone. I don't have an assistant. It takes sometimes months to make a painting. As much as I like traditional folk arts, I also love classical art and I love Byzantine art because I feel extremely at home in a world without perspective.

How did you learn to paint?

I'm entirely self-taught, and I paint only watercolours. When I was 18 or 19 I went to Greece for the first time, for my first holiday after graduating from high school. I knew I wanted to paint. I brought with me boards, gouache, oil paints and canvases, and after two and a half months of work I decided to go back to Rome, where I was scheduled to begin reading literature at university. Alitalia made me the great present to lose my suitcase with all my art supplies and my rolled canvases. I decided at that moment that I was going to go and buy myself a very good quality box of Winsor & Newton watercolours, sable paintbrushes and a pad of paper. And I decided from now on, whatever I do, I'm going to carry these with me as part of my travelling necessities.

Watercolours are usually done at a fast pace. Is this how you work?



I learned the watercolour technique which suited my desires and my needs. In watercolours you either sketch extremely rapidly, or, as you cannot correct anything, you plan and you visualise everything you're going to paint. My work is literally preconceived and then done. There is very little spontaneity. I have the privilege of doing work which takes me a huge amount of time, which means that by the time I finish a work I have already conceived of three or four other works, of which maybe one would be done.



Why does the human hand recur as an important element in your work?

Doing watercolours, the first thing you see is a sheet of paper but also your hand. The hand is a qualifier of people. The hand has substantial beauty, and you end up by painting things you love, which go from animals to hands and occasionally to eyes. I usually paint fragments; very rarely I do a full portrait.

Why did you do the head of a blushing [Aphrodite](#)?

I thought it was only proper that, after all the disasters she made in my life, she would blush with a sense of shame. My blushing Aphrodite is a classical marble head that stands on a mosaic background. Each painted tessera is about two millimetres by two millimetres. This means in the surface of this painting there are 84,000 mosaic squares, tessera that I coloured; but in fact there are more, because many are double painted as I wanted them to be a slightly different shade.

Why mosaics?

Time is weaved into my work, and many of the paintings are not strictly only mosaic but are composed of a fabric that I paint with very tight lines with a 00 paint brush, as if it were embroidered. The hand appears recurrently in mosaics as well. Mosaics do not mimic the representation of space with perspective, and I feel extremely comfortable with mosaics because, as I said, I



love Byzantine art with a representation of space as a flat surface.

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“I’ve hardly ever
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I always literally
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*Paolo Colombo, you are from the city of Turin but are not part of the **Arte Povera** group and are a little younger than those artists. How would you define your work?*



I've always believed in the intimacy of work, and because of my background in literature I look at art work as a text — that one should read it. While a white piece of paper is not a canvas, it is not that different from the space where poetry is written. My poems are short enough for me to remember them by heart, and, to some extent, the reciting of the poem corresponds in terms of spacing to the white part of the page.

You spend a lot of time doing the work of a watercolourist. How is your day?

It depends. When I'm alone I live at the studio. I wake up whenever I wake up. I believe in biological time. I go to the table, work maybe 2 hours and take a shower and work another 2 hours, make a gigantic cafe latte and work till 8 or 9, sometimes till midnight, 13 or 14 hours. It's a solitary activity. I listen to music, to interviews, to lectures, talks, I listen to books. There is a category of books which are meant to be listened to rather than read.

What sort of books?

Books like **The Odyssey** and **The Iliad**, or **Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness**, which is the narrative of Charles Marlow in a club telling the story of his assignment as steamer captain in the Congo River. **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner** is another text one should listen to.

I get the sense that you are a frugal man?

I go to the market to buy food. My food is very frugal because I don't want to be distracted by cooking, so it's generally salads or gigantic vegetable soups.

Do you like to own only a few things?



When I open my closet and see too many clothes it depresses me. My dislike for possessions helped me infinitely in my two divorces. It sounds terribly cynical to say, but I never minded leaving something behind. It's just the nature of things. I have some stones which I own and that I use for theatre. I do some videos which are called Stone Theatre and that are usually initiated by the sight of a stone that reminds me of something. They are actors, and I treat them very well. They each have their own bag. For example I have here a very surprising looking stone that looks exactly like a skull. It's been used for a brief video of [Hamlet and Yorick](#). There are stones that remind me of hands, or that, put together, become hands. They have been used for [Lady Macbeth's hands](#).



Do you think that art can do something about the horrors of war that we now see?

The cruelty of humans is endless. It's tragic. There are communities in danger of life and it's heartbreaking. There is an old Italian saying that says, "If you are not able to do anything do not look." On the other hand, people rightly say "Silence=death." I don't know what to say other than the adage: "There but for fortune go you or I." It is just a coincidence I am not under the bombs of Hamas.

Is your art influenced by history or events?

To some extent... I know I am in an ivory tower and beyond privileged. Just by the nature of my work I tend to be away from the crowds. In Paris, looking at [Guernica](#), German occupation soldiers asked Picasso: "Did you do that?" His response was: "No, you did that." I read up on what are the cases under which one can decry a war crime; there are rules. I feel we're living in a barbaric time.

How has your art changed over the years?

My art is the solitary activity of one person. That is why I'm so fascinated by the humble art that is embroidery, or lace making, pottery, something that is the fruit of a



solitary activity where the maker cannot be substituted. You can make embroidery on a machine but you know right away that's a different animal. I've hardly ever used pre-existing objects in my work. I always literally believed that something has to come out of your hand. The advantage to art that is humble is that it's very hard to eradicate, because you really don't need anything, and the juncture between art and poetry in terms of spacing, of timing, is extremely important. I'm going to make art as long as I have a hand that doesn't shake and one eye that sees. Should I not have these, there is writing, there is poetry.



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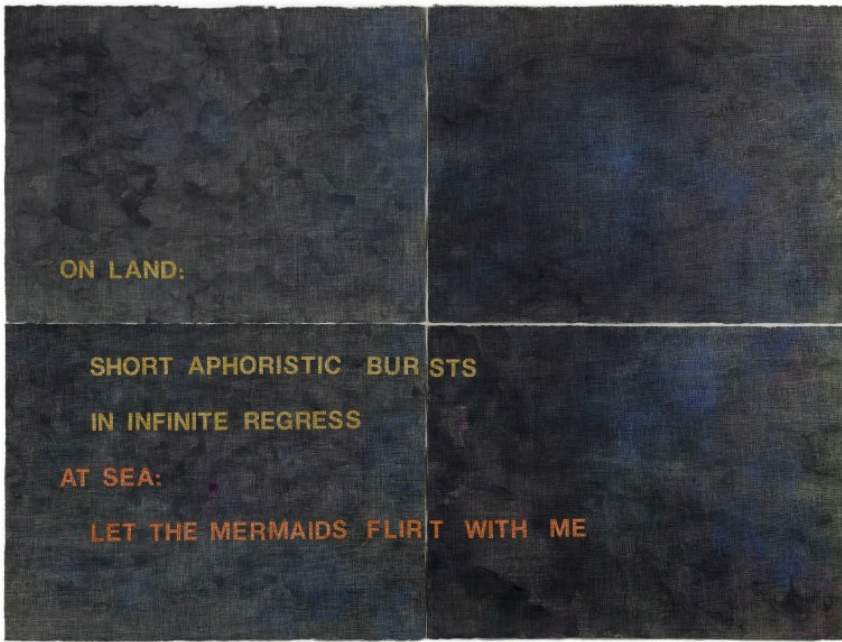


Paolo Colombo: Lady Macbeth's Hand. Photograph. (Stone Theatre)

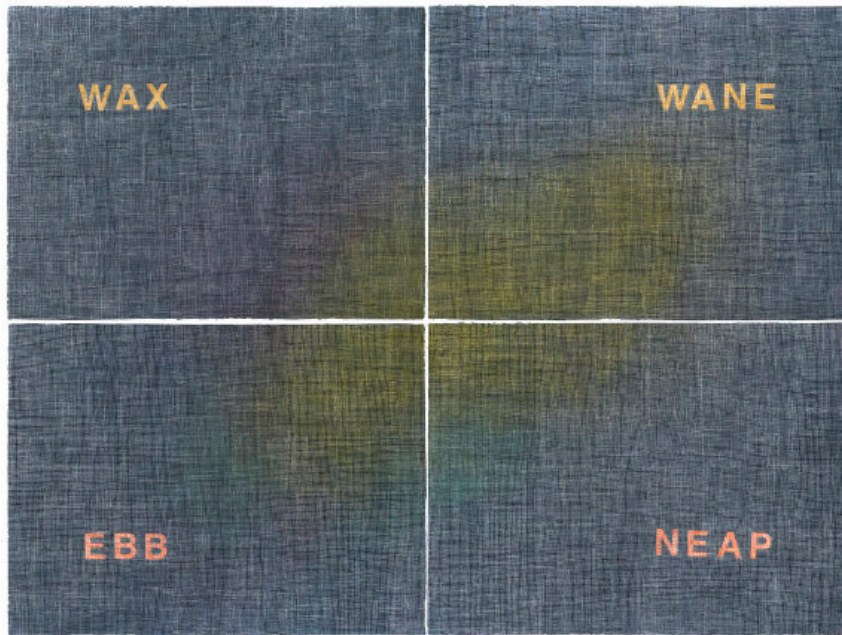


Paolo Colombo: Blushing Aphrodite. Watercolour and gouache on paper. 112 x 75 cm





Paolo Colombo: On Land. Watercolour on Paper. 112 x150 cm



Paolo Colombo: Wax Wane. Watercolor on paper. 112 x150 cm



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Paolo Colombo: Donkey and young man, Watercolour and gouache on paper 112 x 75 cm



Paolo Colombo: With donkey Takis in Sikinos.

Photo: Francesca Martelli



“When I realised
that the aesthetic
instinct precedes
our being full-
fledged humans I
left the show with
goose bumps.”

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Paolo Colombo, how do you compose your poems?

In the Greek book there is a poem composed of two lines: "After the ecstasy / we were lost in metaphors." After a moment of absolute passion one is confronted with the impossibility to describe the event. One has to resort to metaphors. Therefore, poetry has to find the elusive musicality of words dispersed in space.



Is this a unique talent?

No, for example **Rene Ricard** was a fantastic poet and very good painter. I prolong the poem because by painting it, and in taking one month to paint two or four lines, you physically embed time in the poem.

Do you recall anything exceptional that you saw when as a curator you travelled in Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Georgia?

Yes, I fell in love with the **National Puppet Theatre of Georgia**, which at the time was still directed by **Rezo Gabriadze**, who was very old but still handling the puppets. One Sunday afternoon in Tbilisi with not much to do I went to the Puppet Theatre, and they were playing the Siege of Stalingrad. After 40 minutes I realised I was on the edge of my chair, crying my eyes out, literally weeping, and I looked around and there were 30 other grownups in the same position, weeping like I've never seen people weep. Rezo Gabriadze was a genius and I had the fortune to see it. I saw another play there about two locomotives falling in love and everything was just magic.

Anything else?

In Armenia, which was a very poor country at the time, there was a theatre group called the **One Square Metre Theatre**. They travelled with a stage of one square metre like a table and played with one or two people, sometimes doing a ballet for three people within the one



square metre. This is how to do something with nothing, which again brings me to my Stone Theatre, which brings me to my watercolours and to the spirit in which I write: economy of means.

Do you also have a strong interest in folk music and dancing?



It's a total pleasure learning from a culture which gives space to high and folk culture. When I was maybe 7 or 8 years old I had no idea I wanted to paint, but I decided that I wanted to direct a gigantic orchestra with 300 people, each playing a rubber band of a different size. Not being expensive instruments, my "musicians" could go "tum tum tum" and in my mind 300 people could probably make enough sonority to play Beethoven. It didn't happen. I'm not musical at all, but I love Greek music.

Do you like to dance?

I'm very bad at it. A friend of mine enticed me to dance with her and I went because I'm curious, and for 4 years I was in a traditional dance class in Greece. I was the only foreigner and also the oldest one, a bit of a mascot. But the dance is very complicated. I could follow dances towards the fourth year, up to 16 different steps, but there are dances with 38 consecutive steps, which I couldn't remember.

Is your life mostly devoted to your work?

Yes, and my work is no fatigue at all. It's my pleasure. It's how I spend my time. It's meditating. It gives me ideas, and I listen to ideas because I listen to books and talks in an influx of ideas and emotions. My life is totally wonderful. I haven't changed much over the years.

Is it strange that you haven't changed, with all your curiosity, your abundance of knowledge and experience?

I hope it's improved me as a person. The more voices one hears, the more one understands. Although my life



is more layered, my work still inhabits an ivory tower. My mosaic pieces are inspired by ancient mosaics. My poem pieces come from a complete distillation of language. Stone Theatre are videos that last maybe 40 seconds, 120 seconds the longest one. The plays that I make with stones will be in the show in Geneva. How to do something with almost nothing. When I was younger I could spend hours at the beach and now I get dreadfully bored and so when I go to the beach I find these pebbles that amazingly look like something. As I mentioned, my pebble which looks exactly like a skull plays Yorick in my Stone Theatre.



Are you moved by stones?



I saw probably the most exciting show exhibition I've seen a few days ago, an exhibition of stones at the [Benaki Museum](#), stones that are from 2.5 million years ago to roughly 50,000 years ago. These are stones that look like something (pareidolia) and they kept that sort of a beauty. [Neanderthal](#) men chipped tools to cut meat and cut the skin of an animal. One in the exhibition is an obsidian with facets; in the centre of it is a fossilised shell. Whoever this proto human was, he decided to keep the shell and to chip all around it for the sake of beauty. One supposes it was a pure aesthetic choice. There is a stone from 2.5 million years ago from Africa, which was found very far away from where it was quarried. It looks like a perfect human face, and it's been levigated and probably treasured by a proto human who saw in it an image of himself. There was no technique, no ability to sculpt at the time. When I realised that the aesthetic instinct precedes our being full-fledged humans I left the show with goose bumps.

In the Spring you have a new exhibition in Los Angeles. What is it going to be?

That's going to be mosaic paintings, no words, fragments. I have finished 4, I am working on the 5th, I have a 6th and a 7th in mind. The [Baert Gallery](#) in Los Angeles is 120 square metres. These pieces are



commanding and they need space around them, exactly like the poems.

Paolo Colombo thank you for being with us today and good luck.

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