

# Roberto Cuoghi

## PEPSIS

October 15 — November 16, 2024



Roberto Cuoghi, PEPSIS, exhibition view, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris (2024).  
Photo: Martin Argyroglo. © Roberto Cuoghi/ADAGP, Paris (2024).

For his first exhibition in the gallery, Roberto Cuoghi is introducing a new chapter of PEPSIS.

The PEPSIS project is rooted in a primitive drive that the artist calls *stylization*, a logical phenomenon of simplification that conditions every aspect of our inner and social lives. From learning by imitation to the use of signs and symbols as means for the representation of ideas, stylization reveals the essence of our mindset, focused on influencing the course of events to our own advantage and avoiding risks and failures.

From the perspective of stylization, desires correspond to the accumulation of more and more accessible and practicable models of reference.

With the growth in the possibilities of storing information, the rate of communication and the time required for its assimilation have also increased, whence the need to simplify.

The growing number of models available leads, as a result of our cognitive limitations, to an approximation of their meaning.

The impulse to replicate lifestyles, rules of conduct and the ways in which everything is presented gives rise to the suspicion that, by the law of least effort, the desire to see what we have *already seen* is our inexorable fate.

The overdose of references is leveled down to a set of options without any hierarchical structure. Equivalence does not provide sufficient order and models of higher rank are not distinguished. The syntax is lost, and with it the full meaning, which is however arbitrarily stylized on the basis of conventional rules of no consequence.

With PEPSIS this premise of stylization becomes a method of painting, delegitimizing authenticity and the search for the new as the driving force of its history.

In this exhibition, personal suggestions are arbitrarily—and without logic—mixed with Google Lens. The works take root in a cherished jazz album cover, a scene captured from a 1992 thriller, and a photograph taken as a joke. The viewer is tempted to build links between the series, to focus on apparent shortcuts when being exposed to incoherent information. It is always easier to build our own “Musée Imaginaire” with styles, mediums and subjects that can therefore feel familiar. Like a déjà vu, it can be hard to accept that the feeling could be completely fake.

*Pepsis* is the scientific name of a parasitoid wasp that manipulates the behavior of other insects, turning them into brood nests for its larvae. The host insect is turned into something other than itself, giving up any attempt to avoid the fate of becoming the living meal of its parasite and a device for its replication.

—

Born in 1973 in Modena, Italy.  
Lives and works in Milan, Italy.

Roberto Cuoghi is one of the most enigmatic, mysterious and fascinating Italian artists of his generation. Through an array of unconventional techniques, Cuoghi’s paintings, drawings, sculptures and animations bear the imperative to always contest the known, the familiar, the accepted, and the understood. Concepts of perpetual experimentation, rule breaking, continuous and processual learning are central to his work.

The artist’s first comprehensive monograph was published in 2017. This richly illustrated 500 pages catalogue includes new essays by Andrea Bellini, Andrea Cortellessa, Anthony Huberman, Charlotte Laubard and Yorgos Tzirtzilakis in addition to a compilation of previous interviews and texts by the artist, and a complete chronology and bibliography.

Solo exhibitions were held at the Fridericianum, Kassel (2022-2023) ; Centre d’Art Contemporain, Geneva (2017); Museo Madre, Naples (2017); Italian Pavilion, Venice Biennale (2017); DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens (2016); Le Consortium, Dijon (2014-2015); Aspen Art Museum (2015); New Museum, New York (2014); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2011); Institute of Contemporary Art, London (2008).

His work has been shown in numerous group exhibitions at important venues worldwide, such as the MO.CO., Montpellier (2022); Centre Pompidou Metz (2021); Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris (2021); DESTE Foundation Project Space, Slaughterhouse, Hydra (2021); Fondazione Prada, Milan (2018); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2013); Venice Biennale (2009 and 2013); Aspen Art Museum (2012); Gwangju Biennale (2010); New Museum, New York (2010); DESTE Foundation Centre for Contemporary Art, Athens (2007); Pinault Collection, Palazzo Grassi, Venice (2007); Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art (2006).

His work is part of important collections, among which: Castello di Rivoli, Museo d’Arte Contemporanea, Turin; Museo Madre, Naples; Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Pinault Collection, Paris; DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; ACACIA Association of Italian Contemporary Art Collection, Milan; Fondazione Guastalla, Lugano.

*Roberto Cuoghi*  
by Giorgio Verzotti

Along with the series of works grouped under the title PEPSIS, Roberto Cuoghi is delivering a very stark statement, one made up of pithy phrases describing our state of alienation in which he asserts that we have no alternative but to adapt. A condition that does not concern solely the world of the art, his field of operation, his public, but existence itself.

Another *excess*, of the kind that the artist has scattered throughout his work, in images and in writings? It's true that even the possibility of a dialectic between norm and transgression has faded, thanks to the infinite capabilities of power, to such an extent that as far back as 1985 an expert on aesthetics like Hal Foster indicated resistance as the only possible response. Standing up to power implies a stance, not an action, something connected with being and not doing, seeing that, from this perspective, anything one might do would be ineffectual.

If stylization is to formation as style is to form, if that is to say we strip the idea of action from the last two terms, in effect what is left is being. Being resistant? There's no one to stop us from trying, at least: we can become hostile to style.

Michel Foucault said something in the vein of if we can't be antagonists, let us at least be agonists. Let us take that more or less compulsory choice of adaptation to extremes, adopting the measureless as measure of the world. Making the system function to excess, causing it to overheat as a result of overproduction, so that it goes haywire and can open up to other modes of operation.

Besides Roberto Cuoghi has already done this, in that book with a title resembling a tongue-twister, already heralding the oracular style taken to the point of deliberate incomprehensibility which animates the entire publication. Cuoghi wrote a text and then had it translated into a series of different languages: Serbian, Chinese, Finnish, Russian, Arabic, Japanese, Turkish, Slovenian, Greek; and then into the tongues of local communities scattered around the world as well, Quechua, Mixe, Toba, passing back into Italian several times. The result of course was the almost total distortion of the original text, whose meaning was already highly elusive. In his essay on Cuoghi for the catalogue of the exhibition first staged at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva in 2017, Andrea Cortellessa points out that there is a precedent for this. Eugenio Montale had conceived and then carried out a similar undertaking in poetry, and where visual art is concerned we should remember that it was the same logic (although without the excess!) that governed Bertrand Lavier's 1976 installation *Polished*.

In short this is something poets and artists are accustomed to. Using a system from within, and operating solely on the basis of its internal rules, they manage to sabotage it. And Cuoghi as always goes to an extreme: if Alighiero Boetti placed order and disorder face to face, taking language to the brink of babel, he plunges it into chaos. And yet there is sense in this delirious play of non-sense: the act of sabotaging the system also serves to reveal the way it works. It is culture and not nature. It can become a field of operation.

In French the prefix of overheating and overproduction is *sur-*. Georges Bataille, in his dispute with André Breton, wrote the famous article "La "vieille taupe" et le préfixe "sur" dans les mots Surhomme et Surrealisme," attributing a negative value to the prefix because it is elevating: *sur-* means wishing to ascend to the heaven of ideals, to the classical rationality which has shaped bourgeois culture. But we can also understand "over-" in the sense in which it has been used here, perhaps a more "materialistic one": overheating the engine until it burns out. Then it is up to us to turn it into something else. Or, and with good reason, we can use PEPSIS as a method that in a certain sense is one of self-abuse. Use it, that is, to our advantage. As an anomaly within a system that does not break it but, if allowed to persist, helps to make it work in an unexpected way. Thus the artist operating within the system finds a similar possibility in it, acting like the parasitic insect and conditioning the existence of the host. In short the artist surreptitiously uses the system to his advantage, even if he does so covertly.

With this exhibition at Galerie Chantal Crousel, Roberto Cuoghi, who to put it mildly has always been a versatile artist, has “entered” the system of painting, of painting as a specific discipline, if we can call it that, with the full intent of subverting it. A painting that will go against itself, above all against the obligation, for that is what it has now become, of linguistic and conceptual innovation. This last is no longer a matter of emancipation but if anything of marketing, and the distinctive trait has become a means of promotion. To be anti-academic is something they teach you at the academy.

In the pictures painted for the exhibition, Cuoghi has adopted several strategies, although in his case the term is not a very suitable one, since he works more by instinct. First of all there is nothing innovative here. The viewer is faced with a number of groups of similar works, like separate thematic islands that may intersect and get mixed up but in general convey a sensation of déjà vu. There’s a sort of reuse of settled clichés in contemporary painting, recycled by Cuoghi with the clear intention of undermining both the authoriality of the artist and the authority of the subjects he paints. Even when he paints them very well, as in the beautiful watercolors peopled with fabulous female figures, and all the more so when he sets out to mimic the “Bad” Painting of some years ago. There are connections of meaning between the images, but in the end they prove to be incoherent, or a migration of details that reappear in conflicting contexts. In most cases the images are not original, but neither are they really copies. They reappear in repetitions that differ just enough to quell any suspicion of authenticity. There is a fine example of limpid, radiant figuration, attained with the delicacy of a watercolor on paper mounted on canvas, from which an array of almost life-size figures look out at us, but with features that verge on caricature, so that the painting borders on a parody of itself. Finally, we note that while stylization is the product of simplification and repetition, here everything is complicated and nothing is repeated, and this is already quite an achievement.

To go back to Bataille: Cuoghi has always been at once the eagle that flies in Hegel’s high heavens and the old Marxist mole digging away underground, with an attention to formal factors that verges on the virtuoso, and an indisputable skill in composition, and at the same time the almost intemperate emergence of the formless, a tumefied, suppurating, disintegrating material, like that of a world that is being transformed but veering downward, perhaps all the way down to the base materialism of our Georges.

This balancing of two extremes already indicates the extent to which the artist is refractory to an unequivocal and reassuring definition of his status. It is a question of attitude, of stance as we put it, or if you like of character, which always drives him to extravagance, to excess. It is not a plan. It is a dimension of being rather than doing. Cuoghi once said that he likes to “prove everyone wrong:” it’s one way of taking advantage of adaptation.

---

Note:

Andrea Cortellessa, “Flour that does not exist: Asynchronies, Dismasure and other misconceptions in Roberto Cuoghi’s Work,” in *Roberto Cuoghi: Perla Pollina*, ed. Andrea Bellini (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2017), p.27 ff.  
Georges Bataille, “La ‘vieille taupe’ et le préfixe *sur* dans les mots *surhomme* et *surrealisme*,” in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris Gallimard, 1976), vol. 3, p.169 ff. English trans.: “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealist*,” in G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.32-44.