

2015-1958 / 1958-2015: to run history backwards,

not in order to unwind the thread of time and go back to the source, but to compare the different periods, this is the aim of the exhibition that Palazzo Grassi is dedicating to Martial Raysse. The aim is to look both forward and backward, by taking an approach to Martial Raysse's work that is not chronological, but examines it from a contemporary angle, in other words in the light of its most recent developments. Indeed it is our conviction that his latest works change the way we look at what came before, and brings greater depth by raising again the question of the place of painting, as well as that of the artist.

As Giorgio Agamben brilliantly put it, "those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither truly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant. But precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time."

Martial Raysse is one of the few artists for whom addressing the history of "great" art is what really matters, and this has been the case since his outset. Whether through distance, through humor or by trying to copy the masters, in accordance with the principle expressed by Eugenio Garin that "to imitate [...] is to become aware of oneself in relation to another."² This is how he served his apprenticeship and throughout his life we can see, as if in the background, not just the history of art and the masterpieces of the Renaissance, but also the most banal aspects of daily life—from the aesthetics of the chain store to the tedium of little things. Unlike in the Renaissance, when artists had to accept certain constraints, particularly in the

treatment of religious subjects and portraits of rulers, Raysse has worked all his life to keep his independence. He proposes a humane kind of utopia and represents the life we all lead in a way that suggests he is trying to restore our hope in our condition. His taste for the representation of women goes beyond sexual attraction or classic beauty; he is fascinated by she who is Unknown.

In his history paintings, he offers to take a critical distance from what we may see or believe. He explores mythological subjects, as in *L'Enfance de Bacchus* or *Le Jour des roses sur le toit*, and uses them to speak of conspicuous consumption, of his distance from politics (*Poisson d'Avril* and *Ici Plage, comme ici-bas*) or of his desire to laugh at the foibles of his time (*Le Carnaval à Périgueux*).

Painter, sculptor, draftsman, but also poet and filmmaker: so many reductive terms with which to attempt to define this multifaceted and unclassifiable artist whose work spans the second half of the 20th century and continues, even today, to surprise us with its idiosyncrasy. By creating an ongoing dialogue between the works, the layout of the exhibition offers a new perspective on Martial Raysse's career while highlighting the artist's incessant toing and froing within that corpus.

The artist practiced sculpture all his life, using found objects that he diverts or transforms or, more classically, bronze. When visitors go through the forest of sculptures in the entrance hall of the atrium, they are immersed in the world of Martial Raysse. They can immediately perceive his humor notably with the large sculpture *America America* that conjures up the utopia of dreams, more precisely the American dream. Indeed the artist lived for a while in the United States where he was quite successful very early on in his career. His sense of poetry is particularly visible in this practice both through small and larger pieces. Among his numerous themes of interest are the consumer society, which he criticizes, and classic mythology. Martial Raysse has always worked on portraits with a style inspired by pop culture in the 1960s and with a more pictorial approach today. He has always imposed high standards on himself in order to improve his practice. Also, he has always used relatives and people around him as models and, contrary to others, has portrayed

stars only twice. He strives to understand others, and progressing in painting implies intense practice, spending time in the studio, and knowing how to look at the masters, in particular those of the Renaissance period. In my view, he is politically driven: he understood the period of the “Glorious Thirty” (the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s) and invited us to question and criticize it. Nowadays, he invites us to discover others. He has now reached timelessness in his figures while at the same time using colors in a very original way. They add to the banality of the themes he chooses just as neon lights or quirky materials invited us, in an earlier period, to take a joyful distance.

As Dimitri Salmon said, “It is with classical painting, Poussin and many others, that Martial Raysse understood the meaning of balance and the love for life.” And Andrea Bellini commented: “However, beyond labels, one thing is obvious: Martial Raysse’s oeuvre expresses a much stronger political dimension, or rather ‘concern’. Raysse worries about humankind because he loves humankind: he would like to guide people – according to his own competence – on a path of personal conscience and therefore of individual and collective empowerment. With the sincerity, innocence and discipline that characterize soldier-poets, Martial Raysse positions himself as a sentinel ready to sound the alarm and warn us of imminent danger. “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley”. The exhibition also reveals the enormous amount of effort that has gone into that body of work, which, beyond the creation of “beautiful things,” sets out to propose a sort of philosophy of life. Through his radical use of color and freedom of treatment, Raysse presents to us the beauty of the world, the need for each of us to be involved in it, the responsibility that each of us has towards the others and the community. We wanted the exhibition to cover every aspect of Raysse’s artistic practice: from his small sculptures, which range from simple figures to games played with himself, through the drawings as works of preparation and his films, which he uses to convey his libertarian ideas, to the pictures that compose his latest works. We have also punctuated the exhibition with works that are in a way self-portraits, reflecting the incredible demands the artist has made on

himself and the loneliness he has had to endure in order to move forward in his art.

The most recent works offer insights into those of his youth and make plain their radicalism, while causing a genuine visual shock. By the use of bold colors and pure pigments, Raysse offers a different perspective on the world—the “hygiene of vision” he developed in the 1960s—and thereby teaches us to see, “for being modern means above all seeing more clearly.”³ Let us conclude by quoting the artist: “I’ve always thought that the purpose of art is to change lives. But, it seems to me, the important thing today is to change what surrounds us on all levels of human relationship. Some people think that life is copying. Others know it is inventing. You don’t quote Rimbaud, you experience him.”⁴

Caroline Bourgeois, curator of the exhibition

- 1 Giorgio Agamben, “What is the Contemporary” in *What is an Apparatus? And other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 13;
- 2 GARIN, Eugenio. « La culture florentine à l’époque de Léonard de Vinci », in *Moyen Âge et Renaissance* (1954). Paris : Gallimard, 1989. P. 242. (translation in English of original quote in French)
- 3 Excerpt from a conference given by Martial Raysse at the Pompidou Centre, on 13 May 1984, published under the title *De quelques paroles sur la première épître de Paul aux Thessaloniciens... (some comments on Paul’s First Letter to Thessalonians)*, Paris : éditions Janninck, 1992. (Translation in English of the original quote in French).
- 4 Martial Raysse quoted by Jacques Michel, in « Le cinéma de l’autre côté du miroir », *Le Monde*, 16 November 1972. (Translation in English of original quote in French)