



A TRIBUTE TO

ADONIS

03.02.12 - 30.03.12



Untitled

2009-11, mixed media on paper

A Tribute to Adonis

Welcome to London Adonis!

The Mosaic Rooms are greatly honoured to welcome Adonis in London and to be able to pay tribute to his astonishing work as a poet, intellectual and artist.

A great innovator and moderniser of Arabic poetry, Adonis has also been a brilliant witness to the long and troubled histories of the Arab and Muslim worlds. Today in his early eighties, he retains the freshness and energy of mind and body of men much younger than he, yet is able to speak and write with great erudition and solemnity about the Arab past, as well as its troubled present. A rare and wonderful gift, which we are delighted to be able to share with you!

Adonis has always been a champion of the rebels and the marginalised, of poets who challenged and often fell victim to the whims of power – Al-Mutanabbi, Abu Nuwwas – re-reading the history of Arabic culture not through the complacent perspectives of orthodoxy, but rather with a deep sensitivity to the profound conflicts and contradictions afflicting its relationship with religious authority and with itself.

His great re-reading of Al-Mutanabbi's life and work, *Al-Kitab* (The Book), set out on paper like a triptych, is also a retelling of some of the most violent episodes of Arab history since the birth of Islam. Yet at the heart of this monumental work – still shamefully unavailable in English – is also a tribute to the rich tradition of Arabic love poetry, reinterpreted by Adonis in opposition to the violent historical narrative and in parallel to Al-Mutanabbi's existential revolt against earthly and divine authority (the title *al-mutanabbi* means he who claims to be a prophet or *nabi*).

"I have always felt the need to re-interpret our history" Adonis says in a recent interview. "For history is not made up only of facts but of meanings which we need to reveal... often our history is told by those in power. Poetry has the extraordinary ability to express the identity of a people. It does not reinvent history, but expresses its deepest meanings. I prefer to remain on the side of poetry, in other words the deepest realities of a people."

More than ten years ago, Adonis – who has recently declared his retirement from writing poetry - began to make exquisite works on paper, examples of which are exhibited here. These works contain arbitrary quotations from his beloved Arabic poetical canon, which

"A real revolution must change the structures of a society, not simply its governing regimes..."

are elegantly "re-quoted" in a form that is fragmentary and incomplete. Language here becomes like a found object, and indeed the works are adorned with everyday scraps that have no other significance except that they pleased the artist's eye. Nonetheless, this apparent, coincidental and shapeless aesthetic is full of form and almost mystical beauty. Adonis' ability to give meaning to the chaos around him is one of his most extraordinary gifts.

With contemporary affairs, as with poetry and theology, Adonis has never shied away from raising his voice against the follies of official orthodoxy, collective opinion or consensus. He has witnessed first hand the transformation of the Arab world as it achieved independence, suffered the *nakba*, numerous military dictatorships and defeats, civil and regional wars and now the so-called Arab spring. He is thus able to cast a poet's eye on the deep recesses of this complex history; to evoke its euphoria yet intuit its tragic potential; and to speak with great lucidity from a rare position of profound knowledge and experience. "A real revolution must change the structures of a society, not simply its governing regimes," he said in an interview in March 2011, fearing the return of repressive religious ideology, a fear that has sadly turned out to be justified. "I am overjoyed at the festive and happy wedding we are witnessing everywhere" he said in the same interview, "but I fear that it will soon turn to tragedy."

Can Adonis' poetry and art help us see beyond the violent historical moment?

Omar Al-Qattan

"Poetry is not a means but it is a source, it is the spirit of a time"

Adonis



Adonis by Andrea Zanzotto

The poetry of Adonis is a design full of a texture all its own. It is rare and unique and represents the possibility of overcoming cultural differences and divisions.

The idea of an exhibition of this precious and limited production of collages and painted papers...gladdens me: painting which moves towards poetry and poetry towards painting, is an interesting junction from which new forms and figures can emerge. We can say it is like a natural landscape, available at any moment: if we open our mental space to poetry and painting at the same time, we gain and our unconscious becomes richer.

Adonis deserves a privileged place in the world scene because of the depths of his message his figure is all embracing, capable of creating a multiple portrait while respecting all identities. Even this pictorial experience, which adheres in a certain way to the luminescent object of his poetry, demonstrates his courage and openness.

Collages can evoke a sense of tension and on the tension created here by Adonis hang many fundamental issues of our age. However, rather than straining, these collages reflect the effort of keeping together things that do not have a real relationship to each other and yet can communicate and make sense. The issue, therefore, is the capacity of these works to create a dialogue between different things, forcing them to speak in a kind of void.

This is also what happens with inlay works, intended as compositions of various materials, poetical fragments that contain various chromatic solutions, in which the "dissonant" elements converge and diverge with luminescent effect and a feeling that, while seeming united, they are on the verge of exploding.

Therefore the operation is that of "keeping together differently" and Adonis is a true master at this.

This great poet looks for things in the world and assembles them: old parchments, rags, paper fragments, oxides, iron materials; then using coffee grains, he colours. In addition, he inserts beautiful Arabic calligraphy, which goes from right to left in drawings without hierarchies, surfaces resembling a landscape where we can find the depths of a message that unites many different fragments in a magically harmonious space.

Love, intended as a universal feeling, is the dynamic behind Adonis' art. How he manages to make us feel the love of what is distant is almost disquieting, and it is this love that keeps alive the possibility of "speaking" more "languages" all at once.

Extracts of an appreciation by the great Italian poet Andrea Zanzotto, originally published in the catalogue for Di Segni d'Oriente e d'Occidente, a joint exhibition by Adonis and Marco Nereo Rotelli at the Palazzo Reale in Milan in 2010.

Adapted from the Italian by Omar Al-Qattan



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Adonis in conversation with the Italian artist Marco Nereo Rotelli

With Carlo Bocchialini

(Originally published in the Italian catalogue of the two artists' joint show in the Palazzo Reale, Milan in 2009).

This is not the first encounter between your works: how did the Adonis-Rotelli union in Milan come about?

Rotelli – I invited Adonis to join me in the Palazzo Reale with an exhibition of his latest collage work, because Adonis the visual artist and explorer of visual space interests me greatly. It's an experience not to be missed; to me a picture by Adonis is like a short story told in an instant: much time contained in an instant replete with time. Adonis is a great poet and a great man, capable of meeting and conversing with all mankind. My works here together with his are a bit like those "other" existences which we encounter every day, and our encounters should be a coming together and not a collision.

Adonis – In art Marco leaves space for poetry. It is like inserting a different kind of charge: thought contained in poetry acts upon art and the process of art is thus nourished by a new force. In his works I see and feel a condition of being that is precious to me: tireless production and a combination of different levels of expression. His work acknowledges a greater necessity for poetry as an originating force, and in so doing it focuses profoundly on the concept of identity and openness to the other. Every project by Marco irresistibly carries along with it other existences, but it also reveals to us the abyss that lies behind all work. "Marco, they say we are aliens, as if the earth itself was never once alien" (quoted from his text "Corte Nova"; editors' note) his openness comes of this consciousness, which is capable of shattering every labile conviction. I am interested in the idea and the mosaic he has constructed in time, which can bring into being a new artistic spaciousness. Marco is right; the artist must come to terms with the contradictions and the aporiae that go with 'creation'. Without "losing himself" Marco seems to gather in contradiction and different aspects of reality, linking them by the thread of poetry. The artist's identity must be multiple, and this Marco understands very well.

The work of Rotelli has always been centered on a sort of symbiosis between art and poetry, while Adonis is the great poet 'given' to draw and produce collages: is this exhibition a point of encounter?

Rotelli – Adonis turns to visual art in the desire for truth, but there is something in his drawings which eludes all the celebrated and cerebral formulations of truth. His productions gather together fragments of the world, little treasures to be kept safe, to be shored against their own disintegration and dispersal. Obviously I am also very interested in the 'reversal.' I am attracted to the idea of a great poet who turns to the visual and invents a new form of writing using his rich heritage, replacing commas and full-stops with fourteenth-century parchments, rusty tins, oriental and western scraps of fabric.

Adonis – In fact, for me my pictorial work, my collages, are an extension of my poetry, my writing.



Rotelli – Your works are a sort of poetry outside poetry: is it possible to say that what we have here is poetry in a different form?

Adonis – Yes, in fact I like to define this type of work as an ‘other poem’, written in another medium.

Derek Walcott says that in poetry every translation creates a new work, what is your opinion about this?

Adonis – Translation is betrayal. Let’s take Arabic poetry: in every other language it loses its musicality. Robert Frost, the American poet, said that poetry is what gets lost in translation; thus it is untranslatable. At the same time, I would add that betrayal is necessary, but it must be a great betrayal: it can’t be done by just anyone. It takes a genius to betray in poetry.

Rotelli – When I look at Arabic writing, the word ‘harmony’ comes to mind; elegance is not a word of today but when I read your poems I believe that there is a harmony of difference. Poetry is anthropologically necessary to mankind: do you agree or do you think mankind can manage very well without it?

Adonis – I believe that poetry is never a ‘means’; poetry is life itself, existence itself, it is not a means to say something. I cannot conceive of a human being without his poetic existence. The very first man was a poet; everything in his life was poetry. Poetry isn’t just writing poems, it is a way of seeing things, a way of loving, of thinking and of living. Poetry is our existence. Everything connected to human creativity is connected to poetry.

Is it possible to say that these works revolve round the possibility of difference within a single space, a sort of different identity or cohabitation of divergences?

Adonis – No, for me identity is a perpetual opening, a continuous changing. There is no such thing, in my opinion, as ready-made identity; there is a concrete identity every day. Man creates his identity by doing his work, thus identity comes through what we do; it is before us, not behind. And in this sense everything is turned upside-down: if identity is not a heritage, is not ready-made, then it is a research, an opening up to otherness, to that which is no longer an element for dialogue, for exchange, but is a dimension made up of myself. The ‘I’ does not exist without the ‘other’, and also, if I want to go in search of myself, I must go by way of the other. This is beautiful and important if one sees it in the context of dialogue on opposing shores of the Mediterranean.

Rotelli – Adonis is made up of many things, much knowledge, he is able to tune difference. Through words he is able to keep alive the memory of both orient and west. His work is a continuous hymn to creation and to the extraordinary possibilities inscribed in every gesture born of true poetic instinct. In 2001 I wanted very much to carve some words of his in stone in the Quarry of Poets which I created in Carrara. Dream in the face of death’, words which say so much, and which I read also in relation to the alleged, one thousand times declared death of art. To dream for Adonis means to love, to love the other.



You are engaged with poetry, painting, music, theatre - art in its most diverse forms: is a dialogue between the various languages of art possible?

Adonis – Absolutely. Everything that is art is linked. I like to use the term ‘orbit’, in the sense of a dimension that creates the possibility for the planets of language to move within the same constellation.

Your collages are made up of the most diverse materials: what is the significance of this assembly?

Adonis – I use rags, yarn, fabric, documents, ancient papyri, used cans, anything that inspires me. The idea is to give sense, significance to objects that are of no significance. Moreover the objects belong to different cultures.

Is it possible to say that it is the same system that you employ in poetry?

Adonis – In reality there is greater freedom in my figurative art, there’s a ludic dimension about playing with the hands that you can’t get in writing and poetry. And there’s the variety of elements that you can use in a collage. Every work is entirely different to every other; it’s a sort of orchestra of different elements.

How long have you been painting?

Adonis – About ten years.

Are these all recent works?

Adonis – Yes, they were all done in the last two years.

Almost all of them have a background of Arabic writing: besides the fact that it is your native tongue, is there a specific reason for that choice?

Adonis – Arabic has a graphic quality which is exceptional. There are two dimensions to Arabic: the musicality of the spoken word, and the form of the written word; it is in fact drawing. A few lines of writing are a picture in themselves.

What is written here? Are they your poems?

Adonis – Some are; others are from classical Arabic poets. It is important to look to tradition to understand the present day; one must look for the origins of our modernity. I intend next to try using texts from western poets in my collages - Italian, French, and others. The problem will be the translation; I don’t know yet how I will do it; whether I will keep the original language or not.

How long does it take you to complete a collage?

Adonis – It depends, it’s never the same. But everything true, everything that comes from within takes time, and we are our own first critic.

Rotelli – Are we dealing, in these works, with both memory and imagination?

Adonis - It is an imagining rather, but perhaps the imagination is linked with everything that is memory.

Rotelli – In today’s society, the more images there are the less imagination ...

Adonis - Anyway, imagination is essentially linked to memory.

Rotelli – I am in your house in Paris, Adonis. I like the world that is hanging on your walls, I like the composition of things both oriental and western, and also the way you interchange them and talk about them, in individual phrases intimately connected with their history.

To me you convey a spectacular equilibrium, with order on one hand, invention on the other, everything within its formal boundaries on one hand, and everything boundless and inexpressible on the other. And this perhaps is the shadowy region intimately connected with that which in the spirit of time is inexpressible. In your opinion, should a work of art gather the hic et nunc of its time, should it live and bring to life the spirit of the moment?

Adonis – Take Dante; many readers interpret Dante in the context of his time. I do the opposite. I explain the period and culture of Dante through his poetry. And Dante’s poetry gives us more thorough knowledge of his historical context. Returning to my earlier concept, poetry is not a means but it is a source, it is the spirit of a time.

Translated by Janet El-Rayess. With thanks to Marco Nereo Rotelli

“... if identity is not a heritage, is not ready-made, then it is a research, an opening up to otherness...”

Adonis

Adonis was born Ali Ahmad Said Esber near the city of Latakia, western Syria, in 1930. He had no formal education for most of his childhood, learning the Quran at the local mosque school and memorising classical Arabic poetry with the help of his father. His formal education began when, as a teenager, he recited one of his own poems to the then President of Syria, who gave him a scholarship to a French lycée in Latakia, followed by studies in philosophy at Damascus University.

In 1956, he was forced to leave Syria after being imprisoned for his involvement with the Syrian National Socialist Party, from which he later resigned. He moved to Beirut, Lebanon, and, together with Yusuf al-Khal, set up the legendary Shi'r (Poetry) magazine, one of the Arab world's most influential literary journals. Adonis then studied in Paris before returning to Beirut and taking up a post teaching Arabic Literature. In 1982, he and his family relocated to Paris as a result of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon where he remains resident to this day.

Adonis' work includes over 50 books of poetry, criticism and translation. His multi-volume anthology of Arabic poetry (Diwan al-shi'r al-'arabi) covers almost two millennia of verse.

Winner of the 2011 Goethe Prize and a favourite for last year's Nobel Prize for Literature, Adonis is recognised as the man who led the modernist movement in Arabic literature and brought Arabic poetry the international recognition it deserved. He is also famous for his critical views on Arab culture, politics, religion and current affairs. Even today, at 81 years of age, he retains his fresh and critical outlook on the events in his homeland, attracting controversy and debate because of his cautionary and critical words on the Arab Spring.



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Photograph of Adonis by Torstein Blixtjord © 2011

Exhibition open Tue-Sat 11-6pm

Accompanying Programme:

Friday February 3 2012 at 7pm: Readings of his own poems by Adonis, and in English by award-winning translator Khaled Mattawa

Saturday February 4 2012 at 12pm: Artist's Talk, Adonis in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Co-director of Exhibitions and Programmes and Director of International Projects at the Serpentine Gallery

Tuesday February 7 2012 at 7pm: Islam, Sufism & Arabic Literature: Adonis in conversation with Omar Al-Qattan

Wednesday February 8 2012 at 7pm: Reflections on the Role of the Intellectual in Society. Adonis in conversation with the award-winning Chinese dissident poet Yang Lian

Tickets are £8 (£5 concessions) and can be booked online on www.wegotickets.com/location/8442

Cover: *Untitled*, 2009-11, mixed media on paper

the
mosaic
rooms



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Buses: 74, 328, C1, C3

Parking: One disabled parking space is available by prior arrangement. Parking meters are available in Lexham Gardens behind the building.

The Mosaic Rooms brings some of the most exciting, progressive and innovative contemporary creative voices in the Middle East to London.

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