

YOU CAN NEVER ESCAPE YOUR PAST, they say, but over the past 40 years or so, Mario Ceroli has given it a pretty good go. The Rome-based artist is best known for his association with Italy's most famous postwar art movement, Arte Povera, and for a series of works produced during the 1960s, among them *Cassa Sistina* (1966), a wooden shed for which he was awarded the sculpture prize at that year's Venice Biennale, *La Cina* (also 1966), a squadron of wooden silhouette figures, and a playful 1966 homage to Giorgio de Chirico's painting *Mobili Nella Valle* (1927) in which the Surrealist's slightly sinister interior scene is reproduced (with a few modifications) as a wooden set that looks at once incredibly ordinary (because of the everyday untreated wood in which it is produced, something of a Ceroli signature) and like it should be the setting (two chairs, one high-backed, one short, drawn close together in front of an armoire) for some terrible inquisition, not least a metaphysical investigation of de Chirico's work. Indeed, in many ways it's the big metaphysical questions that Ceroli's work attempts to tackle: what's out there and what's it like?

These investigations into people and objects, and into their surroundings, led the sculptor to produce sets for theatre, television and cinema, most notably in collaboration with directors such as Luca Ronconi (a 1968 production of *Richard III*) and Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Orgia*, 1968), and on a production of Bellini's opera *Norma* (1831) at Milan's Scala in 1972. Then furniture, such as *La Bocca della Verità*, a pine bed produced by Poltronova in 1974. And more recently still, a series of public sculptures featuring those silhouette figures, such as *Silenzio: Ascoltate!* (2007), which depicts a series of Florentine heroes (among them Dante, Leonardo, Brunelleschi and Giotto) rendered in terracotta and marble, and located in the city's Piazza Bambine e Bambini di Beslan. Other works use glass or sand, and range in style from Pop-inspired word sculptures to equestrian monuments, in a way that would be both baffling and annoying to those attempting to conveniently place the Italian within an easy art-historical bracket.

# DON'T BOX ME IN

Mario Ceroli, star of Arte Povera, looks to the future by refusing to confront his past



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Ceroli's studio, located just outside Rome, is more like a complex – a cluster of buildings housing an archive of his work (including almost all those mentioned above), attended by a long-serving, chain-smoking assistant whose sand-filled buckets cum ashtrays decorate the studio like fire extinguishers might a major museum. It's part *Name of the Rose* and part stage set for a *Columbo* mystery, with the silhouette sculptures huddled together like characters from a ghost ride or victims on a firing range.

But despite that, Ceroli has not simply retreated into a remote landscape populated by his own creations. With a typically restless energy and no little sense of mischief, he boasts of closing the studio at eight in the evening and going out dancing "every night". And despite the fact that he works in something not far removed from a museum, he says that he's still more interested in the work he's doing today than in the past productions on which his fame rests. "I don't want to die", he finally confesses as we switch to a more personal metaphysics, "and what I do tomorrow will live on in a new generation". Perhaps it's to hedge his bets in this afterlife that

he's also working on a commission for the Vatican. But ask him about young artists today, and he replies that there's a "big, big crisis". "The new generation", he says, "doesn't know how to break free. They may have the talent, but they don't have the creativity to do it. I get the impression that collectors function as art critics and they suggest what artists should do." For Ceroli, art must always have a forward momentum – a modernist attitude that seems so quaint and old-fashioned these days that it's become inspiring to hear anyone say it. The exception to this assessment of the new generation of artists? Maurizio Cattelan – "He's incredibly interesting, the only one with great talent *and* creativity". For Ceroli, it seems, great art is as much about attitude as it is about objects, which presents an intriguing situation for an established artist at the end of his career.

Work by Mario Ceroli is on view at Tornabuoni Art, Paris, until 11 December