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[Spotlight]

Corporate Man

Massimo Guerrera's installations elaborately mirror
the corporate purchase of the real world.

Saidye Bronfman Centre curator David Liss tells how



ABOVE: Massimo Guerrera
Action No 2. Siège social temporaire II 1998
Black and white photo 50.0 x 40.5 cm
Courtesy the artist

RIGHT: Massimo Guerrera
Carnets d'intentions 1998-99
Installation detail
Photo Paul Litherland
Courtesy Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery

IT WAS JUNE 1997, and my train had just pulled into Montreal's McGill Métro station. It sounded like some kind of rave party and so, intrigued, I headed toward it. The source was opposite the Burger King where a bizarre arrangement of forms—they looked like a cross between prosthetic devices and sculptural objects—stretched along the floor. In their midst, two men, dressed in supremely tacky polyester suits, moved around the objects, occasionally interacting with them or fastening them onto their heads, faces and bodies. It looked like some esoteric ritual. A crowd of onlookers had formed around them. Then I recognized Massimo Guerrera, the artist. He was in polyester too, handing out morsels of food from a wheeled, multi-drawer cart to those brave enough to step forward.

These days, the 31-year-old Roman-born Guerrera is one of Montreal's busiest and fastest-rising artists. Last spring he was granted the rare opportunity of a solo exhibition at Concordia University's Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, a venue usually reserved for more established artists. That show, "PORUS," was widely acknowledged to be one of the strongest of the season.

Unlike the Métro station performance, this time the gallery setting was the only indication that Guerrera's work should be considered separate from the stream of everyday occurrences. Just inside its entrance, visitors encountered cheap welcome mats littered with bundles of colourful advertising flyers, like the ones that annoyingly accumulate inside my own front door. In fact, it is the mutable passages between art and lived experience and more specifically, between consumerism and consciousness, which form the core of Guerrera's investigations into the formulation of identity in a culture increasingly defined by marketing demographics and corporate agendas.





It was to mimic the corporate model that Guerrero established Polyco Inc. in 1995, a fictitious company that is ostensibly responsible for producing and disseminating his objects, installations, performances and drawings. In a series of installations in Montreal and Paris called *Siège social temporaire*, Guerrero transformed the art galleries where he showed into temporary Polyco Inc. headquarters.

For these exhibitions, numerous Tupperware containers

of varying sizes containing brightly coloured congealing liquids, dried vegetables, seeds and other organic matter are stacked and arranged along the floor or on metal tables and trays. Custom prosthetic devices lie on the floor or lean casually against the walls. The gallery thus takes on the characteristics of a small manufacturing plant, distribution depot or product showroom. Polyco “representatives”—the artist and his crew—add, remove and rearrange items during scheduled performances. As Polyco

administrator *en chef*, Guerrero sometimes sits at a desk during these performances, filing away drawings he has produced in drawers. Later, visitors are free to refer to these "files" and rummage through the drawings as they wish.

Drawings are an integral aspect of Guerrero's metaphysical investigations, extending and linking various thematic components of his work. Unique and highly imaginative, their delicate, fluid, linear style falls somewhere between scientific illustration and surrealism. Guerrero begins by staining isolated areas on paper supports of varying types and sizes with layered washes of coloured paint, vegetable and mineral oil and home-made pigments ground from spices which saturate the paper's fibres to a filmy transparency. Hair, bits of spice and dust particles, accidentally accumulated during the process, are allowed to remain. Photo images transferred to the paper using acetone occasionally accompany the line drawings. The transparent quality of the paper allows the images to be seen from either side so that, from the reverse, they appear submerged or ghost-like.

For "PORUS," the drawings were laminated in plastic and grouped on the wall in overlapping clusters. Generally the imagery is figurative, with humans interacting in illogical dream-like situations with animals or mechanical apparatuses, such as exercise machines and household appliances, that allude to metabolic systems and the body as a constructed entity. The content of the drawings and translucent skin of the paper surfaces reinforce Guerrero's notion of the body as a permeable vessel through which nourishment and information continually flow in a cycle of absorption and secretion.

While on one level, Guerrero's investigations consider the body within the context of external conditions and constructed artifice, the full depth of his project includes the other half of



LEFT: Massimo Guerrera
Kiosque Domestique 1999
Wood, polyurethane,
pigment, mat, hair
Photo Paul Litherland
Courtesy Leonard & Bina Ellen
Art Gallery

BELOW: Massimo Guerrera
*Action No 3. Monument-mou
à l'honneur des producteurs
de nourritures terrestres* 1998
Black and white photo
50.0 x 40.5 cm
Courtesy the artist

the equation, the human species as part of nature and our relationship to the Earth itself. Take his *Monument-mou à l'honneur des producteurs de nourritures terrestres* outdoor installation for Granby's Troisième impériale série arts centre this past summer. He intended it to be both an organic, anti-heroic monument to the Earth and a critique of how the control of food production has shifted from the hands of small producers and family farms to corporate interests.

In the middle of a cornfield near Granby, the artist constructed a shelter from plastic and wood. There, along with his plastic containers and objects, he lived for eight consecutive days. During the day, he performed various tasks such as digging holes in the ground and lining them with clay or Tupperware containers. His food consisted exclusively of local produce, grown and delivered to him by the farmer who owned the cornfield. At night he slept atop an office desk inside the shelter. Although similar in character to previous projects, the site and the elaborate theatrical metaphors called attention to the Earth as a porous entity and extended Guerrero's dialogue to include the biological. The Earth's pores and cavities, through which nutrients (rain, sunlight, minerals) enter to generate and sustain life cycles, become analogous to human orifices, particularly the mouth, through which food and language pass. He proposes a fundamental rethinking of the principles that define our current perception of nourishment and communication.

In other words, his installation, like all his work, reconstructs the very language of human survival.

What makes Guerrero's strange (some would even say hermetic) enterprise so effective is his ability to create a body of work that is visceral and cerebral, repulsive and seductive and thus capable of infiltrating our physical and psychic pores. Each exhibition, performance, action, drawing and object is part of an evolving organism that resists the static traditional formats for art.

By interacting with the audience, particularly in unexpected public situations where food is distributed, Massimo Guerrera further dissolves boundaries between art and life and suggests an inherent, holistic interconnectedness among life forms that undermines the corporate version of the global village. ■

