

“Adrian Paci. The Guardians”

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Present, elsewhere, beyond

By Gabi Scardi

Adrian Paci makes art, work after work, through an ongoing, never definitive engagement with the present time and context, with art history and the artistic act itself. His practice draws on a deep familiarity with the art of the past, combining the observation of social dynamics in our time with an awareness of how actions endure through different places and times and thereby take on iconic depth and significance; it explores the layered meanings and interpretative possibilities of signs and images.

As a space of thought and knowledge for the expression and transmission of meaning, each work is grounded not only in an imaginative sensibility, but in a capacity to pick up signals from within and without. Paci moves with a clarity of mind and keenness of vision that reflect an ethical attitude. His relationship with reality is based on tension, attention, and precision; on receptiveness and commitment; but also on individuality and distance; which are both a need and a liberation.

Key motifs in his works include travel, passage, waiting—which is above all a state of expectation—and ties to one’s time and place of origin, which are not dimensions to which anyone can return, but rather deep touchstones that individuals must carry with them. These themes are examined in an active relationship with knowledge, seen as the filter through which we decipher the world.

Albanian by birth and Italian by choice since 1997, Adrian Paci grew up under the regime of Enver Hoxha, which sealed off the country and proclaimed the dawn of a new humanity, the perfect out-growth of nationalistic communist ideology. In the 1990s, as his nation sank into chaos, Paci moved to Italy, discovering all the contradictions of a different society that also seemed bent on generating a new version of mankind: the consumption-based, individualistic, standardized and increasingly globalized West we all know. That may be why he isn’t prone to sweeping statements or swayed by fashions, and remains wary of abstract, universal positions. But nor is he satisfied with contingencies. He is drawn to actions and expressions that may be commonplace, yet contain both solemnity and restraint, whose deep and ancient roots give them the quality of archetypes. They move beyond the limits of space and time, tangibly showing the cultural substrate that links human beings together like a common denominator. These are acts, gestures, and attitudes such as a handshake, the subject of *The Encounter* (2011); the tense expression of a bride saying goodbye to the family she is leaving to be wed, in *The Kiss* (2008); the intent faces of the men in *The Column* (2013) who are quarrying a huge block of marble from the mountain; or the weathered ones of those waiting to journey towards a more decent life in *The Line* (2007), or at least find a job for the day in *Turn On* (2004).

Significantly, *The Guardians* opens with the photographic sequence *The Encounter*. It shows the parvis of an ancient church; at the center stands a man shaking hands with hundreds of people who come up to him, dressed in their weekday clothes. They converge for reasons and from places unknown, then move on, leaving him there. A handshake is simple, ordinary, concrete, yet meaningful: it is a greeting, an exchange, a pact, a bond. In *The Encounter*, its ritual aspect is accentuated both by the fact that it occurs in a space of respect, a buffer zone between the place of worship and the public street, and by its repetition, which turns it into a sort of ceremony. Life is given its authentic substance by how we interact with others on an everyday basis; and this encounter in and of itself is a ceremony worthy of celebration.

Paci's interest in these eloquent actions does not cut him off from current events; rather, he places the latter against the backdrop of a long, deep past, to help us grasp their more specific and urgent dynamics. His investigation hinges on the relationship between politics, economics, and social justice, the contemporary crisis in the concept of citizenship, and specifically, the status of those who are forced to leave their homes; on emigration, exile, uprooting. He is engrossed by the state of separation and limbo in which fugitives and refugees must live, and their search for asylum. The figure of the migrant is close to Paci's heart. This can clearly be seen in *The Line* and in the two videos *Klodi* (2005) and *My Song in Your Kitchen* (2017).

The first is a photographic diptych showing a queue of people on a deserted runway; individuals full of potential, but blocked, isolated, waiting in silence for a plane that isn't there. Different levels of reflection intersect in this work: a more universal one of human life as eternal transit—it is the sense of precariousness, the idea of an “elsewhere” that is always with us, the unpredictable journey of existence—and another connected to the phenomenon of migration, the many people now forced to set out on journeys of hope towards other countries; countries that in many cases prove inhospitable and trap them in a painful or even tragic limbo. Despite its seeming simplicity, this image, like the entire series of connected works (including the iconic *Centro di permanenza temporanea*, 2007), presents itself with an urgency and poetic scope that can engender profound experiences of connection and resonance.

Klodi is the live video portrait of a young man eternally in transit, eternally in search of a better future, in search of work, of rights, of an easier life, or simply some way to get by. But in a world where identity is defined and controlled by national politics, he is not allowed to reinvent himself, or forge new social ties. Klodi epitomizes the uprooted individual: cut off from places and people, hidden and vulnerable, constantly on the run; in the spiral progression of history, the idea of “making a home” for himself is increasingly impossible to achieve. And he ends up in a dramatic, absurd state of constant peregrination, whose outcome is unknown. Paci takes the time to hear his tale. As we listen to his voice, the routes along which he has traveled through Europe appear on the screen, traced by hand: the alternative geography of a person forced into a precarious, stateless existence. But what lingers is his story, unshackled from silence, and the expression on his face—troubled but full of life, rescued from invisibility and seen for once in close-up.

My Song in Your Kitchen, on the other hand, is a video shot at Casa Monluè in Milan: a center temporarily housing refugees who have been granted asylum. These are spaces humming with humanity, brimming with nostalgia, and straining towards the future. Here Paci has established a link between food and music, which are both tied to the emotional sphere and childhood memories, to our closest, most basic relationships, to everyday customs in the places we come from; vibrant dimensions infused with stories and memories, which both channel longings and convey a sense of conviviality. At the artist's invitation, the uninviting, impersonal kitchens at the shelter are used to prepare a shared meal, while singing, and become spaces of interaction. In the actions of the young participants, who come from different countries around Africa—in the simple foods, the hands carrying out familiar tasks, the sounds they have brought with them from home—we can glimpse fragments of their past lives. Paci has also interwoven the images with an Albanian song, played by an Italian group. This bridges the distance from them, creating a profound, often joyous sense of shared experience. The video opens and closes with long, empty hallways lined with closed doors on either side, which continue to convey a feeling of transition and of the unknown.

It is no accident that this work, made in a place that is marginalized in every sense—socially, geographically, mentally—was placed in the magnificent space of Sant'Eustorgio: rather, it is an invitation to reflect on the lonely, desperate state of people who have just come to a new country, and also on their potential, their desire to work together and take pleasure in contributing something, and on everyone's right to exist.

A sense of intimacy can be found in all of Adrian Paci's work. It is an intimacy that is not about withdrawing from the world, but rather, focusing one's gaze; that does not shrink the sphere of experience, but rather deepens it. In *The Future of Nostalgia*¹, Svetlana Boym calls this "diasporic intimacy" and sees it as a special form of bonding that has a foothold in personal experience; "Diasporic intimacy," writes Boym, "could be seen as the mutual attraction of two immigrants from different parts of the world or the sense of a precarious coziness of a foreign home. Just as one learns to live with alienation and reconciles oneself to the uncanniness of the surrounding world and to the strangeness of the human touch, there comes a surprise, a pang of intimate recognition, a hope that sneaks in through the back door in the mist of the habitual estrangement of everyday life abroad."

In Paci's work, this form of identification that springs from the overlap between individual and shared experience moves far beyond the personal sphere, raising questions of an ethical, aesthetic, and political nature. What is more: exploring the intersection between these different planes, Paci sees the migrant state as describing not only the entire history of man, but the natural condition of the artist, a constant incitement to imagine new ways of living, new possible relationships with our surroundings, new languages of expression.

A prime example of his skill for forging links between the personal stories and shared memories, turning the individual body into a collective archetype, is *Home to Go*: a sculpture in which the artist portrays himself life size, stripped of everything, walking along with the roof of a house on his back. This piece was made in 2001; in the same period, Paci developed an entire body of work around the theme of separation and loss that included *Back Home* (2001) and *Vajtojca* (2002). But here his symbolism reaches its greatest incisiveness and intensity.

Alone in a spotlight at the center of Sant'Eustorgio's vast sacristy, the figure stands as both witness and monument, eloquently expressing the struggle to move forward while encumbered by the past, and by the heavy burden of a many-layered identity. Reconciling one's sense of belonging with the reality of displacement is a complex and wrenching experience. Life itself seems to become a strain and trial. But by moving beyond grief, the work seems to say, one can resume the journey.

Home to Go centers on the man, the wayfarer, the pilgrim, and reminds viewers that we are all unique and important; and that we are all foreigners here, endlessly journeying across the world's stage. Moreover, the work resonates with its sanctified surroundings, with the liturgical objects and reliquaries, powerfully evoking a dimension above and beyond human actions. The upside-down roof resembles a pair of wings unfurled to welcome whatever may arrive.

While all of Paci's work is infused with a primal spirituality and touches on something beyond the ephemeral, worldly realm, *Home to Go* makes an obvious reference to the religious iconography of the Passion. This is a theme that Paci returned to in many works over the course of a decade, such as *Cappella Pasolini* (2005) and *Via Crucis* (2011) for the church of San Bartolomeo in Milan. Since the artist grew up in a country that not only denied access to the outside world but to any experience outside the material realm, the idea of a religious and spiritual dimension was something he always connected with through the books of ancient art left to him by his father Ferdinand Paci, himself a painter: a legacy that was like a discovery, an experience, a means of training the eye.

This deeply assimilated knowledge of classical art emerges throughout his work in different ways. The various possibilities Paci explores have included recreating ancient images using modern techniques, and vice versa. A case in point is *Brothers* (2010). In the Portinari Chapel, this mosaic forges a dialogue with the Renaissance fresco cycle by

¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

Vincenzo Foppa and the arch by Giovanni di Balduccio depicting Saint Peter Martyr. *Brothers* is juxtaposed with the arch and lined up on the same visual axis, so that it can also be seen between its columns. Like other works in the “Passages” series, *Brothers* is based on a fragment of archival film, one of the many that the artist has collected: often amateur footage depicting traditional ceremonies or moments of everyday life, mostly in Albania. In this case the frame that has been chosen captures a fleeting interaction between two brothers; this tiny, completely marginal story has been reconstructed using an ancient, rigidly codified, almost obsolete technique; one that does not allow for much detail, and tends to freeze images into solemn fixity.

In *Brothers*, the technical characteristics and tactile quality of mosaic lend power to the image, giving it a sense of stability, as if stretched out over time. Nevertheless, amazingly, it retains the dynamic feel of the video, preserving the fleeting nature of a snapshot and the idea of moving light. This is achieved not in a traditional way through the shine of the tiles, but with irregularly chiseled heights and protrusions that generate the effect of light and shadow. The tessellated marble and enamel also evokes the pixels of the grainy video. The resulting image is an enigmatic one, where the simple gestures continue to convey intimacy, but also acquire intensity, monumentality, and a sense of the absolute. And so, through an analytical attention to detail and full awareness of the tools and language of art, Paci combines the contemplated, examined time of mosaic with the virtual quality of video, through the physicality of a technique reinvented from within.

The work grows out of both Paci's interest in the innumerable possibilities of interpretation contained in each image, and his conviction that in looking at the world around us, we tend even today to grasp the same visual structures that artists of the past used to construct their paintings. Masaccio, in particular, is called to mind by the figure of Rasha, whom we encounter in the video bearing her name (*Rasha*, 2017). Paci channels the Tuscan artist's spirit in the editing of this work.

Rasha Meish is a Palestinian woman who came from Syria to Rome in 2016 along a humanitarian corridor. The video shows her sharing her story, which she has asked to tell. But the images we see are the moments between sentences when the woman sits silently, waiting while her words are translated. Her physical presence is a powerful one. We see her listening to her own story, as her posture, her gestures, and the shifting expressions on her face convey not only the strain of the momentarily interrupted narrative, but the power of the experience she has lived through; an experience that despite all efforts to get its essence across, cannot be entirely summed up in words.

As the artist points out, between the verbal narrative and the bodily one, “between the silent face and the voice speaking Arabic, a gap emerges”: Rasha becomes the protagonist not only of her story, but of the act of listening to it. Printed separately, on a sheet of paper that visitors are free to keep, are her translated words: necessary, but not enough. The work is a reflection on the traces left on our bodies by the past and how the body itself conveys them. The nuances of expression on the woman's face speak louder than words. *Rasha* is a work about the complexity of storytelling; about how an experience becomes a story and becomes language, not just through speech, but through the body. Her story is one of violence, of separation from places and people; it is a story of trauma, but also of the solace that can be found in fellowship and friendship. It must be heard, because through it one can sense the pain of countless other people. That is why, as in other works, Paci lingers on her face. Not for descriptive ends, but as an act of respect for the individual; for every individual. And so everything shifts from the plane of contingency to that of symbolism.

Within today's overcrowded visual universe, among a mountain of images, Rasha's face stands out, clear and vivid. And so, with one eye on these images, the other keeping watch on the world around him, and a restless imagination, Paci probes the work as it unfolds. This process acts as a filter and creates a distance that allows him, once again, to describe an era and its contradictions, turning an individual story into one that embodies an infinity of others.

In the Sala dell'Arciconfraternita where it is shown, *Rasha* becomes part of a choral narrative; the video is placed at the center of an eighteenth-century series of large-scale devotional paintings. The presentation evokes the narrative significance of the great painting cycles of the past, but also calls to mind a frame-based approach to film theory. *Rasha's* mutable, responsive expressions weave a dialogue with the dramatic, emphatic gestures of the painted characters, with the mechanical camera substituting the manual technique, and the typically cinematic fixed shot, horizontal and in extreme close up, replacing the animated, stage-like setting found in the paintings. This alternation of tools and methods reflects a shift in era. Yet however different, the figures are linked by the emotional force behind them, emphasized in both cases by the lighting.

Malgrado tutto (2017) also describes the unquenchable human need for expression. It is a series of photographs showing the graffiti that can still be seen on the peeling walls of the cells in an ancient Franciscan monastery that served as a prison during Enver Hoxha's communist dictatorship. From the end of World War II up to the 1990s, Albanian prisoners were shut away here, interrogated, and tortured. Partially restored to its original monastic function, and partially transformed into a Museum of Memory, the place still bears the traces of their silent suffering: drawings, words, calendars scratched into the walls to keep track of time. It is evidence—ephemeral, but still intense—of the human need to leave a trace of our passage, even in conditions of utter privation. The artist captures them in photographs before they disappear, in a commentary on his own country and its transformations that expands out to touch the great themes of time, memory, and forgetting.

Once again, the work involves a shift between different modes of expression. Paci's investigation deals with the different languages that constantly coexist and intersect in the world, and that can only be partially translated into each other. It is precisely by drawing on this linguistic complexity that the richness of everything around us can be expressed.

Malgrado tutto was presented on the walls of Sant'Eustorgio's early Christian cemetery. The fragile yet enduring signs of Albania's recent past are juxtaposed with the steles and epigraphs that have emerged from archeological digs; and they resonate powerfully with this setting, showing the human capacity to leave traces that serve as a bridge across time.

The same area also houses the *The Guardians* (2015). This video tells the story of the Catholic cemetery in Shkodër. Abandoned during the dictatorship, it became a site for encounters that would otherwise have been impossible; after the fall of the regime in 1991, it was refurbished, and has since spread out in an enthusiastic but chaotic way. It is now filled with a swarm of children who are paid to look after the tombs: a phenomenon that mirrors the country's contradictory but unstoppable rebirth.

The children's self-assurance also points to the many different possible facets of our relationship with life and death; their boundless energy hints at the urge for freedom that spurs human beings to break chains and overcome barriers; their efforts show them to be guardians of the future. The early Christian cemetery, where death dwells, is nevertheless a place full of life. And reflection on the hereafter may also offer a way to do better in the here-and-now. This work, humming with poetry and vitality, speaks delicately of the need to take care of the world around us, of new generations coming to the fore, of the dawning future, but also the possibility of forging a true, personal, concrete bond with the past; of establishing a means of transmission so that things of value can remain the shared heritage of those yet to come.

Paci's work grows out of a deep belief in art and its capacity to carve out spaces of reflection. The exactitude of his gaze, with its highly defined details and intense, recurring close ups, shows how contingency is not expunged from it, but rather filtered and boiled down to its essence. In this distillation, each work recreates the link between the deepest, most archaic dimension that lingers on in human behavior, sedimented in the images that art history has passed down to us; and the most immediate present, in which geopolitical

dynamics have drastic repercussions on individual lives. The meaning of his work springs from this overlap between circumstance and universality, participation and distance, poetry and critique: a critique that becomes a constant assertion of the basic value of dignity, which can only be subjective and collective, moral and social at the same time. Paci's oeuvre thus fits seamlessly into the public discourse on the fundamental principles of respect, justice, and coexistence.