

# frieze

## Alessandro Pessoli

Collezione Maramotti  
Reggio Emilia

Is painting a dying language whose only significance lies in its legacy? Or does it still present artists with an opportunity for invention? Alessandro Pessoli's latest project, 'Fiamma pilota le ombre seguono' (Pilot Light the Shadows Follow), is the painterly equivalent of a double leap into the void: in both challenges perceptions of painting being a dying art and, with its references to Christian iconography, responds to evolution of the medium.

Specially commissioned by the Maramotti Collection, Pessoli's three large-scale-paintings represent the development of a concept the artist first explored - with his series of 30 works depicting a mixture of religious figures and fictional ones - at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009. In the new paintings, however, the art-historical association is stronger and more ambitious. Pessoli has taken the Crucifixion as his starting point, an image entrenched for centuries in Western visual culture, to devise a reinvented, anti-classical iconography, in which the sacred and the historical contemporary landscape.

Depicted without a cross, but with exceptionally long arms and enormous hands and feet, Christ occupies the central space of *Fiamma pilota* (Pilot Light, all works 2011). The powerful, distorted form of his bright pink body, reminiscent of a vivid torch, acts as the focus of the scene, with the remainder of the composition comprising a loosely sketched landscape occupied by a number of ghostly characters who, as the artist noted, 'attempt to do things in a somnambulant state - their actions hollow and without consequence'. This is a fervent image, one that hovers somewhere between apparition and dream. Elements that are archaic, almost child-like, are rendered in bold colours using a stencil and spray-paint while other seemingly primitive and amorphous components are rich in art-historical references. The face of Christ, for instance, references a painting in London's National Gallery, *A Head of Christ Crowded with Thorns* (after Guido Reni c.1640), while his feet take their inspiration from Matthias Grünewald's crucifixion from the Isenheim Altarpiece (1506-15); the body is massive, while the large hands recall those painted in Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937).

In his painting, Pessoli positions art's relationship to time and memory at centre stage, demonstrating how paintings is still capable of inducing wonder in its viewers. Yet at the core of his approach is a lengthy process involving stratification, revision, deletion and destruction. Speaking of two works in the exhibition - *Le figure tornano a casa* (The Figures Return Home) and *Testa farfalla su matrice locomotiva* (Butterfly Head on Locomotive Matrix) - the artist commented that 'one painting seems to be the dream of the other', a genesis that leads to the creation of an imaginary place between art and reality. This notion of place is also invoked in the title of *Le figure tornano a casa*, Pessoli's reimagining of the Flight into Egypt which he perceives as a picaresque journey in the dark in pursuit of ghosts. *Testa farfalla*



*su matrice locomotiva* is, perhaps, the most enigmatic painting in the show. An homage to Futurism, it's a summation of the principal elements of the other works: the crucifix is dematerialized in a curious, dark-hued interpretation of the Annunciation, around which extends a luminous, indeterminate landscape, populated by new ghosts.

**Marinella Paderni**  
Translated by Rosalind Furness