

ARTS

Plunged into a world of bitter coffee and creepy characters

Multimedia artist Fabio Mauri's work, now on show in London, focuses on war and suffering. By Jackie Wullschlager

Okwui Enwezor's controversially dark Venice Biennale ended in November, but his powerful exhibition at the Giardini lingers in the mind. The opening work especially, Fabio Mauri's enormous, unstable barricade of hundreds of suitcases with individual luggage tags, "The Western Wall or the Wailing Wall", made in 1993 as a memorial to final journeys to Auschwitz, has gathered ever greater resonance as the migrant crisis has unfolded.

The poetic, awkward, prescient, passionately committed, little-known multimedia works of Mauri, who died in 2009, are now the focus of Hauser & Wirth's winter show. It introduces London audiences to one of the most original spirits in postwar Italian culture through a strange mise-en-scène, stunning, chilling and absurd in equal measure. The Savile Row space is blacked out and the entrance transformed into that of an air-raid shelter, with fire extinguishers and sandbags stacked against the wall and mugs of bitter coffee on offer.

Next, in place of a coat rack, there is an array of officers' hats from various nations, inviting you, says curator Olivier Renaud-Clément, to "pick your side", and suitcase sculptures reminiscent of Venice. A poignant, precarious tower of leather and wicker baskets is a "Monument to Three Soldiers". In the found-object homage "The Sergeant", the contents of one fragile basket – helmet, hammer, nails, conkers, withered leaves – spill out: a hamper of death. Works that look like black monochrome paintings line the gallery; from the series "Picnic or The Good Soldier", they turn out to be glistening iron sheets to each of which is affixed a lonely memento mori – a toy plane without wings, a gas mask, compass, radio.

The show takes its title, *Oscuramento* ("Darkening"), from a central installation of 29 wax figures in military dress seated and standing around a table in a darkened room: a recreation of the last session of the Grand Council of Fascism in 1943. You can walk through and



among these creepy characters, and historians will pick out the features of individuals – De Bono, head of the Italian army; Scorza, secretary of the Fascist party; Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and exterior minister – but really the piece, created in 1975, alludes to any sinister closed world of power and corruption.

With *Oscuramento*'s soundtrack of fascist debates shrieking across the gallery, the exhibition opened to a staging – to be repeated at the finissage in February – of Mauri's performance piece "Rancio" ("Ration"): an actor dressed as a soldier stands at an iron stove and doles out pasta e fagioli in cheap bowls to members of the audience, standing in line. Simultaneously Grigori Chukhrai's 1959 Soviet film *Ballad of a Soldier* is projected on to the back of a young naked woman sitting motionless on a high chair.

Eating, sharing food, co-opts us as we observe fascist or communist

propaganda alike, even as Mauri draws attention to war's direct effect on the human body: the suffering of flesh and blood, and how it "takes place/while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along".

Oddest of all, though, in an exhibition that constantly plays on virtual and fictive realities, is that *Oscuramento*, this giant piece of theatre and collective memory, is for sale. As we participate in the performances around it, we are implicated too in the commercial activities of Hauser & Wirth, the dealership ranked number one in 2015's Art Review Power 100.

Mauri, like the Old Masters, made suffering his subject. Born the son of eminent book and newspaper publishers in Rome in 1926, he was a teenager when the first images of the concentration camps began to arrive on his father's desk. The shock prompted a nervous

collapse, and for the next eight years Mauri was in psychiatric hospitals enduring a series of breakdowns. He began to recover when put to work helping on a production of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello, one of his father's authors.

From the start, then, his oeuvre, informed by the mad fact that atrocities took place openly, with public consciousness shaped by the media – "When I came out of the war, the sun was fascist," he said – was inflected with theatre of the absurd at its bleakest. This show's poster image is the disturbing "Plate with Ornament in Jewish Skin" (1971), a simple painted cream and black horse tag, innocuous without but horrifying with its fictive title.

Facing this piece and continuing as a wraparound enclosing the exterior walls of *Oscuramento* are the 88 photographic images of "Linguaggio è guerra" ("Language is War", 1975), assembled from German and English second world war magazines: swastikas and "Church Army Emergency Tea Car for Troops", battleships and skies lit up by the trails of bombers. The visual and linguistic rhetoric of war, Mauri says, distances us from reality, disguising, aestheticising, diluting experience.

Mauri saw performance art as part of tradition: "It has a notion of itself. It is not anxious to return to figurative art, because it knows that it has never left it." He stands fascinatingly between today's postmodern deadly serious jokers – Paul McCarthy, Christoph Büchel – whose extravagant installations collapsing fictional/real boundaries Hauser & Wirth also promotes, and the postwar Italians with whom he came of age.

Like Lucio Fontana's slashed paintings or Alberto Burri's burnt ones, he formed his own language referencing the wounded body. And although he was never part of Arte Povera and challenged its abstracting tendencies, he shares with that movement both the attraction to poor and found objects – from bowls and wicker baskets to the recycling of films – and the alchemy by which base materials are transformed into gold in his own art of darkness illuminated.

'Oscuramento: The Wars of Fabio Mauri', Hauser & Wirth, London, to February 6, hauserwirth.com



Original: Mauri's 'Oscuramento – Il Gran Consiglio' (1975) recreates 1943's Grand Council of Fascism. Left: 'The Sergeant' (1975), from the series 'Picnic or The Good Soldier'

Alex Delfanne