

PRESSBOOK

Laurent GRASSO

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Laurent Grasso's Radical 'Paramuseum' Restages Palais Fesch

"Paramuseum" at the Palais Fesch – Musée des Beaux-Arts in Ajaccio, Corsica until October 3 is a major museum intervention by the Paris-based French conceptual artist Laurent Grasso.

Challenging the codes of museography, Grasso has initiated an unexpected and unprecedented restaging of works from the museum's collection, including those not usually on display. The radical intervention also incorporates existing works from Grasso's oeuvre, and new ones created especially for the exhibition, in a way that transcends mere juxtaposition.

Taking the concept of the "gaze" and the notion of the "genius loci" as his primary themes, Grasso transforms the works from the collection into phantoms or living beings. The exhibition also explores the aesthetics of the tangible and symbolic dimensions of power – concepts that are key to engaging with the museum and its Imperial and Napoleonic heritage.

What was the inspiration behind "Paramuseum" at the Palais Fesch-musée des Beaux-Arts?

I responded to the invitation of Philippe Costamagna, director of the Palais Fesch, who proposed that I intervene in the museum. Philippe Costamagna is an art historian, a specialist in 16th century Italian painting, particularly portraits in Florence. The exhibition was greatly enriched by our exchanges.

The question of history and multiple temporalities is very present in my work. I did not see the museum as solely a historic place, but rather as a material to be manipulated, one that enabled me to address subjects such as the representation of power during different periods.

The concept of "Paramuseum" is connected to the notion of a parallel voyage in the museum's collections, of a doorway leading to a more subjective and mysterious installation of the works. It takes its place within a practice of parallel thought, as in my film "Paracinéma" (2005), in which the camera navigates through the abandoned movie sets at Cinecittà, thereby raising the possibility of creating a parallel film.

When did you start with the development and creation of "Paramuseum" and what approach did you take?

I didn't want to simply juxtapose my work with the historical works. This approach by way of "intrusion" has become commonplace and I wanted to avoid it. I seized the museum's collection as an artistic material. So I decided to take down all of the works on the museum's top floor, and to make a new selection from the collections – one that eludes the classical codes of museography.

For instance, I created a row of 43 portraits placed at eye-level, running along a large hallway of 61 meters. These portraits from different historical periods come one after another, with no predefined order. They were chosen for their presence or the intensity of their gaze. I also played with neon lighting in order to reinforce the peculiar atmosphere that I wanted to create in this exhibition, in this room opening through arched doorways onto the Grand Gallery of portraits. Here I presented landscapes from the reserves, yellowed by time, sometimes a little damaged and frameless, and lighted by the neon light "Éclipse." I also took inspiration from the architecture of this 19th century palace with its extended perspectives, vaulted rooms, and "irregular" aspects in order to help conjure its ghosts.

Could you explain the new works you created for the exhibition?

I created two new series of paintings that take their place in the earlier "Studies into the Past." I extracted the gazes from certain historical portraits, and reproduced them in small formats on square panels of wood with a silver background. I then placed them systematically at the entrance to certain rooms, arranged in a line. I wanted the spectator to feel observed by these somewhat strange presences. The gazes placed in certain rooms relating to the representation of power reinforce the impression of surveillance.

I also reused the figures of saints, again from the museum's collections, whose silhouettes I reproduced in filigree on a silver background, like ghosts appearing on an icon.

How would you describe your interaction with the Fesch collection, and why did you choose to include the works you did?

These two new series that I just mentioned are indicative of a desire to take inspiration from the genius loci [the spirit of a place]. Hence, there is a very powerful interaction with the Fesch collection. These two series of paintings, with the installation of the portrait gallery for instance, are a way of integrating the collection's pieces in the work, of making them into an artistic material.

It also turns out that the museum's collection, built on that of Cardinal Fesch, in many respects directly resonates with my own explorations, notably with respect to the Vatican and the representation of power, given the cardinal's links with the Bonaparte family. I therefore chose to set off certain works against my own work, according to a principle of free association — always non-scientific and very subjective; for instance, the four portraits of cardinals with one of my sculptures of a bird representing the virtue of silence in the Sala Vecchia degli Svizzeri in the Vatican.

I also wanted to show my latest film, "Élysée," in the museum's Grande Galerie. This film explores the aesthetic of power, and does so by "scanning" the Salon Doré, the personal office of the President of the Republic. In another room, two large natures mortes aux attributs guerriers [still lifes with the attributes of the warrior] by Carlo Manieri are next to paintings made in the manner of the 18th century from my series "Studies into the Past," which presents views of the Salon Doré, along with a hand of power in marble.

I also chose to link together the film "Bomarzo," about an Italian garden created during the 16th century, with busts from the collection. This park is filled with monstrous sculptures, and seeing these busts inhabit the projection room strengthens the dream-like aspect that the Surrealists emphasized when they rediscovered this garden during the 1930s.

What are the main themes and ideas that you explore in "Paramuseum" and what do you want visitors to experience and see?

In addition to the representation of power, which is central to the exploration of the Fesch collection, the question of the gaze was ubiquitous. With this row of portraits appearing to stare at the viewer, along with the pairs of gazes against a silver backdrop, it is no longer just the viewer who is watching the works, but the figures who are staring at the visitor. This is why I chose, for the invitation card, the subject of multiple eyes surrounded by rays of light, which was inspired by an 18th century painting by Ambroise Crozat named "La Vision de Zacharie (The Vision of Zachary)," and that is a theme that can also be found in the work of the Surrealists.

Philippe Costamagna had contemporaneously published a book titled "Histoire d'œils" on the profession of attribution. This work, devoted to the subject of the eye, struck me as a sign of a deep affinity, and greatly inspired me in this context while I was reflecting on the question of the gaze.

What I also wanted to bring forth was the question of the presence that certain portraits can have, that makes them almost living, and to thus instill a somewhat troubling environment. Installed across from this row of historical figures are dates in neon, whose meaning is not immediately apparent.

We enter into this top floor as though opening a door to a hidden museum, in which museographic habits are frustrated, and the methods for exhibitions are somewhat disturbed. There are no labels below the works. There is a booklet containing important information, such as the captions for the works or the names of the persons who provided their gaze. A catalogue will be published too.

There is a powerful narrative dimension in this exhibition: all of these rooms are like chapters, in which the viewer's wanderings play an essential role. The exhibition functions like a succession of rooms with a play on the viewer's perspective, similar to my work on the camera's point of view in my films. There is the effect of a tracking shot with this long gallery of portraits facing the viewer, as well as with the play on perspective throughout the succession of rooms in the museum – one that is reinforced by the positioning of eyes that frame every opening, along with the films at the end of the building.

For me, every exhibition should be a surprising experience, bearing a strong relation to the device, scenography, and architecture. The true work, in fact, is the exhibition.

"Paramuseum" runs through October 3 at Palais Fesch.