



STEFANO MEZZAROMA

NO JOKES PLEASE, WE'RE ITALIAN



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AN EXHIBITION CURATED BY
SERENA MORTON

CRITICAL ESSAYS BY
SOPHIE HASTINGS
and
DUCCIO TROMBADORI

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Pop goes Contemporary

Sophie Hastings

Stefano Mezzaroma's work is graphically brilliant and startlingly beautiful to look at and, at a time when installation art, video art and conceptual art are the lingua franca of the contemporary art scene, it also poses questions. Above all: 'What does it mean to be a contemporary pop artist?' Mezzaroma is a 27-year-old self-taught artist and celebrated DJ whose preoccupation with images from the mass culture that surrounds him, and its expression in collage, found objects, old posters and screen-printing, appears at first to mimic those groundbreaking artists of the 1950s and '60s whose driving impulse was to move on from the cool detachment of modernism and Abstract Expressionism. Why would a young, emerging talent choose to express himself through a genre of Modern Art that has endured since the early 1950s? What gives Pop Art its longevity, its ability to recreate itself and stay relevant way beyond endless tea-towel reproductions of Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup cans? It's worth looking at the history of Pop Art and the legacy young artists like Mezzaroma must assume with their continuation of the genre, in order to show that the new pop art is as current, vital and engaged as it ever was. Like performance art which emerged at the same time, also in reaction to the formal art of the first half of the 20th century, pop art continues to flourish as an avant-garde art form because of its unflinching confrontation with a rapidly changing world.

Pop Art was first identified in 1952 with the founding of the Independent Group, in the UK, which challenged a traditional approach to fine art. Co-founding artist Eduardo Paolozzi presented the band of writers, artists, sculptors, architects and critics with work made from found objects, including his now iconic collage, 'I Was A Rich Man's Plaything.' A pistol pointing at a scantily-clad 1940s pin-up emits a puff of smoke in which the word 'pop' appears. But it was in the 1960s that Pop Art really took off, with Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselman, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg et al in New York and David Hockney, Patrick Caulfield and Peter Blake in London. The 1962 show of 54 pop artists in New York, 'The International Exhibition of New Realists,' brought the genre into the mainstream but there was a

paradox: Pop Art was avant-garde but also commercial. Could these two things co-exist? Can 'cheap' art be good art; what do we do with our perceptions of 'high' and 'low' culture? Of course, this discourse was at the very heart of pop art: intimations of irony and parody of mass culture rendered it 'high' art but Warhol in particular seemed more seduced than bored or appalled by his subject matter. His blank-eyed gaze and vocal monotone seemed to emphasise his refusal to criticise the iconography he repeated again and again until we were blank-eyed ourselves; or was he the embodiment of the effects of an over-commodified, celebrity-obsessed, media-saturated culture on its people?

At the same time, Italian artist Mimmo Rotella, who also took part in the 1962 New York show, was working on his own brand of pop art. It had taken him years to win the critics over but his torn movie posters cut from billboards with a penknife, along with zinc and metal sheeting, and stuck onto canvas, hit a nerve and his 1958 series, Cinecitta, finally gained him an international following. Discovered and befriended by top French critic Pierre Restany in 1960, he joined the Nouveau Realisme group which included Yves Klein, Tinguely, Cesar, Sporreri, Arman and Christo, and moved to Paris. He worked with typography, inseting and super-imposing images, and went on to use pages of magazines distressed with solvents, covering them with the graffiti he'd seen on the streets. In 1990, he was part of the 'High and Low' exhibition held at MOMA in New York and continued to show internationally, until his death in 2006. Venues included the New York Guggenheim, the Centre Pompidou, the Museum of Contemporary art in LA and the internet, with the web's first ever one-man-show in Italy.

During Rotella's exceptionally long career, came a second generation of pop artists: Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Futura 2000 and Jean-Michel Basquiat accompanied by powerful new painters David Salle and Julian Schnabel; Warhol was still working, watching and collaborating. While the first generation of pop artists had responded to a newly sophisticated, post-war advertising industry, the cartoon strips and superheroes of their youth, Hollywood's technicolour extravaganzas and attendant celebrity culture, and the mundane tug of consumption, the second wave was not faced with an external barrage but an internal maelstrom. Nowhere

was this more evident than in the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Asked about the words and phrases that littered his canvases, he said 'they're in my head...when I'm working I hear them and just throw 'em down.' When Basquiat and Warhol collaborated, they defaced each other's paintings and Basquiat's scribbling on and blocking out of Warhol's logos was eloquent in its refusal of the earlier simplicity of pop art and an expression of a disturbingly complex internal life.

A third generation of pop artists has had half a century to absorb and internalise the mass media and there is the addition of the internet, a virtual replica of the information overload we are learning to marshal and direct. Not only are we faced with images on billboards and television screens, in magazines and cinemas, we are sucked into a technological vortex that bombards us with a constant stream of visual stimuli. Artists engaged with popular culture have more material than ever to explore and, one would imagine, less 'headroom' than ever in which to think. And yet, Mezzaroma's clean, sharp graphics and his harnessing of technology give his work a directness that is hugely refreshing. What makes his art stand out, on top of its visual impact, is the subtext: Mezzaroma's meanings are richly layered and he is unafraid of social commentary. In 'Mao,' a black and white photocopy of Chairman Mao taken from a bank note is turned into a silk screen and stencilled with the Google logo and Chinese stars. Clearly a comment on China's banning of Google and on its dubious record on free speech, we're also looking at the commodification of the face of Communism - think Castro t-shirts worn by every traveller across the globe, as well as the proliferation of Mao paraphernalia snapped up by tourists. We also think of the negation of creativity during Mao's 50-year Cultural Revolution and compare it to the recent arrests of Ai Weiwei. In a country where artists are imprisoned for speaking against the government, ambitious Chinese parents choose the career of artist over all others for their children because it is so well remunerated and respected. Is contemporary art seditious or conformist?

Mezzaroma's use of the Jurassic Park logo with the word Microsoft emblazoned across is also obvious in its intention yet underpinned with a deeper narrative. The constant development of technology renders today's brand new computer tomorrow's dinosaur; how do we

deal with a time in which new technology produces ever more gorgeous baubles for our delectation; do we just throw them away and buy again? Do our children see their ipods/pads/phones as desirable and replaceable as sweets? There's something sublimely comforting about the Jurassic Park image, reminiscent of more innocent times when articulated film-studio creatures were really scary and sweets were peardrops. But isn't nostalgia the most insidious emotion of them all?

'Ikea,' which has a black and white Disney Merlin against a grid of colours that suggest a Damien Hirst spot painting, tells us that the Scandinavian superstore will bring colour to our lives like magic. Once Merlin consults his book of spells - or visits Ikea - he will be filled with colour too. Merlin is old fashioned, kindly, again referencing an idealised past, but his gentle posture belies the hollow promise of the sales pitch: we know Ikea furniture is a nightmare to construct and leaves everyone in a fury but its shiny potential is laden with the draw of a magical future. 'Mary Will Save Us,' depicts a cut-out of the infamously strict-but-fair nanny against a backdrop of an empty parliament washed with the Italian flag. 'A spoonful of sugar' is inscribed across the bottom begging the question as to the nature of the medicine we are obliged to swallow. This emblem of chaste, Edwardian womanhood could not be further from the women connected to the Italian prime minister and the quagmire of his private life, so is the artist having a joke at his expense or perhaps suggesting that the salacious gossip we are fed is the sugar to sweeten the taste of political reality and stop us asking too many questions.

'Taxi Cola,' stands slightly outside this body of work. Less graphic, more painterly, with its Jackson Pollock spots and splashes on a grainy black and white film still, this image is more ambiguous than the others. It is uncomfortable to be reminded of product placement when we're busy making associations with a film that has such emotional resonance, and the 'RC' logo seems out of place next to De Niro's moody, insular figure. But graffiti isn't supposed to be easy, the film itself is beyond uncomfortable and the artwork is beautiful. As much as meaning can be found and social critique is intentional, Mezzaroma makes, above all, visually arresting, powerful work. Wherever he goes from here, as a young leader of the third generation of pop artists, will be a fascinating journey.

The Parody of Today's World

Duccio Trombadori

We are pleased to accompany the insightful eye of 'Steve' Stefano Mezzaroma. Through his art he manipulates with ease and loose irony the stereotypes of our more than tested consumer civilization. Gifted with spontaneous expressiveness Steve inspirationally combines advertising messaging, topical information and latest fashion to make his art both a statement and a commentary on today. His art becomes cinema, photography and television all in one contemporary imagery. Avant-garde experimentalism distanced culture and society. New technologies today bridges the gap with the intelligence of digital programs and the fusion of different languages that often fail to communicate the true meaning.

By flexing and inter-mingling of these different mediums, the direct life experience is filtered by Steve through allusions that immerse in the collage of snapshots, special effects and *photoshop* that enhance fiction and expand both imagination and understanding, making it collide with reality. From the forest of symbols of commercial civilization, Steve 'smile' humourously combines a number of poignant metaphors to help the observer understand the serious issue of what is required to 'save the world'. The result is a kaleidoscope of witty appearances that replaces the fairy tale with the coldness of *pop* insignia. Art becomes an expression of realism and practicality and invites everyone to join in a journey through the idols of our time.

It is a reality experience of Alice's looking glass that uncovers and deciphers: the covers of *fashion* magazines, advertising signs, *flashes* of events, crimes news and sports, movie *trailers*, video scripts, wars, traces of life, sex, love and death in both the virtual and real versions.

This iconography memorized by Steve refers to the most recent film heritage: the show begins with Steven Spielberg, with the image that associates the caducity of the *Microsoft* brand in the shadow profile of *Tyrannosaurus* recovered from *Jurassic Park*. It is not coincidence that these are followed by the silhouette of the villain Darth Vader, dark lord of the universe of '*Star*

Wars' silouetted with his sword on a fluorescent background. Michael Douglas and Charlie Sheen enter the fray, framed by the overlaid silhouette of Wall Street bull: to remind us that 'money never sleeps and often charges on relentlessly at the expense of a dense network of blood-stained hands causing the background of posters faces to smile apathetically. Then 'enter' the flowing *silhouette* of Mary Poppins with her umbrella hovering over the semicircle of Italian Parliament (white, red and green) to seal the emblematic and alluding refrain '*just a spoonful of sugar...'*'.

Invention and creativity are not reduced to inlaid figures extracted from the screen and *computer*: So as to avoid visual sterility, Steve manipulates the images on the silkscreen canvas, by painting 'interventions' with gold spray, cutting and pasting of the written word and geometric shapes that intersect with inter-communicating lines. By playing with the idols and icons of our time, he fondles them and somehow uncovers and then exorcises their power and influence:- Bin Laden ends up with a dummy in his mouth to advertise diapers, or tetragonal figures of Chinese communism as Mao Tse-dun is absorbed by the approval sign of Google Viewdata. While Albert Einstein, the sacred monster of science and emblem of antomasia 'homo sapiens', laughs and sticks out his long yellow tongue thereby advertising in the form of the Chiquita banana gourmand monkey; Then by duplicated by a photograph, Mike Tyson, king of physical force applied to *boxing*, actually has no other rival than the menacing image of himself.

By this unconventional witnessing of the strange metamorphoses of the modern age, Steve takes the observer through the weave of symptomatic anagrams that play images against words. The figure of Queen Elizabeth II (who game titles to the *Beatles* - ony to be rejected by John Lennon) appears with a Freddy Mercury style moustache and with the fateful corus of *God Save the Queen*, that highlights the ambiguously between two. Halfway between anecdote and moralizing irony, parody and celebration, Steve's journey continues through the mountain of products consumed by a civilization of images: rituals and myths, the sacred and the profane, science and magic, all held in the melting pot of a culture capable of assimilating and culpable in making every value relative.

The stark comparison between real and virtual world ruled by advertising, Steve reveals the essential features of what our culture has become: by playing with ambiguity between text, image and caricature that involves the myths of certain *sex symbols* (Angelina Jolie) or if the mega-apparatuses of furnishing *prêt à porter* (Ikea and Hermes). So, the remake of the verso of collective infatuations is proposed again even when the author makes a psycho-autobiographical control of his emotional world. The humorous and sincere description of *My World* results from this - a sort of imaginary imaging trip around his room, where the terrestrial globe is constellated simultaneously by dreams, desires, things seen and hoped.

The attempt at parody is expressed in the 'diary in public'. Here the agile modern film hero figure of *Lupin* arises, and combines with images taken from comics, art, history and news: rather like the hands of Adam and the Lord on the *Day of Creation* drawn by Michelangelo; Raphael's cherubs doubled by two winged figures ob-

tained from the *Simpson cartoon* and as the striking background of a night-time New York, associated with the famous image of workers who built the glories of the Thirties, suspended in equilibrium from a skyscraper in construction. Such 'self portrait' could not close without illuminating with a frank morality the *football* champion Francesco Totti, idol of sports crowds in the Rome of our years and an example realized by an exuberant youth, .

Meticulous and capable observers can combine all types of visual stimuli through Steve's imaginative eye that writes information for an unlimited and always enjoyed investigation simultaneously in thousands of facets of our '*Global Village*'. The conclusion from this abstract view of the pandemonium of an era is '*signifying nothing*' - to quote the words that Shakespeare put in the mouth of Macbeth. The end of morality is suggested with a smile on the lips to define the intelligent easiness of Steve's critical spirit, which creatively makes precise the persuasive and poetic focus of a style and a 'way of seeing'.

Tutto il Mondo in una Parodia

Duccio Trombadori

Ci facciamo volentieri accompagnare dall'occhio prensile di 'Steve' -Stefano Mezzaroma- che manipola con leggerezza e sciolta ironia gli stereotipi della nostra più che collaudata civiltà dei consumi. Dotato di spontanea espressività egli utilizza lo sfavillante dispositivo della macchina pubblicitaria, della moda e della comunicazione facendo il verso alla fabbrica dei sogni -cinema, fotografia, televisione- che alimenta l'immaginario contemporaneo. Dopo gli sperimentalismi di avanguardia, che distanziavano cultura e società di massa, oggi il divario è ridotto con le nuove tecnologie, l'intelligenza dei programmi digitali e la contaminazione dei diversi linguaggi.

Grazie alla flessibilità dei mezzi espressivi, l'esperienza diretta della vita è filtrata da Steve per allusioni: ci si immerge nel giardino fiorito delle istantanee, degli effetti speciali e di *photoshop* che esaltano la finzione fino a farla coincidere con la realtà. Dalla foresta di simboli della civiltà commerciale Steve ricava metafore con una effervescente capacità combinatoria. Il diorama figurativo punta a 'salvare il mondo' grazie all'incanto di un semplice sorriso. Ne risulta un caleidoscopio di argute apparizioni che sostituisce la favola alla freddezza della insegna *pop*. Grazie a questo accorgimento estetico la fantasia doppia la realtà come invito ad un viaggio sapienziale attraverso gli idoli del nostro tempo.

Lo sguardo si impegna allora malcerto e incantato come quello di Alice di fronte ad una 'Wonderland' tutta da decifrare: copertine di riviste *fashion*, insegne pubblicitarie, *flash* di cronaca nera e sportiva, *trailer* cinematografici, elaborati video, guerre, tracce di vita, sesso, amore e morte nella versione virtuale e in quella della realtà. L'iconografia memorizzata da Steve fa riferimento al patrimonio cinematografico più recente: lo spettacolo inizia con Steven Spielberg, con l'immagine che associa la caducità del marchio *Microsoft* al profilo-ombra del Tirannosauro ripreso da *Jurassic Park*. Segue poi non a caso la sagoma del cattivo Darth Vader, signore oscuro dell'universo di 'Guerre stellari', che si staglia con la sua spada su di uno sfondo fluorescente. E compaiono anche Michael Douglas e Charlie Sheen, incorniciati dalla

sagoma sovrapposta del toro di *Wall Street*: a ricordarci che 'il denaro non dorme mai', come nell'omonimo ultimo film, a spese di una fitta rete di mani insanguinate che fa da sfondo ai volti da *poster* con il loro apatico sorriso. Per non parlare, poi, della svolazzante *silhouette* di Mary Pop-pins, che aleggia col suo ombrello sull'emiciclo del parlamento italiano (in bianco, rosso e verde) a suggello dell'emblematico quanto allusivo ritornello '*just a spoonful of sugar...*'.

L'invenzione e la creatività non si riducono all'intarsio di figure sottratte allo schermo ed al *computer*: per evitare la sterilità visiva Steve manipola le immagini in serigrafia su tela, con interventi pittorici che prediligono il colore dell'oro diffuso a spruzzo, il ritaglio e l'inserzione di scritte e figure geometriche, la stesura di fondi screziati da linee di interferenza, a commento della composizione. L'autore gioca con gli idoli della contemporaneità, li vezzeggia e in qualche modo ne esorcizza il potere: accade così che personaggi tenebrosi come Bin Laden finiscono con un ciuccetto in bocca a reclamizzare i pannolini *Pampers*; o che figure tetragone del chiuso comunismo cinese come Mao-tse-dun, sono assorbite dal segno omologante della comunicazione telematica di *Google*. Mentre Albert Einstein, mostro sacro della scienza ed emblema per antonomasia dell'*homo sapiens*, se la ride cacciando fuori una linguaccia gialla e reclamizza come una golosa scimmietta la banana *Chiquita*; quando non è la volta di Mike Tyson, re della forza fisica applicata alla *boxe*, che sembra non avere altro rivale che la minacciosa immagine di sé stesso, duplicata da una fotografia.

Un po' scanzonato, un po' testimone delle strane metamorfosi del tempo moderno, Steve intreccia anche un sintomatico gioco di anagrammi tra immagine e parola, quando la figura della Regina Elisabetta II (che nominò baronetti i *Beatles*) si presenta con un paio di baffetti alla Freddy Mercury e con la scritta fatidica *God save the Queen*, dove quest'ultima parola sta ambigualmente ad indicare tanto la Regina d'Inghilterra quanto lo storico complesso dei *Queen* che accompagnava la *rock star* inglese. A metà strada tra l'aneddoto e l'ironia moraleggiante, la parodia e la celebrazione, il viaggio di Steve procede ed il suo istinto figurativo si confronta con l'immane ammasso di prodotti ad uso e consumo della civiltà delle immagini: riti e miti, sacro e profano, scienza

e magia, tutto si tiene nel crogiolo di una cultura capace di assimilare e relativizzare ogni valore.

Nel paragone stringente tra mondo reale e virtuale, governato dalla pubblicità, Steve rivela i tratti essenziali di una cultura: come quando gioca di ambiguità tra testo, immagine e caricatura, e chiama in causa il mito di certi *sex symbol* (Angelina Jolie) oppure dei mega-apparati dell'arredamento e del *prêt à porter* (Ikea ed Hermès). Questo modo di rifare il verso alle infatuazioni collettive si ripropone anche quando l'autore effettua il controllo psico-autobiografico del suo mondo emotivo. Ne risulta la spiritosa e sincera descrizione di *My World*, una specie di viaggio immaginario attorno alla sua stanza, dove l'immagine del globo terrestre è costellata in simultanea da sogni, desideri, cose viste e sperate.

La tentazione della parodia ha sempre la meglio anche nel 'diario in pubblico'. Ed allora risalta l'agile figurina di *Lupin*, eroe del film d'animazione, in un combinato figurativo preso dai fumetti, dall'arte, dalla storia e dalla cronaca: come le mani di Adamo e del Signore nel *Giorno della Creazione* tratte da Michelangelo; come gli

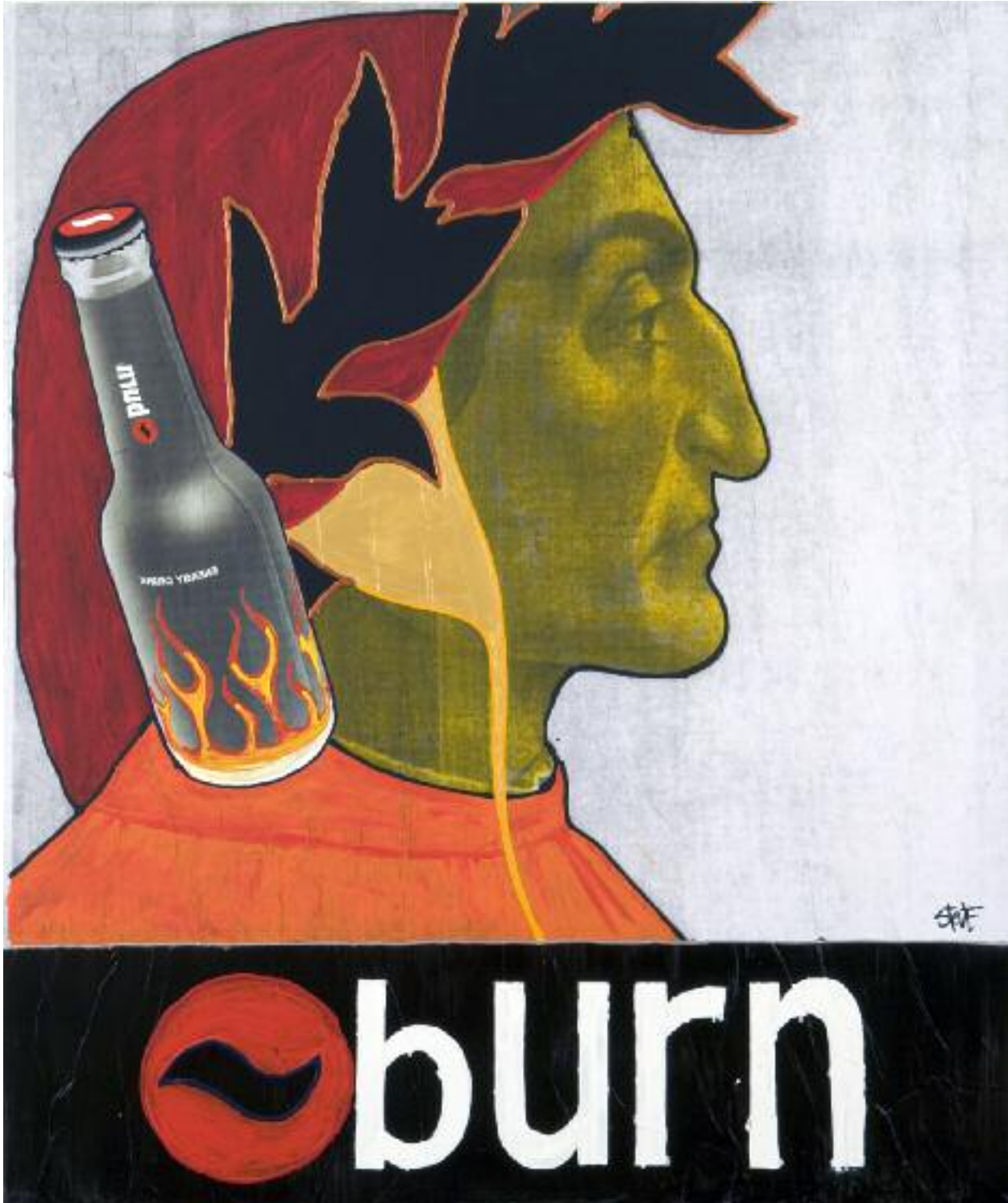
amorini raffaelleschi doppiati da due figure alate ricavate dal *cartoon* dei *Simpson*; e come lo sfondo allusivo di una New York illuminata di notte, associata all'immagine famosa degli operai che ne edificarono le glorie negli anni Trenta, sospesi in bilico da un grattacielo in costruzione. A coronare un simile 'autoritratto' non poteva non campeggiare il campione di *foot-ball* Francesco Totti, idolo delle folle sportive nella Roma dei nostri anni, quale esempio realizzato di una gioventù esuberante e illuminata da franca moralità.

Osservatore meticoloso e capace di agglutinare ogni genere di stimolo visivo, l'occhio fantasioso di Steve annota informazioni per una illimitata e sempre divertita indagine in simultanea sui mille volti del nostro '*Global Village*'. Ne risulta l'effetto di una garbata presa di distanza dal pandemonio di un'epoca '*signifying nothing*', per citare l'espressione che Shakespeare mise sulla bocca di Macbeth. Ed è proprio il fondo di moralità suggerita col sorriso sulle labbra a definire l'intelligente leggerezza dello spirito critico di Steve, che così precisa creativamente l'accento persuasivo e poetico di uno stile e di una 'maniera di vedere'.

OPERE / WORKS



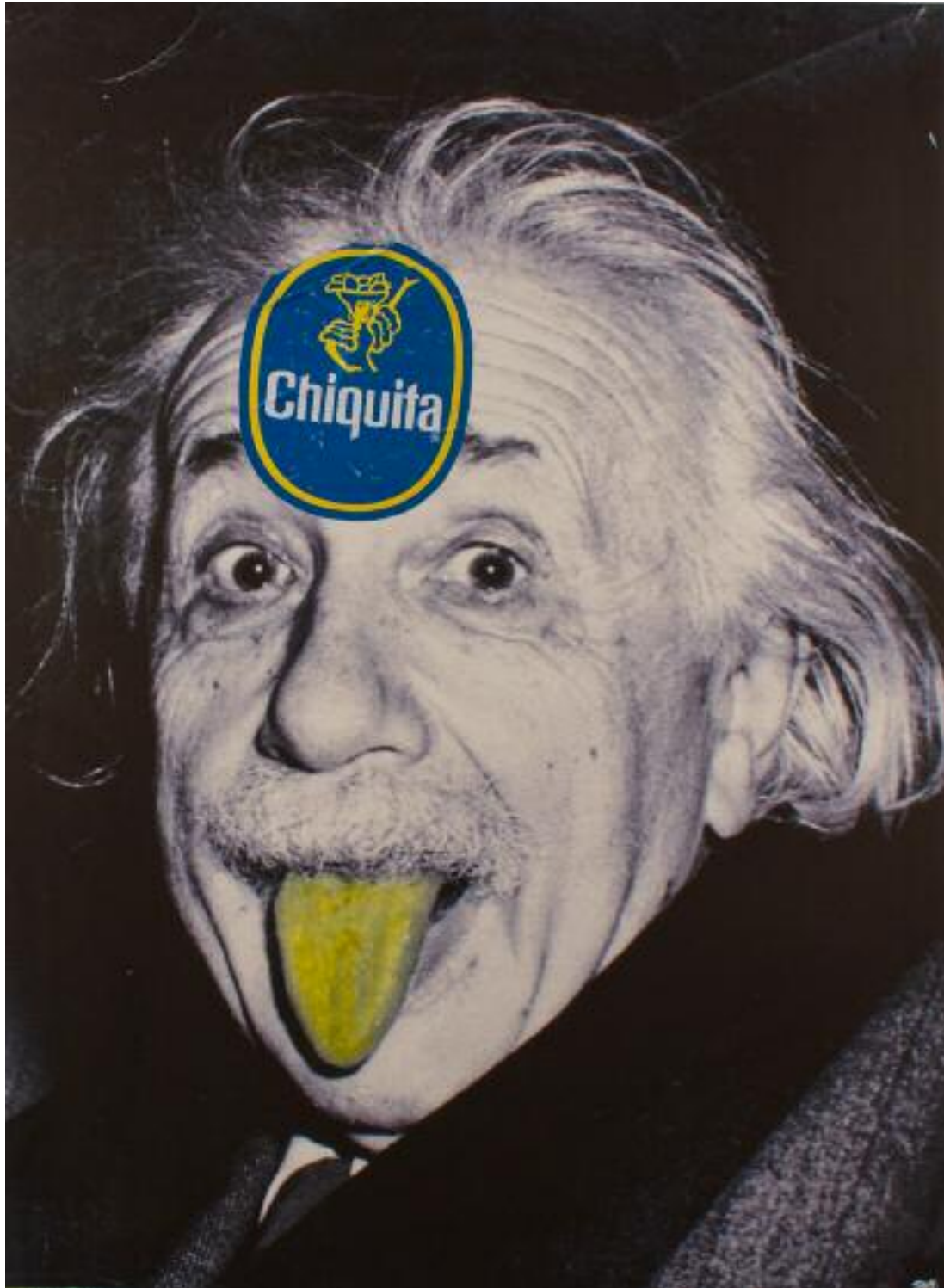
DON'T LOOK @ ME - 2008 - 110x140 cm
mixed technique on canvas



DANTE - 2006 - 160x151 cm
mixed technique on canvas



BIG BABOL - 2008 - 110x140 cm
mixed technique on canvas



ALBERT - 2012 - 135x100 cm
mixed technique on canvas



LAND ROVER - 2008 - 150x120 cm
mixed technique on canvas



MICROSOFT - 2011 - 110x160 cm
mixed technique on canvas



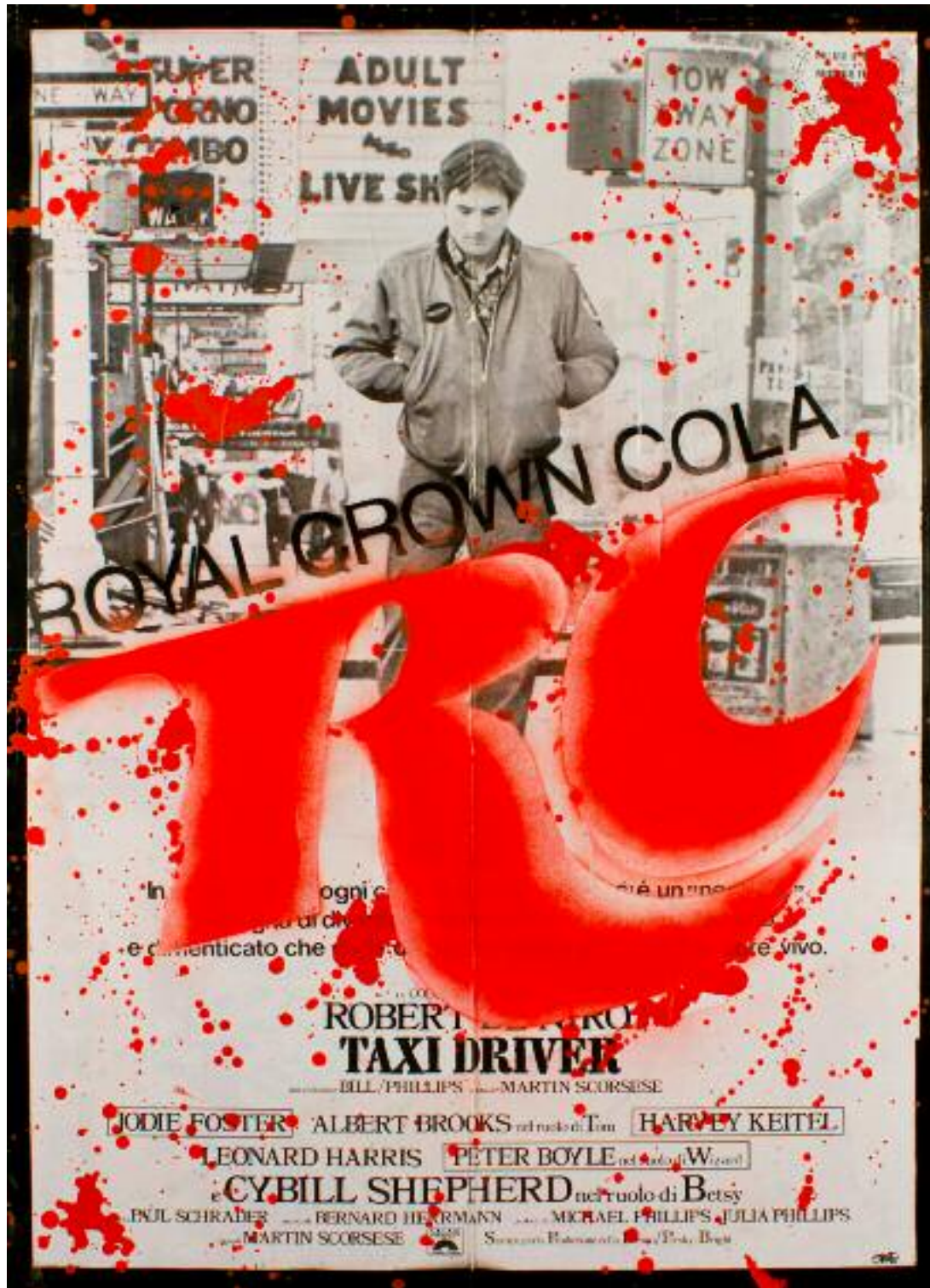
THANK YOU EVE - 2010 - 90x110 cm
mixed technique on canvas



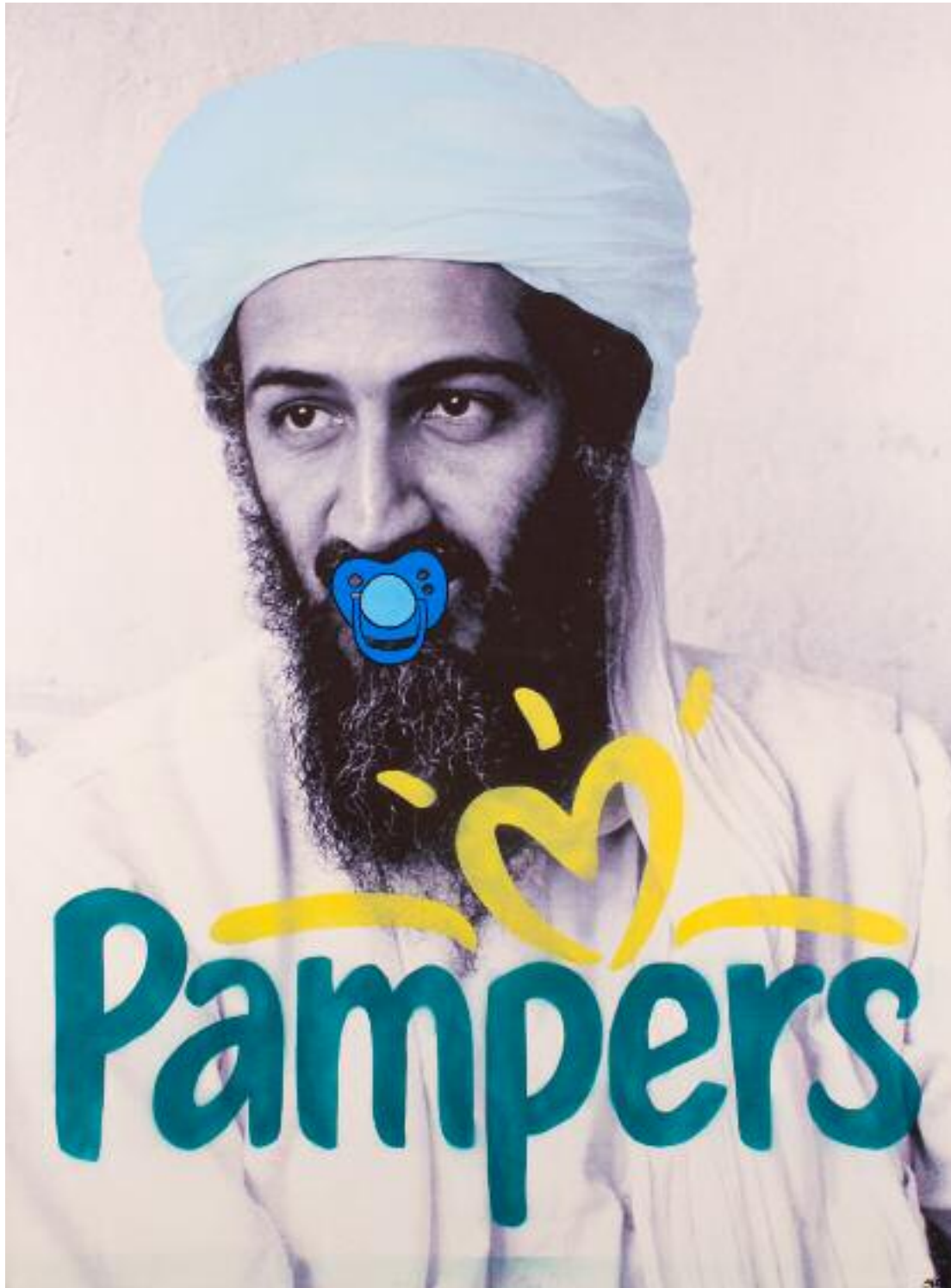
MAO - 2011 - 130x130 cm
mixed technique on canvas



FREDDY MERCURY TRIBUTE - 2011 - 145x120 cm
mixed technique on canvas



TAXI COLA - 2011 - 140x100 cm
mixed technique on canvas



OSAMA - 2011 - 135x100 cm
mixed technique on canvas



NOW JUMP - 2011 - 110x140 cm
mixed technique on canvas



TOO EASY TO FIX - 2011 - 135x120 cm
mixed technique on canvas



WALL STREET - 2011 - 110x140 cm
mixed technique on canvas



MY WORLD - 2010 - 147x147 cm
mixed technique on canvas



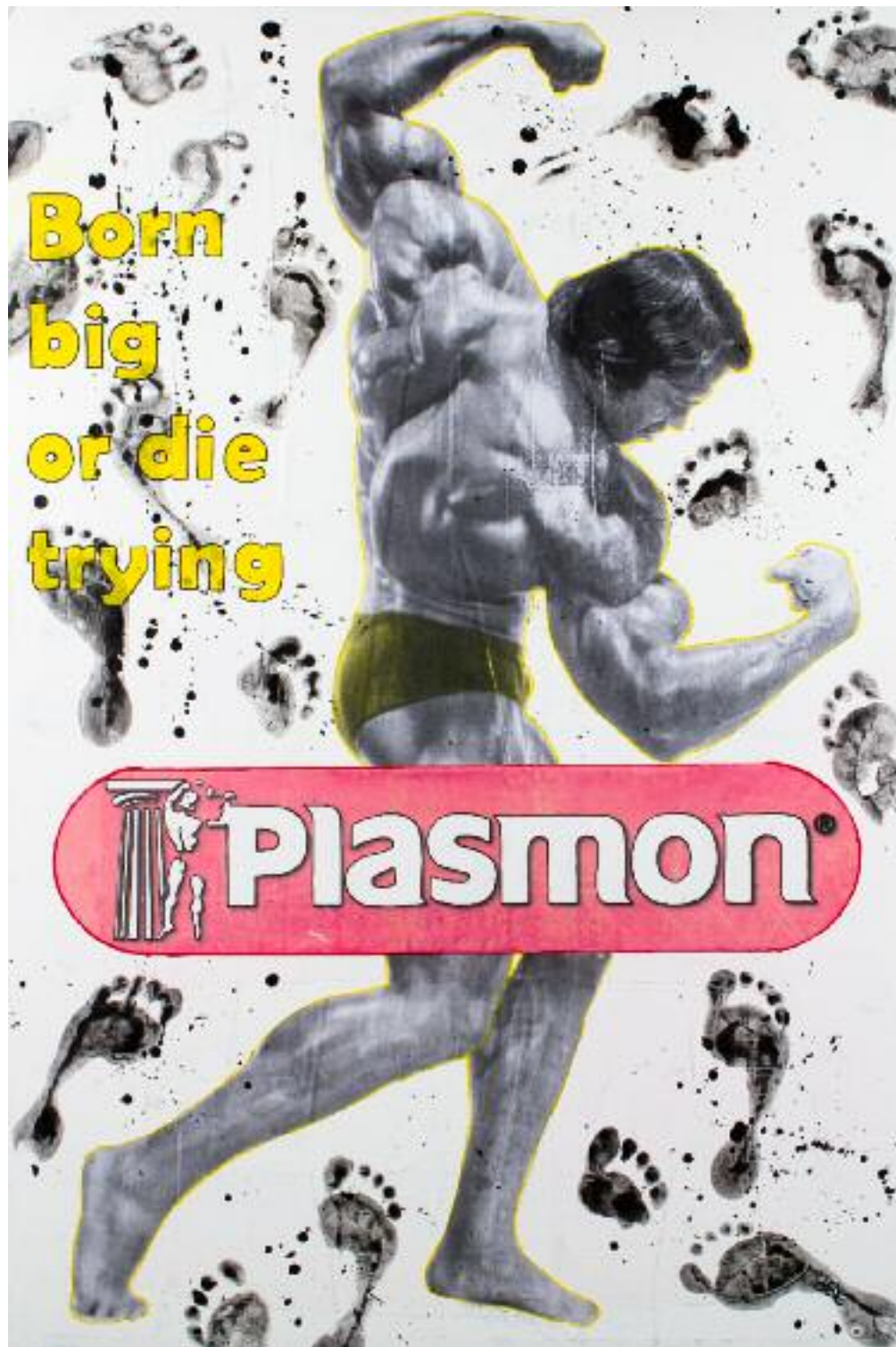
MARY WILL SAVE US - 2012 - 80x110 cm
mixed technique on canvas



ENERGIZER - 2010 - 145x145 cm
mixed technique on canvas



CHE GUEVARA - 2008 - 130x100 cm
mixed technique on canvas



BORN BIG - 2008 - 150x100 cm
mixed technique on canvas



THE NOID - 2011 - 130x100 cm
mixed technique on canvas



HERMES - 2011 - 80x120 cm
mixed technique on canvas



I'M YOUR FATHER - 2011 - 200x150 cm
mixed technique on canvas



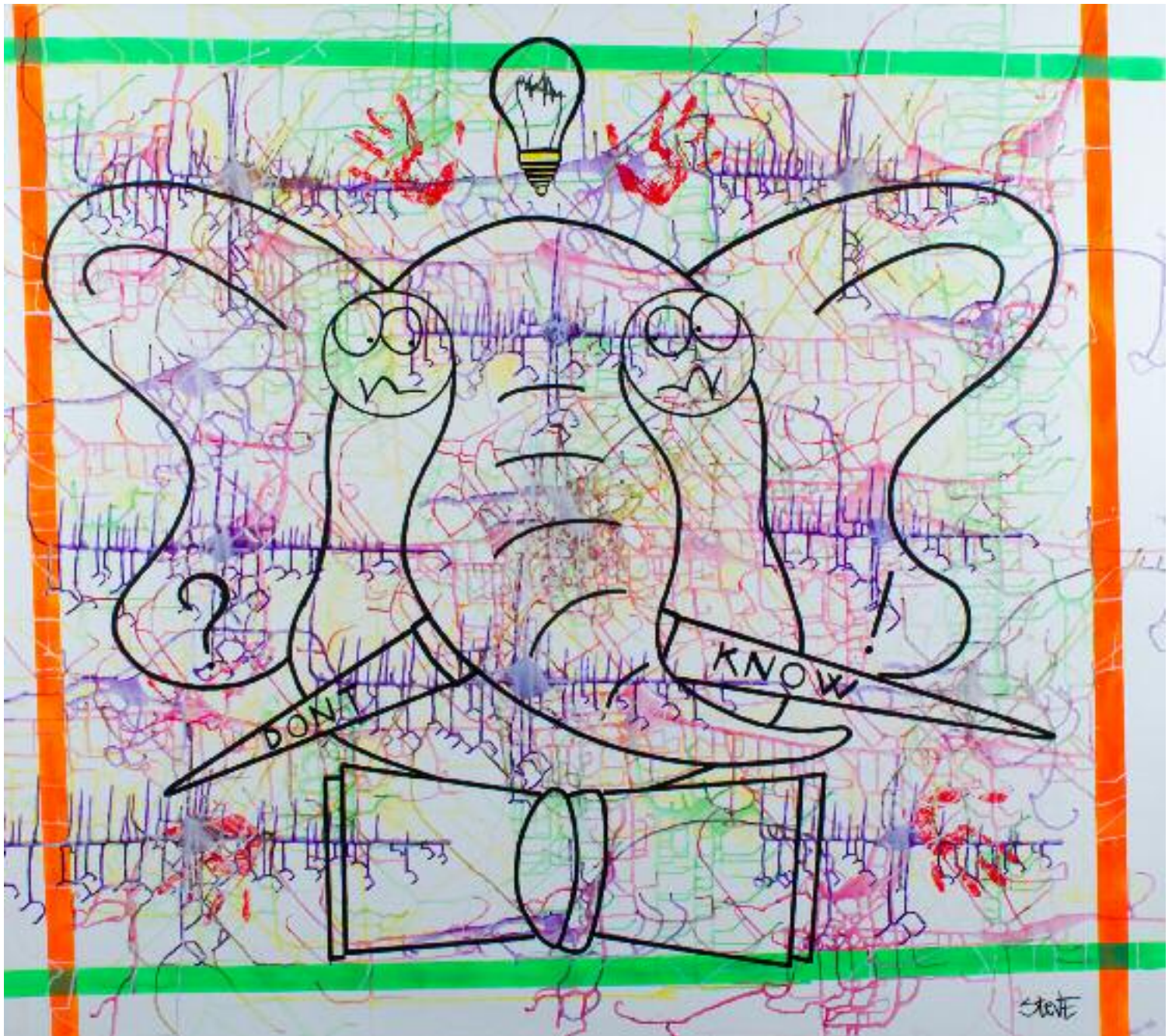
GOOD MORNING - 2011 - 100x150 cm
mixed technique on canvas



CALL 115 - 2011 - 70x200 cm
mixed technique on canvas



FORZA ITALIA - 2011 - 100x130 cm
mixed technique on canvas



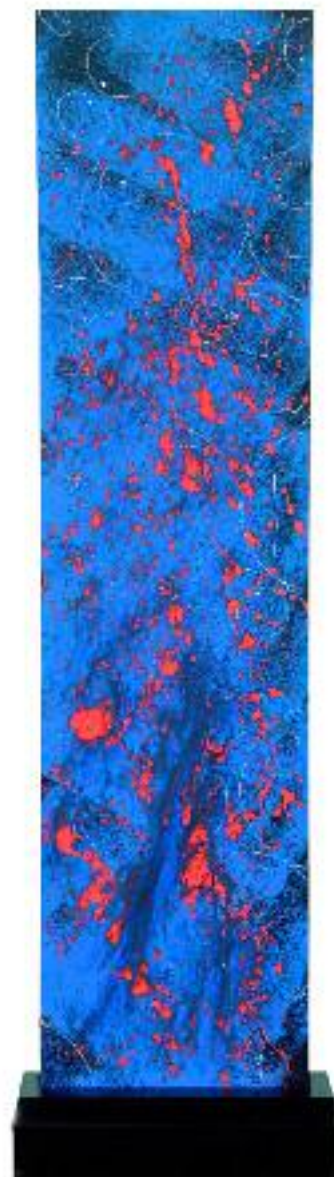
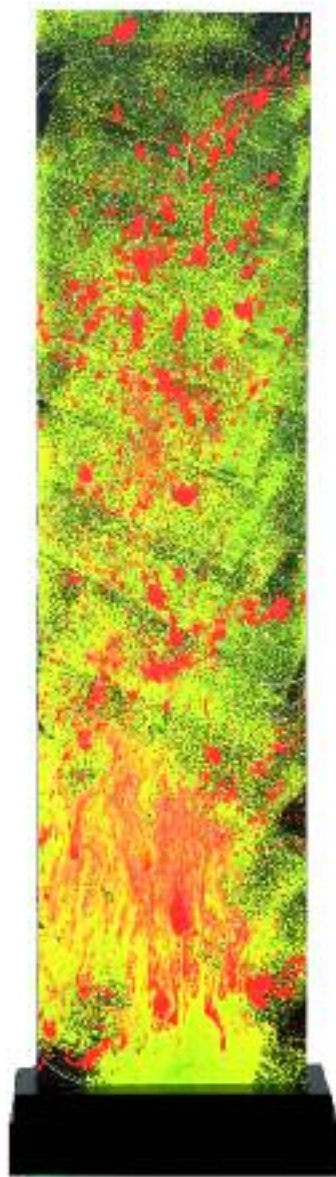
DON'T KNOW - 2008 - 160x180 cm
mixed technique on canvas



MAROCCO - 2007 - 196x214 cm
mixed technique on canvas



GIORGIO ARMANI - 2006 - 180x200 cm
mixed technique on canvas
private collection



TOTEM - 2008 - 66x220 cm
mixed technique on canvas

BIOGRAPHY



Stefano Mezzaroma, at only 27 years old, has forged a successful career as both a DJ and artist. Brought up in Rome, a city steeped in history, it was not until he attended university in Milan that Stefano was fully exposed to a vibrant scene of international, contemporary culture. Whilst studying Economics at Bocconi University he began to produce House music and paint in his spare time. Painting for intense periods whilst listening to music, he started to experiment with new artistic media including spray paint, collage, screen printing and digital manipulation. Though Stefano has no formal training he was able to develop his own unique style which he describes as 'Contemporary Pop Art'.

As a child Stefano was encouraged to paint and draw and enjoyed regular trips to the cinema with his father. Films have come to play an important part in his art, in which he often reuses old movie posters bought at flea markets. He has developed a unique hybrid of both artistic media and subject matter by marrying iconic figures from popular culture with commercial brands and humour. Though he uses elements made recognisable by other artists such as Andy Warhol and Mimmo Rotella, Stefano has created a signature aesthetic which has brought Pop Art into the twenty first century.

In 2011 Stefano was selected to show work in the Italian Pavillion at the 54th Venice Biennale. This coincided with his largest solo show to date, which was entitled 'Rewind' and held at Spazio Underground in Rome. A selection of work by the artist is on permanent display at the Hausammann Gallery in Cortina D'Ampezzo. Collectors of his work include the illustrious Italian designer Giorgio Armani. Having exhibited widely in Italy and in a few locations internationally such as Monaco and St Petersburg, the artist now hopes to bring his work to a wider audience.