

Annual 2006

# contemporary

## Manfredi Beninati

By Nicholas Cullinan



Manfredi Beninati, *Untitled (Fes-Hagosh)*, 2006, Oil on canvas, 79 x 63 inches

THE paintings, collages, sculptures and installations of Manfredi Beninati recall rich repositories of memory, both real and imagined. Beninati, born in Palermo but now resident near Rome, infuses his works with intermingling stratas of nostalgia, melancholy and decay. Some of his paintings and drawings derive their titles from the imaginary cities described by Marco Polo to Kublai Kahn in Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*. While Calvino's interpretation of Marco Polo manipulates memory by basing all of the narrator's fantastic voyages to exotic metropolises solely on Venice, Beninati also explores in his works the blurry line between remembering and forgetting, truth and fiction.

Childhood memories – real, embellished or totally imagined – are replayed through the cinematic aspect of Beninati's paintings, which recall his beginnings as an assistant director to Tornatore and Damiani. Many of Beninati's works evoke a subtle transience, such as the fleeting half-light in his paintings that seems to be dusk – the transition between day and night. Equally, the presence of photography in Beninati's paintings in the form of prosaic but poignant snapshots, recalls Roland Barthes's description of the temporal dislocation that occurs when we pose for the camera: 'I am

neither subject nor object, but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a microvision of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre.'

Nostalgia, which in itself implies mourning and melancholy, permeates Beninati's work like mould. This comes not just from his iconography, which reclaims remnants such as old family photographs to imply loss as well as recuperation, but also his technique. Even paintings in his studio that are wet and unfinished have already acquired a patina of age, reminding us that memories are as disquieting as they are comforting.

Beninati's recent wax sculptures, on show in his solo exhibition at Galleria Lorcan O'Neill, Rome (November, 2005), are reminiscent of Medardo Rosso in their material, while their Technicolor hues recall brightly coloured, sickly-sweet Sicilian cakes. Even in such cloying confections, the air of decay that pervades these works can suggest something more sinister, such as the corpses of the catacombs of Palermo. Sicily's cannoli and cadavers – both eerily well-preserved, but subject to decay – provoke a simultaneous attraction and repulsion that is echoed in Beninati's wax wonderlands.

After taking part in high-profile shows such as last year's 'Expander' exhibition at the Royal Academy, London, Beninati's installation at this year's Venice Biennale was wilfully obscure. Viewers had to peer through a dirty glass window at the end of a small corridor, barely able to make out in the twilight a full-scale reconstruction (from memory) of the artist's youthful discovery of a room in his great-grandmother's crumbling palazzo. In this and other works by Beninati, we are left peering through a glass darkly.