

Ultrapop Idols of Paolo Porelli

*Article by
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IT IS WITH THE LIVING MATERIAL OF CERAMICS THAT Paolo Porelli has given form to an idea that he wished to translate into images explicative of our times. He wanted to find a way to provide a voice to the present; he chose the most archaic mode of representation. The present, even if it manifests itself in a society that is reassuring and evolved like our own, contains its own profound uneasiness on which Porelli would like to focus. Porelli has created ceramic figures recasting the fundamental figures on which the outcome of the future depends, those that in the real world have a crucial role and that influence the course of contemporary history.

Figures like *The Producer*: symbol of the proliferation of an enormous quantity of products that both satisfy and create needs, outstanding manipulators of primary material and natural resources and inventors of everything disposable. *The Petrol Idol*: fundamental icon on which depends the energy for the activation of the worldwide technological system which is responsible for the overheating of the planet. *Salesman*: protagonist of the global market, impressive promoter of profit and speculation. *The Chemical Polluter*: symbol of the risks of potential environmental degeneration. *The Politician*: key figure for the orientation of the economy, the army, and information. The destiny of the world is linked to these characters and Porelli wants to bring them to our attention. He wants them to be icons of reality that do not remain only as images in the news but that make the leap into the complexity of the metaphysical sphere in which the contemporary personage appears in its

The Politician. 2008. Glazed refractory clay. 47 x 20 cm.



true interior semblance transformed into a symbolic creature, a conceptual equivalent of the ideas of which it is the bearer.

In addition to the necessity to single out the strategic figures that govern current reality, the sculptures are also sculptural inventions, compositional jokes, chromatic intention. The entirety is however synthesised in a message that wants to be easily comprehended, direct, even as it maintains hermeneutic symbols. The language is ascribable to the trend of pop art with which it shares the search for a theme of consumer society of which it would like to be the icon. Thus the objects/attributes that the figures carry, which diversify their roles, are taken from casts of objects from the industrial world that imitate actual objects whose function is recognisable, but they can also become 'ready-made' unidentified objects that assume the significance of generic technico-artificial objects or products incognito.

Fire is a recurrent symbol, represented in its multiple manifestations. Our society is underpinned by this element. It is fire that activates the gigantic technological global machine; every mechanism needs the energy of combustion in order to function. Global society has an enormous need for fire and it is this priority, as a ceramist then that is always present in the sculptures. At the same time, there is a parallel allusion to the psychological fire by which modern civilization is traversed: the frenzy, the acceleration, the exaltation that are behaviours of futuristic memory that express the psychological temperature to which we are subjected. This is also reflected in commercial art in which everything is super, explosive, disruptive, exciting. The metaphor then extends to the citation of certain animals symbolic of aggressiveness, voracity, possession, aspects of a capitalistic society that represent the reverse of the medallion, of images of progress, evolution, liberty.

Another constant in addition to fire that the sculptures clearly demonstrate is material as a generic concept under the form of agglomerate, raw material, formless mass. Material as a subject to possess, transform, sell presents itself as another presupposed foundation of the civilisation of consumerism. One more sign that must be added is the concept of numbers. The idea of numbers as an expression of quantity, of calculation and of the reduction of everything to an amount is another element that could not be absent in the logic of the materialistic thought: thus, the creation of masses of numbers, extensions, and accumulations that the sculptures vaunt as trophies of their quantitative power of acquisition. Moreover, it is as if the saying that publicity is the soul of commerce was invented by the characters of the sculptures that make use of it, displaying signs and placards with mysterious acronyms with clear graphic impact that draw the attention of the consumer to the product.



Above: *Salesman*. 2008. Glazed refractory clay.

46 x 26 cm.

Below: *The Consumer*. 2008. Glazed refractory clay.

47 x 22 cm.





Above: *Energy Salesman*. 2009. Lustre glazed refractory clay. 48 x 22 cm.

Below: *Copper Petrol Idol*. 2008. Lustre glazed refractory clay. 49 x 20 cm.



Moreover as much as one might wish to describe the sculptures, they are much more and therefore they resist a detailed explanation. It is often better to push only up to a certain point and then leave the rest open to the imagination. But Porelli has a specific necessity. He does not want to leave too much space to interpretation. His images have a precise goal. He believes that the environment is running very serious risks of instability and degeneration. Thus, he wants to reveal to everyone the cause, without the possibility of being misunderstood. Earlier, I mentioned that Porelli absolves this task in the most archaic manner: ceramics, the ancestral technique with which the first divinities of mankind were sculpted. This must have been an inspiring motive for Porelli, who operates as a contemporary man, but seeks the perspective of men of the past. Naturally, the perspective of the world has changed and with it the divinities that underpin destiny have assumed a new morphology. Since the enlightenment, it is no longer usual to speak of divinities, but Porelli continues to do so as if he knows the significance of that which was and will be despite the caveat of our times. He is aware of individual energies that propel the world and he transforms them into anthropomorphic forms. Like the ancient Greeks, he delegates semblances to the representations, but he recognises that the forms take their origins from within. Each sculpture is a centre that expands taking on the morphology of the quality of its specific energy. In this way, an equivalency is created between the interior and the exterior of the figure that guarantees its veracity. However, Porelli plays with this concept, since in creating a 'man-idol' image he shifts to an idea of the interior vacuity of the idol, solid only in its appearance and as a consequence false. This is the ultimate goal that he wishes to demonstrate, the essential significance of the sculptures, to communicate their falsity as ideal, social and political models. And thus the idols of glazed terracotta formally and conceptually resolved, as representations of contemporary life which Porelli intentionally sought to create. And it is in the making (poesy) that he has discovered the creative response. Only through the act of modelling was he able to bring to the surface the forms obscured in the unconscious and to recognise them, in their appearance and significance. Through a consistent and laborious series of trials and errors, the idea achieved its correct portrayal. The figures are represented in a static vertical position, wearing a suit, the symbol of our times; they have an elegant air, impressive and almost hieratic. In fact, they are like priests in their fields, leading them to rely entirely on their image in order to be credible. As sculptural objects, they wish to give the impression of artificial products, objects that are industrial in conception, made in series because it is with this very concept that they identify themselves.

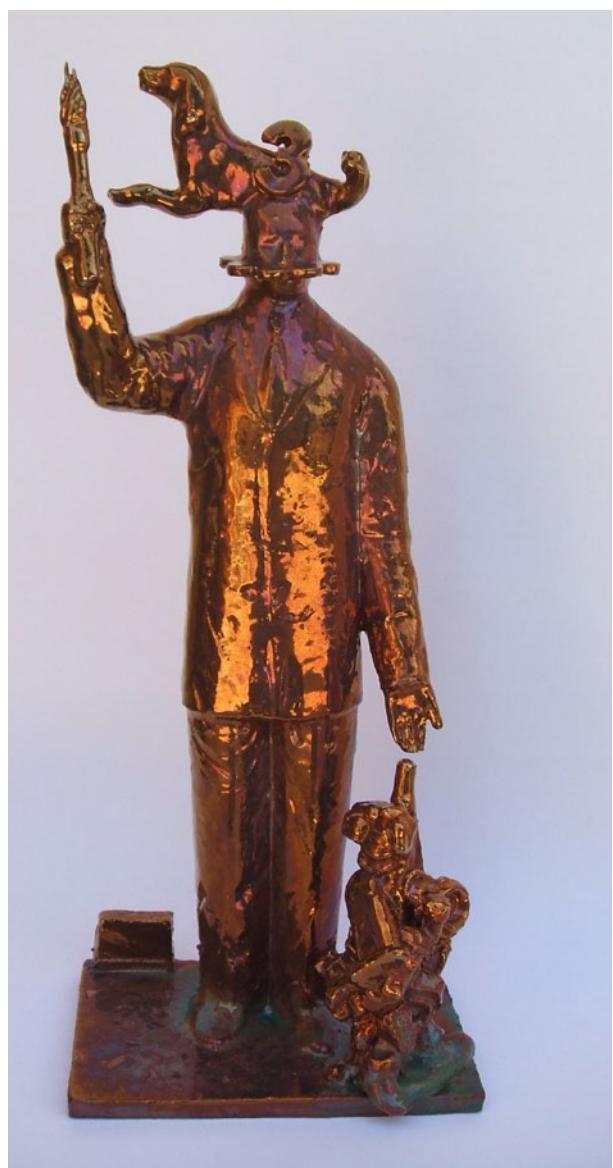
Moreover, one also intuits the use of industrial glazes with homogeneous cold tints emulating plastic. But Porelli controls these only to a certain point, since he enjoys contradicting this aesthetic. As a sculptor, he prefers to leave some transparencies that allow the refractory clay to emerge as well as the layering of glazes that create an unexpected colour or occasional drips that recall the glazes of antique Chinese, Islamic or Italian ceramics. At times, he uses the monochromy widespread in sculpture to emphasise the plasticity of the sculpture or else he enters into chromatic description with the use of majolica and combines two, three or more colours in specific different parts of the sculpture. The result is a work that is both surreal and absurd at the same time remaining within an objective formal context. We still ask ourselves what the figures are doing, what they signify, despite all the effort of Porelli to render them comprehensible. In the end, one has to surrender oneself to that which will always be unexplainable and mysterious.

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The term *Ultrapop Idols* was first coined by Gabriele Simongini in his critical essay "The new paganism of the Ultrapop idols" for Porelli's solo show entitled *Eidolon*, held at *InternoVentidue Arte Contemporanea*, Rome, Italy in 2008.



Paolo Porelli.



*Above right: Conjurer. 2009. Lustre glazed refractory clay. 52 x 22 cm.
Below: Insieme (Installation). 2008.*

