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Critics' choice

Life&Arts

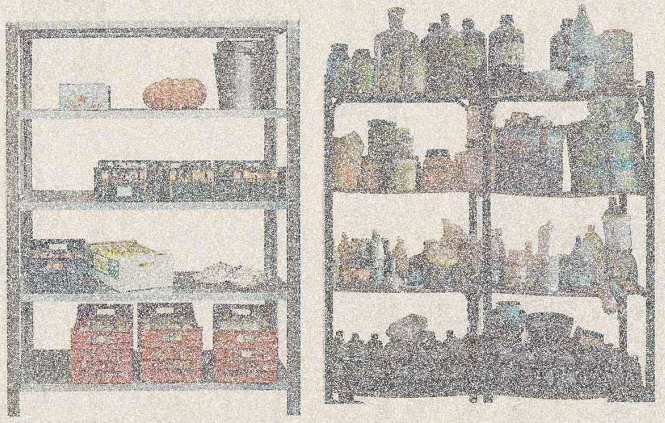
Visual arts Jackie Wullschlager

Michelangelo Pistoletto: Scaffali
Simon Lee Gallery
An Arte Povera artist who uses the glossy material of highly polished stainless steel; a conceptual pioneer concerned with figuration; an individualist insisting art is a communal activity: through his 60-year career, Michelangelo Pistoletto has enjoyed paradox, tension, and the open-ended game of inviting audiences to complete his works.

His most celebrated series are mirror paintings, begun in 1961 when he painted his face on a varnished black background, "saw it come toward me" — and realised that "the true protagonist was the relationship of instantaneousness . . . created between the spectator, his own reflection and the painted figure, in an ever-present movement".

This show presents the latest variation on the theme: Pistoletto's "Scaffali" series of silkscreened images meticulously depicting shelves laden with particular sets of items, applied to large mirrored surfaces. Some have grid-like neatness — colourful crates and buckets in geometric formation; ordered layers of mallets, hammers, tools; rows of Chinese vases whose curves offset the horizontal shelves. Others are haphazard — a jumble of grey car parts and engine fixtures, heaps of fruit and vegetables — or emphasise asymmetry, with single doors to one side.

All evoke human narrative — greengrocer, car dealer — and, as always, the reflective sheen makes the audience integral to the work: we are playfully invited to reach for an object on the shelf. Yet even as our fluctuating reflections bring dynamism to these static arrangements, the dominant, busy compositions also obstruct our presence in the mirror. Rigid composition set against elements of time and chance brought by our participation; the aesthetic versus the utilitarian; minimalist austerity balancing pop's celebration of the everyday; material reality challenged by mirrored games with infinity: into these apparently straightforward works Pistoletto brings art history, social engagement and masterly play with form.
simonleegallery.com
February 23-April 7



From left: Pistoletto's 'Scaffali: frutta e verdura', 'Scaffali: Accademia de Bellas Artes, La Habana' (both 2015)

Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize
The Photographers' Gallery, London
An impressive shortlist for this year's prize, of artists all of whom are concerned with heavyweight topics. Mathieu Asselin, nominated for "Monsanto: A Photographic Investigation", critiques corporate power and ecological irresponsibility. Rafal Milach's "Refusal" is about government ideological control in post-Soviet countries. Luke Willis Thompson's "Autoportrait" was filmed with Diamond Reynolds, who broadcast on social media following the fatal police shooting of her partner Philando Castile in Minnesota. Baiba Siter collects found images in "Parallel Encyclopaedia #2" to question how we understand and categorise the physical world.

In different ways, each artist considered manipulation of knowledge and systems of representation.
thephotographersgallery.org.uk
February 23-June 3

AR Penck
Michael Werner Gallery, London
Paintings in his characteristic reduced stick-figure style and exuberant colour, made in the 1980s just after Penck left Dresden for West Germany, are shown with his monumental sculpture "Memorial to an Unknown East German Soldier" (1984): a sacrificial tableau of bronze and wooden figures which the artist described as "an abstract embodiment of man's passage from life to death".
michaelwerner.com
February 23-April 21

Made in North Korea
House of Illustration, London
A rare glimpse into a closed society: the UK's first exhibition of North Korean graphic design, from Nicholas Bonner's private collection, reveals a unique style honed over decades in isolation from the rest of the world, shown through everyday objects including posters, sweet wrappers and stamps.
houseofillustration.org.uk
February 23-May 13

Anthony McCall: Solid Light Works
The Hepworth, Wakefield
McCall's light projections are sculptural, cinematic yet based on drawing. He has created three new interactive solid light installations in David Chipperfield's airy galleries here; also on display are experimental 1970s film and light pieces.
hepworthwakefield.org
to June 3

London Painters
Ordovas, London
Ahead of Tate's *All Too Human* showlater this month, this cherry-picked show brings together Freud, Bacon, Auerbach ("The Pillar Box III"), Kossoff ("Stormy Summer Day, Dalston Lane"), Hockney, Michael Andrews and Ron Kitaj — who coined the term "School of London", resisted by the others. The highlight is "Man in a Blue Shirt", Freud's portrait of Bacon's partner George Dyer, displayed alongside Bacon's important triptych "Three Studies of George Dyer".
ordovasart.com
February 22-April 28