

Gelatin
GELATIN 2023

10.11.2023 – 13.1.2024

Galerie Meyer Kainer is pleased to be able to present the exhibition "GELATIN 2023". It is not the first time that the artist group Gelatin (Wolfgang Gantner, Ali Janka, Florian Reither and Tobias Urban) has referenced Leonardo Da Vinci's iconic Mona Lisa. The ongoing series, first exhibited in 2008 at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, pays homage to the most famous painting in the world. Her interpretations of the iconic lady, created from plasticine, play with the viewer's imagination and explore the concept of the cultural icon, questioning its all-encompassing power over human memory and perception. Ultimately, even the Austrian Post also presented one of the many unusual gelatin interpretations of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa on a special stamp.

The detail that unlocks the Mona Lisa

by Kelly Grovier, BBC Culture 2021

The 1503 painting by Leonardo da Vinci is the world's most famous piece of art. Kelly Grovier explores an overlooked object that offers a different perspective on the masterpiece.

For centuries, our attention has largely been focused elsewhere in the small (77 x 53cm/30 x 21in) oil-on-poplar panel, which Da Vinci never fully finished and is thought to have continued to tinker with obsessively until his death in 1519 – as if the painting's endless emergence were the work itself. A preoccupation principally with Mona Lisa's inscrutable smile is almost as old as the painting, and dates back at least to the reaction of the legendary Renaissance writer and historian Giorgio Vasari, who was born a few years after Da Vinci began work on the likeness. "The mouth with its opening and with its ends united by the red of the lips to the flesh-tints of the face," Vasari observed in his celebrated *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, "seemed, in truth, to be not colours but flesh. In the pit of the throat, if one gazed upon it intently, could be seen the beating of the pulse." He concluded: "In this work of Leonardo, there was a smile so pleasing, that it was a thing more divine than human to behold, and it was held to be something marvellous, in that it was not other than alive."

The mesmerising mystery of Mona Lisa's smile and how Leonardo magically leveraged it into creating "a thing more divine than human" and yet "not other than alive" would prove too intense for many to bear. The 19th-Century French art critic Alfred Dumesnil confessed to finding the painting's paradox utterly paralysing. In 1854 he asserted that the subject's "smile is full of attraction, but it is the treacherous attraction of a sick soul that renders sickness. This so soft a look, but avid like the sea, devours". If legend is to be believed, the "treacherous attraction" of Mona Lisa's irresolvable smirk consumed too the soul of an aspiring French artist by the name of Luc Maspero. According to popular myth, Maspero, who allegedly ended his days by leaping from the window of his Paris hotel room, was driven to destructive distraction by the mute whispers of Mona Lisa's engrossingly gladsome lips. "For years I have grappled desperately with her smile," he is said to have written in the note he left behind. "I prefer to die."

Walter Pater sees past the seductive snare of the portrait's smile to a larger vitality that percolates as if from deep below the surface

Not everyone, however, has been content to locate the centre of Mona Lisa's magnetising mystique in her enigmatic grin. The Victorian writer Walter Pater believed it was the "delicacy" with which her hands and eyelids are rendered that transfix and hypnotise us into believing that the work possesses preternatural power. "We all know the face and hands of the figure," he observed in an article on Da Vinci in 1869, "in that circle of fantastic rocks, as in some faint light under sea". Pater proceeds to meditate on the Mona Lisa

in such a singularly intense way that in 1936 the Irish poet William Butler Yeats found himself compelled to seize a sentence from Pater's description, break it up into free-verse lines, and install them as the opening poem in the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, which Yeats was then compiling. The passage that Yeats couldn't help co-opting begins: "She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants, and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes." The portrait "lives", Pater concludes, "only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands".

Pater's description still astounds. Unlike Dumesnil and the doomed Maspero before him, Pater sees past the seductive snare of the portrait's smile to a larger vitality that percolates as if from deep below the surface. Contending that the painting depicts a figure suspended in ceaseless shuttle between the here-and-now and some otherworldly realm that lies beyond, Pater pinpoints the mystical essence of the panel's perennial appeal: its surreal sense of eternal flux. Like Vasari, Pater bears witness to a breathing and pulsing presence – "changing lineaments" – that transcends the inert materiality of the portrait's making. Key to the force of Pater's language is an insistence on aquatic imagery that reinforces the fluidity of the sitter's elusive self ("faint light under the sea", "a diver in deep seas", and "trafficked... with Eastern merchants"), as if Mona Lisa were an Da Vinci's subject has a strangely submarine quality to her that is accentuated by the algae green dress she wears – an amphibious second skin that has only grown murkier and darker with time.

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Perhaps she is. There is reason to think that such a reading, which sees the sitter as a shape-shifting spring of eternal resurgence, is precisely what Leonardo intended. Flanked on either side by bodies of flowing water that the artist has ingeniously positioned in such a way as to suggest that they are aspects of his sitter's very being, Da Vinci's subject has a strangely submarine quality to her that is accentuated by the algae green dress she wears – an amphibious second skin that has only grown murkier and darker with time. Pivoting her stare slightly to her left to meet ours, Mona Lisa is poised upon not just any old bench or stool, but a deep-seated perch known popularly as a *pozzetto* chair. Meaning "little well", the *pozzetto* introduces a subtle symbolism into the narrative that is as revealing as it is unexpected.

Suddenly, the waters we see meandering with a mazy motion behind Mona Lisa (whether belonging to an actual landscape, such as the valley of the Italian River Arno, as some historians believe, or entirely imaginary, as others contend) are no longer distant and disconnected from the sitter, but are an essential resource that sustain her existence. They literally flow into her. By situating Mona Lisa inside a "little well", Da Vinci transforms her into an ever-fluctuating dimension of the physical universe she occupies. Art historian and leading Da Vinci expert Martin Kemp has likewise detected a fundamental connection between Mona Lisa's depiction and the geology of the world she inhabits. "The artist was not literally portraying the prehistoric or future Arno," Kemp asserts in his study *Leonardo: 100 Milestones* (2019), "but was shaping Lisa's landscape on the basis of what he had learned about change in the 'body of the Earth', to stand alongside the implicit transformations in the body of the woman as a 'lesser world' or microcosm." Mona Lisa isn't sitting before a landscape. She *is* the landscape.