

Italian artist Costantino Ciervo's "Comune" project: "I believe in a world without borders, but I'm not a utopian. Borders can't be eliminated merely by wishful thinking"

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Artist Costantino Ciervo was born in Naples in 1961, and now lives and works in Germany. His work is multimedia and addresses urgent social issues. In 2023, Ciervo completed a documentary titled "Mimmo Lucano—used to pulling—not pushing back," focusing on the fate of migrant workers in southern Italy and presented at various international festivals.

His most recent work includes the multimedia projects "mare nostrum" and "Sew in the Sea," dedicated to migrants who died trying to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean. The exhibition was presented earlier this year at the Museum Ostwall in Dortmund.

A recurring theme in Ciervo's work is the condition of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation. He is currently working on a project entitled "Comune," which will be exhibited at the FLUXUS+ Museum in Potsdam this autumn. The project combines art, technology and social engagement, and aims to stimulate reflection and debate on the situation in the Middle East in light of the homicidal Israeli war against the Palestinians.

This interview was conducted in Berlin.

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Steinberg: Can you tell us something about your latest artistic project?

Ciervo: My new project focuses on the conflict in the Middle East, where terrible things are happening. A people is being annihilated. Official figures speak of 60,000 dead, half of whom are women and children. Other sources indicate 100,000 dead, mostly civilians murdered. For me, that's enough to take a stand. Such a reality affects me deeply because for years I have been creating artworks with social relevance. My work is political: paintings and installations focused on specific themes.

For the exhibition planned in Potsdam, I have started painting and assembling a series of medium-format portraits. I am working on the concept of twins. I realized that modern conflicts often take the form of fratricidal wars—Ukraine, Sudan, Palestine. Conflicts between peoples who have much more in common than what divides them.

This raises the question: why do these wars happen? In my view, the ultimate driving forces are economic. The conflict in Israel has

a long history. To represent the "twins," I found real people who represent Palestinians in all their forms: young, old, men and women. I based them on a photo found online, depicting a typical Palestinian.

Clothing plays an important role in identity: the keffiyeh scarf, the veil for women, typical of the Arab region. I paint these figures as portraits and then use artificial intelligence to transform them into an almost identical "twin," but with a crucial change: they now wear Jewish-Israeli religious clothing and symbols. The faces are the same, but now you see the Star of David and traditional Jewish garments.

The political element is provided by the background to the portraits—a map of Palestine through the ages.

The first portrait contains a map of Palestine from 1917, when the region was part of the Ottoman Empire, and Arabs, Jews, Christians and Druze lived in relative harmony. The following portraits show the stages of historical development and how the map changes over time. A key point is 1948, when Israel fought the so-called War of Independence. Palestine was occupied, and you can see how, almost overnight, the Palestinian population was halved. The various portraits show how the area inhabited by Palestinians has progressively shrunk, leaving only the Gaza Strip and the West Bank—two regions completely separated by Israeli occupation. It is a political statement that raises the question: how is it possible that a people with a 2,000-year presence in the region is being nearly erased?

As I said, the main causes are economic and political. To clarify this, two of the paintings depict the role of foreign powers. In one, we see two roosters fighting each other. The roosters represent two main power centres and are standing on a tank made of dollar bills.

The second shows an American soldier surrounded by panels depicting aspects of the war in Gaza: use of high-tech drones against a largely defenceless population, and the misery of Palestinian families thrown unwillingly onto the front line. One of the panels depicts the sharply rising curve of the stock market. All of these elements are related.

It is important to place Trump and Netanyahu's plans to create a "Greater Israel"—expelling and annihilating the Palestinians of

Gaza and the West Bank while expanding into southern Lebanon—in the correct geopolitical context. As with all major conflicts, it's about money and power.

It's well known that the United States has accumulated an enormous national debt, over \$35 trillion, and must pay extremely high interest in return. Much of this debt is in the form of government securities held by countries like China, Saudi Arabia and Russia.

The main problem for the US is China, its most powerful economic rival. In recent years, the US has paid less attention to Europe after achieving its goal of creating divisions with Russia. Now the focus of American foreign policy is concentrated on China and the BRICS countries. To reduce economic dependency on foreign creditors—primarily China—the US is trying to consolidate the so-called “Cotton Road,” which should run from India through the Middle East, Italy and finally reach Northern Europe.

In these plans, an expanded Israel, as the main US military outpost, plays a key role. And the Palestinians are in the way. That's why the Tel Aviv regime continues to pursue its plan of an “Endlösung”—that is, genocide and deportation—which it has been pursuing for years.

Steinberg: What do you think about the position of Western powers like Germany and Italy, which continue to trade with and supply weapons to Israel? At the same time, there have been waves of protests from young people against the genocide in Gaza.

Ciervo: Germany is the most powerful country in Europe and plays a major role in the conflict. It is determined to defend its capitalist interests in the Middle East and, as the nation responsible for the Shoah, provides crucial political support to the criminal regime in Tel Aviv.

In Italy, the government is led by the post-fascists of Fratelli d'Italia, who are determined to stay in power. To do so, they must follow the American line while maintaining relations with Europe. The result is a combination of neoliberal policies and repression. Italy needs cheap labor, workers exploited in inhumane conditions, living in shacks and doing the hardest jobs.

Amid these political and economic upheavals, refugees in Italy are trapped. I addressed this theme in my film “Mimmo Lucano—used to pulling—not pushing back.”

I believe in a world without borders, but I'm not a utopian. Borders can't be eliminated merely by wishful thinking, but that must be the direction. I focused on the condition of migrants because there lies revolutionary potential. They are driven to flee their homelands by war and poverty, then exploited in the countries they arrive in—in many ways, they represent the most oppressed layer of the working class.

This theme of Exodus, which has roots in the Old Testament, is a recurring thread in human history.

Steinberg: Today, what's new is that, thanks to the development of global production and the internet, new forms of information and collaboration have opened up.

Ciervo: I agree. The fact is that capitalism, for its own economic reasons, has undermined the foundations of the nation-state. These developments mean that sections of the working class in less developed countries—Africa, the Balkans, South America—can unite

and understand that they face the same problems as poor workers in rich countries. This is the key to solving the problem: the union of workers.

Steinberg: The art world today is in crisis—many artists seem trapped in formalist or self-referential forms, lacking any meaningful social content. How do you see art? What role can it play?

Ciervo: Thank you for the question—it's a very important topic. I have a very critical view of most of us artists. For many of us, the only goal is to make money, find a market, gain recognition. We are willing to do anything for notoriety, and often, in private life and in our art, we lack honesty.

This problem would be solved immediately with the introduction of a global universal income. Economic independence would free us from the blackmail—or the excuse—of having to compete with each other, constantly trying to stand out just to sell our work to private collectors.

I don't believe in artists as a category, but I believe in the power of art. The best art is like a good book: it allows you to examine and reflect on the world. Books can generate change. But too much art remains locked away in private villas, far from the public.

The truly important works are those designed for public spaces, in museums and squares, artworks that help the viewer deepen their understanding of the world—and of themselves.

We artists reprocess and regurgitate our neuroses. But we must separate the “regurgitated” product, called ART (whose real value is always decided by history), from the one who regurgitates—the artist as a person. A good number of us manage to control our neuroses in private life and live more or less in a socially responsible fashion. At the same time, in this society we are all damned to fight for visibility in order to survive. Some, often the most successful, fail to control their egos and behave like predatory capitalists—accompanied by the aggravating belief of being morally superior to everyone.

The best of art can be revolutionary because, unlike politics and philosophy, it employs a symbolic, non-argumentative, universal language. Its “truth content” emerges thanks precisely to its peculiar non-discursive, universal form of communication.

In the last resort what matters is not so much the artist, but rather what he or she leaves behind. History is the judge.



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