

'Rudolf Stingel' (2013)
Installation view, Palazzo Grassi, Venice
Courtesy the artist
Photograph Stefan Altenburger

RUDOLF STINGEL: CARPET FETISH

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Walking through the meandering chambers of Rudolf Stingel's carpeted Palazzo Grassi in Venice¹ was like a journey through the neurotic subconscious. Nearly every surface within its 5000 square metres was swathed in a colossal eighteenth-century replica Turkish carpet. The monumental hush made you feel like a tiny Alice in a Vermeer home, the rug's geometry reverberating, like the motif of a baroque symphony, around every corner.

From the columned neoclassical atrium a grand staircase led to the second floor, past a fresco by Alessandro Longhi, known as a mediocre portraitist, to where dreamy grisaille paintings by Stingel captured the Venetian archipelago under fog; one small canvas had sky blue emerging from a wash of atmospheric greys; another, a monumental triptych, invoked materialised mist, with textural crinkles rubbed out in spots. Other rooms held only single paintings, ghostly beacons calling to mind temporal windows. The patinas mimicked the blurry quality of memory, like deceitful veils playing hide-and-seek to confound recollection with desire. In some, liminal traces of arabesque ornamentation recalled Venice's past as a powerful trading port allowing passage of exotic luxury goods into Europe, some certainly adorning this very palace, like Stingel's Islamic carpet from the same era.

The complex structure of Palazzo Grassi generates suggestive interplay between its spaces. Viewed across the inner courtyard through symmetrical arched portals, for example, Stingel's shimmering triptych became the centrepiece of a multidimensional composition, the vermilion carpet and temple-like architecture acting as a stylistic frame. From other angles, carpeted portals outlined architectural features, and series of identical receding doorways formed dizzying diminishing perspectives. The whole could have been a portrait of the city, invoking the mingling of far-flung cultures or lovers engaged in clandestine assignations. Indeed,

the construction of Palazzo Grassi coincided with the life of Casanova, who was born and baptised on the next street.

On another level, Stingel instigated a figure-ground reversal, transforming the background into a prominent subject and rendering the monotone paintings as negative spaces. This device was intensified on the top floor, where diminutive depictions of medieval religious icons levitated as if disembodied in overwhelming rooms. Portraits depicting ideal feminine and masculine beauty were blighted with florid patterns, rendered in tar-like paint; an image of a praying Saint John, prophet of the Apocalypse, was obfuscated with a textured smear that reflected the carpet weave. Near-photorealistic reproductions, these greyscale images could have been blow-ups of badly framed snapshots but for their tactile painterly surfaces. Nevertheless, Stingel's bloodless, amputated depictions rendered the figures static and lifeless.

The music wafting throughout the palace did not so much evoke the sinuous melodies of the carpet's origins as the bombastic chords of Sigmund Freud's Mitteleuropa, where oriental ornament was the apotheosis of bourgeois fetishism. Freud had a collection of miniature sculptures crowding his desk, copies of religious icons from various eastern and western faiths. He saw psychoanalysis as akin to archeological excavation and these figures as manifestations of archetypal human desires. Such objects comprised the context of his science, and populated his own dreams, although he likened religious belief to neurotic obsession. Stingel's palace could be a surreal, fragmented portrait of Freud's legendary studio, which was adorned with Turkish carpets, most famously associated with the bolstered couch that is synonymous with psychoanalysis.

At Palazzo Grassi, Stingel created a giant *Gesamtkunstwerk* that implicated its audience and radiated out into the city and beyond.

The exhibition also evoked the hermetic mechanism that fuels the continuum of art history, nodding to the late Franz West in a portrait obscured with sanguine paint splatters (*Untitled [Franz West]*, 2011), which in turn echoes Urs Fischer's 2012 Palazzo Grassi exhibition, 'Madame Fisscher', where the artist referenced the work of West in his own and portrayed himself and Stingel as life-sized candles – mutating *vanitates*. Here, in 2013, where a depiction of the Grim Reaper straddling a lion dominated a room, Stingel seemed to render the Palazzo Grassi itself a *vanitas*.

Indeed, the monumental palace was transformed into an immersive psychoanalytic divan encouraging an inner journey of free association, the carpet a vehicle dissociating the building from space and time. A large self-portrait of a pensive Stingel, installed on the ground level, bade welcome to the warped universe within. Paint-can rings marred the canvas, as if out of disrespect for its assumed cultural value. All the artworks were untitled (some with subject in parentheses), prompting viewers to read between the lines. Similarly, by privileging details that normally register only subliminally and by portraying archetypal figures through second-hand reproductions, Stingel turned things inside out. One wonders what Freud would have said of someone who takes the trouble to carpet over the pristine Mies modernism of Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie with a decorative pattern that would make the architect turn in his grave.² I would say that Stingel is excessive-compulsive.

¹ Presented at Palazzo Grassi, Venice, over 7 April – 31 December 2013.

² The exhibition, 'Rudolf Stingel: LIVE', was exhibited at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 2011.





Untitled (Madonna), 2009
Oil on linen, 40.6 x 33 cm
Installation view, 'Rudolf Stingel' (2013), Palazzo
Grassi, Venice
Pinault Collection
Courtesy the artist
Photograph Stefan Altenburger



Untitled (Franz West), 2011
Oil on canvas, 334.3 x 310.5 cm
Installation view, 'Rudolf Stingel' (2013), Palazzo
Grassi, Venice
Pinault Collection
Courtesy the artist
Photograph Stefan Altenburger