

Arteviste

A Review of Tristano di Robilant: Youth at Tristan Hoare, London



*Courtesy of Tristan Hoare,
London*

In an essay on the poet Enrique Lihn's *In the dark room*, the writer Alejandro Zambra says: 'childhood is, then, a time in the service of ghosts, a place to put images that, seen from the present, form a kind of foundation. A difficult foundation, of course, unsteady: the darkroom is where photographs are developed, where images appear, for the first time fixed on paper, that both authorise and destroy identity.'

In *Youth*, Tristano di Robilant's first show at Tristan Hoare Gallery, one feels that Zambra might just have easily been describing the Italian-American artist's lucid images from his own childhood. The exhibition gathers together di Robilant's early photographs with his later glass and bronze sculptures. In the light of these mature works, photography appears as a site of *primigenio*. Literally 'before generation', this term captures a kind of ideal anteriority of the sort revealed in di Robilant's youthful gaze.

One sees these photographs in two ways: first, side-by-side with the young artist, one looks forward in time to his creative flowering, but one also looks backwards with the nostalgic gaze of the adult enjoying once more the freshness of discovery. These negatives were unearthed by di Robilant after almost forty years. Returning to the same printers in Rome he used forty years ago, di Robilant made the prints on display; thus establishing a kind of lineage in which these images, revived once more, come to be the foundational documents of his current poetic and playful sensibility.



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This sense of a mythical timeline, in which history intermingles with retroactive fables of self-fashioning, is skilfully established in the curation by Nicola Brandt and Elisa Schaar, which eschews a linear chronological approach for a more thematic organisation. Each object has its own distinct mythos, and the curators have sought to bring these charges to the fore and allow them to inflect the other pieces.

The show begins with a self-portrait, taken by the artist in Rome in 1976. Di Robilant poses uncomfortably in a small bathroom, his body angled so as to be visible in the mirror opposite. His face is almost entirely obscured by the camera which looks enormous in his teenage hands. There is a certain precocious insouciance to the photograph that transcends di Robilant's pre-pubescent emotions. It is an image of a particular childhood, yes, but also of a particular time: throughout Italy, strong winds were gathering to blow the old guard away, and everywhere youth was the rallying cry for the future.

But from the charming images, one would have no idea that Italy's 'Years of Lead' were in full swing. The political violence that marked the everyday reality of so many Italians in the 1970s is far from the crisp lawns and apartments of di Robilant's childhood, spent amongst his parents' American and European artistic circles.



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It is from this rarefied position then that the child appears in this exhibition as an outsider, a ghostly presence, an ideal originator of the philosophical and poetic glass sculptures with which these early works share the space. Glass carries powerful connotations of the photographer's art (whether through the lens or early glass plates), however, it also evokes the unbridgeable distance of a wall that can be looked through but never crossed, its glassy surface cold and unyielding.

Di Robilant's photographs are almost suspicious in the clarity of their vision, the considered poise of his compositions, and the acute emotionality achieved in the printing. He is possessed with a restraint beyond his years. Each image is the result of days of waiting before snapping the shutter closed on the perfect moment so not a frame is wasted. A bra hanging in the open window, an ant summitting a plaster cast; playful details seen through the eyes of a peculiarly attentive child.



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In *Youth*, the teenage di Robilant emerges as the very image of the ‘true artist’, whose gifts are held innately rather than taught. Like the shepherd-boy Giotto, whose untutored drawings amazed Cimabue, di Robilant depicts himself as sitting on the edge of society, looking across at the world and into himself. It was around this time that the artist first read Wang Wei and other Chinese poets of the Tang era, which eventually inspired the glass sculpture *China Mountain* in the exhibition. It makes absolute sense that di Robilant was the kind of adolescent who read Tang poetry, but also that his sensibilities would accord with these court poets writing in exile.

The photographs show the young di Robilant tentatively positioning himself as an artist, as a grown-up, and in doing so he exiles himself from unselfconscious childhood in order to take up the role of commentator and documentarian. In looking at these images one is encouraged to imagine a mythical Italian past and rose-tinted childhood, but this embellishment (or fiction) is only born out of di Robilant’s own childish imaginings of a future as wonderful, to which these images might serve as some explanation or foundation: a *primigenio* or dark room for future transformations.



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