

DE CHIRICO. IN DEFIANCE OF KITSCH¹
 MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE LA VILLE DE PARIS PRESENTS
 GIORGIO DE CHIRICO'S WORK IN ALL ITS ASPECTS

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Without doubt, Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) should have reigned as absolute monarch at the exhibition "Bad painting – Good Art" held last summer at Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna, Austria. His followers, Picabia, Magritte, Philip Guston, together with George Baselitz, stood united in the same audacity: the act of knowingly making bad paintings in order to push the limits of Art. Indeed, de Chirico's work evolved well beyond his period known as "Metaphysical", of 1910-1918, a synonym of existential anguish with empty piazzas, anonymous architecture and statues with evanescent shadows. This phase appears, still today, as the main part of the Italian artist's *œuvre* through André Breton's influence: the Surrealists hailed these "metaphysical" compositions, to then decry the artist when he went his own way. And yet, the sixty years that follow show an extraordinary inventiveness, freedom and haughtiness. It is under this light that Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris offers this retrospective.

Caution is advised however, as the exhibition is booby-trapped: right from the first room, the "metaphysical" portraits establish an ambitious, intellectual and demanding kind of painting. In addition to the gory *Battle of the Centaurs* (1909), inspired by Böcklin's painting, the Renaissance-style portraits show the artist's ability to integrate elements of Old Master painting into modern compositions: faces in full or three-quarter profile and windows open upon a background plane. Thanks to many prestigious loans, the first section summarises the artist's first period completely, whilst still rubbing the visitor the right way, even though de Chirico subjects us to enigmas and confronts us with the intangible. Contrarily to Yves Tanguy, who sends us off track with his landscapes filled with falsely recognisable inorganic forms, de Chirico uses familiar iconography: trains, bananas, biscuits, anthropomorphic mannequins or geometric elements, to stage intellectually challenging scenes.

To André Breton's great chagrin, this diligent reader of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer quickly called Modernism, which he judged insufficient, into question. His return to the classics and to figuration is even more revealing when considered alongside the recent exhibition "Picasso et le maîtres" held at Grand Palais. Whilst the Spaniard assimilates tradition to make it his own, the Italian hijacks it in order to astonish and bewilder, as in the example of his *Gladiators* (1928-1929), deformed and disquieting in battle and at rest. De Chirico explores Old Master masterpieces to draw

¹ M. Marozeau, *Chirico. Le défi du kitsch – Le Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris présente l'œuvre de Giorgio de Chirico dans tous ses aspects*, "Le Journal des Arts", 20 February 2009, p. 12.

out their quintessence, to understand just how a painting imprints itself upon popular imagination. This aspect, in particular, has never been considered to its just value: the historical perspective was not sufficient and the artist's second degree too difficult to grasp. "Before Jeff Koons, John Currin and George Condo, these late works by de Chirico were impossible to look at. Only today do we understand their Pop Art spirit, that which Andy Warhol was the first to understand", argues Fabrice Hergott, the museum director.

Closely hung, the series of Baroque self-portraits in seventeenth century costume, as bullfighter or Renaissance painter, is a paragon to kitsch that would make the cushions embroidered with dogs found in antique shops pale in comparison. There is no use dwelling on the view of Venice (1966), worthy of a Canaletto from Place du Tertre. What a delight of intelligence, cheekiness and arrogance! In the 1960s, de Chirico ended up reproducing his metaphysical paintings disdainfully setting his detractors on a wild-goose chase. With famous paintings, such activity is unveiled in broad daylight, just like the infinite freedom of his last canvases. "One must trust artists", concludes Fabrice Hergott. And celebrate bad taste.