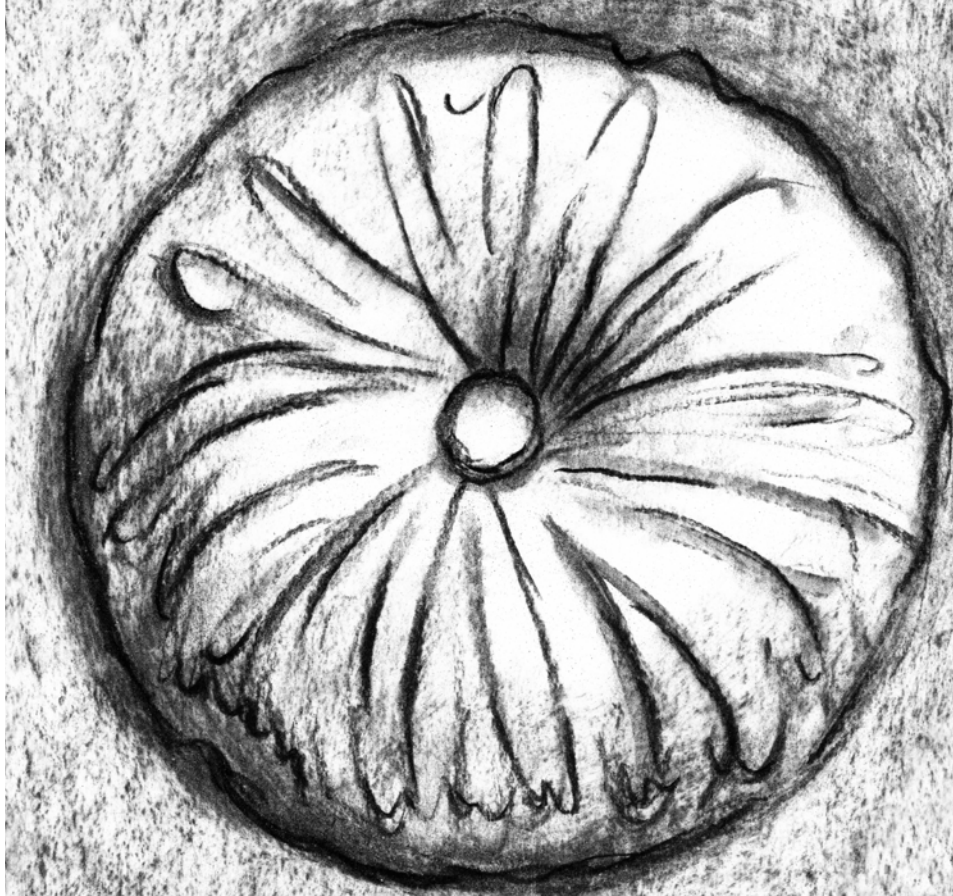


# THE LUSTFUL TURK

PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO



# THE LUSTFUL TURK

PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO

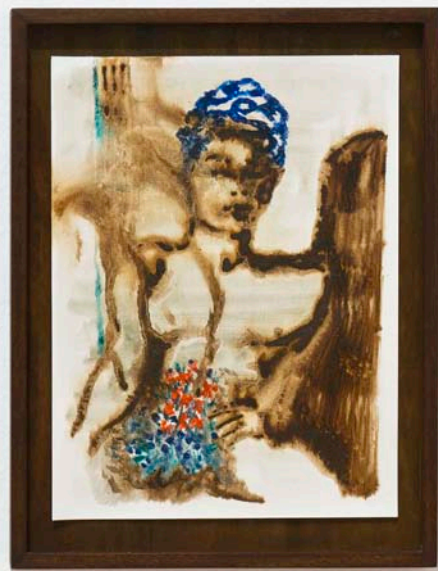
Il Turco Lussurioso  
Villa Medici, The Academy of France, Rome  
23/11/12 - 16/12/2012



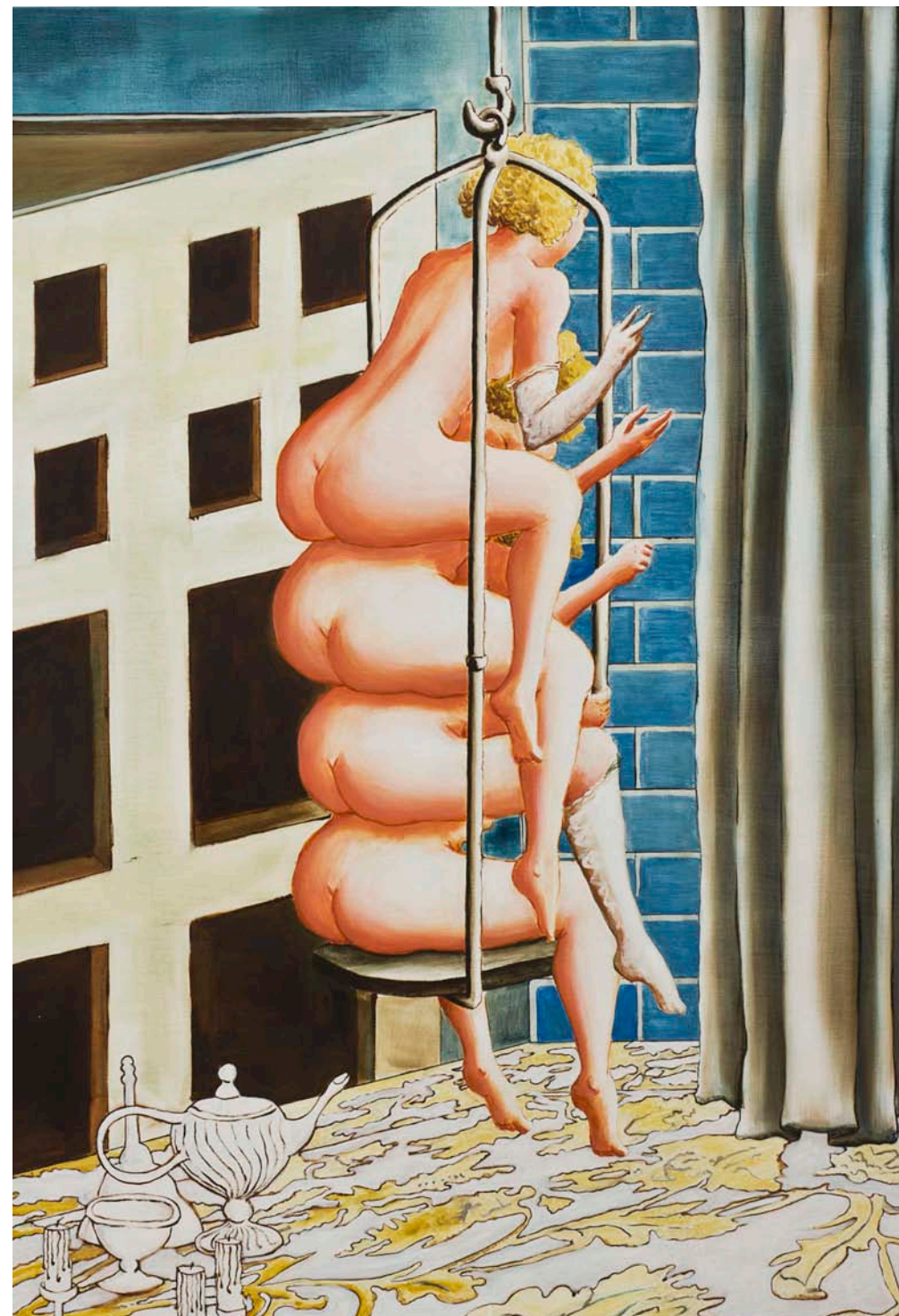


*The Lustful Turk* at Villa Medici, 2012  
Opposite page: {1} *The Lustful Turk (Cushions)*, 2012





{2} *The Lustful Turk (Diptych)*, 2012  
 Opposite page: {3} *The Lustful Turk (Harem)*, 2012

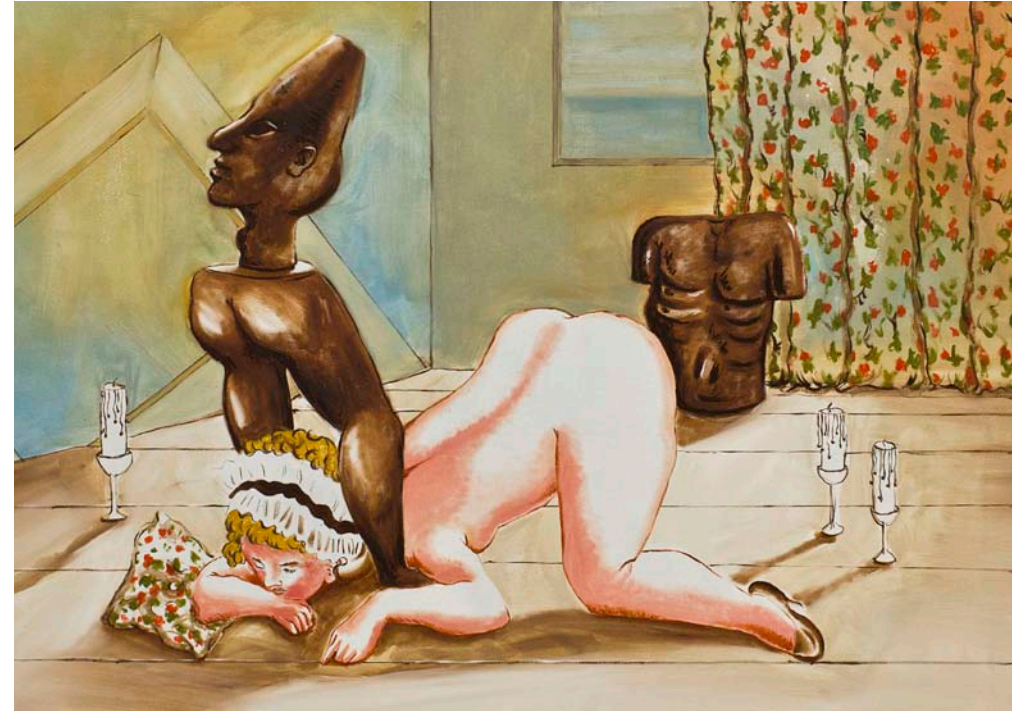








{5} *The Lustful Turk (The Blue Room)*, 2012



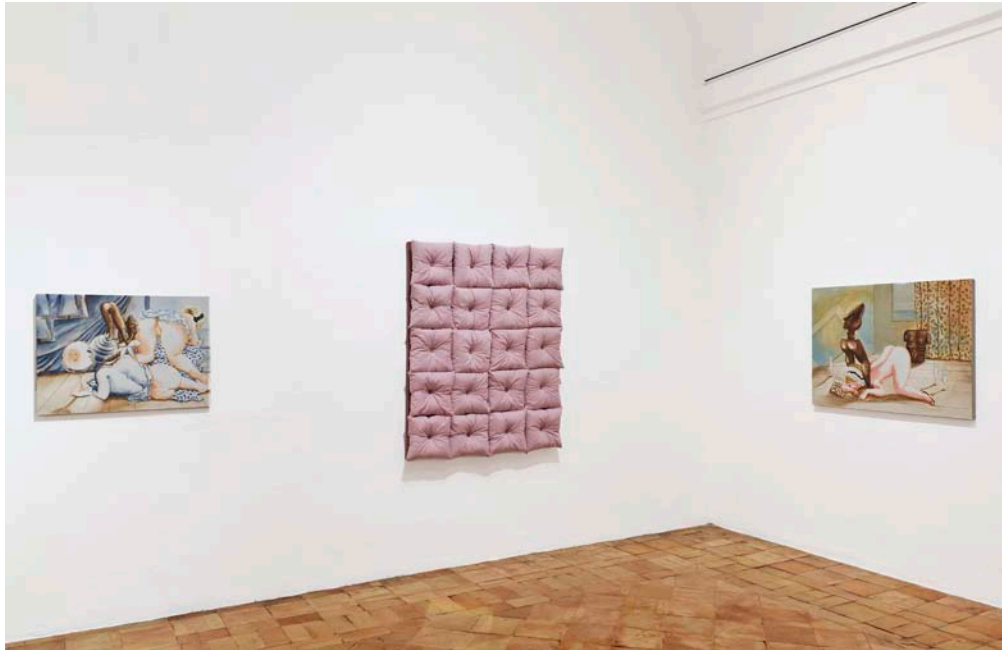
{6} *The Lustful Turk (The Green Room)*, 2012



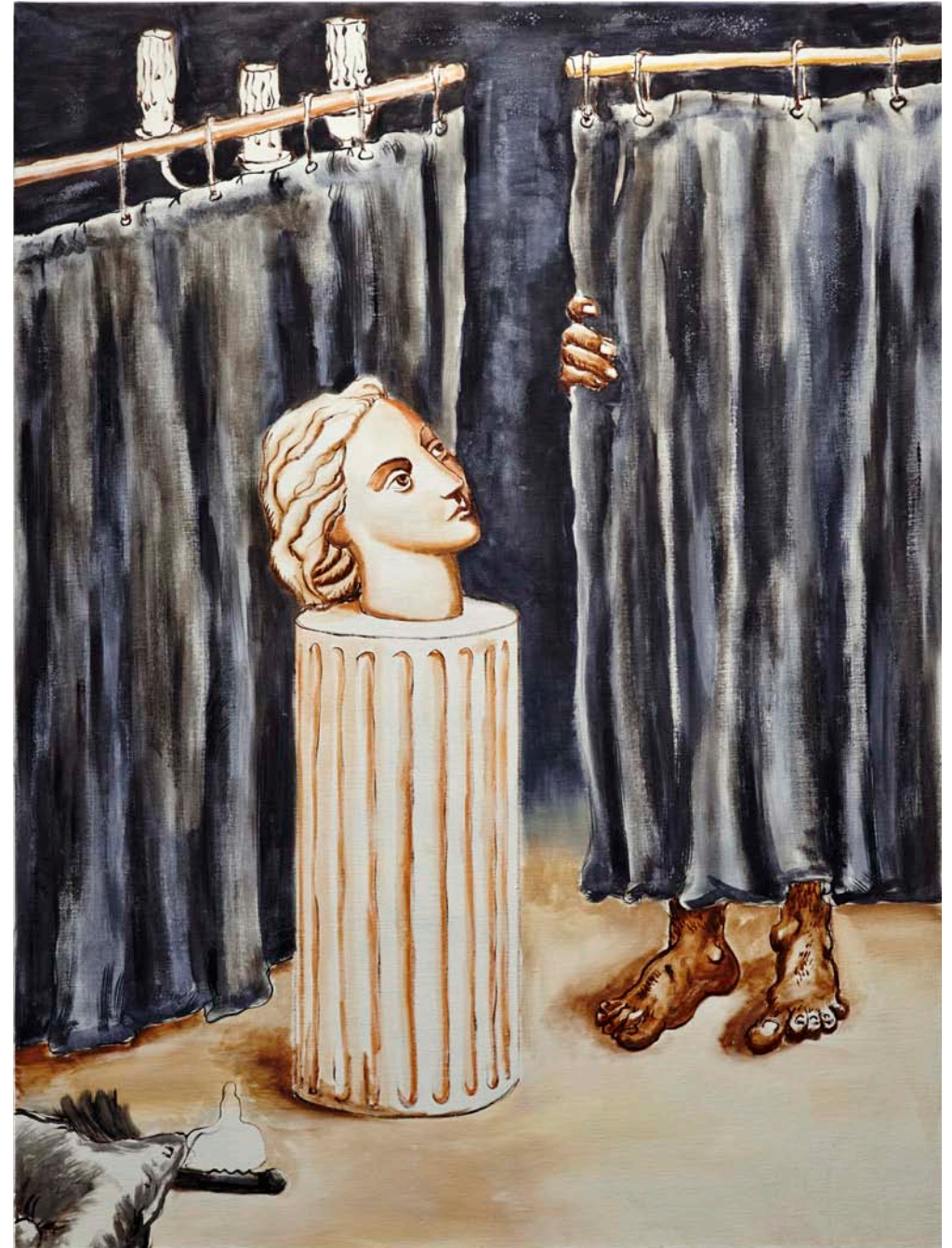


{7} *Cushions n.1 (Portrait of Emily Barlow)*, 2012  
 Opposite page: {8} *The Lustful Turk (Mum The Turks Are Coming)*, 2012





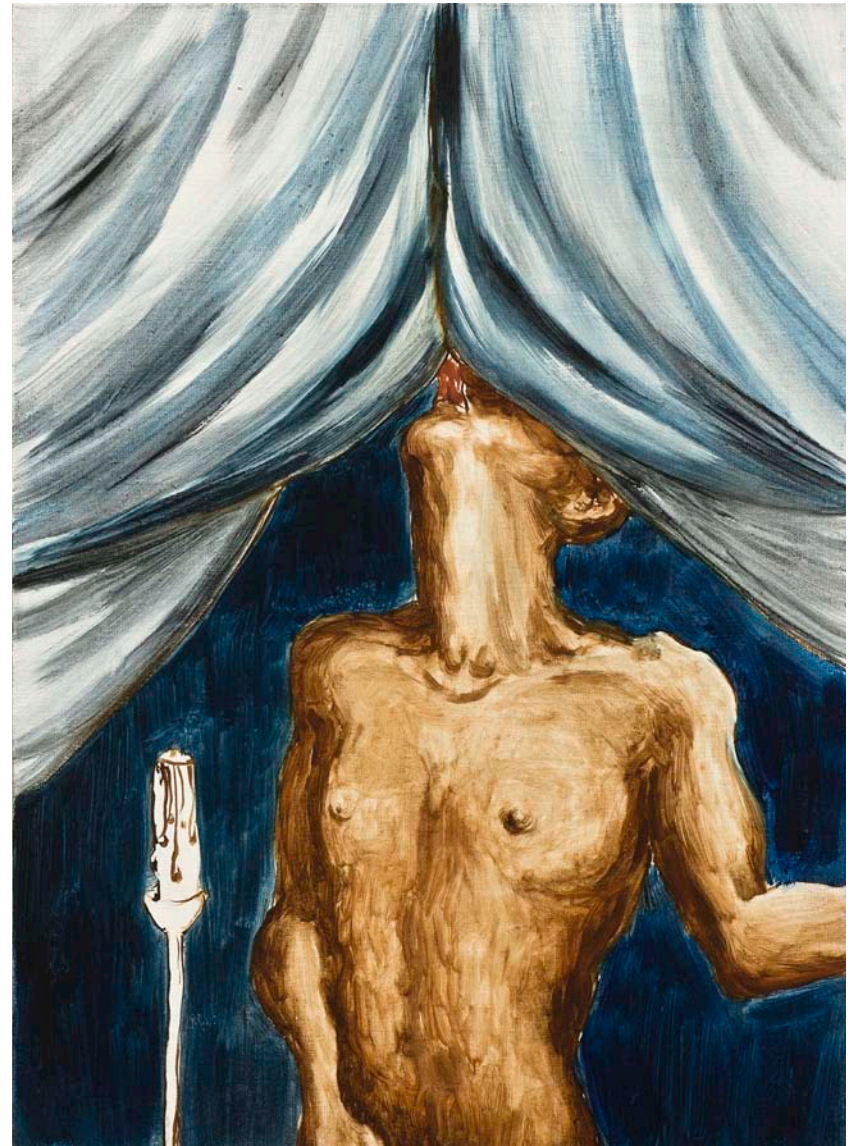
Opposite page: {9} *The Lustful Turk (Coucoun), 2012*  
{10} *Curtain n.7 (Portrait of Ali, Sultan of Algeri), 2012*







{11} *The Lustful Turk (Blow)*, 2012



{12} *The Lustful Turk (Curtain)*, 2012





*The Lustful Turk* at Villa Medici, 2012  
Opposite page: {13} *The Lustful Turk (The Greek Slave)*, 2012





{14} *The Lustful Turk (Souvenir)*, Detail, 2012  
Opposite page: {14} *The Lustful Turk (Souvenir)*, 2012







A conversation between  
Patrizio Di Massimo and Robert Leckie  
October 2013

## A conversation between Patrizio Di Massimo and Robert Leckie October 2013

RL: To begin at the beginning: How did you first come across *The Lustful Turk* book? What were your initial impressions?

PDM: I first came across *The Lustful Turk* while reading Edward Said's *Orientalism* – a foundational work of postcolonial theory, as you know – during my MA at Slade School of Fine Art in 2009.

My final dissertation, *Italian Orientalism*, attempted to reconsider Said's theories, which focus primarily on the UK, in relation to Italy, my native country. It begins by looking at maritime republics, when Italy “opened up” to the Orient – to China, Turkey and Africa – then moves through Italian imperialism. Then later it explores the contemporary legacy of Italian colonialism by looking at the respective business and immigration policies of the Berlusconi government and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi.

In the introduction to *Orientalism* Said makes reference to *The Lustful Turk* – a work of epistolary erotica published anonymously in England in 1828 – which he describes as a “black book” of Western Orientalism<sup>1</sup>. Intrigued, I quickly bought a reprinted edition online. When first flicking through, I found it to be a very curious document. American academic Steven Marcus lucidly describes it as something like [paraphrasing] “a condensation of the stereotypes that the West produced about the Orient”<sup>2</sup>. But its erotic, Oriental staging also fascinated me – you could say that I participated in the writer's fascination. And I did this despite having originally encountered the book through Said, knowing therefore that it was deeply rooted in the ill-informed authority of Western “knowledge” about the Orient.

I also remember that I could barely finish reading it because, with some notable exceptions, it's actually quite mundane. The plot is very basic and there is little character development or depth. Formally however, it was the first epistolary erotica ever written and set a precedent for this form of erotic writing in the Orientalist tradition. The story goes that the heroine, an innocent English girl named Emily Barlow, writes letters back home to a friend about her adventures, with the plot unravelling through her pen. I was also greatly intrigued by the anonymity of the author, which led me to read the book as a kind of collective production of the West.

RL: How has this book helped you, as you've mentioned to me before, “re-engage with the practice of painting”?

PDM: Painting has always informed my practice, even when I was making video, performance or installation. I was a very keen painter as a teenager, but I stopped practicing when I began studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Milan, continuing though to draw. More recently I felt the desire to reconnect with painting and *The*

*Lustful Turk* presented me with an entrance point, an opportunity.

After discovering *The Lustful Turk* book, I questioned for a long while what form my engagement with it should take. I began roughly 3 years ago, while reading it, to do some drawings, which I never exhibited. I was in residence at the time at De Ateliers in Amsterdam and I remember trying to describe the project to some tutors and peers. My ideas then were admittedly very vague and while some of them found it a very intriguing prospect, others insisted that I shouldn't pursue the subject, and so I didn't. It wasn't until some years later that I returned to the idea after receiving an invitation from Alessandro Rabottini to present a solo show at Villa Medici in Rome. And this is also partly because I found out that Villa Medici was historically directed by the French Neoclassical painter Jean Auguste Dominic Ingres in the 1830s and by the Polish/French Modern artist Balthus in the 1960 and 70s, both of whom I knew engaged problematically with Orientalism.

The path leading to that exhibition was rough and frustratingly slow. I remember discarding most of what I produced in the first few months. Looking back, I think I had three main difficulties: how not to banalise such a loaded subject, how translate such an interpretation into painting, and how to “follow” the text, or not.

RL: What do you consider to be the contemporary relevance of this historical book?

PDM: I think that reworking the cultural production of the past can encourage us to re-think what, where and how we have been before, culturally. And though *The Lustful Turk* may not be of interest to some, we all continue to be influenced by the way in which Western empires deformed the relationships between countries during the colonial period. The astonishingly simplistic and dichotomous relationships between East and West, so grotesquely portrayed in the book, are still geopolitically relevant today and the fetishisation of the Orient also persists. For the writer of *The Lustful Turk* the Orient was the place to imagine a series of sexual encounters that weren't permitted in pre-Victorian England. For us, opening a space for debate about the representation of sexual desires and practices in the Arab world is I think crucial to our understanding of that culture.

RL: How do you consider the replication or re-stating of historical, “racist” cultural stereotypes to be a critical gesture?

PDM: When I started this project I thought a lot about what position I should take. I could have, for instance, proceeded with moralistic judgement and political correctness, seeing the book as nothing more than an emblem of a retrograde and “racist” culture, or otherwise I could have reiterated the author's highly questionable motive, weaving my work into his, unquestioningly. But neither path felt like mine, and so eventually I realised that all I wanted was to somehow bring this topic to the table and to do so in my own way.



In this sense I don't consider my project to be a replication or re-staging of the book – I see it more as a proposition regarding how entrenched we still are in our past cultural heritage. My referencing the book also serves primarily to emphasise the connection between the Orientalist tradition and sexual desire, which I believe remains an interesting lens through which to pick apart our relationship to the “Other” nowadays, no matter how problematic and ambiguous that may be.

RL: You've said to me before that you didn't want to illustrate *The Lustful Turk* book. With that in mind, I'd like you to talk about your style and method of painting and sculpting. I would argue that, with your paintings for instance, your use of bright, quite garish colours, lightly worked canvases and thick, almost comic book-like outlines is quite illustrative. And you also envision your sculptures as abstract portraits?

PDM: I didn't want to detach the project from the illustrative tradition. What I think I meant to say is that I didn't want my work to follow the narrative of the book page by page, with my images responding, secondarily, to particular passages of text. As far as I understand it, painting has always referred to literary sources historically, whether the bible or Greek myths, and my work looks for contemporary “ways in” to this kind of art-making. So that's why I wanted to embrace illustration and to understand my work as continuing that tradition.

I also think it's important to see my paintings as a development of my drawing practice, based on symbols and lines, and to consider that I use oil almost like a water-colour, applying it thinly rather than building up many different layers.

RL: To what extent do you think *The Lustful Turk* book is an essential reference for understanding or unlocking these works? Is it fair to say that your work “leans on” this book to some extent?

PDM: That's an interesting question, partly because I'm not sure I know the answer. It's difficult for me to imagine how someone who doesn't know anything about the book might engage with the work or not. As we've just discussed, these images are illustrative, but I also like to think that they can stand up on their own.

I think that context just makes one's encounter with the work different, not necessarily better or worse. For example, when you see for the first time a certain very famous painting of man holding an apple in his hand, you just see an image which you either like or don't like for what it is – your interpretation is contingent upon your taste. But if you were then to listen to a tour guide's description of this same work you would soon understand that the apple signifies the world and that the person holding it therefore possesses incredible power. Knowledge then, in this instance, unlocks for the viewer another way of understanding and appreciating a work, but it doesn't make one's previous impression irrelevant.

RL: I'd now like you to talk about emblems, which are everywhere in these works, from the tassels adorning the *Portrait of Emily Barlow*, to the candelabra depicted in the paintings, drawings and wallpaper at Gasworks. How are they significant for you?

PDM: Well, when I started drawing and painting in relation to the book I slowly started to put together an alphabet of elements. This came quite naturally and was informed by the Orientalist tradition. Imagining the harem interior, I became particularly interested in elements of décor -- cushions, curtains, tassels, candelabra – which I began to use in paintings as substitutes for the human figures and body parts. In this way, I created a sort of meta-language. There is a reconnection with language through the use of visual “figures of speech”. In the same way that you can replace language with an image, I found I could replace a leg with a tassel, for example, or buttocks with a cushion. I think this makes the work funnier, more allusive, more suggestive, and far different from more classical understandings of the figurative.

I also think these works are unapologetically over-the-top because I don't think there is any reason to be apologetic. Racy as it may be, I have to follow through on my decision to make a project about this thorny subject, and I think, for me, that necessitates pleasure, playfulness and enjoyment. If *The Lustful Turk* book is based on stereotypes and how these stereotypes condition our understanding of an “Other” world, and if I don't want to be moralistic about these stereotypes then I must make use of them.

RL: Please could you talk about your style? Why this style in particular? Do you see your style evolving through these works?

PDM: I try not to produce images “in the style of”, so I haven't made *The Lustful Turk* work by deciding to draw as a pre-Victorian artist would, for example. But I'm dealing with image production that is intimately connected to who I am. This is what painting is based on, how things work.

Certainly there is an evolution in *The Lustful Turk* series, which has entailed two solo exhibitions and a full year of work. At the beginning, as I said before, I struggled a lot. Then, eventually, after months of struggle, I had a sort of epiphany and the work just came, quite intuitively. This is overly romantic I know, but with painting it just has to be the right moment, because it comes through your brain, your hands and your heart all at once. I made *The Lustful Turk (The Green Room, 2012)* in an hour of seemingly suspended time, just like that. And I knew while I was doing it and when it was finished that that painting was the key to entering the project, and in the following few weeks I made all the paintings that I would eventually show at Villa Medici. Somehow they all just manifested themselves like “this is it”, it was not what I was thinking of doing, or what I was trying to do, thinking of, or what I wanted to do, because of. And then I accepted it. And accepting it has in many ways

been *the* major challenge of this project.

RL: Sure. I can understand that this moment is essential because it's when the transformation of your source material occurs. *The Lustful Turk* book has an awful lot of baggage, if we can call it that – it has a complicated, anonymous and racist history that has been subsequently unpicked by scholars of intimidating clarity and intellect. But actually, this moment of making that you describe is deeply personal, intuitive and part of your studio practice.

PDM: Yes, exactly – it was emotional.

RL: Could you describe the significance of the phrase “guilty pleasure” for you and this body of work?

PDM: To be honest, I'm not sure that I can. Guilty pleasure is a readymade description for a feeling that I have used many times when describing my attitude or approach to this project. It's something that we know we shouldn't do, but nonetheless we like to do. Is it possible to have pleasure without feeling guilty?

RL: Not if you're catholic.

PDM: [Laughs] That's a good point – Catholicism could be an interesting way to read my work... But anyway, guilty pleasure underlines that there is no pleasure without guilt. I'm also interested in *The Lustful Turk* book as a form of contraband, which would have been circulated secretly because it describes sexual acts, such as the Turk's attraction to anal sex, which were illegal in the West at the time. It also depicts the Orient as a stage for actions that then contravened moral laws at home.

RL: What new iconography have you introduced in the newer works in *The Lustful Turk* series and why? I'm thinking of the statue of a black panther in *The Lustful Turk (Haberdashery)*, paintings of other paintings in *The Lustful Turk (Salon)*, etc.

PDM: When making these large-scale paintings for the exhibition at Gasworks I wanted to sum up what I felt were the project's key topics in a trilogy of new works. The painting with the panther (*The Lustful Turk (Haberdashery)*) also depicts a mountain of cushions, an overload of décor. The panther is there because I had the feeling that something was missing on the opposite side, and it just came out intuitively, it just happened. So, in a way, it was my own unthinking guilty pleasure that allowed the panther to occupy that space in the painting.

Then, in *The Lustful Turk (Bang Bang)*, we have an overload of artefacts, represented by African sculptures. Here, as with other works in *The Lustful Turk* series, I was interested in replacing the fetishisation towards the Orient with the fetishisation of artefacts. And, as we know, African artefacts have also greatly influenced the tradition of Western painting and so these artefacts also hint at a fetishisation of painting

itself.

The last of this trilogy of large-scale paintings, *The Lustful Turk (Salon)*, is about the overproduction of images, framed as paintings. It depicts other paintings inside the frame of the image, in which I have inserted many references to other works produced as part of *The Lustful Turk* series, which were not exhibited at Gasworks. All of them are cut off pieces of other paintings. Beyond my formal interest in this, *The Lustful Turk* project also looks to unravel the idea of the cannibalisation of other cultures through sexuality. At the end of the original book, for example, a new girl is introduced into the harem and, objecting to her violent treatment, castrates the Turk. Emily Barlow, the heroine, then takes his genitals back to England, preserved in a jar, as a relic or keepsake. In this way, she possesses him through his genitals. And it is precisely this kind of emblematic, almost cannibalistic, severing into parts that I have tried to recreate in this and other paintings. But also it's this painting in which you begin to see all the paintings as scenographic objects. And these three paintings that we have just discussed, they depict the same room, have the same floor, same wall, and same three windows (or paintings), and they all insist on an ambiguity between tromp l'oeil, scenography, painting and illustration.

RL: I think the idea of a relic or keepsake is a poignant note on which to end our conversation. As I understand it, *The Lustful Turk* project is now finished. Which aspects of it – if not the same image world or narrative – will continue to inform your work?

PDM: A lot will be kept. It's difficult to know now of course, but certainly a lot. It has been like a battle, against people who didn't want me to embark on this project and against myself, who didn't indulge in the guilty pleasure of doing it at first. Now I can say that, for me, this was a very important project. I don't like to talk about it in terms of success or failure because I think there's never success without failure and vice versa. But it has felt very important for me because I feel that I have conquered new territories of practice.

RL: Interesting choice of phrasing!

PDM: You know... one thing leads to another, it just goes.

*Please note.* All works were made in 2013 unless otherwise stated

(Endnotes)

- 1 Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, Penguin, 2003 (1978), p. 24
- 2 Marcus, Steven, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, Paperback, 2008 (1964)



The Lustful Turk  
Gasworks, London  
03/10/13 - 01/12/13



{15} *The Lustful Turk (Billboard)*, 2013



*The Lustful Turk* at Gasworks, 2013

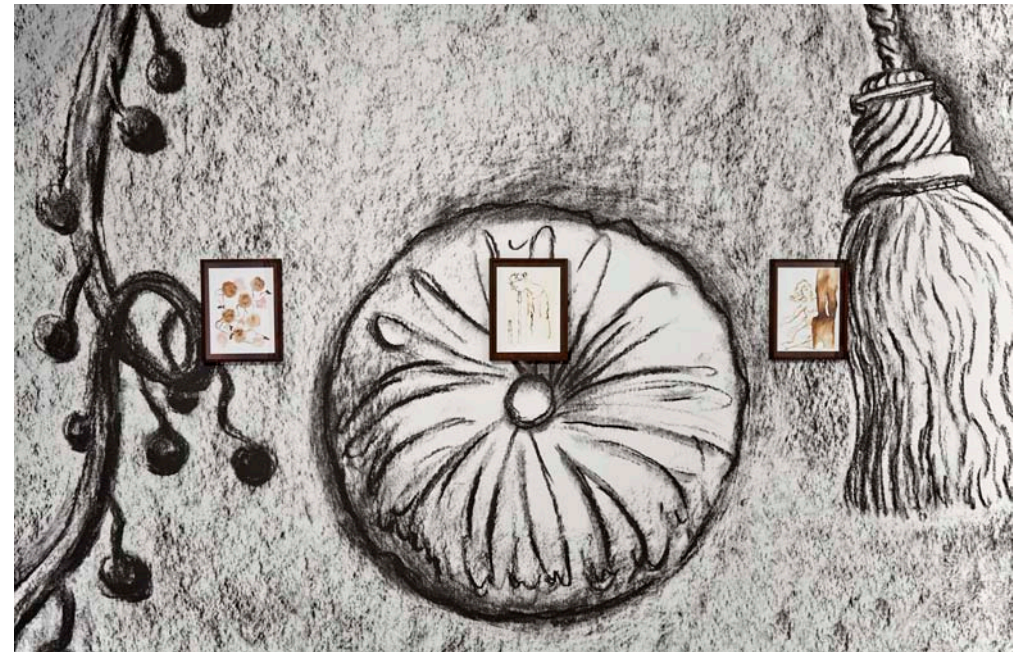
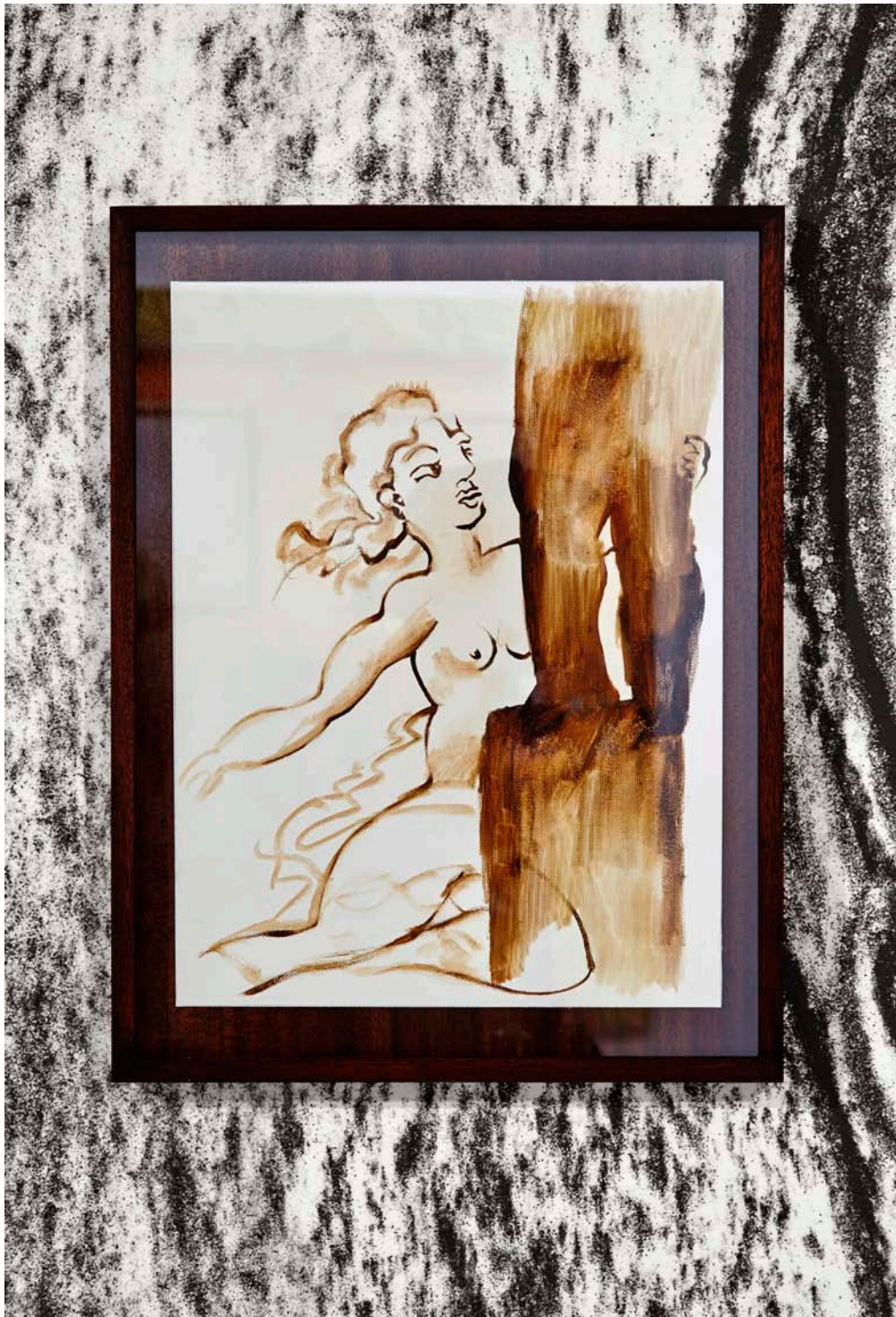




*The Lustful Turk* at Gasworks, 2013  
 Opposite page: {16} *The Lustful Turk (Legs)*, 2013

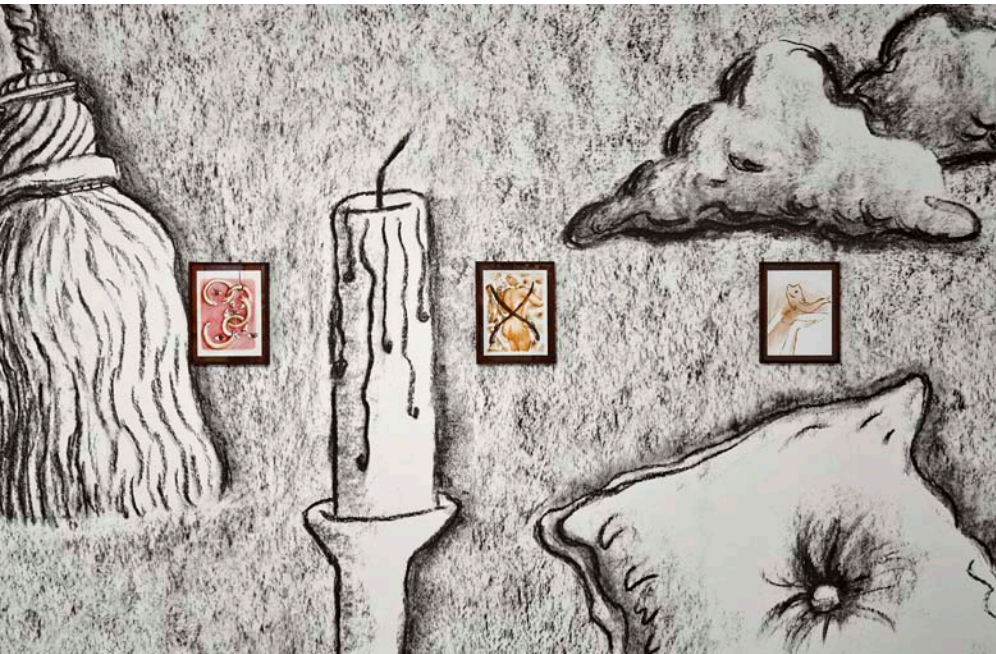








{18} *The Lustful Turk (Wallpaper)*, 2013



{19} *The Lustful Turk (Swords)*, 2012







{20} *The Lustful Turk (Bracelets)*, 2013



{21} *The Lustful Turk (Fish on a Dish)*, 2013





{22} *The Lustful Turk (Whip)*, 2013



Opposite page: {23} *Cushion no.3 (Portrait of Eliza)*, 2013















Previous page: {25} *The Lustful Turk (Bang Bang)*, 2013  
 This page: {26} *Curtain no.10 (Portrait of Emily Barlow)*, 2013  
 Opposite page: {27} *Cushion no.4 (Portrait of Ali, Sultan of Algeri)*, 2013  
 Following page: {28} *The Lustful Turk (Haberdashery)*, 2013







## Catalogue

{1} *The Lustful Turk (Cushions)*, 2012

Oil on linen

55 x 40 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

Courtesy Christodoulos Panayiotou

{2} *The Lustful Turk (Dptych)*, 2012

Oil on paper

30.5 x 22.9 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

Private Collection

{3} *The Lustful Turk (Harem)*, 2012

Oil on linen

152.5 x 112 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

Courtesy Nomas Foudation, Rome

{4} *Cushion n.2 (Portrait of Eliza)*, 2012

Oil on velvet cushion color mauve

40 x 40 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

Courtesy Nomas Foundation, Rome

{5} *The Lustful Turk (The Blue Room)*, 2012

Oil on linen

66 x 89 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

{6} Previous page: *The Lustful Turk (The Green Room)*, 2012

Oil on linen

86.5 x 117 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

{7} *Cushions n.1 (Portrait of Emily Barlow)*, 2012

20 cushions 35 x 35 cm each in mauve cotton,

20 buttons in mauve velvet

150 x 120 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

Courtesy Giuliani Foundation, Rome

{8} *The Lustful Turk (Mum The Turks Are Coming)*, 2012

Oil on linen

152.5 x 112 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

Courtesy Giuliani Foundation, Rome

{9} *The Lustful Turk (Coucou)*, 2012

Oil on linen

117 x 86.5 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

Private Collection

{10} Previous page: *Curtain n.7 (Portrait of Ali, Sultan of Algeri)*, 2012

4 horizontal Italian-style crimped valances

Bruxelles black velvet

150 x 200 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

{11} *The Lustful Turk (Blow)*, 2012

Oil on paper

30.5 x 22.9 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

Courtesy Nomas Foundation, Rome

{12} *The Lustful Turk (Curtain)*, 2012

Oil on linen

55 x 40 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

Courtesy Nomas Foundation, Rome

{13} *The Lustful Turk (The Greek Slave)*, 2012

Oil on linen

90 x 65 cm

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

{14} Detail of *The Lustful Turk (Souvenir)*, 2012

Oil on canvas

paper, frame, oil on mauve cushion, rope, tassels.

Dimensions variable

Photo Credit: Roberto Apa

Private Collection

{15} *The Lustful Turk (Billboard)*, 2013

Vinyl Print

Dimensions variable

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{16} *The Lustful Turk (Legs)*, 2013

Oil on paper

30.5 x 22.9 cm

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{17} *The Lustful Turk (Ercolanum)*, 2013

Oil on paper

30.5 x 22.9 cm

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{18} *The Lustful Turk (Wallpaper)*, 2013

Wallpaper

Dimensions variable

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{19} *The Lustful Turk (Swords)*, 2012

Oil on paper

30.5 x 22.9 cm

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{20} *The Lustful Turk (Bracelets)*, 2013

Oil on paper

30.5 x 22.9 cm

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{21} *The Lustful Turk (Fish on a Dish)*, 2013

Oil on paper

30.5 x 22.9 cm

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{23} *The Lustful Turk (Whip)*, 2013

Oil on paper

30.5 x 22.9 cm

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{23} *Cushion no.3 (Portrait of Eliza)*, 2013

4 velvet cushions, 4 satin cushions, tassels,

cord, trimmings, iron.

120 x 45 x 45 cm

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{24} *The Lustful Turk (Salon)*, 2013

Oil on canvas

200 x 270 cm

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{25} *The Lustful Turk (Bang Bang)*, 2013

Oil on canvas

200 x 270 cm

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{26} *Curtain no.10 (Portrait of Emily Barlow)*, 2013

Triple pleat pinch, inverted box pleats on duchess satin, tassels, trimmings, wood.

200 x 270cm

Thanks to Peter Pilotto Fashion House

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{27} *Cushion no.4 (Portrait of Eli, Sultan of Algeri)*, 2013

10 cotton cushions, 8 velvet cushions, tassels, cord, trimmings, iron.

250 x 50 x 50 cm

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

{28} *The Lustful Turk (Haberdashery)*, 2013

Oil on canvas

200 x 270 cm

Photo Credit: Matthew Booth

All works (if not otherwise mentioned):  
Courtesy Patrizio Di Massimo and T293,  
Rome/Naples

# Colophon

## Exhibitions

Il Turco Lussurioso  
Villa Medici, The Academy of France, Rome  
(23/11/2012 - 16/12/2012)  
Curator  
Alessandro Rabottini

The Lustful Turk  
Gasworks, London  
(23/10/2013 - 01/12/2013)  
Curator  
Robert Leckie

## Booklet

Authors  
Patrizio Di Massimo  
Robert Leckie

Interview copy-editing  
Robert Leckie

Graphic design  
Patrizio Di Massimo  
Flo Pepper

Print  
Printroom Group

© Patrizio Di Massimo  
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrievable system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author.



