

Life... and death

*Philippe Pasqua's exhibition
'Memento Mori' is on display in Tel Aviv*

• By BARRY DAVIS

Philippe Pasqua has got some pretty sizable things on show at Zemack Contemporary Art (ZCA) gallery in Tel Aviv's fashionable Kikar Hamedina. Some of it is even tailored to the locale. Take, for instance, a delightful sleek-looking silvery full-size olive tree adorned with butterflies fluttering among the branches. That sounds all well and cozy, but then you encounter Pasqua's darker side when you espy a white skull, which also comes complete with butterflies, of a less delicate nature, with a number of gold-capped teeth strategically placed in the skull's mouth for good measure and effect.

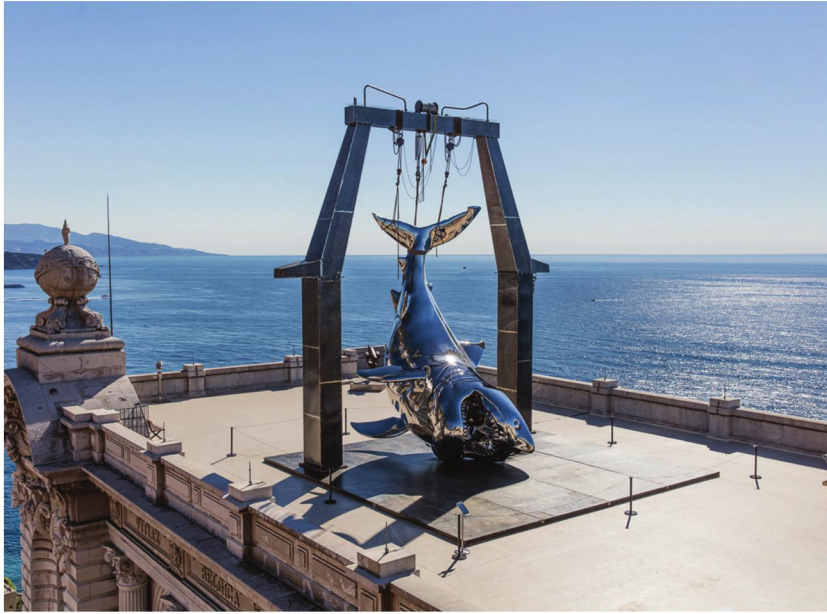
The world-renowned French artist's exhibition opened at ZCA a couple of weeks ago and will run until July 28. Entering the gallery is like stepping into a wonderland populated by all manner of mythological and larger-than-life characters, sculpted and painted.

An exhibition titled "Memento Mori" has to feature, at least, the odd nod to mortality. The Latin phrase, which translates as "Remember that you have to die," indicates the Latin Christian practice of referring to this world as merely a conduit to better, celestial, things and the transient nature of material belongings. Pasqua puts the lustrous slinky tangible wealth ethos front and center with several outsized sculptures that include, for instance, an in-your-face chrome-covered sculpture of a prehistoric monster as the 52-year-old Frenchman flits between realism, super-realism, surrealism, the abstract and something approaching the romantic.

As dimensionally striking as some of Pasqua's works tend to be, the artist says he does not set out to wow viewers by sheer force of scale.

"The works tell me what size they want to be," he says, referencing one of his better-known and corporeally outstanding creations. "That's how it was with the *Shark*," he elaborates, referring to an enormous chrome-covered work currently on show at the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco as part of his "Borderline"





exhibition, which runs until September 30.

Pasqua didn't bring that gargantuan sculpture to Tel Aviv. The ZCA owners had enough on their hands trying to squeeze in the T-Rex, olive tree, an assortment of skulls and other items that required quite a bit of logistical acrobatics.

The artist seems to be constantly engaged in a balancing act. He is capable of producing items of almost ethereal delicacy, and then he can blow you away with something of a seemingly crass nature. Take, for example, a large painting of a young woman wearing a short dress in a most unladylike pose, displaying her underwear for to all to see. That comes across as being a little on the erotic side, if not downright pornographic. But not for Pasqua.

"Pornography would be showing the woman fully clothed and asking the viewer to use their imagination," he observes, with a smile. "Here, there is nothing hidden. So it's not pornography."

Death and life make regular appearances in the artist's oeuvre, and he frequently mixes the two, to produce a subtly crafted oxymoronic effect. The olive tree on the ground floor of the gallery not only has a fleet of butterflies hovering among the spindly leaves, but Pasqua also saw fit to scatter some diminutive skulls around the soil. That, he says, is partly designed to impart a sense of optimism.

"There is death in the skulls, but the olive tree is bigger and stronger. That means life is stronger than death," he reasons.

That is also suggested by the contrast

between the natural subject matter; for example, a tree and the fundamentally unnatural material he uses to make the work. "That produces immortality," Pasqua posits enigmatically.

It is also a geographic location-specific creation.

"Olive trees are natural to this part of the world, and they are a symbol of life and strength," Pasqua adds. "I am drawn to olive trees. They are, maybe, 3,000 years old, and they are always changing."

You get the impression that Pasqua is something of an enfant terrible. With his long hair and wild beard, not to mention his decidedly less than chic dress sense, he comes across as a Peter Pan character determined to have his fun, and his say, with his art. His fascination with skulls and all sorts of other scary paraphernalia began when he was a teenager, and he is not done with them yet. There is a totality to his output that flies in the face of any vogue that may be doing the rounds out there and anything that even smacks of logic.

The basement space at Zemack is devoted mainly to Pasqua's paintings of various young ladies that have passed through his studio. Some of his sitters appear several times, giving both artist and spectator the opportunity to get viewpoints of the character in question. The pictures all display an almost feverish energy, as the artist presents his subjects across a wide range of emotions.

Pasqua is clearly blessed with a devil-may-care disposition and seems to be thoroughly enjoying himself.

'Memento Mori' is on display at the Zemack gallery in Tel Aviv until July 28. For more information: <http://zcgallery.com/> and (03) 691-5060