

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

What does Greed smell like?

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David Brinn , THE JERUSALEM POST

Francesco Vezzoli would have made a great magician. The celebrated Italian conceptual artist has a knack for creating things out of midair - like a video trailer for a film that doesn't exist, or most recently, an advertisement for a non-existent perfume called Greed.

Vezzoli might have made a good politician as well, since his power of persuasion has managed to convince such top-flight talent as Natalie Portman, Roman Polanski, Catherine Deneuve, Benicio Del Toro and Helen Mirren to appear in his farcical social commentaries.

But an artist is what the 38-year-old native of Brescia, in northern Italy, chose to be, and today he's walking down a busy Rome street, talking into his cell phone and juggling appointments as the date nears for the February 6th opening of his latest work at Rome's Gagolian Gallery entitled *GREED, A New Fragrance by Francesco Vezzoli*.

The project, which replicates the strategy and aesthetics of a commercial perfume launch, includes an actual perfume bottle featuring Vezzoli in drag, photographed by Francesco Scavullo, and is accompanied by a 60-second commercial for the perfume - directed by Polanski and starring himself, Portman and actress Michelle Williams - as well as a new series of endorsements in the form of needlework portraits of leading female figures in art history - including Tamara de Lempicka, Eva Hesse and Leonor Fini.

The last-minute preparations for *GREED* have necessitated the cancellation of Vezzoli's appearance in Tel Aviv Thursday for the opening of "Sounds & Visions: Artists' Films and Videos from Europe, the Last Decade" at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the opening shot of the three-week-long Contempo Festival.

Contempo, the Tel Aviv International Festival for Contemporary Music, aimed at showcasing a decade of creativity in Europe and Israel, is a multimedia extravaganza taking place at a multitude of venues focusing on video art, electronic music and contemporary classical music performances by European and Israeli artists to mark the 100th anniversary of Tel Aviv's founding.

Besides Vezzoli's seminal *An Embroidered Trilogy (1997-99)*, the Sounds & Visions exhibition features more than a dozen other European video artists, including Cyprien Gaillard (France), Christian Jankowski (Germany), Jesper Just (Denmark) and Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor (Romania).

"TECHNICALLY SPEAKING, I can't miss the opening of GREED," the good-natured Vezzoli told *The Jerusalem Post*. "If there's no real perfume, that's one thing, but if the actor doesn't show, then the show doesn't happen."

When he was approached about the project, Vezzoli said that he researched some real perfume ad campaigns and came across the Ralph Lauren ads for Notorious, based on the Hitchcock movie.

"I thought, we have to do better than this. Then I thought - why don't we convince someone like Roman Polanski to direct the ad - he'd be a natural to portray this crazy game of a product that doesn't exist. Natalie Portman was very enthusiastic and she's one of the best actresses in the world. The fact that she's one of the few actresses who have never been part of a perfume advertising campaign makes it all that much better and more effective," said Vezzoli.

And what exactly does a perfume with the name Greed smell like?

"I've been struggling with this notion," confessed Vezzoli. "To be honest, I'm so happy that the whole project worked out so well that no perfume could smell as good as this castle of sand we constructed from nothing."

GREED is just the latest castle in what the Gagosian Gallery coins Vezzoli's "ongoing preoccupation with the fundamental ambiguity of truth, the seductive powers of language, and the instability of the human persona in a series of works that explore the undisputed power of contemporary media culture."

According to Vezzoli, his art is designed to hold a mirror to society which idolizes the concept of celebrity. At the same time, Vezzoli's racy art plumbs the depths of celebrity culture itself and seemingly revels in it, with devastatingly funny results.

"It's all part of this kind of style of promotional deconstruction that I've been researching for a long time. I'm not so much of a moralist trying to make a statement," he said.

"I'm fascinated by celebrity. It's a phenomenon, and I don't think the whole celebrity culture is silly. It invades everything: fashion, cinema. Without stars, no event is deemed worthy of the media to cover - you need that red carpet. My work is the study of media."

Earlier Vezzoli productions with the same theme include *Non-Love Meetings* (2004), a pilot show for a reality dating game that will never go to air, starring Catherine Deneuve, Jeanne Moreau and Marianne Faithful; a trailer for a remake of Gore Vidal's *Caligula* (2005), a Hollywood movie that will never be made, starring Gore Vidal, Helen Mirren and Courtney Love; and perhaps most biting, *Marlene Redux: A True Hollywood Story!*, a mockumentary in the format of the tabloid E! and VH1 celebrity profiles which portrays Vezzoli in a tortured relationship with the Marlene Dietrich of Maximilian Schell's 1984 film, *Marlene*.

The recurring theme in *Marlene Redux* is the testimonials by people from Vezzoli's past who uniformly refer to him as a "pushy little shit," a persona that Vezzoli happily embraces.

"At the beginning of my career it was difficult to approach famous people to participate, now it's changed. There's a different dynamic for everyone, and there have been some surprising reactions. I've been lucky to have the chance to work with some great actors," he said. "To make these things happen, like the *Caligula* film or *Marlene Redux*, and to get those actors and directors to participate, you have to be somewhat pushy. So I don't mind if that's the case where I'm perceived like that. I'm pushy in order to turn my dreams into reality."

THE ONLY child of a lawyer and a pediatrician who both encouraged him to seek out the arts, the openly gay Vezzoli received a classical education in Greek and Roman literature and history in Italy and attended art school in London. That's where he first took up the craft that has played such an integral role in his art throughout his career: needlepoint.

"I didn't like going to school very much. So needlepoint was perfect. I could stay home and do that, and show that I had been working hard at home," he said.

Weaving an interconnecting thread between himself, the celebrity icons of his fascination and his audience, Vezzoli's initial embroidery embellished black-and-white film stills of Edith Piaf or Maria Callas, or pop stars Nick Cave or Ricky Martin, with elements like stitched metal tears or sparkling eye shadow. The works proved to be both popular and controversial. "People in the art world were not very happy - the response was that it was too camp and kitschy, and people were somewhat suspicious of the needlework. I hope they aren't anymore, I don't know," said Vezzoli of his early work, which can now fetch up to \$40,000 for some portraits.

As he began to integrate video into his art, Vezzoli still kept the embroidery theme alive, as exemplified by *An Embroidered Trilogy*, which is being featured at Sounds & Visions. Consisting of three videos made between 1997 and 1999, each episode of the trilogy is directed by a famous filmmaker and stars an Italian diva. Vezzoli appears in each episode as an embroiderer, personifying the thread which sews the three videos together.

"The whole concept was that I wanted to be filmed while I was doing needlework, but I wanted to be part of the director's vision," explained Vezzoli. "Now, it's a little like looking at old pictures of myself, especially because I'm in them."

According to Angelo G'ioe, director of the Italian Institute of Culture in Tel Aviv and cocurator of Sounds & Visions, Vezzoli's work was the perfect representation for the exhibition.

"*An Embroidered Trilogy* is the oldest work in the exhibition, but it's really connected to the subject," said G'ioe, adding that the integration of Italian singers, actors, directors, fashion and architecture provides a stunning representation of Italian culture. "I think it presents Italian style with a sense of both irony and class."

G'ioe said that he and cocurator Maria Rosa Sossai looked at the video work of over 400 artists before deciding on the finalists for the exhibition, a collaborative European effort initiated by the Italian culture institute, in partnership with the Institut Français, the Goethe-Institut, the Institutul Cultural Român, and with significant support from the EU Commission to Israel.

"The idea was to look at the relationship between sound and image, and from that starting point, we began looking for artists and work in Europe that combined those two elements. Maria, who has written two books on visual arts, prepared a list of artists from each European country, and we got in touch with European and American galleries and asked them for suggestions," he said.

WHILE VEZZOLI won't be attending Thursday's gala opening of the exhibit, G'ioe said that many of the other artists would be there, including Bulgaria's Kalin Serapionov (*In Addition*, 2008), Malta's Vince Briffa (*Body of Glass after Caravaggio*, 2006) and Slovenia's Natasa Prosenec (*Tomb*, 2002).

Vezzoli said he was disappointed about being unable to attend the opening and was looking forward to visiting Israel for the first time.

"I've been concentrating on *GREED* so much - otherwise I would have come for sure, it would have made complete sense," he said, adding that he didn't consider himself a political artist.

"Yesterday, a journalist interviewed me and I felt so bad - she asked me about the political situation in Israel and Gaza and I didn't feel entitled to make a comment. I have too much respect for the Israeli people to even remotely imagine that I have the right to express a point of view."

Instead, Vezzoli hopes his art does the talking, but he has no illusions to transform the views and opinions of people. His goals are much less lofty.

"I hope that people will laugh. I think if they laugh, then it's fantastic and I think that I'm doing a great service."

A politician - or a magician - couldn't have put it better.