

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### Francesco Vezzoli

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**Francesco Vezzoli** has been called both a tease and a whore. The tease camp points to such recent artworks as a trailer for a movie that doesn't exist and a premiere for a play that never ran, while the other cites his [self-admitted obsession](#) with bold-faced names, many of whom — **Helen Mirren, Milla Jovovich, Cate Blanchett, Natalie Portman, Sharon Stone, Courtney Love,** and **Benicio Del Torro**, to name a few — have participated in these productions.

Both tendencies are evident in Vezzoli's latest work, a highly polished, celebrity-endorsed marketing campaign for an utterly elusive product. Debuting tomorrow at **Gagosian Gallery** in Rome and running through March 21 is "Greed," an exhibition based on a nonexistent perfume, featuring a minute-long commercial directed by **Roman Polanski** and starring Portman and **Michelle Williams**, a series of billboard-like ads with images of famous Greed gals (artists ranging from **Frida Kahlo** to **Eva Hesse**), and a nifty bottle with a photograph of the artist in drag (an homage to **Marcel Duchamp**, also auteur of a fake perfume whose bottle has a self-portrait in drag).

And inside the bottle? Well, last we heard that's still up in the air.

ARTINFO caught up with Vezzoli on the eve of the worldwide launch of his new fragrance and asked about his celebrities, his critics, and the fugitive scent of Greed.

**Francesco, how did the idea for Greed come about?**

I've done a trailer for a movie that didn't exist, an election campaign for candidates who were completely fictitious, and a premiere for a play that was never going to run. A project about the launch of a perfume that didn't exist seemed like a natural next step.

**Miuccia Prada and Francois Pinault, owner of Gucci, have sponsored some of your works. Did you speak to people at these fashion lines to learn about building a campaign for perfume?**

Miuccia Prada and Francois Pinault are collectors of mine, but we never talk perfume.

**Do you imagine that Greed has a smell?**

No, I think that Greed smells like nothing, but nothing smells like greed.

**That was clever. Have you practiced that answer?**

No, no. Only for you.

To give you a more serious answer, I played with the idea of Greed smelling like something. But then I was so happy about the video, which is made by one of the best movie directors in the world, that I thought that even if I worked on a perfume for three years with the best noses in the world I wouldn't be able to find a perfume that defines the notion of a perfume as well as this perfume commercial defines the notion of a perfume commercial.

**I presume you started this project before the current economic crisis.**

Yes, otherwise nobody would have green-lighted it.

**Do you feel that the meaning of the work has changed as a result?**

Well, some people have said, You are clairvoyant, you have anticipated the moment. Others may think that because it's such a daring project, it belongs more to the type of work that people would have done before the crisis. Me, I just hope that greed will evaporate like a perfume.

It would be very easy for me to claim territory on this project and say that it has a critical and moral stance, etc., etc., but I don't like to sell this version. I thought of Envy by Gucci and wondered how to push it forward. I thought to myself, What's similar to a capital sin, and Greed came up.

Unfortunately greed will always be fashionable, with or without a crisis.

**So you don't think of the project as having much of a critical element?**

No, I do. I think my work is very political, because it deals with the perception of celebrity culture, which is something that we're all involved with. But many critics get stuck on the fact that I have celebrities in my work and conclude that since my work is about surface, it stays on the surface. So I have given up trying to claim a political aspect to my work. I leave it to others to judge.

But it's great that a gallery like Gagosian allowed me to play with everyone's identity: I play with my identity, since on the label I look like a woman; Roman Polanski plays with his identity by doing the job that a movie director hates the most, which is being a perfume commercial director; and the actresses play with their identity, because they accept to do what most actresses hate the most, which is to be like coathangers; and the gallery allows me to play with its public identity by claiming they produce or sell perfume.

**As part of the exhibition, you've designed Greed posters featuring female artists like Eva Hesse, Leonor Fini, and Frida Kahlo. How do all these figures relate to one another?**

The list is very perversely chosen, because I wanted to mix the sacred and the profane. I deliberately mix artists who had an aura of integrity, like Eva Hesse, with others who have an aura of corruption: either completely sold-out commercial figures like Tamara de Lempicka or social hangers-on like Leonor Fini, who you only see in that store in SoHo where there are all those dreadful multiples of Salvador Dali and pictures of her going to parties with him.

**Is the idea that these are women who would use the perfume Greed?**

No, the idea is that this project is all about corrupting everyone's image into commercial promotion. Since we are turning an artistic structure into a perfume commercial, why not use artists as the ultimate testimonials to push the project onto a more perverse edge. I thought: What's more violent than imagining Eva Hesse wearing Greed?

**What do you think your work says about celebrity culture?**

I think our culture's obsession with celebrities is evident, but few artists deal with this topic, because the moment you touch it you feel corrupted. You're dealing with your own vanities, your own insecurities, your own desires to be close to celebrities, to know the secrets of their visibility. I see myself as a mirror holder. I hold up the mirror and say, OK, this is the reality we live in. These are the fascinations most people have, and art should look at them the way art looks at most phenomena.

I don't think the crisis will make the obsession for celebrities any weaker. It will make us less rich, it will make us less interested in money, but not in celebrities. Even in a changed financial panorama, I think people will still go to see movies and want to dream.

**You've worked with celebrities who are very much of the moment, such as Natalie Portman and Cate Blanchett, but also with figures like Anita Ekberg, whose time has passed. Do you think that people relate differently to these two types of celebrities?**

In the beginning I was fascinated by nostalgia. I deliberately quoted Italian and European film history, and I thought that was my contribution to the artistic discourse. Later, I shifted to dealing more in the moment. I wanted to make work that was more realistic and less oneiric, less evocative.

If I look at the sculpture of Jeff Koons, like *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, and I think that if I'm capable of putting in my videos the people that Jeff Koons uses as subjects in his sculpture — or the contemporary equivalent in terms of the amount of media curiosity they generate — I'll be making an interesting social study.

**Who do you have in mind?**

Right now I would do a project with Zac Efron if I could. I am fascinated by youth culture, by all these movies I would never go watch. I open up these magazines and I don't know who these people are, but clearly they generate an insane interest, which feeds my curiosity.

In the end it's all about making art, because making art, being an artist, is about creating an aura about things that don't have one or creating an aura around your persona that then enables you to push boundaries or make different types of dreams on behalf of other people. It's very natural for me that an artist is fascinated by big stars.

**What about your interest in advertisements? You've done a movie trailer, political ads, and now a perfume campaign.**

Well, I'm fascinated by propaganda. I never miss those exhibitions with the Russian posters from the '20s, and I love that room at MoMA with all the old movie posters. I love when commercial obsession gets translated into an artistic language.

**But do you see a difference between a trailer and a movie, between a political ad and an actual campaign?**

I think there is a difference between art and a real trailer, but I don't think there's any difference between a real trailer and a movie. The promotion of something and the something itself sometimes merge very dangerously, but that's world we live in.

**A lot of your work seems to reference artists: Pasolini, Pirandello, now Duchamp. We could put Gore Vidal into this category as well. People will say that you're obsessed with celebrities, but what about this other obsession, with artists of the past.**

Well, they were celebrities too, but we like to deny that. I think Pasolini and Gore Vidal have always used the media for their best interests and to make their best work. Pasolini was a movie director who worked with the celebrity actors of his day, sometimes for commercial purposes; and he was a celebrity himself. Some of his best writings were the editorials he wrote for the *Corriere della Sera* on the front page, which would be as if Gore Vidal — God would wish that on us — were writing editorials for the front page of the *New York Times*. I think that whatever great artist or thinker we look at, they've all used whatever weapon they might have to attract interest to their thoughts.

I don't see anything wrong with using celebrities to make clearer, more understandable statements or, in my case, simply to reflect a reality that has a huge power on our lives. I insist that the taboo surrounding my work comes from the fact that people get stuck on the presence of Gore Vidal or Cate Blanchett. I'm kind of stuck and surprised, too: I'm so surprised Polanski accepted. I thought this time maybe I was not going to be able to pull it off. I thought an actress might accept for vanity, although the ones I work with have way better job proposals than the ones I offered. But I thought: Polanski, why would he give a fuck about me? But he said yes.

**What was it like to work with him?**

A dream. He came to one of our meetings in this fake crocodile Ralph Lauren jewel box perfume promotional thing; he just got the ironic and critical aspect of the entire operation, and I think that's why he accepted. It was the easiest professional relationship ever. My job was to commission him to make the commercial, and his was to direct it in his eponymous and unmistakable style. The last thing I wanted to do was put my finger in it and try to make it more Vezzoli than Polanski.

**What is the role of humor in your work?**

It's the only strategy that I have. There are many contemporary artists who do so many great things, but there are very few who can really make you laugh. If you speak to movie producers they can tell you that you can make people cry with a couple of tricks, but to make people laugh is so hard. If I make them laugh, I win.

**What are you working on now?**

We're in the process of potentially remaking the Kinsey Report with the Prada Foundation. The trick would be to come up with a project that through artistic channels raises enough media curiosity so that the poll has a real scientific value. In the same way that the perfume commercial that Polanski did could easily be a real perfume commercial, even if it is a very wild and twisted and intellectual one, my dream with this Kinsey thing is that some serious scientists see real scientific evidence that they'll be surprised with. To achieve that is very complicated, but I think that would be the point of an art project like that. I believe that doing pale, low-tech imitations of high standards belongs to the past in terms of artistic practice.

**How concerned were you with the example of Duchamp as you conceived of Greed?**

It was very important. His perfume bottle is such a genius piece. And then it ends up in the hands of Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Berge — you can't imagine a more appropriate metaphor for the past century, you know, *Eau de Voilette* by Duchamp ends up in the hands of the two most sophisticated, gay, creative brains in France since the War; it's such a great story. The Duchamp perfume for me is unlike some of his objects — I know that this is dangerous to say, and people will think Vezzoli is taking some weird drugs — but compared to the urinal or other famous pieces, this has a kind of dandyish touch, a play with the vocabulary of fashion with Man Ray shooting him dressed like Rose Selavy. I love that. There's no real intellectual agenda. Just to say how much I loved that part of his work.

**I gather there is an actual Greed bottle.**

There is, right at the center of the gallery, and it looks like a very desirable sculpture, made in crystal.

**Is there anything inside it?**

We're discussing that right now. I want to put Scotch. Because it looks like piss.