

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ROME

Francesco Vezzoli GAGOSIAN ROME

Francesco Vezzoli's exhibitions are always a mix of high and low—apparently banal but in reality dense with sophisticated citations—or at least they have a knack for calling on the right references at the right moment. For “Greed, a New Fragrance by Francesco Vezzoli,” the large oval room of Gagosian Rome was converted into a luxury showroom, with an almost perfect transformation of the environment that recalled the installations of Guillaume Bijl. The walls were entirely draped in red velvet, and at the center of the gallery was an enormous perfume bottle, called *Greed, the Perfume That Doesn't Exist*, 2009—perhaps because the liquid in the bottle is actually whiskey. The flacon's format imitates the one used by Duchamp for his *Belle Haleine, eau de violette*, 1921, in which a photo by Man Ray, serving as a label, portrayed the artist as his feminine alter ego Rose Sélavy; here Vezzoli appears with his face feminized in a photo previously taken by Francesco Scavullo for a double male/female portrait. What interests Vezzoli specifically is Eros—the passionate and carnal element that underlies Duchamp's work as well as all the highbrow cultural forms Vezzoli adopts (art, literature, cinema). Ten large portraits hung on the draped walls—rectangles of aged damask cloth printed with images of Magritte-like clouds and photographs of ten artists—Tamara de Lempicka, Frida Kahlo, Tina Modotti, Georgia O'Keeffe, Meret Oppenheim, Louise Nevelson, Lee Miller, Niki de Saint Phalle, Leonor Fini, and Eva Hesse, all evoked through images by famous photographers. As in other works, Vezzoli has embroidered tears streaming from the eyes of each face, but this time some are formed by strings of colored beads and the like rather than thread: suffering sublimated into artistic creativity? Whatever the case, here the ten artists are treated as advertising testimonials; each artist has her name on one of the canvases, followed by the phrase FOR GREED, just as major brands juxtapose Hollywood stars with ad copy today.

This debasement of the avant-garde artist to perfume spokesperson corresponds to the spirit that animates the accompanying video, a would-be television commercial for the perfume, directed by Roman Polanski and starring Natalie Portman and Michelle Williams. Before reaching the large oval room, visitors encountered a screen in a gilded

frame, installed on a wall covered in black damask wallpaper. Polanski set the very brief video (just over a minute) in the suite of a luxury hotel in Paris. It shows the two women, who—without saying a word—stage another sort of debasement. To the sounds of Chopin, one sits fixing her hair, in front of a mirror, while the other embraces her (as friend? Sister? Lover?), but then smells a fragrance and opens a perfume bottle that sits on the dressing table. The first sternly removes her hand; an indecorous struggle quickly breaks out, and the two women fall to the floor, hitting each other, while behind them the artist retrieves the bottle that has fallen. Technically perfect, the commercial turns glamour into farce and chic into ham comedy.

Vezzoli communicates all this through the clever and uninhibited artistic use of mass media—its mechanisms and above

all its players, always chosen from among the best, seemingly unreachable figures conquered thanks to an avowed strategy of seduction. They say that Vezzoli is superficial; I say that he is the Balzac of our time, and that every work of his is a sociological essay, but without the boredom.

—Giorgio Verzotti

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

Francesco Vezzoli,
Enjoy the New
Fragrance (Tamara de
Lempicka for Greed),
2009. inkjet on
brocade; wool; cotton;
metallic embroidery;
and custom jewelry,
70 1/4 x 51 1/2 x 2".

