

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Scene & Herd

### Rose Sélavy's Baby

*Rome*

02.14.09



Left: Gagosian Rome director Pepi Marchetti Franchi and Roman Polanski. Right: Artist Francesco Vezzoli with Miuccia Prada. (Photos courtesy Gagosian Gallery)

**THE OPENING OF FRANCESCO VEZZOLI'S "GREED"** at the Gagosian gallery in Rome last Friday was inevitably a cause célèbre, drawing luminaries of the Italian art and fashion worlds along with a handful of international bigwigs. Dressed to the nines (and sometimes tens), the crowd crushed the entrance of the grand Neoclassical former bank, vying to enter as if it were the hottest club in town. Ladies perched on spike heels outside the door were saying into their mobiles, "Roman Polanski is arriving!" At the top of the stairs, attendees were greeted by a fake commercial, directed by none other than

Polanski himself, in which Natalie Portman and Michelle Williams engage in a burlesque fracas over a bottle of the fictional perfume *Greed*.

Clad entirely in red velvet curtains, the magnificent oval gallery space was a cross between a boudoir and a funeral parlor; the oversize crystal bottle of faux perfume sat encased in a glass box in the middle. The spectacle of the opening itself was a fitting complementary performance for the work. Famous female artists—Tamara de Lempicka, Eva Hesse, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Niki de Saint Phalle, among them—were conjured via a series of needlework portraits framed as perfume endorsements, their faces embroidered with tears, as in Vezzoli’s prior work. Presiding at the center of it all, Larry Gagosian regarded the perfume vitrine and gently teased architect Firouz Galdo about how much he had charged to design the glass case.

Some guests argued that the commercial for *Greed* paled in comparison with the camp excess of *Caligula*, Vezzoli’s star-studded trailer for a nonexistent remake of the 1979 film. But it inspired my Italian companions to reminisce about “*Cacao Meraviglioso*,” an ’80s song by Renzo Arbore that posed as a jingle for a nonexistent brand of Brazilian chocolate. One noted that he “personally preferred the scantily clad Brazilian dancers” to *Greed*’s starlets. Around this time, some trickster set off a stink bomb in the gallery, prompting speculation as to whether that was the true scent of the apocryphal perfume.



Left: Artist Luigi Ontani and Performa founder RoseLee Goldberg. (Photo: Cathryn Drake) Right: Garage Center for Contemporary Culture founder Dasha Zhukova. (Photo courtesy Gagosian Gallery)

Vezzoli has the sort of unstudied nonchalance that makes you feel, on first encounter, as though you have known him forever (perhaps accounting for his ability to seduce celebrities into participating in his projects). “There are five liters of scotch in the perfume bottle—enough to kill you,” he noted enigmatically. “My work is not for sale,” he added. His visage on the bottle in drag (taken, naturally, by Francesco Scavullo) is an homage to Duchamp’s 1921 *Belle Haleine, Eau de Voilette*, for which the artist famously posed as his female alter ego Rose Sélavy.

“It is not possible to judge it as art anymore,” observed curator Marcello Smarrelli, standing beneath a portrait of Frida Kahlo. “It exists in a completely self-referential system. That is what happens when art becomes business.” And what better place to fete the demise of the market—and the market’s enduring intersections with art—than Rome, the languishing former capital of an empire currently ruled by a prime minister who takes time off for plastic surgery and places attractive female friends on his TV shows and into ministerial positions?

The nineteenth-century Grand Hotel Plaza, a musty classic that appears in period films by Visconti and Zeffirelli, proved a suitably decadent backdrop for the dinner. Guests sauntered in through a palatial marble lobby, past an impressive version of the lion of Babylon descending the staircase and into the ballroom, decorated in Baroque church–*cum*–fin de siècle overkill. Players included Milan fashion royals such as Vezzoli’s friend and patron Miuccia Prada, as well as Margherita Missoni, Silvia Fendi, Beatrice Bulgari, and Byblos’s Masha Facchini.



Left: Collectors Emilio Re Rebaudengo and Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo. Right: Curator Alison Gingeras, dealer Lorcan O'Neill, and artist Piotr Uklanski. (Photos: Cathryn Drake)

Red was the primary palette there, too. In the dark corner of a side room adorned with ruby silk wallpaper, Gagosian dined at a table with Polanski, Prada, artist Piotr Uklanski, curator Alison Gingeras, and collector Dasha Zhukova. Others swarmed a buffet, where I spotted showgirl Alessia Marcuzzi, hostess of the Italian version of *Big Brother*. August curator Achille Bonito Oliva alighted from group to group while Danilo Eccher, the new director of Turin's GAM, and MACRO curator Claudia Gioia, former Red Brigade terrorist, lounged on a floral divan beneath naked stained-glass cherubim and gigantic crystal chandeliers. If you squinted a bit, you could pretend you were in Caesar's Palace in Vegas.

Toward midnight, Fiat heiress Ginevra Elkann and her fiancé, Giovanni conte Gaetani Dell'Aquila D'Aragona, could be spotted smiling and canoodling to one side of the ballroom. Fading from jet lag, Valentina Castellani, daughter of Turin's former mayor and a director of Gagosian in New York, sank into the upholstery next to *Panorama* magazine's Silvia Grilli and Castellani's counterpart at Gagosian Rome, Pepi Marchetti Franchi, and admitted how grateful she was that she had flown in on the dealer's private

jet. An understated Vezzoli mingled with the fashionable guests, and at night's end he gleefully flitted around the room handing out the following day's *International Herald Tribune* wrapped completely in a glossy fake advertisement for his perfume—the improvised pièce de résistance.

— Cathryn Drake