

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Artifacts | Francesco Vezzoli's Temple of Obsession

Culture

By LINDA YABLONSKY

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Robert McKeever, courtesy of Gagolian Gallery "Crying Portrait of Christie Brinkley As a Renaissance Madonna With Holy Child," 2010, by Francesco Vezzoli.

For his first solo show in a New York gallery, Francesco Vezzoli chose an apt title: "Sacrilégio." Its irreverence starts with his redesign of that gallery, the expansive Gagolian space on West 21st Street. It is now a stripped-down, dimly lit Gothic church

that is painted an Armani gray and is dedicated to a real Madonna, the source of Vezzoli's diva complex – his own mother.

Dressed as a nun, she appears in a video projected in a hushed alcove on the transept, singing to a young boy standing in for the artist. Actually, she is lip-syncing to “Dominique,” the 1963 hit by the Singing Nun (religion's first pop star), as recorded in Italian by Orietta Berti. It's funny but also somehow touching. The two figures stand in the landscape of a 15th-century painting by Pinturicchio, “Madonna With Writing Child.” In the original, the boy is holding a book. Here it is the embroidery hoop Vezzoli has used for his needlepoint-assisted photographs of crying pop stars.

Because the projection is behind a two-way mirror, the scene doesn't just amplify the artist's own self-absorption, but makes the viewer's voyeurism complicit in it as well. It's the highlight of the show, a stylized meditation on glamour and fame that never cuts quite as deep.

It does have a kind of narrative, however. In the apse of this temple of obsession is a faux stained-glass window, a light box where Vezzoli pictures himself standing on the seat of a Thonet chair dressed in saintly robes and holding a staff that is actually an elongated embroidery needle. The figure looks out to a white fake-marble Madonna whose face is that of a Barbie doll, the ultimate fashionista.

In each niche along the chapel nave hang appropriations, or rather apparitions, of Madonna-and-child paintings from the Italian Renaissance. But these digital prints on canvas have the faces of Christie Brinkley, Cindy Crawford, Naomi Campbell and other supermodels of the 1970s and '80s, the period of Vezzoli's own coming-of-age as an artist. Each sheds his signature embroidered tears, only here they double as Warholian thought bubbles sampling icons of Arte Povera and Pop. And each wears gobs of actual designer makeup. They are encased in gold-leaf frames that “melt” at the bottom, Dalí-style, as if they were crying too.

Even if contemporary art is our most fashion-conscious religion, not everyone will be amused by this absurdist display of “restrained camp,” as Vezzoli called the show at his opening last Saturday night. As a critique of the art world’s slavery to fashion — and its worship at the altar of Gagosian — it’s all rather superficial and obvious. It’s also quite personal to the artist, a Milanese conceptualist who has made a career of sticking it to art and celebrity worship while involving the art and celebrities he reveres himself.

Most of it is steeped in the icons of Italian culture. His output includes a movie trailer for a fictitious remake of Gore Vidal’s “Caligula” and a television commercial for “Greed,” a nostril-flaring perfume that does not exist, directed by Roman Polanski. At other times, Catherine Deneuve, Veruschka and Lauren Bacall have succumbed to his persuasion. In 2007 he staged a reading of Luigi Pirandello’s “Right You Are When You Think You Are” at the Guggenheim Museum, where Cate Blanchett, Ellen Burstyn and Elaine Stritch were among its stars and Anita Ekberg was the presiding eminence. Despite the presence of other celebrities in the audience (Uma Thurman, Salmon Rushdie, Lou Reed, Marion Cotillard), the event was most memorable for the outrage its tedium caused. The real performance took place on the faces in that audience. In that regard, it was a big success.

In 2009, he topped himself by bringing members of the Bolshoi Ballet to join him and Lady Gaga onstage for a surreal musical evening benefiting the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. “After Gaga,” he said the other day, “I felt there was nothing much left to explore about celebrity.” So he returned to his fascination with female identity, embodied by his mother, who is a doctor.

“The real sacrilege of the exhibition is not the fashion model or the Madonna,” he said. “It’s more challenging to discuss motherhood, or an obsession with your own mother, in a Chelsea gallery. I haven’t seen any other representation of the artist and his mother in a long time,” he added, referring to Arshile Gorky’s famous painting of that subject, a particular inspiration.

It took Gorky from 1926 to 1936 to finish the painting, which hangs in the Whitney Museum and is a powerful picture of loss. (Gorky's mother died when he was a teenager.) Vezzoli's labor of love is about origins, not death, but his church still feels like a crypt for the relics of a fantasy that is definitely not at rest.

Francesco Vezzoli's "Sacilegio" continues through March 12 at Gagosian Gallery, 522 West 21st Street.