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Interview: Francesco Vezzoli Talks the Second of His Three-Part “Trinity” Exhibition Series at MOCA Los Angeles

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Image via MOCA Los Angeles / Francesco Vezzoli Death in Venice, CA (2008)

“All of a sudden, it all exploded, and I feel I was hit by a tornado,” the artist Francesco Vezzoli told *The New York Times* last year, when he was told that “The Church of Vezzoli,” the third exhibition in his “Trinity” retrospective series, could no longer happen as planned at MoMA PS1. In an attempt to export a deconstructed church from Italy, he learned that he was under criminal investigation.

After a successful first “Galleria Vezzoli” exhibition at MAXXI in Rome last year, he opened “Cinema Vezzoli” at MOCA Los Angeles in April of this year (runs through August 11). The retrospective view of his work continues with his early framed, embroidered star portraits, fabricated film posters, and finally, his many films over the years. He has starred in these films with an array of celebrities, adapting the drama of old '50s cinema into contemporary life.

It's no coincidence that many of his celebrity portraits have embroidered tears. Heightened, sentimental emotion runs throughout Vezzoli's work, and the drama surrounding “The Church of Vezzoli” contributes almost serendipitously to the narrative.

We interviewed Francesco Vezzoli about all three parts of the “Trinity” and whether or not “The Church of Vezzoli” will see the light of day, after all.

What did you learn from looking back at your early work for this exhibition? It seems like you've come full circle, in a way, since you have a long history with MOCA and had your first solo exhibition in Beverly Hills.

I've learned that maybe I'm too superficial? [*Laughs*] My interest in cinema has been present since the beginning. My mother remembers that I used to watch *Magnificent Obsession* by Douglas Sirk when I was five years old, and I loved it. I was obsessed with that movie.

I've always been fascinated with public identity and celebrity. By looking back at all of the works, I've learned that my approach has changed after working for so long with so many actors. Also, the types of works have changed, and you can see that in the exhibition.

My relationship with celebrities and celebrity cultures shifted, which is normal. In the beginning it started with fear and desire. After getting closer and closer to the source of fascination, the mystery vanishes a little bit. It was part of the course I intended to engage in. The first works were homages [to celebrities], then there was more interaction, and now there's more courage. On a formal level it's harder for me to say. I leave that to the critics.

When was the first time you ever came to Los Angeles?

Actually, it was the first trip I ever took alone. I was just barely 18, and I was still in high school. I still had one year of high school left, and it was the first place I wanted to visit, so I asked my parents. L.A. and I go back a long time.

Have the impressions and observations you had during that first trip directly informed your work?

Usually, but strangely enough, it was more for the art than for the cinema. I could see cinema in Italy. I went to MOCA, and I saw this great show called "A Forest Of Signs" that had a gigantic impact on my perception of contemporary art. I'll never forget it. It was the first time I saw Jenny Holzer's work, and I was really blown away.

How has your fascination with famous women and what people have termed "diva iconography" changed throughout your practice? The privacies people used to have really don't exist anymore.

I don't have much to add besides what he already have right in front of our eyes. We all know that mystery creates desire, and the lack of mystery kills desire. We inhabit a historical moment, where we believe in the lack of mystery. It's not the choice of the divas, it's the moment of social media.

As a non-diva, I'm not necessarily against it. I'm just saying that the entire system of diva and mystery, it's about change. We have to see if all this common and public knowledge we have of other people's lives will change our sexual desires, our emotional desires, and our compulsion to follow and be curious about someone else's life.

Do reality stars intrigue you as much as the more traditional idea of a celebrity?

They intrigue me to watch, but I would never discuss them in my work. I think it's kind of late. I've done what I had to do on this topic. If I were to propose Kim Kardashian for a project right now, I would feel out of place. I respect her, I've got nothing bad to say about her, but I don't think it would be appropriate for me.

There are so many different forms of fame taking place on the Internet alone, not including reality television. There are animal celebrities, YouTube celebrities, and even butt selfie celebrities. Are you interested in this?

I'm actually looking at the new cover of *New York Magazine* that features all of these self-made stars of the Internet. I mean, it's fascinating. I look at all of these pictures and ask myself, "So what is the point?" I'm sure there are new types of managers and agents. They're going to find ways to create lucrative situations around these characters. In Italy there are some fashion bloggers who have gained international reputations, and then they cash in like all people who are apart of commercial systems do.

It's interesting to see how all of this will unfold with new types of players who have new types of knowledge. The kind of publicists who can land you the cover of *Vogue* may not be able to land you the opening page of *NOWNESS.com*. It's just a shift. I don't think of it so much as a moral, cultural, or philosophical shift, because fame, success, and power is always the final goal.

I guess only the media has changed. Media means medium, which means the in-between. If you go to the lexical root of the word itself, the medium is not the matter. In this case, the medium is just the medium.

Yeah, it's fascinating, but it's not revolutionary.

In looking at all of your work for *Cinema Vezzoli*, I wonder—do you see yourself as creating another world with these films and advertisements, maybe one where desire and pain exist in exaggeration?

No, I don't think I've ever tried to create a new place. My ambition has been to reflect the world as it is—what it wasn't and what it will be. I hope my work still retains some interest in the future.

My work can survive because it captures the desires of visibility and success. Morally speaking, you're always in the same position. You want to be looked at, you want to be famous, you want to make money out of your visibility. These are not new feelings. These are not new ideas. I'm not critical of it, I'm just saying history almost always repeats itself. So we have to be careful in branding the new "something" that is just a reinvention of the old.

Exactly. How have you chosen to engage with your own celebrity? One of the most striking pieces in *Cinema Vezzoli* is the *True Hollywood Story* (2006) that dramatically expresses the story of your theoretical "rise" and "fall."

The *True Hollywood Story* is about objective decency and the possibility of me reaching the actress versus the reality of reaching the actress. The mystery diminished, so I started doing this. I worked with Jessica Chastain, and I think she's amazing. I am in awe of her acting, but the way we related to each other was very friendly. I wasn't afraid of her or terrified. I related to her the way I would have related to Cindy Sherman. Like, "You're a great artist, you're a great thinker, you're a great doer. I'm not fascinated by you because of how crazy or mysterious you are."

Did you ever hesitate to include yourself in your films?

I always hesitated, because I hate seeing myself on video. I hate seeing myself in photographs. I am very insecure. I don't find myself pretty at all. I always see the flaws. Critics pushed me to do so, and rightfully so. I think it becomes my art only if I am present. Otherwise it could be confused with something else.

At a time when people are fascinated with 3D printing and other forms of duplication, do you think that people still value handmade objects, such as your intricate, unique embroidery? Do you think people value it more? Do *you* value it more?

I do value it more for a very basic reason. Something that is unique is unique. We are competing in a world of uniqueness and excellence. But I'm not a market star, so that kind of proves me wrong. I'm not complaining about my position, but I'm not a big market artist. Unless reality is your statement, as was the case for Warhol, then doing something serial is your uniqueness; it is your novelty.

For The Trinity of exhibitions so far, you've said that you didn't want to repeat the same exhibition in three different places. How does the more introspective and digital part of "Galleria Vezzoli" relate to "Cinema Vezzoli," and ultimately, how do you hope to connect these to the "The Church of Vezzoli" coming to MoMA PS1?

They will connect by sharing different topics. The videos at "Galleria Vezzoli" were played in very, very small monitors in the hands of huge, fake marble sculptures. In "Cinema Vezzoli," there are gigantic projections that take over almost half of the exhibition, including dozens of chairs. They are diametrically opposite. The way viewers will see video may not be the same in the "The Church of Vezzoli," because it's all presented in very different, bold, and beautiful ways. To create a narrative, I try putting one thing in, taking one thing out, and mixing the cards continuously. It's the only way to make this traveling exhibition more interesting today.

Are you allowed to share the status of bringing the church to PS1? Where do you think the misunderstanding lies with being able to bring it from Italy to New York?

I should always double-check with my lawyer, because I'm still under criminal investigation. All I can say is that when we deconstructed those ruins [of the church], they were not under anyone's protection. We had permission. Then, the government decided to put it under protection, but only after we did it. So I'm not accused of destruction. Basically, I've been accused of attempted illegal export. Since I am an artist who imports and exports all over the world constantly, it's kind of surreal.

Basically, it all stems from the fact that it's such a publicized project. It wasn't publicized by me, but it became publicized because it made people curious. Some found it very unexpected and weird, and that raises controversy. I trust that when they read all of the papers and study how it all went, they will understand that it was all bona fide.

Will the exhibition take place regardless?

Yes, it will.

Currently where do call home, are you constantly traveling?

No, my life changed a lot. I was a constant traveler. I was living out of a suitcase for 20 years. Now, I've relocated in Milan to be closer to my roots. I'm happier here at this moment in my life. It doesn't mean I'm getting older. I'm more eager to study my roots than to study abroad. Now I'm looking more inside than outside.