

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Los Angeles Times

Review: Surveying Francesco Vezzoli's shrewd, movie-mad work at MOCA

Christopher Knight



An image of Katharine Hepburn is part of a nod to Hollywood's Walk of Fame. (MOCA /April 23, 2014)

A typical video by Francesco Vezzoli is a veritable cavalcade of stars, mostly female — Helen Mirren, Natalie Portman, Catherine Deneuve, Eva Mendez, Milla Jovovich, Michelle Williams, Lauren Bacall and many more, plus a few men (Helmut Berger, Benicio Del Toro) — whose movies have referred to art (“Dorian Gray,” “Basquiat”). Detractors of the often-controversial work complain that, celebrity-wise, it’s all just too much — as if the gross excess had not occurred to the artist.

Well, it is all too much. And we should be glad for that.

“Cinema Vezzoli,” the modest survey of movie-mad work by the Milan-based artist newly opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, begins with a nod to Hollywood’s Walk of Fame. Photo-portraits related to the 1959 Southern Gothic potboiler “Suddenly, Last Summer” hang on the wall in gilded, star-shaped frames.

Looks can be deceiving. This work is no empty celebrity gush, even though the star chart starts out that way.

There’s Katharine Hepburn, cast as wealthy New Orleans socialite Violet Venable. Her handsome son Sebastian was mysteriously murdered on summer holiday in Europe.

Hanging nearby is Montgomery Clift, the neurosurgeon dealing with the tortured aftermath of the death. Sebastian, an artist who is never seen, was a closeted homosexual with a secret penchant for hiring straight boys as sex partners.

Then there's Rita Webb, an uncredited extra (her face did not register, so I had to look her up). Her atmospheric role was as a raving insane-asylum patient. Vezzoli's celebrity web suddenly begins to stretch, snaring strangers.

Soon, it also warps.

Elizabeth Taylor, Violet's emotionally unstable niece, is not shown. At least, not directly. Instead, the actress' cloyingly fluffy, little white dog happily occupies a star.

So does Spencer Tracy, who wasn't even in the movie. But he did carry on a long extramarital affair with Hepburn — an open secret in Hollywood, not unlike Clift's own closeted homosexuality (also claimed of both Hepburn and Tracy). The movie's romanticized story line starts to blur into actual life.

Fiction and reality commingle — not by accident, but by Vezzoli's slyly orchestrated design. Take little Fido. An age-old artistic symbol for feminine marital fidelity is absurdly funny as a stand-in for Taylor, the much-married tabloid favorite.

Finally, a close look at all these portraits reveals that they have been photographically reproduced on embroidery fabric — embroidery, as in embellished storytelling. Scandal-marked Hester Prynne, who used her sought-after skills with needlework to survive society's expulsion for her transgression of adultery, lurks in the work's conceptual history.

Vezzoli ornaments each picture with glittery red, white and blue thread, stitching tears that stream from the wretched celebrities' eyes. Blood trickles from their noses, as if they've been pummeled.

Vezzoli has said that the baroque spectacle of modern media strategy is a primary focus of his art. (Think of that next time you see the canine accessory of a Chihuahua being toted around by Paris Hilton, whose feeble celebrity rests on a homemade pornographic sextape.) As a subject, outlandish media machinery makes some critics, especially in cloistered New York, suspicious or even dismissive of his work.

That's a mistake. Waving off this art with the most common (and banal) insult of decadence is instead emblematic of critical projection. It reminds me of the foolish misreading once heaped on Edward Ruscha's paintings of L.A. gas stations and the Hollywood sign, dismissed as kitsch graphic design.

Vezzoli's Walk of Fame is a path strewn with tragic muses — and what could be more artistically venerable than that? They join a long parade of distinguished forebears.

In 1784, Joshua Reynolds painted renowned British actress Sarah Siddons as "The Tragic Muse," a famous canvas housed at San Marino's Huntington Library. Reynolds' bravura brushwork, all piled into a burnished mound of theatrically applied paint, is as much a dramatic performance as any role Siddons ever played.

A century later, Rodin cast a tragic muse in enduring bronze. The nearly abstract head has been described as the most drastic reformation of the subject in Western art since the Middle Ages. A

mass of compressed bumps and torqued ridges, the sculpture wages serious war on art as an imitation of nature.

Picasso got in on the tragic act in the 1930s. His “Weeping Woman” series was built around an autobiographical legacy of tumultuous relationships with wives and mistresses — not to mention the Pietà-like composition of dead child and wailing mother immortalized in “Guernica.”

Thirty years later, in the immediate aftermath of Marilyn Monroe’s suicide, Andy Warhol transformed her into a tragic muse. Ditto Jackie Kennedy, brutally widowed. Revered New York School painters of the 1950s such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman touted “the tragic and the timeless” as art’s most profound subject, so Warhol gave them what they wanted.

Finally, in the 1980s Marlene Dumas painted women battered and bruised. They strip the esteemed subject of any romantic glow, while slipping into an autobiographical feminist mode in our gender-conflicted society.

For his part, Vezzoli frames the tragic muse from a decidedly queer perspective. (After all, “Suddenly, Last Summer” was from a script by Gore Vidal after a Tennessee Williams play.) His extravagant theatricality is Post-Camp.

The work is often compared to the 1980s commodity fetishism of sculptors like Jeff Koons, Ashley Bickerton and Haim Steinbach, who typically find the commercial objects of their fascination on department store shelves. Historical ballast comes from Marcel Duchamp, who seized on the burgeoning phenomenon of mass-culture a century ago, back when it was new.

More important, I think, is Cindy Sherman. The Conceptual photographer enacted a media-made litany of restrictive roles of American femininity in her “Untitled Film Stills” (1977-1980), begun a few years after Vezzoli was born. He enters similarly fractious territory, albeit from a queer angle pointedly seen from abroad.

MOCA’s exhibition includes big posters for made-up movies costarring actors and artists — notably Marlene Dietrich, a stunning movie star, and Anni Albers, a homely genius known for functionally unique textiles. German contemporaries, their relationship to industrial mass-culture smashes Paramount into the Bauhaus.

Two huge tapestries (Le Corbusier called such things “nomadic murals”) replicate movie screens. And five jaw-dropping videos, often acerbic, steal disconcertingly poignant scenarios from movies and TV.

Building a mock movie theater inside an art gallery, as MOCA has, is far smarter than the usual museum strategy, which is to show films and videos as if they are ersatz paintings and sculptures — projected on blank walls or on monitors atop pedestals or on the floor. But a museum gallery, all hard surfaces, does need acoustical padding, which is absent here. Vezzoli’s sound is often annoyingly muddled.

There’s a spot for a fake new fragrance called Greed (Roman Polanski directs, echoing Erich von Stroheim). A lavish movie trailer touts a nonexistent remake of 1979’s epic flop, “Caligula” (a tragedy in Hollywood as it was in Rome). Vezzoli’s own autobiography is screened (assembled as a tawdry, gossip-filled video collage in the manner of an “E! True Hollywood Story”).

And more — always more. Florid and grotesque, the videos are cheerfully nauseating — and a welcome respite from the humdrum tragedy of modern life.