

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



true faith

INTERVIEW TRICIA JONES AND DEAN MAYO DAVIES
ARTWORK FRANCESCO VEZZOLI



Francesco Vezzoli is the Italian artist who trumps celebrity by elevating his icons – actors, singers, models and beyond – to even loftier heights.

Left: *Crying Portrait of Wilhelmina as a Renaissance Madonna with Holy Child (after Leonardo)*, 2010.
Right: *Crying Portrait of Kim Alexis as a Renaissance Madonna with Holy Child (after Giovanni Bellini)*, 2010.

FRANCESCO VEZZOLI's art is fascinated with pop icons. Michelle Williams and Natalie Portman, directed by Roman Polanski, fight over fictitious perfume 'Greed' (which features Vezzoli in drag as Marcel Duchamp on the bottle). Sharon Stone is cast as a fictional presidential candidate and Catherine Deneuve and Jeanne Moreau are bachelorettes on a *Blind Date*-type gameshow. All video works by the artist grab attention from the highest brow to the nower-than-now gossip column. Vezzoli is a fan first of all, let it be said. He makes the most charged artworks from a pure, heartfelt place. His art is where fantasies come true, glamorous, glorious and even a touch ridiculous; romantic, dramatic and melancholic, embedding itself both in the media and the gallery simultaneously. He is one of the most contemporary figures practicing today, stitching together showbusiness, politics, culture and mass consciousness effortlessly – try tweeting that in 140 characters. Yet beyond bold video or performance, it's the humble needlepoint that's his current medium of choice, a craft Vezzoli first started exploring whilst studying at Central Saint Martins. Inspired by i-D,

The Face and London club culture, Vezzoli moved from his native Italy to the capital to study as a teen. Today, Vezzoli is based in Milan and still works on all his needlepoints himself, "even when they are very elaborate," he tells i-D over the telephone from Paris. "For me, needlework is a very ironic, paradoxical, parallel to painting, that's why I have chosen it. You can call it 'paradoxical painting.'" As a child, Vezzoli's parents displayed "very serious art" on their walls. "Bauhaus, Joseph Beuys and conceptual art from the 60s," he explains. "That, for me, was the art of my parents, which is why I am much more fascinated with pop icons. That is why I wanted to work with Lady Gaga. You can see the rebellion." For his first solo exhibition at the Gagolian Gallery in New York, Vezzoli has transformed the gallery space into a Renaissance chapel, complete with enlarged reinterpretations of fifteenth and sixteenth century Madonna and Child paintings by artists such as Giovanni Bellini, Leonardo da Vinci and Sandro Botticelli. Instead of beatific Madonnas, Vezzoli's women are the world's leading supermodels. We caught up with the artist to find out more.

DEAN MAYO DAVIES: Tell us about *Sacrilegio*?

FRANCESCO VEZZOLI: The gallery in Chelsea is not only one of the most amazing spaces but also very culturally charged – they normally host really dream-like exhibitions, so I'm finding myself sandwiched between the Rauschenberg retrospective and the Picasso show, museum level exhibits. I felt very intimidated when I received a proposal to work in that place. I've been thinking about this gallery, how it's kind of the cathedral of Chelsea, the art quarter of New York. What better thing for a formerly Catholic young kid to provoke and turn the whole place into a real cathedral of art? That is what we are doing with the help of this great architect Annabelle Selldorf. We're forming a big chapel – or a medium sized cathedral – and filling it with fifteenth century Madonna and Child painting re-interpretations.

It sounds like your most ambitious project yet... It could be tricky. Some people could be offended because I put the faces of 80s supermodels onto Renaissance paintings. A supermodel may be horrified of being turned into a holy figure. Some people will find the whole religious theme complicated and maybe too daring. Furthermore, in one private chapel, I'm putting a video portrait of my mother as a Madonna with an embroidering child. I wanted to go full-circle and use my own mother as the ultimate and most personal reference.

Who are the supermodels you've depicted? One has the face of Cindy Crawford, one Claudia Schiffer, one Tatjana Patitz. Don't tell me you're too young to know them? [Laughs]. Tatjana, Claudia Schiffer, Cindy Crawford, Christie Brinkley, Linda Evangelista. We're finishing one now with Stephanie Seymour, you get the picture.

Is this the first time your mother has appeared in your work? After working for so many months on this idea of motherhood and religion, I was really compelled. The last icon I worked on was Lady Gaga [for the 30th anniversary of the MoCA gala, Los Angeles, 2009. Pictured in i-D's *Flesh and Blood* Issue, No. 304, Winter 2009]. She became one of the most relevant human beings and public figures in the world and I felt like there was no other icon I could request the participation of who could be more symbolic. So I thought, 'If you can't go any higher, then you should go deeper, back to your most intimate feelings.' That's when I made that casting call for my mum.

You've taught art fans a lot about Italian pop icons over the years, people not put on a pedestal outside of your homeland. Well, they were the people that, to a certain extent, inhabited my childhood. They inspired me in the beginning. It's endearing to know that when I did it, it was a form of provocation. I was embroidering the face of the local Cilla Black or even the local Twiggy or the Italian Marianne Faithfull. It was a form of cultural provocation towards the artistic establishment and now it's more of a momento. It's sweet.

I'm impressed you can reference Cilla Black and Samantha Fox. I studied in London and I was a big fan of London culture, I know much more than that!

Do you think Italians make good icons because of their inherent passion? We know about drama, we believe in melodrama, we invented glamour, so those are elements that can operate in the creation of an icon. For the next century, I don't know what the new icons are going to be like. If they are like Lady Gaga, that still involves drama, melodrama and passion – she has Italian roots doesn't she?

TRICIA JONES: If you had to put together 'your gang' who would be in it?

FRANCESCO VEZZOLI: Definitely my mother. Luca who was at school with me when we were fourteen and has remained my right arm forever. We have been working together for twenty years. I think it is very important to have people in your professional team that have known you from day one. It brings every crazy experience that can get to your head down to a level of 'oh that famous actor reminds me of that weird maths professor we had.' Everything becomes easier and human. My friend Gioele, who is an architect, has been helping me professionally and then all my friends who have been working with me for a very long time – as an artist I can't really separate friends from my job because I consider work sharing my ideas with them. Last but not least, Miuccia Prada. She is always there for me.

What does age mean to you? Does getting old matter? Strangely enough if you look at my earlier work, age meant fascination. I was always fascinated by older people, by older actresses or intellectuals because they all embodied universal values and sensibilities that I wanted to attach myself to. Oddly enough now, I am very obsessed by youth, maybe because I am losing mine. In my life, I've had and I still have many friends who are older than me, who I treasure. I now feel the need to have friends who are younger than me because I really want to understand the future. I'm really fascinated by talking to younger people and understanding their value system, so at the moment my relationship with age is quite conflictual.

What was it like working with your mother? My art is a tool through which I make things that bring joy to me and try to go further with my political and cultural analysis. But an artist must also talk about himself in the most honest and disarming way. When I relate to my mother in my art maybe I reveal something more about myself than I could even desire. It's very private, you know. It's easier to speak about Lady Gaga and Cate Blanchett but to involve your mother so directly can be really intimate.

What about your relationship with your father? He's a very shy man. He never comes to my openings because he gets wet eyes. I come from a very sensitive family. My father is a very serious man in his profession but when it comes to me, he gets all emotional so we are a disastrously sensitive bunch of people.

But you're very close to him? We are all very close to each other. I've been raised by my grandmothers, to whom a lot of my early work is dedicated. And now I felt the need to put my real mother into my work. It's an endless homage to how the female universe has occupied my life. Inevitably I am very fascinated and I have a great dialogue with women that have the power or fight for their identity. I find that very exciting.

How would you spend an ideal day? For once, I am discovering nature. Last month I had my first week off in years. I went to a seaside in a wonderful place and I discovered nature: it was so peaceful. I felt like, 'Is this too bourgeois? Am I being too spoiled? Am I like some stupid Hollywood guy?' I didn't care, I only wanted to enjoy it. In the past my ideal day would have been staying in a hotel room watching Italian television and eating french fries. Now I would choose a holiday on a beautiful beach. But only once or twice a year.

gagolian.com

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