

DIARY

DIVINE COMEDY

December 24, 2017 • Naples • Cathryn Drake



Artists Maria Thereza Alves and Jimmie Durham with MADRE director Andrea Viliani.

ARRIVING IN NAPLES for the late-November opening of “Pompei@Madre: *Materia Archeologica*,” curated by Massimo Osanna, director of the Pompeii Archaeological Park, and Andrea Viliani, director of the Museo d’Arte Contemporanea Donnaregina (Museo MADRE),

I hit the ground running and did not stop before hopping the northbound train for Rome a few days later.

The official opening was attended by a number of politicians, including Dario Franceschini, the minister of culture, who declared it the best show of the year. Juxtaposing pieces from the permanent collection and artworks by Betty Woodman, Mark Dion, Laure Prouvost, Roberto Cuoghi, and Adrián Villar Rojas, among others, with antiquities and relics from the archaeological sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum, the exhibition beautifully conveys the palpable past that infuses contemporary Neapolitan life. Casts of the forms of a Pompeian mother and child preserved by volcanic ash at the moment of death, displayed together with Mimmo Paladino's ghostly female figure facing a wall animated by graffiti, caused visitors to gasp and stop in their tracks. A black-and-white mosaic of dolphins and swimmers, whose subjects seem as fresh as ever, is displayed opposite a gigantic anchor by the late Jannis Kounellis, to whom the show is dedicated. Andy Warhol's iconic Pop portrayal of an explosive Mount Vesuvius resides with incandescent Romantic paintings.



Left: Collectors Raffaella Sciarretta, Maurizio Morra Greco, and Stefano Sciarretta. Right: Collector and shoe designer Ernesto Esposito, artist Ricardo Passaporte, and dealer Francesco Annarumma.

When Viliani took the helm of the museum five years ago, it had been largely dormant in the wake of an economic crisis and left with a very small permanent collection. Since then, he has collaborated with local artists, galleries, and foundations such as Fondazione Morra Greco, Fondazione Morra, and Laura Trisorio's Artecinema festival, as well as several foreign institutions, to mount exhibitions and grow the collection. The legendary history of the

Neapolitan contemporary art scene, which began in the 1960s with the activities of Marcello and Lia Rumma, Lucio Amelio, and Pasquale Trisorio, can already be traced in the MADRE's collection. Credited for introducing Warhol and Joseph Beuys, Amelio and Trisorio invited artists such as Kounellis, Robert Rauschenberg, Sol LeWitt, and Cy Twombly to stay on the island of Capri.

The 1968 show “Arte Povera + Azioni Povere,” organized in nearby Amalfi by Marcello Rumma and curated by Germano Celant, birthed a new movement. While there has been a near exodus of Neapolitan galleries to Milan following Rumma's lead in opening a second space, it is really the terrific Neapolitan collectors and private foundations that fuel the prodigious local passion for contemporary art and current production. As ever, foreigners are drawn to the city's intoxicating vitality: In January, London's Thomas Dane Gallery will open an exhibition and residency space in the palatial Casa Ruffo, and artists Jimmie Durham and Maria Thereza Alves have moved into a former cloister, Lanificio Borbonico, where they run an artist residency and workshops as part of a collective.



Left: Fondazione Morra Greco's Alessia Volpe and Maurizio Morra Greco at Europeo di Mattozzi. Right: Fondazione Prada's Chiara Costa and Andrea Goffo with Fondazione Morra's Raffaella Morra and Claudio Catanese.

The weekend festivities kicked off with the opening of Delia Gonzalez's “The Last Days of Pompeii” at Galleria Fonti, a show that compresses the city's opulent decadence in a pithy geometric lexicon accompanied by the throbbing clubby electronic sound track “Vesuvius.” “Everyone here lives life to the fullest, knowing that Vesuvius could explode at any time,” said the artist, bathed in pink neon light. A short walk away at Studio Trisorio, in the posh Chiaia

district, Francesco Arena was inaugurating the show “Passaggio,” where bronze sculptures reflecting various measurements of the artist’s body and movements reduces life’s essence to sculptural geometry. Everyone reconvened at Laura and Lucia Trisorio’s home atop the labyrinthine Palazzo Aselmayer. The decadent facades of Neapolitan palazzi very often conceal splendid residences and verdant courtyards. Afterward, Anna Cuomo and I made it to artist Paul Thorel’s dinner in honor of Gonzalez at his palatial quarters—the fireplace is adorned with a Giacometti bust of his mother—in time for dessert and yet another stupendous view.

The next day we dodged the crowds of Spaccanapoli and arrived at Alfonso Artiaco Gallery to see Glen Rubsamen’s Los Angeles paintings, and then crossed the courtyard to Galleria Tiziana di Caro for an exhibition of stunning 1970s geometric collages by Betty Danon. Down in Chiaia, the Annarumma gallery was showing street artist Riccardo Passaporte’s spray-painted canvases treating the myopia of consumerism through the Tesco brand. Finally we made it to Umberto di Marino for Venezuelan artist Eugenio Espinoza’s “Unlocking Something,” a series of distorted black-and-white grids that depict the spatial repression of modernist strictures and structures. From there we went to Galleria Lia Rumma for the opening of Gian Maria Tosatti’s “Damasa,” conceived as a spiritual home for writer Anna Maria Ortese and introduced by a hallway with furniture covered in ashes, the sculpture of half a loaf of bread on a table recalling the petrified Pompeian food at the MADRE. Later, Rumma hosted dinner at her residence in the legendary Palazzo Donn’Anna, jutting out over the sea on the Rocks of the Siren, where we mingled amid the Kiefers, the Kosuths, and the Kentridges. “Naples is the whole world,” said Tosatti, who just bought a place in the city.



Left: Dealer Francesca Minini and artists Delia Gonzalez and Haris Epaminonda. Right: Dealer Laura Trisorio, collector Gianfranco D'Amato, and curator and MADRE VP Laura Cherubini.

The raucous church bells on Sunday morning could have awoken the dead, but I was occupied by more mundane endeavors: a luncheon on the Vigna di San Martino—with a panoramic view of the city and the sea—hosted by the fantastic collectors Peppe Morra and Teresa Carnevale, with Raffaella Morra, Chiara Costa, and Andrea Goffo of Fondazione Prada, and artists Christoph Büchel and Ina Otzko. Hermann Nitsch has performed on the vineyard, most recently in 2010; Morra first organized one of his “actions” in 1974, when, according to the artist’s diary, the police tried to halt the performance and Morra resisted as the proceedings escalated to riotous proportions. Fondazione Morra recently restored the colossal Palazzo Ayerbo D’Aragona Cassano to showcase its collection of more than two thousand works—including pieces by John Cage, Shozo Shimamoto, Allan Kaprow, and Julian Beck, and the archives of the Living Theatre—in a planned one-hundred-year exhibition program. “Peppe is keeping the feeling of the 1960s and 1970s alive,” Cuomo said. Certainly Nitsch and Naples are a match made in heaven: The blood-splattered mock crucifixion rituals enacted by the Austrian artist correspond with the Neapolitan rite of the blood of San Gennaro, where the liquefaction of the saint’s relic augurs another year of safety under the volcano.



Left: Artist Mariangela Levita and curator Adriana Rispoli. Right: Artist Francesco Arena and collector Lucia Trisorio.

On my last day I traveled through thousands of years on foot. Along with Herculaneum, Pompeii must be the most vivid archaeological site anywhere, conveying in frescos, advertisements, and graffiti found in brothels, baths, and taverns how little humanity has

changed. I arrived at the Museo di Capodimonte, a stupendous collection of masterpieces ranging from the thirteenth century to the present (the most recent being John Armleder’s site-specific mural *Split!*) housed in a former royal palace built by the Bourbon monarch in the eighteenth century. Over pasta at a local family trattoria, museum director Sylvain Bellenger recounted the adventures of reorganizing the institution and its three-hundred-acre park since his arrival two years ago. “The Neapolitans are very creative and always have been,” Bellenger said. “An exhibition that would take three years to organize in Chicago can be done here in eight months.” He has already whipped the unruly estate into shape, creating an official football field for local kids and winning public cooperation as well as a national award of excellence for garden design.

There is nothing quiet about Naples, where divine and demonic coexist. It is a city that you either love or hate, as Naples trades the energy it takes to navigate its exuberant chaos for inspiration and belief in miracles. Take, for example, Roberto Rossellini’s 1954 film *Journey to Italy*, where a couple on the verge of divorce gets caught up in a religious procession: “How can they believe in that? They’re like a bunch of children,” the husband says. “Children are happy,” replies the wife. After she is nearly swept away by the rapturous crowd, they hug and declare their love for each other—an act of unremitting faith.



Left: Pompeii mother and child shown at MADRE. Right: View of Mount Vesuvius from the Vigna di San Martino.

— Cathryn Drake