Friends in High Places

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THE LATEST NEW YORK INVASION of Rome took the form of “Three Amigos,” a suite of solo shows by Dan Colen, Nate Lowman, and Dash Snow at three local venues, the Palazzo Rospigliosi, the American Academy in Rome, and MACRO, respectively. The brat pack is hardly new to the Roman scene: They all participated in the Depart Foundation’s irrepressible “New York Minute” survey two years ago (back when six-figure auction records for these artists were an exception rather than the norm). The trilogy opened on the heels of Lisson’s inauguration of a new space in Milan, which took cues from two prior Anglo-Saxon launches in Rome, by Lorcan O’Neill and Larry Gagosian. Perhaps the hermetic Italian art world is finally opening up: Following the efforts of dealers like Francesca Kaufmann and Pasquale Leccese, the initiative also signals a rise in cooperation among art galleries and institutions in different Italian cities.

Always preferring to lead the fray, Gagosian kicked off the whole brouhaha with its own Colen show, titled “Trash.” A typical opening in the elegant oval salon is like a posh private party, populated by a strange brew of local artists, curators, and dealers peppered with the Roman mondana. Monday’s reception was also a fashion clash: The American artists and their assistants in plaid shirts and jeans, accompanied by dealer Michele Maccarone, rubbed shoulders with Romans in designer gear and stiletto heels for a schizoid mix of dressed up and dressed down. But at least in terms of the art, the Romans seemed to think that the grunge on the canvas was too contrived—a rubber tire glued to the top of one canvas, a lampshade stuck to another—to be the flash-frozen products of spontaneous action. “It is a big risk to have prices that high when you are so young,” collector Erminia Di Biase argued. Drawings were going for $80,000 each and the massive paintings topped out at around $225,000—and it seems that everything sold out. “It’s his Richter phase,” quipped critic Daniela Salvioni. Standing in front of an acid yellow composition, Colen affirmed that he is inspired by Arte Povera, the Italian sibling to American Pop. It just so happened that Germane Celant, the chronicler of the movement, was in the room, taking a break from organizing his upcoming nationwide superretrospective “2011: Arte Povera in Italia.”

Tuesday night was frantic enough with the openings at the scattered venues of “Three Amigos,” but
Announces 2011 Arts Awards
Mary Hunt Kahlenberg (1940-2011)
Arthouse at the Jones Center to Merge with Austin Museum of Art

MAXXI's preview of the traveling exhibition 'Indian Highway' was also that evening. I arrived at Lowman's show to see New Delhi-based dealer Peter Nagy on his way out. "I am not American anymore; I am really Indian now," he proclaimed. It was a pity to miss the party for the incense-infused Indian show, but there was so much left to see. Lowman's exhibition was a meditation on time: A series of pictures riffed on the overexposure of images in popular culture, while other, more painterly works, like Dirty Dancing, rendered the temporal ticking gorgeously in materials like oil, dirt, and dental floss.

From there everyone crammed into vans to get to Colen's show. The seventeenth-century Palazzo Pallavicini Rospigliosi is the former home of the powerful cardinal and art collector Scipione Borghese—famously the patron of bad boy Caravaggio—and sits just across from the Italian president's gargantuan palace. Into salons frescoed with mythical rape scenes were inserted giant black-on-white canvases shouting anachronistic expletives: OH FUCK! OH CHRIST! Ceiling murals in the next room depicted chubby cupids tugging at one another's hair and engaging in other naughty antics. By the time wordsmith Joseph Kosuth sauntered in, nearly the only people left were curator Ludovico Pratesi and dealer Massimo De Carlo, the two men responsible for the "Three Amigos" project.

We made it to the cavernous (and nearly empty) MACRO just in time to see Dash Snow's film Sisyphus, Sissy Fuss, Silly Puss. Viewers stood around in hushed silence watching the raw beauty of a woman and child, the artist's partner and daughter, wandering a grainy landscape straight out of a Romantic painting. It occurred to me that here in Rome the three enfants terribles seemed not so much "Warhol's Children" (to recall the old New York magazine appellation) as the offspring of Caravaggio, whose edgy existence came through in his earthy depictions of life, both reviled and coveted by the wealthy establishment.

Dinner was in the lush park of the Villa Borghese, where De Carlo laid out an al fresco buffet on the terrace. The DJ served up kitschy Italian songs from the 1960s, but soon the night became notable as the public premiere of the Cold Ones, a rock band composed of Colen's and Lowman's assistants. The guitarist tore the white linen off a table and spray-painted the band's name on it as a backdrop. Running around bare-chested, the frontman kicked off the cacophonous show by screaming "RIP Dash Snow!" A raven-haired Italian beauty made a sidelong glance toward the band and rolled her eyes. "Oh wow, he can smoke and drink and sing at the same time!" someone shouted. That turned out to be a bit of an exaggeration.

"Why don't they like us?" one of the band members wondered later in the elevator.
His amigo shrugged: "Cause they're Italian?"

One man's trash is another man's treasure—an HSBC-ad truism that could have encapsulated the day. "When you look at the power and energy of these paintings, in terms of American painting of the last seventy-five years, these things are a bargain," Gagosian's Sam Oriofsky explained. "I think of four things every morning: what girl I'm going to call, Mike Kelley, Dan Colen, and a cup of coffee." By then the DJ was back at it and we were all trying for our third wind. Still separated into distinct groups—the New York kids smoking at one end of the terrace and dealer Ludovica Barbieri and MAXXI curator Pippo Ciorra having a tête-à-tête in the opposite corner—the Italians and Americans were eventually brought together by the great disco classics, as two of the MDC girls got up on a giant window ledge and did their best to rally the troops. We left just as MJ's "Billie Jean" was setting the dance floor on fire.

— Cathryn Drake
Left: At the "Three Amigos" afterparty. Right: The Cold Ones perform.