



All That Glitters

ROME

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Left: Artist [Francesco Vezzoli](#) and architect [Zaha Hadid](#). Right: [Bernardo Bertolucci](#). (Except where noted, all photos: Linda Yablonsky)

ONE WAY TO THE VENICE BIENNALE is through Rome. A healthy swath of the art tribe took that option last Sunday, when MAXXI, the National Museum of XXI Century Arts, hosted the gala premiere of “Galleria Vezzoli.” It was the first installment of a three-part, multinational career retrospective for [Francesco Vezzoli](#), the Italian artist that many Americans love to hate.

“Why is that?” asked the dealer [Almine Rech](#), who attended with her husband [Bernard Picasso](#) and other longtime Vezzoli supporters in Europe, such as the erstwhile Italian supermodel [Mirella Haggiag](#), the designer and collector [Miuccia Prada](#), collector [Beatrice Trussardi](#), and the Milanese dealer [Gió Marconi](#), who gave Vezzoli his very first gallery exhibition—“the one where Miuccia discovered Francesco’s work,” he said.

The evening, a fund-raiser that celebrated the post-Berlusconi government’s approach to cultural affairs—one that accepts American-style private support for public institutions—amounted to something of a state dinner. Instead of the movie stars who have come out for Vezzoli in Los Angeles, New York, and Paris, the event drew politicians, collectors, dealers, and curators, as well as royal personages like [Gloria von Thurn und Taxis](#) and [Alessandra Borghese](#). They all rubbed shoulders with Balthus’s kimono-clad widow, [Countess Setsuko Klossowska de Rola](#), the film directors [Liliana Cavani](#) and [Bernardo Bertolucci](#), and [Klaus Biesenbach](#) and [Jeffrey Deitch](#), the directors of the two American museums that will house the other two parts of the retrospective, MoMA PS1 and La MoCA.



Left: MAXXI president [Giovanna Melandri](#) and MAXXI chief curator [Anna Mattiolo](#). Right: Artist Wade Guyton and dealer [Gió Marconi](#).

The show—which includes Vezzoli’s embroideries (hooker calling cards and tearful cultural icons), classical statuary holding flat-screen monitors showing videos, marble busts of the artist, and the installation of a cinema that he once made for the Prada Foundation in Venice—created a nineteenth-century-style salon that beautifully offsets the museum’s rather clumsy, futuristic design by architect [Zaha Hadid](#). Though it pleased the majority of those who accepted the self-portraiture as both an art-historical critique and an indictment of celebrity culture, one resistant guest called it “sheer narcissism” before stealing into the sweeping [Luigi Ghirri](#) retrospective on view in adjacent galleries.

This was the first time that the museum had held a dinner in its lobby. MAXXI president [Giovanna Melandri](#) emphasized the new chapter in patronage represented by the gala, which added four hundred thousand euros to the institution’s coffers. She also congratulated Vezzoli for rising to the challenge of Hadid’s architecture before concluding with an aphorism. “Let’s remember,” she said, “that of all lies, art is the least deceitful.”

After a lengthy speech by curator [Anna Mattiolo](#) that set many eyes rolling, a diplomatic Vezzoli allowed that “making this exhibition was a moment of extreme happiness,” while acknowledging, “Happiness is not common to contemporary art.” Then it was Hadid’s turn to express happiness with a show that “combines art with film, fashion, and many other things.” Adding a sweet personal note, she invoked the spirit of [Herbert Muschamp](#), naming the late architecture critic as the mutual friend who introduced her to Vezzoli two decades ago. Then she gave the museum her own poke in the ribs. “I remember when I first heard the museum was called MAXXI,” she said, “I was horrified. It means something rather different in English. But when I realized it meant a museum of the twenty-first century, I calmed down.”



Left: Curator [Alex Gartenfeld](#). Right: Collectors Shelley Fox Aarons and Phil Aarons.

Rome is actually enjoying something of a contemporary art resurgence, particularly within institutions. On view in the Eternal City are two Sterling Ruby shows (at the Fondazione Memmo and at MACRO, the contemporary exhibition space in a former abattoir) and “Empire State,” an exhibition of art from New York curated by [Norman Rosenthal](#) and [Alex Gartenfeld](#) for the Palazzo delle Esposizioni.

Gartenfeld led a few of us visiting New Yorkers through galleries that showed R. H. Quaytman, [Virginia Overton](#), [Ryan Sullivan](#), and [Keith Edmier](#) to great advantage. As a whole, though, the show felt, perhaps naturally, somewhat disconnected from its source, though the Helmut Newton retrospective upstairs seemed right at home.

Monday brought an unexpected pleasure, when independent curator [Cristiana Perrella](#) and [Gagosian Rome](#) director [Pepi Marchetti Franchi](#) arranged a private tour of the Villa Borghese, where [Thomas Houseago](#) has two monumental plaster figures installed in the aviary. They were surprisingly well suited to the site, though for those of us on the tour—Rech, Picasso, Carl D'Alvia (currently a fellow at the American Academy in Rome), and yours truly—the chance to commune at length with the astonishing Berninis and Caravaggios in this museum on a day when it was closed to the public was a little bit of heaven.

That evening, after visiting the converted seventeenth-century stable where Lorcan O'Neill will move his gallery in the fall, the dealer brought me to the opening of [Joan Jonas](#)'s wonderful, fish-themed solo show of ice drawings, ink paintings, and video at the nearby Alessandra Bonomo gallery. This event also attracted [Luigi Ontani](#) and private dealer [Damiana Leoni](#), who had that day lost her YouTube campaign for a local political office. I would see Ontani again a short time later at the American Academy, which was bestowing its McKim Medal on Maestro Bertolucci during a gala dinner at the Villa Aurelia, on the 120-year-old institution's ravishingly beautiful grounds.



Left: Artists [Luigi Ontani](#) and [Joan Jonas](#). Right: Art consultant [Damiana Leoni](#) and dealer Lorcan O'Neill.

On hand were two previous medal winners (Ontani and Prada), the outgoing American ambassador [David Thorne](#), board members [Robert Storr](#) and [Francine Prose](#), philanthropist [Mercedes Bass](#), director [Christopher Celenza](#), poet [Karl Kirchwey](#), and architect [Valentina Moncada](#). The dinner, which raised money specifically to bring Italian artists and scholars to join the Rome Prize-winning Americans in residence next year, brought the sort of cultural Italian-American exchange that is the institution's mission into focus with an elegance and purpose that made the hill where it sits feel like the Olympus of intellectual life. Which it kind of is.

"No one could exemplify film better than [Bernardo Bertolucci](#)," said [Adele Chatfield-Taylor](#), the Academy's soon-to-retire president of twenty-five years. Noting that the nine-time Oscar winner is among those individuals who have "changed the world in his medium," she brought the young actress [Tea Falco](#) to present the maestro with the medal, fashioned by jeweler [Fabio Salini](#) from a design by Cy Twombly. Though now confined to a wheelchair, following an operation that left him partly paralyzed, Bertolucci was as fascinating as ever, right down to his scarlet sneakers. "My father presented me with *Moby-Dick* when I was too young to read it," he said in an acceptance speech that illustrated the high points of his own enduring exchange with American culture, one that he characterized as an "affair." The opening phrase, "Call me Ishmael," had a lasting resonance, as did his introduction to jazz. "For me," he said, "it meant America." The classic [John Ford](#) western *Stagecoach* "became for me like Homer," he said, before recalling how he marched with other Italians against the war in Vietnam while smoking pot and listening to [Bob Dylan](#). "So there was a conflict," he admitted. "But I was very comfortable with that conflict." That got a big laugh from an audience that could easily recall feeling the same. Of course, such contradictions are what make the world go round, and a few hours later they would turn it to Venice. — [Linda Yablonsky](#)