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The Americans at the Villa: A Lunch With This Year's Rome Prize Winners

By Sarah Dohrmann



To call the **American Academy in Rome** a beautiful place is to call a Caravaggio painting merely pretty. Founded in 1894, the Academy is the oldest American center for overseas study, located on an 11-acre sprawl atop the highest hill in Rome. It's also where Galileo first publicly demonstrated his telescope more than 400 years ago. For fellows of the **Rome Prize**, visiting the Academy is a career-changing distinction, a year to live and study with artistic and intellectual freedom amid the classical tradition of ancient Rome. Each year, approximately 30 American artists and scholars are chosen for the Rome Prize by juries of their peers; they eat lunch and dinner together daily and are given stipends, private studios, access to the Academy's vast library, and of course the city of Rome.

Pick at random three of **this year's Rome Prize fellows and their projects** and you get a cross section of the cultural zeitgeist: ancient-studies scholar **Sarah Levin-Richardson** is at work on a post-doctoral study of Pompeii's purpose-built brothel; designer **Rob Giampietro's** mobile-optimized website will offer audio guides and GPS maps for walks in Rome; and composer **Paula Matthusen's** field recordings of Rome's ancient aqueducts will be used in the creation of original music. At a recent lunch at the Academy just a few weeks into this year's program, we caught up with artist **Cynthia Madansky**, whose Rome Prize project will be a cinematic exploration of the **Esposizione Universale di Roma (EUR)**, an area conceived by Benito Mussolini to be the site of the 1942 World Fair that never

happened.

Tell us about the film you plan to make while you're here.

It's an experimental 16-millimeter film called *E-42* that will excavate the EUR, a site at the edge of the city that embodies the city's past, a utopian vision of its future, and its complex resonance in contemporary life. Mussolini designated [the area] to be the site of the World Fair in 1942. He called this site E-42 and hired architects to design it. And then the war happened and all of the construction stopped. After the war, the architects that Mussolini hired and the ones that he fired rebuilt this area because it was sort of half built. The area became a villa district with parks, a big lake, a state national archive, monumental official buildings, big boulevards. It was an area that was originally supposed to be like this stage for him, for his empire because he really saw himself as this new Roman emperor.

E-42 will be the second part of a trilogy about the second World War; the first film I made, *Past Perfect*, was filmed in Poland and the third film will be shot somewhere in the former Soviet Union. Most of my film work engages with cultural and political themes, and [explores] the consequences of politics on the daily lives of individuals.

How will you go about making *E-42*?

Right now I am doing research at the National Archives, which are located in the EUR, focusing on the elaborate systems of surveillance, which were in place during the Fascist era, as well as looking at material about the architectural history of the EUR itself. I spend a lot of time walking around the massive area, in the parks, throughout the residential neighborhoods and of course around the monumental buildings. I am particularly interested in how people interact and use this space. At this point I know the film is going to be an exploration of the period of Italian Fascism, and the monumental nature of Fascist architecture.

Tell us about your experience so far at the Academy.

What [the Academy] has set up here is brilliant: I've had conversations with medievalists, archaeologists, anthropologists, designers, composers, and other artists. There are public lectures and programs, visiting scholars, Italian advisors who are available to assist you on your project, visits to historical sites, and contemporary art tours. It's an incredibly immersive experience! I didn't expect this kind of cross-pollination, the way it's already happened in 14 days.

How do Rome Prize winners interact with the city?

Everyone here at the Academy is engaged with the city — the opportunities to explore are everywhere. Yesterday, we went on a tour of the **Foro Italico**, a sports complex in Rome; tomorrow there will be a lecture by an academy trustee about contemporary politics in Italy; Friday we're going to the San Lorenzo district to see an artist space called **Pastificio Cerere** — and of course it's always delightful to go down the hill to Trastevere to have a caffè and watch the people.

This interview has been edited and condensed.



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