

Visual arts

New temples in the Eternal City

Despite its riches from the past, Rome has shown less enthusiasm for contemporary art – until now. Rachel Spence reports

Next weekend the new Gagosian Gallery throws open its partial doors in Rome. The Eternal City, despite its magnificent riches from the ancient past, has for decades hardly bothered with new art, but the opening of an offshoot of Larry Gagosian's New York-based gallery speaks volumes about a change in Rome's attitude.

The director is Peppi Marchetti Franchi, a 57-year-old Roman who was recruited to head the Gagosian operation from her role as assistant to Thomas Krens, director of the Guggenheim museum in New York. She is keeping her lips sealed about the inaugural exhibition, Cy Twombly's *Three Notes from Salalah*. All she can tell me about the maestro's three new canvases is that they are huge.

At Gagosian, size matters. One of the reasons it took so long to find the premises was an entrance big enough for monumental works. "We had to find a door that was five metres high. And we wanted to be in the centre of the city," says Franchi.

The building that ultimately won Larry Gagosian's seal of approval is a 1930s neo-classical palace. Located in the affluent heartland between via Veneto and the Spanish Steps, and boasting a lofty portico framed by florid Corinthian columns, it certainly fulfils the two chief criteria. It has a ten-high oval gallery which – as Franchi points out – could have been designed by Roman baroque maestro Borromini.

The quintessentially Roman character of the building symbolises Gagosian's ambition for this project. "Mr Gagosian wanted to be here because of the role that Rome has always played in the imagination of artists," explains Franchi. "In the 10 years since I have been away in the US, the city has changed enormously." Rome has embraced contemporary aesthetics with an enthusiasm similar to that of counter-reformation popes for baroque when they needed to dazzle their errant congregations back into the catholic fold.

An impressive line-up of international architects have been commissioned to change the Roman skyline: already completed are Renzo Piano's music auditorium and Richard Meier's *Flam glass and travertine edifice* that shelters the Ara Pacis shrine on the banks of the Tiber. MAXXI, the state-sponsored museum of contemporary art and architecture by Zahar Hadid, should be ready by 2010, although progress has been crippled by a funding crisis; the same year should see the completion of Cloud, a futuristic congress centre being designed by Maximiliano Fuksas.

The creation of public spaces for contemporary art has been crucial to this modernising vision. In 2000, the Macro museum of contemporary art opened in a converted beer factory. It is currently awaiting an extension by Odile Decq, and the temporary shows here have included Marc Quinn and Jenny Saville, although it also exhibits distinguished Italian artists. More experimental is Macro Future. In an excavator in the newly hip district of Testaccio, this cavernous space remains open until

midnight in a bid to become a fashionable meeting place like Tate Modern. Clearly, all this activity aims to make up for the years when Rome languished while cities such as Paris, New York and London created a cultural infrastructure worthy of the 21st century. "Now it is the time to catch up because a contemporary sensibility is essential to a cosmopolitan culture," says cultural assessor Silvio Di Francia, who works closely with Rome's mayor, Walter Veltroni. Now the leader of Italy's new Democratic Party, Veltroni – a jazz-loving novelist – is the person responsible for pushing through many of the new initiatives.

Veltroni's administration refuses to be cowed by its heritage. Meier's building caused immense controversy but that didn't stop the city council from commissioning Canadian artist Angela Bulloch to project an illuminated sphere into the sky above it for two weeks last May. This February, Ara Pacis hosts an exhibition by southern Italian artist Mimmo Paladino with an accompanying sound-track by Brian Eno. On the Campidoglio, a glass exedra now covers the statue of Emperor Marcus Aurelius and throughout the winter, the Lights of Art project will illuminate seven historic underground sites, including the Circus of Massimino, with light installations by contemporary artists.

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Yet the most exciting phenomenon has been the proliferation of private galleries, whose presence has injected an energy into the art scene absent since the 1960s when the Arte Povera movement was Europe's answer to Pop Art. The best of today's crop of galleries strike a balance between top international artists and Italian talent. Galleria S.A.L.E.S., for example, shows both Wolfgang Tillmans and the brilliant young Torinese video artists, Botto & Bruno, while Valentina Bonomo, whose gallery in a 15th-century convent in the Jewish ghetto is currently staging a fascinating confrontation between British computer artist Julian Opie and Mimmo Paladino. Seen against the vaulted alcoves of Bonomo's beguilingly intimate space, Opie's cartoonish female suddenly manifest the splendid proportions of a renaissance Madonna. Meanwhile Paladino adds a Byzantine-esque intensity to his trademark totemic heads and scribbled hieroglyphs by enclosing them within antique-style hinged wooden frames, reminiscent of the caskets used for Greek Orthodox icons.

Bonomo loves the ghetto for its timeless quality. "It hasn't been tarred up like Trastevere," she says. Yet when she opened her gallery in 2002, the decision to move here was a brave one. Even today the district, with its sprinkling of kosher bakeries, down-to-earth



bars and cafés, ironmongers and second-hand clothes stores, retains a pleasantly shabby air. Yet already Bonomo's presence is attracting other galleries, such as Ermanno Tedeschi, who possesses other spaces in Milan and Turin.

"The Rome contemporary art scene is in ferment," says Tedeschi as we talk in his back office, while staff in the gallery perform hurried preparations for their first show, a mixed exhibition entitled *Promised Land*. More overtly commercial than Bonomo, Tedeschi perceives a revitalised collectors' market in the Italian capital. "There's a new generation of collectors here, entrepreneurs and professionals between 30 and 50, who recognise art

as a form of investment," he observes. Certain members of this generation act from more altruistic motives. When Giovanni Bulgari (son of Bulgari chairman Paolo) and his wife Benedetta bought a palatial apartment close to Piazza Farnese, they lent it to a group of young contemporary artists who installed their works – from a fountain of almond milk to a flaming sphere – around the rooms. Captivated by a rare glimpse of contemporary art in an intimate setting, thousands of visitors flocked to the house.

Irish gallerist Lorcan O'Neill, a Roman resident since 2002, has been surprised by the intensity of the local scene. "There is a real love of contemporary art in Italy," says O'Neill, who

has Richard Long, Tracey Emin and Rachel Whiteread among his artists. "There are over 100 galleries in Rome, while at art fairs for example, one will see at least 30-40 contemporary magazines on display."

Previously director at the Anthony D'Offay gallery in London, O'Neill was initially drawn to the city for its "grand and earthy" quality. "I wanted to be here because the art world is full of independent-minded people – artists, curators, collectors – and I sensed that they might get tired of the hegemony of London and New York."

Most importantly, artists themselves love Rome. Among the city's full- or part-time residents are Joseph Kosuth, Cy Twombly, Sandro Chia and Jannis



The exterior of Gagosian's new gallery (above) combines grand tradition with the contemporary. MACRO, one of the liveliest of Rome's new spaces devoted to contemporary art

Kounellis. Even if they don't live in Rome, a growing number of top artists such as Tracey Emin and Jeff Wall are spending extended periods there. O'Neill thinks they feel soothed by the city's air of languor. "Rome is nowhere near as intense as London; it's a place where artists can think in peace."

Any Italian artist risks being intimidated by their country's heritage. Could this be the reason that the post-Transavanguardia generation have – with a few notable exceptions such as Maurizio Cattelan and, latterly, video artist Francesco Vezzoli – failed to make much impact on the international scene? O'Neill says not.

"It's not that the art doesn't travel; it's that the artists don't. Cattelan and Vezzoli have both left Italy; they speak English fluently. If you can talk to collectors and journalists about your work, that helps your career. But it's possible for artists here to live well and have stimulating discussions without ever leaving Italy."

One young Italian artist who seems to be finding a balance is Pietro Ruffo. The 29-year-old, who recently showed at O'Neill's gallery, works out of one of the historic studios in the Pastificio Centre, a turn-of-the-century bread factory in the San Lorenzo district colonised by the Roman School artists in the 1970s. As we eat pumpkin soup in a local restaurant with fellow San Lorenzo residents, photographer Ileana Franchetti and Giuseppe Gallo, a lyrical painter and sculptor, it's clear that Ruffo thrives on the sense of community. "Yet as an artist he travels far from this familiar terrain, producing works inspired by time spent working as an art therapist in a French psychiatric hospital and running workshops for the child survivors of the Beslan massacre."

Among his finest pieces are pencil drawings of the Caucasian mountains – sublime, provocative meditations on the meaning of national borders – and a series of maps depicting war-torn territories overlaid by the fanged skulls of carnivorous animals and flag calligraphy. Such a global vision is appropriate in a city determined to inscribe itself on the international art map. From this February, Rome will host its own contemporary art fair. Exhibitors will be allotted stands in historic sites across the city: in terms of visual spectacle at least, it will put up some competition to Frieze, Basel and Miami.

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