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ART REVIEW | 'SENSO UNICO'

Art History, Italian Style: Blessing or Burden?

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With artists zipping around the globe and the political map in constant flux, is an exhibition that focuses on the art of a single country a viable concept?



"Home to Go" (2001) by Adrian Paci, from the show "Senso Unico" at P.S. 1.

"Senso Unico," a show of eight contemporary Italian artists at P.S. 1, confronts this issue head on. Its title echoes the Italian sign designating a one-way street. But a museum handout suggests that "Senso Unico" be translated as "unique feeling" and that viewers look for this quality in each of the artists, who express themselves in distinct languages.

P.S. 1 is in many ways the perfect laboratory for this experiment because it has a long history of mounting Italian-centric shows. Most of the artists in this one, organized by the museum's director, Alanna Heiss, were born in Italy, though most no longer live there. Yet some common threads become apparent. One is an attempt to address Italy's exalted art history, alternately celebrating or attacking it. Nothing new here: The Italian Futurists in the early 20th century felt buried by history and advocated demolishing museums and libraries.

That same impulse can be felt in Paolo Canevari's big graphite drawing of the Colosseum burning. (Does it get any more pointed than that?) Angelo Filomeno takes a different approach with two elaborate knight's helmets, decorated with feathers, crystals and embroidered silk, that celebrate the campy pomp employed by Baroque popes. Moving along the timeline, Pietro Roccasalva's dark pastels pay homage to Modigliani and other artists.

Arte Povera, a movement of the 1960s and '70s that also referred to Italy's classical past, is itself a point of reference here. Adrian Paci's "Home to Go" (2001), a marble figure with a small terracotta roof tied to his back, recalls Michelangelo Pistoletto's "Venus of the Rags" from 1967, in which a curvaceous classical nude gazes into a pile of old clothes. Mr. Paci's work seems more a reference to the plight of immigrants or, perhaps, to a man without a country. (Mr. Paci was born in Albania and now lives mostly in Milan.)

Another nod to Arte Povera — particularly its use of common materials — appears in Mr. Canevari's video "Continents" (2005), which greets visitors as they enter the show. He has consolidated the seven continents into five. (The Americas are simply America, and Antarctica is absent.) Each is represented by a tire labeled in white lettering and tied to an animal: America gets a barking dog, Europe a cat, Africa a pig, Australia a rabbit and Asia a rat (or maybe it's a large mouse).

Italy is an oblique reference in the work of the best-known artists here. Vanessa Beecroft's video "VB61 Still Death! Darfur Still Deaf?," taped in the Venice fish market in June for the Biennale, depicts the artist, elegantly coiffed, performing a bloody Jackson Pollock drip action over bodies painted black. Like much of her work, this video attempts political commentary, but comes across more like performance art equally at home on a Milan runway.

Francesco Vezzoli, an artist whose greatest patron actually *is* a Milanese fashion fixture (Miuccia Prada), offers "Marlene Redux: A True Hollywood Story!" (2006), which tracks his life from his birthplace in Brescia, Italy, through his rise in the art world. Following the format of a tabloid television show, the denouement is a typically sordid fall into ruin.

Elsewhere, the show's work wanders into other areas of Italian art and culture — and beyond. R&di Martino's short video shows the artist in drag, donning a gray wig and breaking into an exuberant rendition of the can-can, crossing the culture of the Italian grandmother with dolce-vita abandon. Paola Pivi's imposing sculpture of a polar bear covered with yellow feathers is a puzzling bit of theatricality, purportedly about crossbreeding.

In many ways the idea of looking at artists and their relationship to a nation and its cultural history is the most interesting part of this show. Yet there is little conversation among the works: The sculptures and videos gaze politely across the room at drawings or paintings, or ignore one another altogether in their separate nooks and corners. This is fitting, perhaps, when artists are exploring different paths rather than traveling in the same direction down a one-way street.

*“Senso Unico: A Show of Eight Contemporary Italian Artists” is on view through Jan. 7 at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens; ps1.org or (718) 784-2084.*