

ArtForum

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"Made in Italy"

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By Giorgio Verzotti

For the first time since the appearance of the Transavanguardia, artwork by young Italians is being appreciated - even outside Italy - almost as much as that of young English, German, or American artists. A recent exhibition, which was conceived by Paolo Colombo for the Centre d'Art contemporain in Geneva and then traveled to London, was the most important manifestation thus far of this somewhat unexpected phenomenon. Despite the important role the Transavanguardia played in the aesthetic debates of the '80s, work by younger Italians rarely crosses the borders of Italy, regardless of quality, except in the case of certain higher-profile figures like Maurizio Cattelan or Vanessa Beecroft.

The show's original title, "Fatto in Italia," was an ironic translation of "made in Italy," a phrase that evokes fashion, shoes, cuisine, and perhaps even political corruption. Here, it was used to introduce to an international audience twelve artists who appeared on the scene after the mid '80s. Stefano Arienti and Liliana Moro were the sole representatives of the generation that began exhibiting in 1985; the others, although their contemporaries, all began to receive recognition later. Moro presented an ambiguous terra-cotta self-portrait that was an artifact from an earlier performance. Arienti's amusingly aggressive iconophobia was revealed in a large-scale photographic self-portrait with only a ghost of the blurry image remaining, thanks to scratches and cuts made on the negative by a few of his friends. The work of these two artists exemplifies some of the approaches that have been put forth in opposition to neo-Expressionist painting.

One strength of "Made in Italy" was that it attempted to highlight the variety of strategies deployed by young Italian artists. Cattelan's black humor was visible here in a piece wittily illustrating a familiar expression - an ostrich hiding its head in a hole in the floor. Cattelan also often creates works in situ: here, he intended to leave paper bags containing fake hand grenades lying around the floor of the ICA bar, but ended up abandoning the idea. There were some who also strongly suspected him of having graffitied incendiary slogans onto the exterior of the building after the show's opening (the graffiti was later removed by authorities). Beecroft exhibited small drawings and large canvases populated by nervous figures, and she also presented a performance, loaded with erotic significance, that featured girls dressed only in camisole tops. Grazia Toderi's videos, which deal with cyclical time by investigating everyday events, were among the most interesting pieces in the show. Her work was represented by *Nata nel '63* (Born in '63, 1996), which incorporates archival images from the 1969 Apollo moon landing. Miltos Manetas' video installation dealt with issues raised by new technologies.

Mario Airo contributed a wooden structure on which one could climb to listen to Lou Reed's song "Satellite of Love," while Eva Marisaldi presented a large photograph of flowers next to a projected image of one of her lively drawings. In contrast,

Margherita Manzelli's self-portraits elicited a sense of repugnance: the artist often depicts herself grimacing and seemingly deformed; she also often inaugurates her shows with disturbing performances featuring her bound body. Here, she suspended herself from a wall with a magnet. Franco Silvestro investigates his own roots in the area surrounding Naples by addressing the marginalization of its residents and resulting criminal activity. He displayed a large black-and-white photograph - depicting a desolate urban landscape with a car in the foreground, its windows shattered by rocks - as well as a video in which entertainers from a local television station sing a sentimental tune dedicated to a fugitive from justice.

The work of the Vedova Mazzei team included one older photograph, as well as a video in which a band formed of postmen from a town in southern Italy plays the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen." Unfortunately, another work the artists prepared to take its place was damaged on arrival.

Bruno Esposito's performance took place over a period of three days in a north London flat that was quite far from the exhibition site - thus it was frustratingly difficult to see. In general, thanks to the limited space available, the works in the show seemed to have been piled one on top of another, and certain works shown in Geneva were left out altogether. Even worse, the available space was allotted in an uneven fashion. Although the show had many strong points, the organization and installation of the English stage of "Fatto in Italia" were somewhat disappointing, which was irritating for those who appreciate the work of this generation of Italian artists.

Translated from the Italian by Marguerite Shore.