

"Art and Homosexuality". A Controversial Exhibition Opens in Florence

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Contested by Catholic city leaders in Milan, the show is now hosted in Florence. It covers 100 years of gay and straight artists exploring codes, symbols, allegories and metaphors of homosexuality.

Following objections from Catholic politicians and the right-wing Mayor of Milan, Letizia Moratti, an



international gay art exhibition now opens in the more left-leaning city of Florence - uncensored, albeit without the official blessing of the city council.

'Art and Homosexuality - From Von Gloeden to Pierre et Gilles' will run at the Palazzina Reale in Florence until 6 January 2008.

150 artists from all over the world are on display with works tracing connections between art and homosexuality over the past 100 years.

The original Milan location (Palazzo della Ragione) was abandoned by the organizers after Ms Moratti insisted in drawing up a blacklist of works that had to be removed on the ground that they could be offensive for Catholics and unsuitable for children.

Among the works exhibited are a sadomasochistic portrait of a man in a gimp mask by controversial American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, drawings of heavily muscled men engaged in graphic sexual acts by fetish artist Tom of Finland, and a picture of two men kissing under a crucifix by British painter John Kirby.

The Italian newswire service ANSA reports the exhibition's curator Eugenio Viola as saying: "The public finally has the opportunity to judge for themselves what is perhaps the most contested exhibition of recent years. It's good news for freedom of expression and thought, and a happy epilogue to a difficult affair". Viola based his selection of works on a common theme of expression rather than on the sexuality of the artists, who are both gay and straight. "On the basis of that logic some works have an openly homoerotic content, while in others this expresses itself in a less obvious way through codes, symbols, allegories and metaphors," he explained.

The largest show of its kind ever held in Italy, this Florence exhibition will feature, among others, black-and-white photography by German artist Wilhelm von Gloeden from 1900, balletic nudes by Bruce of Los Angeles from the 1950s, portraits of famous male torsos by American fashion photographer Herb Ritts from the 1980s, and a video installation by bald German couple Eva and Adele, self-proclaimed 'hermaphrodite twins', from the 1990s.

Other famous names include David Hockney, Keith Haring and Bruce Weber as well as the British royal family's favourite snapper Mario Testino.

Self-taught Italian artist Carol Rama is among the 20 women artists with works on display.

As the ANSA press release notes, the most likely crowd-pullers are two sculptures by young Italian artists that topped Moratti's blacklist in Milan: Paolo Schmidlin's Miss Kitty (2006) - the life-size replica of an ageing, semi-naked transvestite in a wig, white underpants and stockings bearing a strong resemblance to Pope Benedict XVI; and Paolo Cassara's Pieta' (2007), which portrays a latex-clad Virgin Mary cradling a blow-up doll in place of the baby Jesus.

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