

Italian (Gay) Diaries

George De Stefano (January 06, 2013)



Diaries, an exhibition of gay male-oriented Italian photography now on view at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in Manhattan, presents the work of 11 artists who live or work in Italy.



Diaries: An Anthology of Photography from Italy

Curated by Peter Weiermair

Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art

26 Wooster Street, New York, NY

(212) 431-2609

www.leslielohman.org [2]

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Italian visual and plastic arts have a tradition dating back to Greco-Roman antiquity of glorifying the naked male body, and there often is a homoerotic subtext to paintings and sculpture of nude males. But explicitly gay art, including photography, has been more rare in Italy, where gay liberation (and concepts of gay identity and community) has made fewer inroads than elsewhere in Western Europe.

During the late 19th century, the expatriate German aristocrat Wilhelm von Gloeden took the hundreds of photographs of nude Sicilian men and youths that would be re-discovered late in the twentieth century (and which are now sold in souvenir shops all over Sicily). In the 1970s and 1980s, Tony Patrioli (the nome d'arte of Antonio Pietta) produced work for Italian and European gay magazines, as well as books of male nudes, the best known being *Mediterraneo* (1984). Dino Pedriali, whose pictures were admired by Pasolini, produced (and continues to produce) highly aesthetic work, characterized by brilliant use of chiaroscuro, that made erotic icons of the models he found in the streets of Rome.

Francesco Vezzoli, based in Milan, is an internationally famous artist (and filmmaker) whose work reflects a camp gay male sensibility, but his main preoccupation is pop culture and its iconic figures, male and female, not homoeroticism.

Gay imagery often has been either marginalized or banned in Italy. The right-wing administration of Milan's mayor (and Opus Dei member) Letizia Moratti in 2007 censored the exhibit "Art and Homosexuality" – the first art show of its kind ever presented in Italy -- demanding the removal of some of the works on the grounds that they were offensive to Catholic sensibilities. Ironically, the curators, fearing the prospect of Church-State attacks, had pre-censored the work, eliminating any pieces that were explicitly sexual and keeping full nudity to a minimum and excluding minors from admission to the show.

One can only imagine the reaction of Moratti and her kind to *Diaries*, an exhibition of gay male-oriented photography from Italy now on view at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in Manhattan. (She'd no doubt be thrilled that the work is being shown in New York, and not Italy, and probably so traumatized by what's on display she'd need some Opus Dei-style self-flagellation to



exorcise the images from her mind.) Diaries presents the work of 11 artists who live or work in Italy, and one non-Italian, the Austrian Matthias Herrmann, a part-time resident of Tuscany.

The artists represent multiple generations, ranging in age from late 20s (Luigi Vitali, Luca Guarini, Daniele de Vitis) to middle-aged (Pasquale Martini, Fiorenzo Niccoli, Stefano Scheda) and one septuagenarian (Gianfranco Maria Lelj). With exception of Daniele de Vitis, born in Lecce, and Gianfranco Maria Lelj, from Aquila degli Abruzzi, they all are from northern or central Italy.

Diaries has been curated by Peter Weiermair, a German who has led museums in Austria, Germany and Italy, including Bologna's Galleria d'Arte Moderna. According to Weiermair, "the unifying theme of the work is the male nude, its beauty, Eros and sexuality." He notes that although the artists he has selected all have established reputations in Italy – Gianfranco Maria Lelj, for example, has collaborated with such auteurs of Italian cinema as Fellini, Visconti and Scola – "their intimate photo-diary work has seldom been exhibited. These photos offer the rare opportunity to see images through an artist's eye, created in the most part for their own personal satisfaction."

(At the exhibit's opening night reception, the affable Weiermair, while praising the artists and their work, angrily denounced Italy as a "medieval" country for its attitudes towards homosexuality.)

The photographs are informed by gay culture, Italian culture and history, fine art photography and erotica. There are analog pictures and digital images. Most of work is formal and highly composed; the viewer will not find photorealism or images caught on the fly in this show. Stefano Scheda is represented by tableaux vivants of naked men in poses combining athleticism and dance; the narrative series by Luigi Vitali and Luca Guarini depicts in symbolic imagery the dissolution of their romantic partnership. Many of the photos exude desire and sexuality, conveyed through the expressive power of the nude male body.

Curator Weiermair titled the show Diaries because the photos document personal experience; they are, he says, "a history of incontri (meetings)." Fiorenzo Niccoli's work reflects the theme in images of immigrants from Eastern Europe he met (and picked up) at the Termini station in Rome. In several of his photos, Niccoli has staged his models in homage to Baron von Gloeden. As in the German's pictures, some of Niccoli's young men wear laurel wreaths or Arab skullcaps. But the images, in gorgeous silver gelatin prints, are more frankly erotic than Von Gloeden's.

Italy is a land famous for its intense sunlight, but much of the best photography of Diaries is studio-based and in black and white. A notable exception is the sun-burnished and sexually-charged work by Gianfranco Maria Lelj, particularly the photos featuring a naked, well-built and hirsute model, with the evocative titles "In the desert of life I fear nothing" (the model happily running through sand dunes) and "Even its lightest touch burns my hand" (with the model's formidable erection as the picture's cynosure.)

Peter Weiermair deserves high praise for collecting and organizing the diverse, beautifully executed and often compelling photographs that comprise Diaries. But as much as I admired the exhibition, I wished it had been more diverse in its representation of Italian men. I missed images from the Mezzogiorno, from the streets of Naples and Palermo and Reggio Calabria, where the eroticism of



everyday life can be powerful, even overwhelming. Some less composed and stylized work also would have been welcome.

But these are minor cavils about a very good and important exhibition that should be seen by anyone interested in contemporary photography, not only gay men and/or Italophiles. While taking in these photos, the visitor might also appreciate the fine irony of their having been made in Italy, a country that has given the world so many indelible images of unclothed male beauty but so few opportunities for un-closeted gay art to be seen.

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