

Francesco by Francesco. Happily Ever After (2002).

THE SPECTATOR

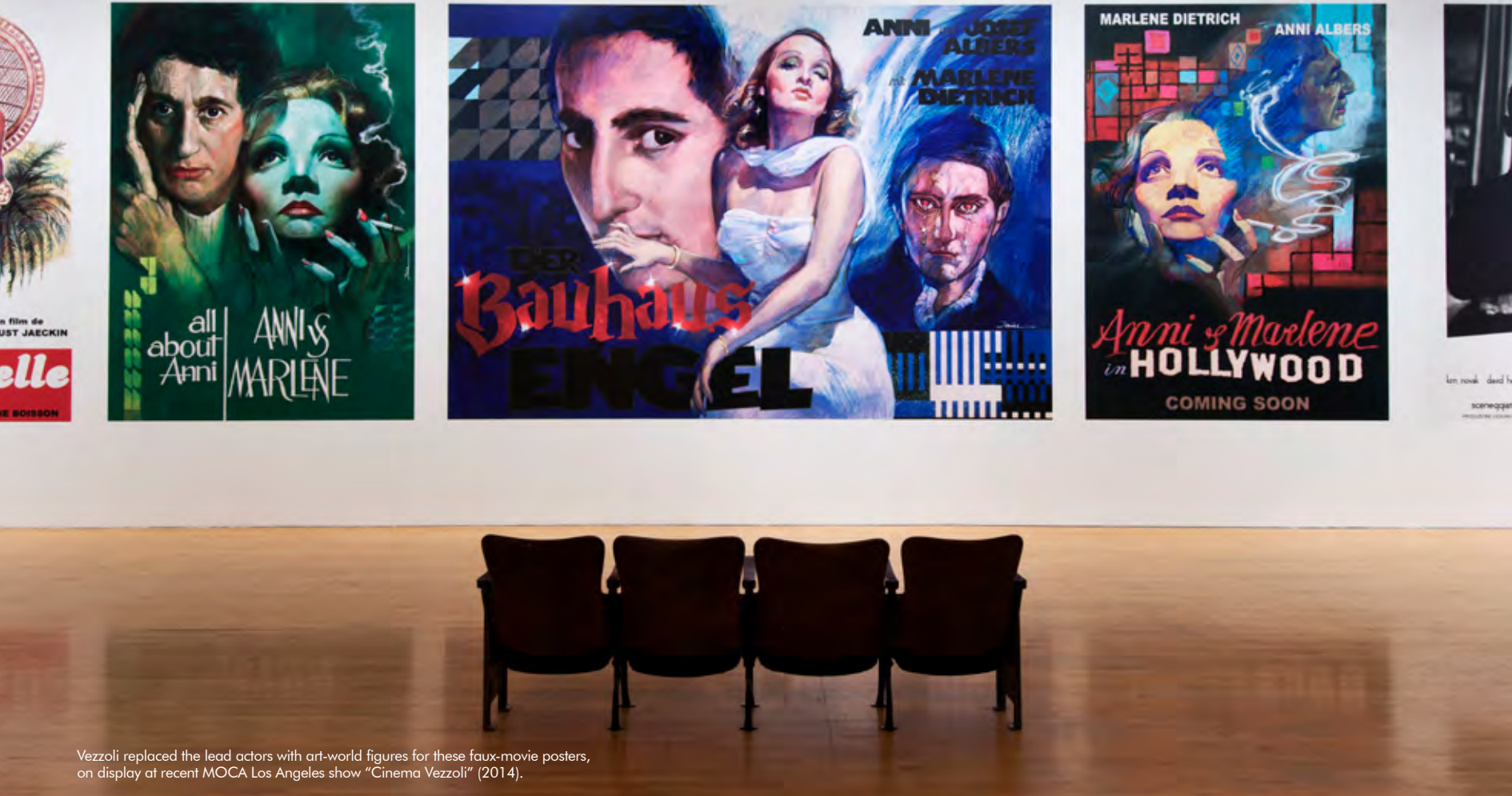
043

Teary-eyed Italian artist Francesco Vezzoli made his name satirising the vainglorious worlds of international fame and celebrity. But an exciting new direction finds him ditching his Rolodex and returning home.

BY MAX CROSBIE-JONES

When I spot Italian artist Francesco Vezzoli across a crowded five-star hotel lobby, he appears a little out of place, dressed as he is today in a somewhat disheveled combination of shorts, jacket and trainers. This is ironic: Francesco, 44, is not just a man comfortable inhabiting the decadent world of 21st century luxury – he is a challenging artist whose entire body of work consists of borrowing and remixing elements of it, putting a grand rococo-frame around it and calling it conceptual art.

Since graduating from London's Central Saint Martins in the mid-1990s his art, ranging from petit-point embroidery and videos to elaborate public spectacles, has had a consistently high celebrity quotient. It's the art-world equivalent of an Elton John birthday bash – everybody who's anybody appears to have been invited. He has, for a mock-commercial, had Michelle Williams and Natalie Portman catfight on the carpet of a Baroque apartment over a bottle of fictional fragrance Greed. He has convinced Milla Jovovich, Courtney Love and Helen Mirren to slip on Versace togas for a mock-trailer for Gore Vidal's *Caligula*. He has



Vezzoli replaced the lead actors with art-world figures for these faux-movie posters, on display at recent MOCA Los Angeles show "Cinema Vezzoli" (2014).

transformed hip-hop star Nicki Minaj into a heavily powdered 18th century courtesan for a magazine covershoot and got Kate Moss to DJ at the opening party for a Prada-sponsored 24-hour museum in Paris. And, for MOCA Los Angeles' 30th anniversary gala, he conceived (and pulled off) a surrealist homage to Russian high culture that had Lady Gaga playing a pink Damien Hurst piano whilst clad in a Frank Gehry hat and Miuccia Prada dress – and the Boshoi Ballet pirouetted behind her.

If the practice of contemporary artists can be reduced to a shtick, then Francesco's is pulling celebrities down through his trap door and out into an operatic parallel universe. Or it was. "I've moved away from working with celebrities," he declares in his smooth Italian accent, as we sit in the Miami sunshine, the rays bouncing off his shades. "This is not happening for me anymore."

The reason for this, he explains, has nothing to do with logistics or expense. It's about saying what he wants to say succinctly. "I could give you an intellectual answer," he says, "but to be honest I felt I had exhausted the topic. I did a fake commercial, a fake collection, fake publicity, fake election trailers and fake movie trailers. I touched on all those points where politics and publicity, beauty and publicity, culture and publicity meet, so I decided to move on."

At this moment in time, Francesco's moving on entails looking back. Way back. Often egregiously gaudy, his work has always telescoped the past to comment on the present, only now that telescoping finds him looking back with a more sustained and thoughtful gaze towards ancient Rome. His most recent show, which wrapped up at MoMA PS1 in New York back in March, featured classical Roman statuary

– something he has appropriated before, only never quite like this. With the help of restorers, Francesco gave five busts that he acquired at auction a layer of paint. "I've done diptychs before where I put them into relation with modern sculptures," he says, "and I've done insertions where I basically add pieces to these sculptures. But the most poignant and I think daring step was to bring back the colour that they once had."

Back up a second: Francesco is not playing the artistic-license card when he says "the colour that they once had." And there's a reason for this. Art historians are now largely agreed that the view of the white marble bust as the polished acme of classical art is a misrepresentation, as a large proportion of them were originally painted. In other words, the impression left by your trip to the British Museum or Parthenon is

wrong: what many busts strived for was fidelity or even hyper-reality, not some impossibly refined and remote and alabaster-white Platonic ideal of beauty. For Francesco, this is proof that classicity was, in fact, "garish, kitschy and colourful – all those things that you don't see anymore because all that's now left is the structure."

Teatro Romano, as this project is called, marks the start of a brave (and more nuanced?) new direction for an artist best known for getting public figures to participate in projects that challenge our perceptions of them. But it's not altogether that unexpected a direction given another recurring theme in his work: a questioning (from within) of the nature of institutions and culture consumption (something he also did in shows such as 2012's "24h Museum" and last year's "Vezzoli Primavera – Estate," which took place across three of Florence's



One of five restored busts that comprised "Teatro Romano" at MoMA PS1.

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The poster for "Cinema Vezzoli," a 2014 show at MOCA Los Angeles in which Vezzoli deconstructed the vocabulary of filmmaking and celebrity-driven culture.

046

refined house-museums). As a reviewer for *The Brooklyn Rail* puts it, *Teatro Romano* "is not about educating the viewer so much as reconstructing the way we normally encounter history."

Does his restoration work bring us closer to historical fidelity? Or is it wanton desecration? By giving these busts back their eyebrows and imperfections and original vigour, is Francesco bringing us into the time of these statues? Or is he merely bringing them into ours? Which is 'truer' and more valuable, the bust faded by time, or the bust that appears unmediated by it? Also, Francesco thinks *Teatro Romano* signposts another important question, one that's especially pertinent to an Italy that is, after the socioeconomic inertia of the recent recession years, trying to rediscover a lost sense of greatness: "What do we want to make of our past?"

One has to wonder if another reason Francesco is now

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working with inanimate objects is that he felt he had gotten too close to famous human beings (certainly his ironic treatment of them could be mistaken for idolatry). His obsession with celebrities is well-documented. As a teenager growing up in the provincial Italian city of Brescia, 50 miles northeast of Milan, he was cinema-mad and smitten with Donna Summer, then Blondie; and while studying in London he devoured fashion shows. "I remember going to see the Vivienne Westwood shows back in the nineties, or the Galliano show in Paris: the wonderful 1994 one with the wolves howling," he says. "I was obsessed with fashion." Fast forward to today and he's still an artist that you're more likely to see taking in a fashion show than

an art fair. (For the record, the latter agitate him: "You made this object carefully, with so much love, and then you see all these people walking passed and not caring, so you just suffer.")

Nightclubs – particularly London's – also stoked his interest in tribes. In the mid-nineties, a substance-soaked club scene was thriving in the hedonistic British capital. He was never into the club drugs, he claims, but he was hooked on the clubs. "I went to all of them," he says, "not just the gay ones. All the ones promoters like Steve Strange and Leigh Bowery were doing." In them, he encountered a new "concept of queerness," one that didn't exist in Italy, where "you were either straight or a fag," and "being a

fag meant being sophisticated or fashionable." Most of all, he was fascinated by how the social interactions in them had little to do with status or money. Like the loved-up clubbers, this scene was open-armed. "In Italy the club scene was always linked to wealth," he recalls. "You had to be rich and be at the table with a bottle of champagne. Instead, the clubbing culture in London was a real form of culture. It was a leveler, but also bound to different sub-cultures. It was a whole new universe and one I enjoyed terribly."

It was around this time that Francesco took up needlework. He started out making petit-point copies of the calling cards left by prostitutes in phone boxes. On an art-theoretic level it was an early dalliance with appropriation, and "a way of using a very domestic language to represent sex and desire." It was also a declarative statement – "kind of decorative, kind of gay, kind of silly... a

047



24h Museum (2012). For this ephemeral installation sponsored by Prada, Vezzoli erected a "non-existent museum" in Paris' historic Palais d'Éna. It hosted parties and press conferences, as well as interpretations of classical sculptures, during its 24-hour lifespan.

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Selfie Sebastian (Self-portrait as St. Sebastian by Andrea Mantegna, 2009/2014).

It's hard to shake the image of Francesco as a rascalion who, blessed with no small amount of cunning and self-possession, has charmed his way past the towering gates of global celebrity, only to begin chipping gamely away at the pillars with his chisel.



Gala (Portrait of Gala Dali as Sylvia in *La Dolce Vita* (2008).



Tua (Portrait of Dolly Parton After Palma il Vecchio and Ambrosius Bosschaert, 2010).

perfect reaction to the environment I grew up in," as he once told an interviewer. And on another, more prosaic level it got him out of attending classes at Central Saint Martins. "Nothing was wrong with art school," he insists, "it was great, but I hated going. Needlework was the perfect practice to escape school with because to do a full one takes you a month."

It has been a leitmotif in his work ever since. In his screen-printed images and Monty Python-esque appropriations of Renaissance-era Madonna with child paintings, stitched teardrops stream from the faces of contemporary divas such as Dolly Parton and Liza Minnelli, or supermodels such as Naomi Campbell and Linda Evangelista. This isn't mere decoration. For Francesco, there exists a compelling link between celebrity and embroidery – early on in his career he found out that many movie stars practiced it for its therapeutic and solipsistic quality. Particularly inspiring was the story of how Silvana Mangano, Italy's "sophisticated answer to Sophia

Loren," became a needlepoint fanatic after the death of her son in a plane crash. "Learning this," he told a journalist back in 2011, "created a link for me between embroidery as an art form and a place of isolation, concentration, and refuge from pain." In light of this, Francesco's signature tears can be read as an expression of sympathy for the plight of female celebrities.

Links such as this crop up regularly in his work. Whether he's sat quietly embroidering in one of his own videos (self-mythologising is another Vezzoli trope), immortalising iconic women in knock-offs of the old masters ("women fuelled my fascination, men didn't"), staging a week-long takeover of online video channel NOWNESS (as he did in late March), or discussing the machinations of gay hook-up app Grinder, there's usually a hidden depth lurking under that shallow surface. And that won't be going away. What will, he tells me, is the layer of irony that has, until now, coated his substantial body of satirical commentary on celebrity,

glamour, media and fame in our very mixed-up times. "My work used to always be full of irony, but not anymore," he warns.

Are we witnessing an artist at a creative crossroads? It would appear so. Now based in Milan, he spends a lot less time hanging around in capitals such as London or L.A. or on the road – the "comfortable road" – than he used to. And this coming-home is being mirrored in his work. When I ask what we can expect from him next, he talks not of dissecting fame or calling in favours with celebrity friends but furthering his "historical search" and a "big leap into the past and roots of my nation." This is an unexpected about turn for an acclaimed provocateur who was doing very nicely – not a market star by any means, but respected by art institutions, and with a long list of high-profile solo shows, ephemeral events and Venice Biennale appearances to his name. According to Francesco, we should expect more of the unexpected. "I've changed many times, so I'm

not worried about becoming cliché," he says. "First they said, 'ah, you're the needlework artist.' Then they called me the video artist. And now they say I'm the antiquities artist. And in five years I'll be something else."

Still, for now, it's hard to shake the image of Francesco as a rascalion who, blessed with model's looks and no small amount of cunning and self-possession, has charmed his way past the towering gates of international celebrity, only to begin chipping gamely away at the pillars with his chisel. His aim: not to bring them tumbling down, but to show us what their foundations are made of. One hopes that, as he moves back out through the gates and sets off in a new direction, there are many more such transgressions still to come. ✕

Francesco will have a solo show at Turin's Galleria Franco Noero in June, and in November he takes part in New York's Performa 2015 festival. Alternatively, the website www.wannabevezzoli.com lets you make a Vezzoli series of your own.