

Neapolitan dialogues

Naples | As a British gallery

opens in the city, Jackie

Wulschlager picks highlights

of a richly eclectic art scene



Can art compete with Naples? “One may write or paint as much as one likes, but this place, the shore, the gulf, Vesuvius, the citadels, the villas, everything, defies description,” Goethe wrote in 1787. Yet, as three glorious winter exhibitions attest, artists go on trying to draw out the contrasts of beauty and loss, cultural richness and crumbling infrastructure, shrieking street life and silent churches, distinctive to Italy’s most vibrant city.

At the Madre museum’s *Pompei*, some hundred works chart centuries of excited responses to Naples and its ancient sites, including Johan Christian Dahl’s 1820 imaginary Romantic landscape featuring the erupting volcano,

Rebecca Horn’s casting of skulls from the Fontanelle cemetery, illuminated by mirrored lights and animated by a single human voice beginning to chant as you enter her installation “Mother of Pearl Spirits”, and Richard Long’s swirling mud wall paintings surrounding ancient terracotta pots.

Madre, the museum of contemporary art, is housed in a Neoclassical villa down an alley close to the cathedral, and is characterised by a sensitive, affecting palimpsest of styles. Squashed into the city fabric, Madre affords views on one side of its courtyard straight on to the mosaic floors and huge arches of the semi-ruined Donna Regina monastery; on the other, stretch out your hand from the upper windows and you could touch washing hanging from peeling walls of blackened 19th-century apartments.

The antique and conceptual dazzlingly converge, too. Daniel Buren has transformed Madre’s entrance into an atrium of crazy mirrors and red and yellow stripes. Argentine sculptor

Adrián Villar Rojas has installed blocks of stones posing as archaeological findings. Francesco Clemente’s frescoes of modern life enclose a living room transported from Pompeii.

A series of simple elegant white galleries then unfold. In one, Richard Serra in “Judith and Holofernes” pairs two shimmering steel cubes with a warm terracotta female figure and a delicate bronze of a young boy holding out a platter. In another, an Ottaviano mosaic of swimmers and fish battling the waves looks on to Jannis Kounellis’s huge rusty anchor leaning against a metal and glass grid, which rattles as in a storm. Echoing to Horn’s chant of dead souls, such rooms have an exquisite, and cumulative, melancholy: art’s power to memorialise and mythologise.

Madre’s 21st-century offerings, exceptionally, hold their own against ancient

objects such as “The Sleepers” from Pompeii – figures of a father holding a toddler in bed, their poses captured by volcanic debris at the moment of death. Classical and contemporary alike carry an emotional charge which urges you to continue round the corner to the Duomo, itself a magnificent convergence of early Christian, Gothic and baroque architecture. Madre’s mash-up of sights and sounds also connects to everyday life outside: medieval shrines under gaudy Christmas neons still blazing in mid-January; busy shoppers stilled when a singer in an anorak fills the street with an aria from *Traviata*.

To show works that reflect this milieu, its history and geography, obliquely, loosely, without falling into the obvious, is the challenge that

The antique and the conceptual dazzlingly



converge in the Madre's 'Pompei' exhibition

London gallerist Thomas Dane chose for the inaugural untitled show, opening next week, of his Naples gallery, perched above the sea in a whitewashed villa with a grand loggia looking out to Capri. Contemporary Italian dealers are successful in Naples, but this is the first British gallery here: a sign of rising global interest and investment.

Dane has gathered eclectic and unexpected pieces: Steve McQueen's "Running Thunder", about the thin line between sleep and death for a horse lying among swaying blades of grass; Kelley Walker's collages of photographs including Warhol in 1980 with his hand in the mouth of the stone lion in Piazza dei Martiri. Most inspired is "Easter Morning" (2008), the last work by Bruce Conner, who emerged as an experimental filmmaker in the San Francisco Beat community in the 1950s. Its stop-motion shots of close-ups of plants, burning candles, views from a window, a nude woman, all flickering and metamorphosing in blue and amber lights, have an odd affinity with the changing textures of Naples – the open coastal aspect, ornate church interiors, flamboyant sexualised advertising.

The frames move in rhythms to the trancelike beat of Terry Riley's composition "In C" (1964), played on ancient Chinese instruments, giving a phantasmagorical air to everything – notably to Catherine Opie's severe yet empathetic photographs of her friends with tattooed and pierced bodies from the West Coast leather community. Against deep monochromatic backgrounds, they gaze out steadily across the bay, in poses stark, monumental, formal, emulating Old Master portraiture.

There is a dialogue here with portraits by Titian, Raphael, Caravaggio, which are among the highlights at the Capodimonte, Italy's most under-visited great museum. In December director Sylvain Bellenger splendidly refreshed familiar displays by giving "Carta Bianca" to 10 public figures, artists, scientists, entrepreneurs, each to curate a "Capodimonte Imaginaire" gallery of any works from the collection. In this heavy Bourbon palazzo set in a wood of towering palms and ferns, the effects are original and engaging.

Showing Agostino Carracci's Renaissance portraiture with monkeys, satirical rococo figurines of apes as painters and scholars, and delightful 19th-cen-

tury narrative paintings such as Filippo Palizzi's "After the Flood", neurologist Laura Bossi Régnier wonders what depictions of monkeys tell us about attitudes to the human brain. Conceptual prankster Francesco Vezzoli parades sculptural "impossible couples" from different eras: small Meissen figures and Renaissance effigies, a serene Greek "Aphrodite", pompous 18th-century busts, culminating in his own polyurethane giant, "Metamorphosis: Self-portrait as Apollo Killing the Satyr Marsyas", where the fake modern god holds a knife about to flay a 1st-century

AD marble, "Marsyas Playing the Flute". Vezzoli explores the history of taste, and creates human encounters out of works customarily ignored here.

In a pitch-dark gallery entered through red velvet curtains, the crimson, blue and gold hues of Masaccio's 1426 "Crucifixion", set within a gilded Gothic arch, sing out doubly: first from the original small panel where Masaccio depicts the scene from below, so that we look up as if at an altar, and then projected at enormous scale on the back wall, where the painting's dramatic horizontal composition built on the exaggerated extension of Christ's arms, dominates the empty space.

This is Naples-born conductor Riccardo Muti's display, inspired by the effect the painting had on him as a child. Yanking the work out of a museum setting, Muti returns us to the wonder of the early Renaissance, and embodies in a single installation the brilliant colour, theatrical flair and spiritual energy of his native city.

*'Pompei@Madre', to April 30,
madrenapoli.it/en*

*Thomas Dane inaugural show, January 25-
March 24, thomasdanegallery.com*

*'Carta Bianca: Capodimonte Imaginaire', to
June 17, museocapodimonte.beniculturali.it*



Clockwise from top: the Madre museum; its 'Pompei' exhibition; the Vezzoli room, Capodimonte museum; Bruce Conner's 'Easte Morning' (2008); Thomas Dane Gallery; 'The Sleepers' by Alamy, Almedo Benestante, Francesco Squaglia



La proprietà intellettuale è riconducibile alla fonte specificata in testa alla pagina. Il ritaglio stampa è da intendersi per uso privato