

Exhibition Reviews

Italianità: Italian Diaspora Artists Examine Identity.

Curated by Marianna Gatto.

The Italian American Museum of Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California.

May 5, 2018–January 13, 2019.

Italianità at the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles (IAMLA) showcased the visual art of Italian diasporic artists and aimed to explore the diversity of experiences and themes that fall under the rubric of Italian identities found outside of Italy. Curator Marianna Gatto made good use of a small space to achieve the exhibit's ambitious goals. The exhibit succeeded in underscoring the important contributions of artists connected to the Italian diaspora and highlighted the complexity that defines Italian identities abroad. The works on display covered a time span from 1935 to 2018 and included both canonical figures and contemporary Italian diasporic artists. As such, the exhibit was a testament to the fluid nature of the Italian diaspora, a concept that has grown to include not only turn-of-the century Italian migrants and their descendants but also those Italians who at present are living and working outside of Italy.

The fully restored Italian Hall in downtown Los Angeles, home to IAMLA, was a fitting venue for *Italianità*. Constructed in 1908, the Italian Hall was a central gathering place for Los Angeles's Italian community until the middle part of the twentieth century. As the oldest surviving structure of the city's Italian enclave, the hall itself is a testament to a history that, until recently, many had forgotten. Indeed, despite the long presence of Italians in Southern California, Italian American history and culture remain more closely associated with the major population centers of the East Coast. Like the building that houses it, *Italianità* underscored those substantive and important parts of the Italian diasporic experience that are too often overlooked. True to the museum's mission to showcase the historical and ongoing Italian American contribution to Southern California, *Italianità* highlighted the work of artists connected to the region, such as Rico Lebrun, Robert Peluce, Leo Politi, Joseph Mugnaini, David Trulli, Italo Scanga, and Michele Nardon Renn, to name a few. In addition to these artists, featured works by Paolo Soleri, Joseph Stella, Ralph Fasanella, Anthony Riccio, Margaret Ricciardi, and Luci Callipari-Marcuzzo exemplified the rich diversity of Italian diasporic identities throughout the United States and beyond.

Among the featured works by artists with ties to the Southern California area, pieces by Lebrun, Mugnaini, Scanga, Peluce, and Luigia Martelloni were especially noteworthy; of these artists, Lebrun and Mugnaini are the best-

known, and their pieces are well-suited to underscore the important work of Italian diasporic artists in California. Lebrun was a key figure in the modernist art movement in Los Angeles, while Mugnaini is remembered for his years-long collaboration with Ray Bradbury. Lebrun's *Turtle Soldier* (1958) in particular reflects the influence of Italian religious imagery, harkening back to his study of Luca Signorelli's *Last Judgment* in Orvieto. Peluce's painting *Fun House Redux* (2002), on the other hand, appears to draw on Italian architectural tropes and commedia dell'arte figures for a distinctly interesting allegorical work. Also worthy of note were the two pieces by Scanga: the mixed-media *Madonna That Cries Blood* (1974) and the sculpture *Monte Cassino: The Animals Surprise* (1983). Scanga was the only artist to have more than one work in the exhibit, and each is a striking example of the artist's use of Italian folklore and religious iconography. Finally, Martelloni's *Sea of Promises* (2018), a three-dimensional installation organized around a boat, pays homage to the act of migration and expressly draws on Italy's *arte povera* movement for inspiration.

Italian Australian artist Callipari-Marcuzzo's *Tracciando fili del passato: ricamo* (*Tracing Threads of the Past: Embroidery*) (1950/2016–2018) is a fine example of the work of diasporic artists who are based outside the Southern California area. Callipari-Marcuzzo is an “interdisciplinary artist” of Calabrian descent whose work focuses on questions of spirituality, cultural practices, and women's roles in Italian Australian society. Like Scanga and Martelloni, Callipari-Marcuzzo makes use of everyday materials as a vehicle to explore the Italian diasporic experience. Her installation comprised eleven embroideries, each of which the artist made during a live performance. The embroideries depict Calabrian proverbs and explore female family relationships by showcasing both a craft and a proverbial wisdom that are handed down from mother to daughter. As such, *Tracciando fili del passato* is one of a few works that contributed a feminist perspective to the questions of diasporic identity that *Italianità* examines.

In addition to *Tracciando fili del passato*, works by Stella and Soleri also remind us of the contributions of diasporic artists outside of Southern California. Their pieces further stood out as the work of two of the best-known figures included in the exhibit. Stella's *Smoke Stack* (1935) is an important reminder both of the artist's role in carrying the influence of Italian futurism to American shores and of his impact on subsequent generations of American artists, especially the abstract expressionists. Soleri's work, a series of sketches dating from 1946 to 1947, is especially notable as a rendering of his arrival in the United States from Italy. Soleri, most known for his work as the architect of the experimental city of Arcosanti in Arizona, captured his reaction to arriving at Ellis Island in his drawings of the Great Hall and the Manhattan skyline.

Though small in size, *Italianità* conveys a nuanced understanding of Italian diasporic identities, and Gatto is to be commended for carefully selecting

pieces to achieve this end. Highlighting the contributions of canonical figures, alongside the important work of contemporary artists, *Italianità* was a testament to the remarkable diversity of the Italian diaspora and furthered the museum's mission to engage with the history of the Italians of Los Angeles and beyond. By extension, the exhibit did a service to Italian diaspora studies, reminding specialists and the general public alike of the complexity and richness of the diasporic identity and culture.

—JOSEPH TUMOLO

University of California, Los Angeles

Italian Brooklyn: Photographs by Martha Cooper.

Curated by Martha Cooper.

John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, New York City, New York.

April 19–December 14, 2018.

What does Italian American life look like? A recent exhibition of Martha Cooper's photographs at Queens College's John D. Calandra Italian American Institute explored this question for a brief window of time in Brooklyn's history. Cooper's images in *Italian Brooklyn: Photographs by Martha Cooper* coincide with the era of films like *Saturday Night Fever*, *The Warriors*, and *Dog Day Afternoon*—that is to say a time before celebrity chefs, man-bunned hipsters, waterfront parks, and large-scale gentrification. The city teetered near insolvency, municipal services were cut, and labor strikes were commonplace. New York City was gritty, and Brooklyn, the most populous borough and largely working class, was grittier. White ethnics were the majority demographic group in Brooklyn, and Italian Americans dominated portions of Bay Ridge, Bensonhurst, Bath Beach, Williamsburg, and Gravesend (Romalewski 2013). That would shift dramatically in the 1990s and later, as Brooklyn became increasingly heterogeneous. *Italian Brooklyn: Photographs by Martha Cooper* documents without nostalgia or kitsch the vitality of Italian American vernacular culture in the early 1980s in a loving portrait that breathes life into a world largely gone.

Cooper and folklorist Joseph Sciorra were commissioned to document Italian American culture for the Brooklyn Educational and Cultural Alliance in 1981; Sciorra identified a rich variety of expressive activities, from cooking, to religious rites, to the care of shrines, to the construction of puppet theaters, to laboring in the community. Cooper, now seventy-five, is an internationally