

Interview: Francesco Vezzoli

The Italian artist and film-maker on his 'obsession' with truth and the connection between sexuality, art and capitalism



Cindy Sherman stars in Vezzoli's video for Rufus Wainwright's opera 'Prima Donna'

Generally, videos are a cross that art-lovers have to bear. Most are too long and pretentious, made by practitioners who would never have survived were they obliged to use a less generous medium such as paint or marble.

So it was with a heavy heart that I pushed open the curtain that shielded Francesco Vezzoli's film at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Six minutes later, I was reeling. For "Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal's 'Caligula' " was a hilarious riff on Bob Guccione's 1979 movie Caligula. Disavowed by Vidal, the original screenwriter, Caligula had been panned by critics as a piece of hard-porn kitsch masquerading as a feature film.

Vezzoli had made a trailer for a movie that didn't exist inspired by one that was never what it pretended to be. Furthermore, he had scooped up Hollywood stars, including Helen Mirren — who had also appeared in Guccione's film — Milla Jovovich and Benicio del Toro. Vidal himself intoned the introduction. Courtney Love popped up in a cameo as Caligula. Not only was it far more engaging than most artists' films, the logistics were baffling. How did Vezzoli persuade his all-star cast to participate? Mirren is a busy woman. Vidal was no pushover.

"Sincerity and flowers!" Vezzoli replies when I ask him, 10 years later, how he had convinced such legends to work with him.

After half an hour in his company, I believe him. With floppy chestnut hair, treacle-brown eyes and a tanned, well-proportioned figure in floral cotton shorts and blue hoodie, the 43-year-old looks like a 21st-century Christ as cast by a better director than Guccione.

Even without the tiny diamond cross around his neck, his thoughtful manner suggests that he is a man of compassion. (When I ask if he is a Christian, he replies simply: “My grandmother gave me this [cross] hours before she died.” He proffers a gold band on his right hand. “This is from my other grandmother.”)

Represented by galleries including Gagosian, with recent shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and MoMA PS1 in New York, and chosen to inaugurate Italy’s national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007, alongside Arte Povera star Giuseppe Penone, Vezzoli is one of Europe’s most successful contemporary artists.

His career balances on a tightrope of satire. Like an antidote to a virus, his art combats the absurdities of 21st-century culture by injecting viewers with small doses of its poisons: celebrity, fame, image and wealth. At the 2007 Biennale, he debuted “Democracy”, a video of a fake US election campaign starring Catherine Deneuve and the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy as the über-glamorous candidates bankrolled by petrodollars and false promises.

Of late he has cast ancient statuary, rather than Hollywood actors, in leading roles. In September he will unveil his new sculpture “Eternal Kiss” at Almine Rech gallery in London. Showing two classical marble heads turned towards each other so that their lips — hers reddened by Vezzoli with paint — appear about to touch, its creation has evolved from Teatro Romano, the show Vezzoli presented at MoMA PS1 last year. There, he worked with archeologists, conservators and polychrome specialists to redecorate five ancient Roman busts in radiant hues similar to those they would have originally boasted.

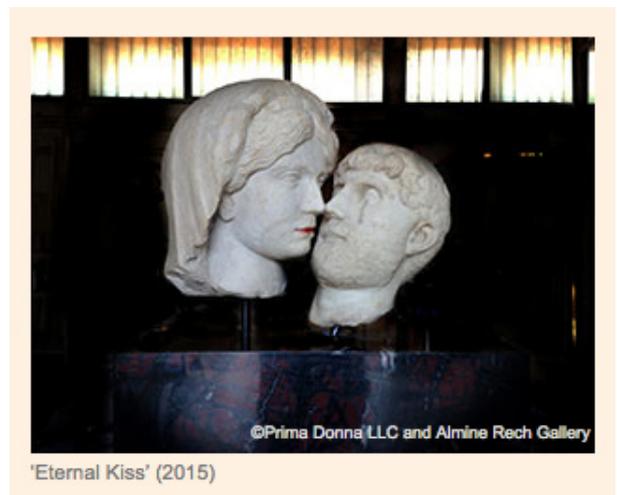
His fascination with both Hollywood and classical Rome stem from what he describes as his “obsession” with reality. “I cannot read fiction or sci-fi,” he says, in perfect English with Mediterranean inflections. “It stems from an emotional antipathy for lies. I like history. I watch documentaries. I read biographies.

“I am interested in the truth. That’s why [my films] are a way of highlighting how little is true in Hollywood and the media. The biggest lie in classical art is the lack of colour,” he continues, referring to the fact that today’s surviving marbles are denuded of their rainbow-bright skins. “You take the colour away and everything becomes like a Calvin Klein advertisement in the 1980s...like a minimalist fantasy.”

A mood of illusion prevails in Vezzoli’s own life: our interview in Milan takes place in a suite of offices belonging to lighting manufacturer Flos.

“This isn’t my apartment,” he says. “But they very kindly let me sleep [in a flat] here when I am in Milan.” Designed by Achille Castiglioni, the elegant space is a reminder of Milan’s glory days as a hub of interior style. Yet it is far from homely. Wouldn’t he prefer something cosier?

“I don’t have a dog. I don’t have a boyfriend. I don’t have a driving licence,” he replies with a melancholy laugh. “The more I worked with the most famous people in the world, the more I wanted to keep myself anonymous.”





Vezzoli in 'Self-portrait'

Although Vezzoli's upbringing was liberal — his father was a lawyer and his mother a paediatrician — growing up in 1970s Italy was no breeze for any child who yearned for a world beyond conventional parameters. After graduating in classical literature and history, he moved to London in the 1990s. He enrolled at Central Saint Martins but more than art school, where the shadow of the Young British Artists “hung over us like owls”, it was the city that seduced him: “I explored the nightlife. I explored my sexuality. In Italy being gay was always linked to something fancier. The figure of the antiquarian, for example. That Visconti identity,” he says — referring to the great Italian film director responsible for such exquisite elegies to unrequited gay love as *Death in Venice*.

In London, however, there was “a gay identity that was working class”, he says, still sounding slightly amazed.

With friends including the performer Leigh Bowery, Vezzoli threw himself into the London club scene. “Back then, it was not based on money. The doorkeepers didn't look at you like the gatekeeper from Art Basel who is just checking out your Birkin.”

His words highlight the connection he makes between sexuality, art and capitalism. “Thanks to psychoanalysis and feminism and gay politics, we started to become more honest,” he says. “But now we are closing down and disclaiming certain truths that we took for granted long ago. Have you noticed how little sex there is in contemporary art? How little romance? Yet if you go to the internet, love and sex sell more than anything else. Contemporary art is so cold. It's a tool for the wealthy to show their power, money and inhumanity.”

Yet as an artist represented by one of the world's most commercially influential galleries, isn't he in danger of hypocrisy? “I resist [commercialisation],” he says firmly. “I do works like that.” He points to an image on the office wall: a laserprint of Saint Sebastian with jewels attached to his nipples. “[My work] is about putting the colour back on.”

Beneath Vezzoli's LA-bright veneer lurks a singularly Italian anima. Among his finest works is his three-part video “An Embroidered Trilogy” (1997-99), which shows three divas, including Truffaut muse Valentina Cortese, crooning torch-songs while Vezzoli sews in an armchair, oblivious to their high-octane emotions. He made the trilogy partly in homage to Visconti: “I learnt from the YBAs that you have to be true to your roots or it will have a very short run.”

Vezzoli's gift for both mocking and celebrating our nostalgia for a more sensuous past returns in his latest project, a video made as a backdrop for *Prima Donna*, a contemporary opera written by singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright.

“Can I show you?” he opens his smartphone and an ageing diva in a feather-trimmed silk gown fills the screen. What follows is 10 minutes of melodrama as the singer bids operatic farewell to her career. The actress is none other than Cindy Sherman, contemporary art's mistress of disguise. *Prima Donna* will premiere on September 15 in the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, the ancient amphitheatre below the Acropolis, as part of an international conference on democracy.

How fitting that Sherman and Vezzoli should find a showcase together in the cradle of Greek drama, another art which spoke honestly to power using the language of masquerade. Sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction.

‘Eternal Kiss’, September 8-October 3, at Almine Rech Gallery, London; alminerech.com

‘Prima Donna’, September 15, Odeon of Herodes Atticus, Athens; athensdemocracyforum.com

Photographs: Courtesy of the artist, Prima Donna LLC and Almine Rech Gallery