

STEAL OF THE MONTH

Mother Love

Francesco Vezzoli's upcoming New York show depicts supermodels as Madonnas. By Dodie Kazanjian. Photographed by Annie Leibovitz.

It makes perfect sense that the Italian artist-provocateur Francesco Vezzoli is having his first one-person New York gallery show at Larry Gagosian's vast space on West Twenty-first Street. The 39-year-old artist has pitched his aesthetic tent at the crossroads of performance, celebrity, and fashion, and his show, which opens on January 20, makes canny use of the gallery's reputation as the high church of contemporary art—the scene of recent museum-quality exhibitions of Picasso, Monet, and Rauschenberg. Vezzoli asked architect Annabelle Selldorf to help him transform the space into a Renaissance chapel containing his reinterpretations of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Madonna-and-child paintings in which the Virgin's features are replaced by those of Claudia Schiffer, Linda Evangelista, and other supermodels. In each case, mother and son are shedding large tears, which Vezzoli has added in his signature needlework. "I'm sweating all the blood I have to make a fantastic show," he tells me, "but if some New York critics don't like it, what can I say? I've already booked my flight home the morning after the opening."

Vezzoli's videos, films, performance pieces, and embroidery paintings are all characterized by a sense of knowing how far to go too far. Being photographed with his mother by Annie Leibovitz for *Vogue* was his idea. Leibovitz's celebrity portraits have always personified American glamour to him. "I love everything she represents," says Vezzoli, who has lured such high-wattage gods and goddesses as Catherine Deneuve,

Gore Vidal, Cate Blanchett, Anita Ekberg, and Lady Gaga to appear (gratis) in his videos and performance works. "To me, she's the ultimate human-beings portrayer, the Boldini, the Sargent. This time, the diva was photographing me, rather than me photographing the diva."

In sync with his Gagosian show, the photograph takes the form of a living Pietà. Titti Guizzi-Vezzoli, Francesco's mama, swathed in a borrowed \$300K brown sable that is "the kind of thing my mother would never wear," makes her living as a pediatrician in Brescia, the small Northern Italian city where Francesco grew up. "She enjoyed the whole experience," he says. "She said it was like a fairy tale. She was ready to do anything, even be naked, with leaves on."

Vezzoli recently overheard his mother telling an art critic that for her son, being an artist was an excuse to do all the things he'd always wanted to do since he was five years old. "It was a beautiful thing for her to say," he tells me. "I use art to meet people, to know them, to work with them, to express my aesthetic vision and obsessions. My mother gave me the answer." □



MAMMA MIA!

The artist, with his mother, Titti Guizzi-Vezzoli. On Titti: Dennis Basso sable coat. Miu Miu shoes. OPPOSITE: Vezzoli's *Crying Portrait of Tatjana Patitz as Renaissance Madonna with Holy Child (After Raffaello)*, 2010. Details, see In This Issue.

Sittings Editor: Alexandra Kotur.

Photo: The Broomfield Project; Opposite: Alice Lena for NARS; Courtesy of Larry Gagosian; Photo of Renaissance Madonnas with Holy Child (After Raffaello)

