

R o m e

Diamond in the Rough

BY ANA VUKADIN



NAVIN RAWANCHAIKUL, *Ciao da Roma*, 2018, oil on canvas, 160 × 336 cm. Courtesy Navin Production, Chiang Mai.

I grew up in Rome in the 1990s as a first-generation immigrant—one of the privileged ones who attended an international school. I distinctly recall, though, the injustice that I felt on the playground, where speaking English brought admiration while communicating in languages from outside the European Union made you a foreigner from a backward country (in my case, former Yugoslavia). Yet, despite the casual racism and dysfunction, I adored Rome. Its beauty was breathtaking and it was queen of all that mattered: art, delicious pizza, and gelato.

Things have changed since then; you hear more foreign languages everywhere. Still, Rome is home to only 13 percent of the nation's migrant population, a modest share compared to Milan (19.9 percent), or even the smaller city of Florence (16 percent). The financial crisis, ongoing since the 1990s, means a fraying infrastructure that fails to attract and support residents, who navigate an urban landscape of endless potholes, double-parked cars, vandalized parks, and the occasional self-combusting bus.

Amid all this, conversations on diversity, gender, and sexual identity often take a backseat. "Multiculturalism is relegated to individual realities, organizations, and foreign institutes," says Paola

Guadagnino, founder and director of T293 gallery, pointing to the lack of systemic change within the country. T293 is one of few Rome galleries challenging the European art historical canon. In 2020, it mounted solo shows spotlighting Kabul-born Hangama Amiri, whose textiles recreate the bazaars of her childhood memories; Tendai Mupita's drawings, which are inspired by Zimbabwe's spiritual traditions; and Korean-American artist Anna Park's dynamic charcoal-on-paper works.

Commercial galleries have played a significant role in expanding the capital's Eurocentric culture. Since its inauguration in 2007, Gagosian's Rome outpost has presented exhibitions of artists from its international roster, including Huma Bhabha and Sarah Sze, and in 2015, New York-based art dealer Gavin Brown converted a deconsecrated church into a gallery, Sant'Andrea de Scaphis. Among the noteworthy shows staged there, "Love is the Message, the Message is Death" comprised Arthur Jafa's video montage on Black America, while Frida Orupabo's stunning "12 Self Portraits" featured her black-and-white collages tackling the legacies of colonialism.

Making headway in the nonprofit sector, Sarah Cosulich, artistic director of the Rome Quadriennale of Italian

art, has made diversity central to the platform's curatorial vision. Co-curated by Cosulich and Stefano Collicelli Cagol, the 2020 event, titled "Fuori," launched in October with over 40 artists, including filmmaker Yervant Gianikian, Palestinian architect and researcher Sandi Hilal and her partner Alessandro Petti, and Kosovo-born Petrit Halilaj. "We wanted to support and show how Italy is porous and in debt to the contributions of other cultures," says Cosulich, who views Italy's stringent citizenship laws as a hurdle to developing "a more cohesive and rigorous debate on diversity and inclusion."

Hou Hanru, artistic director of MAXXI, echoes Cosulich's sentiments: "Cultural diversity has always been a very important part of understanding how Italy has been formed and transformed over time." His curatorial leadership in Rome cannot be overstated. Since starting his tenure at MAXXI in 2013, he has presented an unfalteringly ambitious exhibition program that examines issues such as postcolonialism, globalization, capitalism, and the environmental crisis. He views MAXXI as an "interactive entity." Its dialogue with the Mediterranean region and the Middle East, for example, has culminated in group exhibitions including "Home Beirut. Sounding the Neighbors" (2017-18) and

"The Street: Where the World Is Made" (2018-19).

In 2018, MAXXI decided to commission Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul, who is of Indian descent, to create a project on Rome's South Asian community. The debut of the painting *Ciao da Roma* (2018), originally scheduled for December 2020, was pushed to February due to Covid-19. The composition alludes to Bollywood posters and features the city's largest diasporic population going about their daily lives. Notes and photographs from the artist's informal conversations with the community in local markets, bars, and temples are woven into the portrait. Running across the top, in Italian and English, is the sentence, "The world is in flux and our notions of home are changing."

The phrase resonates strongly in the context of the pandemic. Covid-19 has taken a huge toll on Rome's art community, which was already battling poor state funding and a stifling bureaucracy. Adrienne Drake, director of the Fondazione Giuliani, believes that now is the time to focus on grassroots arts initiatives and to build resilience using Rome's own assets. "Rome is never going to be New York. We have to stop thinking that we have to aspire to something that is unattainable and concentrate on what the resources of the community are and bring those to the foreground."