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THE TALK

## Modern Masters in Naples

By [ERIC KONIGSBERG](#)

When my parents went to [Naples, Italy](#), 15 years ago, a taxi driver told my mother to hide her Mandarina Duck handbag under the back seat, the better to elude the city's notorious thieves. If the image brings to mind an out-of-towner's visit to New York during that same time, be assured that Naples is Naples, a city quite unlike any other, although it (much like New York) has overcome its reputation as a crime capital.

It is the city of Mount Vesuvio and [Pompeii](#), of the Camorra Mafia and a continuing garbage-removal problem. It has the best tailors in Italy. We also know it as the backdrop of Pasolini's "Il Decameron" and Billy Wilder's "Avanti" and multiple films starring Sophia Loren. What is not so well known is that Naples is also home to a group of first-rate [art](#) galleries and emerging talent. While [Turin](#) still holds the title as the country's premier destination for contemporary art, Naples is Italy's best-kept secret.

"In the late '60s, all the artists were passing through Napoli," says Laura Trisorio, who owns [Studio Trisorio](#), one of the city's blue-chip galleries. Major figures like [Andy Warhol](#), Sol Lewitt and [Robert Rauschenberg](#) were attracted to the unpredictability, the carnival-like and seamier qualities of the city. Studio Trisorio was founded by Laura's father, Pasquale, in 1974, after years of collecting. Pasquale had turned Villa Orlandi, the family's estate on the nearby island of [Capri](#), into a salon of sorts, inviting artists to stay and work on the grounds. The first to come was Cy Twombly, followed by others — Joseph Beuys, Dan Flavin, Mario Merz, even the La Mama theater troupe. "When Mario Merz made neon numbers and put them up on columns in front of the house, the people of Capri were thinking these were signals to the contrabandisti," Trisorio says. Today she shows a mix of foreign and Italian artists, including Rebecca Horn, Martin Parr, Marco Bagnoli and Enzo Cucchi.

Along with Trisorio, there are a dozen or so visionary dealers, most of them clustered around Piazza dei Martiri in the Chiaia district — more or less the southern-Italian equivalent of Madison Avenue, with a bit of the Lower East Side thrown in. The piazza is an elegant square with a white 19th-century obelisk in the middle depicting four lions in various states of combat (dead, wounded, stable, fighting), each commemorating a different battle in Neapolitan history.

The galleristi are a diverse lot. Some are entrenched establishment figures like Trisorio, Lia Rumma and [Alfonso Artiaco](#), all of whom also represent quite a few artists who are relatively new to the scene. The rest run tiny, entrepreneurial galleries dedicated to more challenging work. Paola Guadagnino and Marco Altavilla's T293 recently held an exhibit of exquisitely detailed, cartoonish drawings by Mario Maffei, a young Neapolitan; they also show artists from further afield like Claire Fontaine, a French collective that works with neon and video installation. (The galleries' prevailing focus on the modern has made for a bias against painting — too quattrocento — in favor of photography and multimedia works.)

Another upstart, Giangi Fonti, who abandoned his law career to open a gallery, is cultivating individuals like Piero Golia, a longtime friend and Neapolitan bambino terribile. Golia is best known for a performance-and-photography piece in which he convinced a girl he had met on the street to get a large tattoo of his face on her back with “Piero My Idol” printed beneath it. In a rather traditional city like Naples, this is controversial stuff. Which may be why Golia, like several of Fonti's local artists, has a better track record abroad than in Naples. In New York, he is represented by Bortolami-Dayan, a gallery in Chelsea. Seb Patane, another of Fonti's Italian artists, who lives in [London](#), will have a solo exhibit in the [Tate Gallery's](#) Art Now program this fall.

Only two years ago, before the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donna Regina Napoli and the Palazzo delle Arti Napoli (P.A.N.) opened their doors, there were no museums in Naples devoted to contemporary art. “Except for once in a while an exhibit at the Capodimonte, all the contemporary work was being introduced to Napoli by the galleries,” says Artiaco, who moved his gallery from the nearby town of Pozzuoli to Naples in 2004.

The public sector has come a long way, in fact, and although the P.A.N. does not have a permanent collection, the city of Naples, in a sense, does. Some of the subway stations feature works contributed by Joseph Kosuth, Janis Kounellis and others. And every Christmas season the city's main square, the Piazza del Plebiscito, is given over to a large installation by a different artist: Anish Kapoor, Richard Serra, Horn, Lewitt. Last year some 3,000 people turned out to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Artiaco's gallery.

Artiaco, a tall, bearish fellow who opened the gallery when he was only 22, using the money he'd made coaching a children's swim club (“that was 30 kilos ago,” he says), has made a point of investing in the future of young Italian artists, such as the Naples-based duo Bianco-Valente, known for the gorgeous botanical and urban video stills they print on plastic. “Many of them — so many Italian artists, in fact — their work is devoted to memory,” says Artiaco's gallery director, Barbara Crespigni. “We have a problematic relationship with our own history, especially with art. We had so many periods that are certified — the Renaissance, the Baroque and so on. What can you do with art after all this history?”

One of the more interesting works Artiaco showed recently was by Raffaele Luongo, a Neapolitan who was born in [Venezuela](#). He installed a small video camera inside a water-filled basin, the sides of which were lined with the artist's tiny reproductions of paintings important to the forming of his sensibility, including works by Georg Baselitz, Donald Baechler and the Neapolitan Francesco Clemente. The basin, in the middle of the gallery, was flanked by two fans, which caused the camera to spin slowly, and what it filmed — blurred, bubble-dotted images of the paintings in this “personal museum” — was shown live on two large screens.

Lia Rumma, known as the Mary Boone of Naples, holds court at her gallery most evenings. On a recent Friday night, she arrived from [Milan](#), where she also has an outpost, wearing large sunglasses, a white pantsuit and a single Bakelite earring. She opened shop in 1971, not long after the death of her husband, a publisher and proponent of the Arte Povera movement. “We had been very young collectors, and when he died, his parents were able by law to take two-thirds of his collection and sell it, because we had no children,” she says. “I couldn't afford to collect anymore, so this was the only way to go on and continue to live among artists.”

Rumma considers herself more of a mentor, or at least a champion of artists, than a dealer, citing Thomas Ruff's photographs of the Naples fish market and Anselm Kiefer's seven concrete towers at the Pirelli estate in Milan, an installation that she curated. "It's the most important Kiefer piece in the world," she says. "People come to Milano to see Leonardo's 'Last Supper' and the Kiefer." But she is also very devoted to Naples's own, like the video artist Franco Scognamiglio, whom she represents.

"I am trying to form an Italian group of artists," she says. "The galleries have tended to be so focused here on big international artists. It's more important to show a young American artist than a local artist, since we are so peripheral to the art world." Although she can take credit for introducing Italy to Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth and Thomas Ruff, part of the 1990s German school of photography, it troubles her that none of her most celebrated artists are local. As one of Rumma's staffers explains of Scognamiglio, "He is wonderfully cultured. I think he could be much bigger if he lived somewhere else."

That, however, is more of a practical problem — not insurmountable, at least not with sufficient care and feeding of the most promising. At her gallery, Rumma painstakingly shared the work of a half-dozen people she works with: Kiefer and Ruff, yes, but also Michele Guido, an artist whose day job turned out to be putting up work at her galleries here and in Milan. She said it was because of, not despite, his Neapolitan roots that he had such potential. "We are always on the limit of an explosion: so much crime at night, garbage," Rumma says. "Vesuvio can blow up, we could have an earthquake. And from this, a great artist can be born."

## ESSENTIALS: NAPLES, ITALY

### Hotels

Chiaia Hotel de Charme. Friendly, modest pensione in a superb central location on a pedestrianized street. Via Chiaia, 216; 011-39-081-415-555; [www.hotelchiaia.it](http://www.hotelchiaia.it); doubles from about \$136. [Costantinopoli 104](http://www.costantinopoli104.it). Beautiful 19th-century villa, close to museums and sights. Via Santa Maria di Costantinopoli, 104; 011-39-081-557-1035; [www.costantinopoli104.it](http://www.costantinopoli104.it); doubles from \$285. [Hotel Excelsior](http://www.starwoodhotels.com). A grand hotel, with beautiful views facing the bay. Via Partenope, 48; 011-39-081-764-0111; [www.starwoodhotels.com](http://www.starwoodhotels.com); doubles from \$488. Micalo. Slick, simple boutique hotel, near shopping, galleries and the water. Riviera di Chiaia, 88; 011-39-081-761-7131; [www.micalo.it](http://www.micalo.it); doubles from \$183.

### Galleries and Museums

Alfonso Artiaco. Features local talent as well as art stars like Darren Almond and Rita McBride. Piazza dei Martiri, 58; 011-39-081-497-6072. Galleria Fonti. This three-year-old gallery is housed in a 17th-century palazzo. Via Chiaia, 229; 011-39-081-411-409. Galleria Lia Rumma. Run by the grande dame of the Naples art scene. Via Vannella Gaetani, 12; 011-39-081-764-3619. Galleria Raucci/Santamaria. Offers an international program of artists. Corso Amedeo di Savoia, 190; 011-39-081-744-3645. Mimmo Scognamiglio Arte Contemporanea. A mix of established and emerging talent. Via Mariano d'Ayala, 6; 011-39-081-400-871. Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donna Regina Napoli. Important works by Francesco Clemente, Jeff Koons and Andy Warhol. Via Settembrini, 79; 011-39-081-562-4561. Palazzo delle Arte Napoli. Focuses on local artists from the last 50 years. Via dei Mille, 60; 011-39-081-795-

8605. Studio Trisorio. This blue-chip gallery opened an outpost in Rome in 2003. Riviera di Chiala, 215; 011-39-081-414-306. T293. Focuses on up-and-coming artists. Piazza Amendola, 4; 011-39-081-197-281-16.

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