

Press Release

**Through the female gaze: women and work in Italy since the 1950s**

Italian Cultural Institute, London

3-23 December 2021



The exhibition looks at how female photographers have explored the world of work in contemporary Italy, with over 100 selected images from the work of 12 female artists and two collectives, together with important loans from the Collezione Donata Pizzi and a selection of images from UDI (Union of Italian Women) Archive in Bologna.

A constellation of women from different generations are brought together through their shared use of the medium of photography as a means of personal emancipation and political inquiry. The selection includes: Paola Agosti, Marcella Campagnano, Lisetta Carmi, Liliana Barchiesi, Letizia Battaglia, Cristina Omenetto, Collettivo Donne Fotoreporter, Nicole Gravier, Gruppo del Mercoledì, Allegra Martin, Gabriella Mercadini, Michela Palermo, Alessandra Spranzi, Francesca Volpi .

The exhibition is curated by Maria Chiara Di Trapani and coordinated by historians Ilaria

Favretto (Kingston University), Nico Pizzolato (Middlesex University) and Eloisa Betti (Università di Bologna and UDI). It is sponsored and funded by Kingston University, Association of Modern Italian Studies, Middlesex University, Italian Cultural Institute (London and Edinburgh), with loans from UDI archive, Bologna; Collezione Donata Pizzi; Cineteca di Bologna; Noi Donne magazine.

The show is displayed in the ground floor and the basement of the Italian Cultural Institute, London into a long sequence mostly in black and white, accompanied by two site-specific video projections. It will open in the main space of the Italian Cultural Institute, Edinburgh, on the 8th of March 2022. A selection of 64 images will be on display, from the 3rd of December, on a virtual platform, freely accessible on this [link](#).

Two main themes are investigated: documentary photography of the world of work, broadly construed, and artistic experimentation understood as "research into the self in between female identity and social roles".

The images flow together like in a feature film, essentially in black and white. The *punctum* of this "continuous flow" is the reciprocal seeking out and looking at each other with respect and empathy, in a game of reflected mirrors, in which the difference or distance between the person behind the lens and the one in front melts away.

The artists presented here are well-known to the general public and include have been the subject of great international recognition as Letizia Battaglia, the first woman to head the photo team of the newspaper *L'Ora* who shot for over a decade the mafia killings in Palermo; or Lisetta Carmi, well known for her trailblazer series "I travestiti" (1965). On display on this occasion is her series dedicated to the workers in the Port of Genoa, or in the cork factories in Sardinia.

The UK public will have the opportunity to see for the first time Paola Agosti's ethnographic reportage *Immagini dal mondo dei vinti*, and the series *La donna e la Macchina-The Woman and the Machine* (1983) as well the reportages by Gabriella Mercadin a militant photographer and contributor to *Noi Donne* and *Il Manifesto* newspaper, Mercadin captures strikes, marches and demonstrations on film, focusing on the themes of women's emancipation in 70's. She stands out for her predilection for vertical framing and the handwriting with which she fills the white border of the small-format print to convey the captions and content of the events represented.

The search for the self in between female identity and social roles is the main theme of artistic experimentation of many artists also in the 70's. Nicole Gravier, Alessandra Spranzi, Liliana Barchiesi questioned myths and gender clichés in their series, using an ironic and irreverent style.

In an atmosphere suspended between happenings and studio portraits, disguise, make-up and camouflage become instruments of "a conscious collective game to reveal oneself" and to free oneself from prejudices and stereotypes in Marcella Campagnano's series "Ruoli" (Roles) ; Collettivo Donne Fotoreporter become creators of *tableaux vivants* that prompt a reflection on the female condition in the context of the profession of photography, overturning the usual points of view.

The analysis of migrant labour in Italy is the theme of the authorial reportage conducted by Cristina Omenetto in her long-term editorial projects in the 90's, and more recently Michela Palermo's investigation into the second generation of migrants in Italy, born and raised in one of the poorest towns in Campania, Castel Volturno.

Photography in colour is the language of Allegra Martin's *Welfare* project on daily moments inside the recreational spaces where women who have finally reached the age of honourable retirement meet and gather. In colour are also the photostories of Francesca Volpi's photojournalistic series, whose images show the world through the first tragic moments of the COVID emergency in Bergamo in 2020. A delicate and powerful work, which allows us to glimpse at the commitment of medical staff in providing care and assistance at the advent of the pandemic, and the respect and dedication of the photographer in reporting and informing.

Each of the authors in the exhibition uses their lens to enter into communication with other women, occupying a pioneering role in the craft of Italian photography, in every sphere, whether in artistic experimentation, photojournalism or social documentation. The selection of images from which the exhibition and this publication take their title is presented as a narrative of "photography by women" over the last fifty years, and it is intended to be a contribution rather than a definitive verdict to the understanding of the role of women in Italian photography.

## REFERENCES

**Collezione Donata Pizzi** started in 2015 with the aim of bringing together and promoting the work of female photographers and artists active in Italy since the 1960s. In a few years, more than 70 authors are currently held by the Pizzi Collection representing some of the most significant conceptual, aesthetic and technological developments in the history of Italian photography.

**UDI (Union of Italian Women)** is the largest organisation for the emancipation and freedom of women in Italy. Since its foundation in 1945, UDI has participated in the construction of a republican and democratic Italy. The photographs are selected within a vast chronological

spectrum, between the second half of the 1940s and the end of the 1970s, with a focus on Emilia Romagna, a region where there was a remarkable participation of women into the world of work. These photographs are not all by women, most of them have the signature of Enrico Pasquali, but women remain the central subject of the images and central to the aims of the curatorial project of the UDI archive. **Info and images**

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1wLf32SvntPu5wLS1xsrh66jBZ6rcTFnU?usp=sharing>

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