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150° anniversario Unità d'Italia

Part of the celebrations of the 150<sup>th</sup>  
anniversary of the Unification of Italy

**Estorick** Collection  
of modern italian art

# United Artists of Italy Photographic Portraits

**22 June – 4 September 2011**

**Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art**

39a Canonbury Square

London N1 2AN

[www.estorickcollection.com](http://www.estorickcollection.com)

**A project by**

Massimo Minini

**Exhibition curated by**

Gabriele Magnani

Roberta Cremoncini

*Photographs can reach  
eternity through the moment.*

*It is an illusion that photographs are created  
with a machine...they are created with  
one's eyes, with one's heart, with one's head.*

Henri Cartier-Bresson

The Estorick Collection regularly hosts exhibitions dedicated to photography, exploring the medium's pioneering years as well as more recent developments. I believe that this represents an important aspect of our programme, not only because I have a personal love for this art form, but also because it offers our visitors the opportunity to consider the Collection's works of painting and sculpture in a broader creative context.

However, *United Artists of Italy* has a still greater relevance for our museum. The selection of photographs from the collection of Massimo Minini exhibited here comprises over 80 portraits of modern Italian artists. All of them are portraits (albeit not in the traditional sense of the term) that allow us to see 'behind the scenes', or better, into the minds of many of the artists either represented in the Estorick Collection itself or included in our exhibitions over the course of the years. It is fascinating to see the faces, gestures, expressions and attitudes of those figures who have produced works of art that are so familiar to us. These images, then, offer us another key to understanding the artists that they depict, and it is the clear intimacy between the photographer and the subject that makes them so fascinating. However, the twenty-two photographers presented here are not only interesting in terms of their personal rapport with major figures from this period of Italian art, but also for the way in which their work offers a broad overview of late twentieth-century Italian photography and illuminates in unusual and unexpected ways a precise moment in the nation's cultural life.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Massimo Minini for having agreed to loan this selection of photographs, and for his generosity in contributing to the realisation of the exhibition here in London. Naturally, I am grateful to the journalist and critic Gabriele Magnani for having suggested the exhibition, and for having helped me choose the selection of works presented in our galleries. My thanks also go to my colleagues at the Estorick Collection – Harry Hare and Christopher Adams – as well as Valentina Costa at the Galleria Massimo Minini. Finally, it is most gratifying that this exhibition celebrating Italian artistic creativity forms part of the celebrations marking the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Italian unification.

Roberta Cremoncini  
Director

## **Preface**

Gabriele Magnani

Donated to Britain by the American collector Eric Estorick, since 1998 the Estorick Collection has represented an important reference point within London's international cultural scene for all those with an interest in Italian art of the twentieth century, whether as collectors, connoisseurs or intellectuals. Initially focusing on the period 1890-1950 – reflecting the temporal span of the collection itself – this museum in Canonbury Square has generated much interest over the years among the most important sectors of the British press, receiving a consistently high level of coverage for the various exhibitions and initiatives promoted by its Trustees and its Director, Roberta Cremoncini.

The current show is a result of the latter's immediate and enthusiastic response to the idea of an exhibition of works from the collection of Massimo Minini – a well-known Italian gallerist who has devoted his entire career to modern and contemporary art – when I brought to her attention the richness of its photographic holdings.

When I met Minini some time ago at the Frieze Art Fair I was already aware of his collection, yet I was struck by the large volume containing those images that today comprise the exhibition *United Artists of Italy*, consisting of a fascinating selection of black and white photographs produced over several years by twenty-two of the greatest names in Italian photography – including Gabriele Basilico, Claudio Abate, Ugo Mulas, Luigi Ghirri, Elisabetta Catalano and Giorgio Colombo – masterfully portraying the leading Italian artists of the twentieth century. The collection arrives in London at the end of a European tour.

Ranging from images of De Chirico and Morandi, to those of figures associated with Arte Povera and Transavanguardia, the current exhibition comprises a selection of 86 striking works, taking us on an enchanting journey that brings us face to face with many protagonists of the most high-profile auctions of modern and contemporary Italian art. This, then, is a collection of extremely high quality

and rare imagery, assembled through the passion and competence of Massimo Minini; a fitting tribute to Italy's great artistic heritage, which Minini also frequently explores in his books, with touches of irony that testify to his affectionate contact with the artists. In short, this is a truly charming collection that once more reveals 'the constant and tenacious Italian creativity' that has never ceased since the times of our universally beloved Renaissance.

## **"Untitled"**

*Massimo Minini*

I first began amassing this collection under the influence of the beauty and precision of Elisabetta Catalano's portraits. Even though I knew many of the names and the events, I did not follow the world of photography very closely. I had seen beautiful reproductions of Catalano's work, for example, and I was well aware of her fame as a portraitist. But we had never had the opportunity to meet. So, one day, I decided that the moment had come for me to start to work with her. I bought some of her photographs – the best way to get into contact with someone... From that day forward, my passion for photographs began to grow slowly together with my observation of the fact that Italian photography does not always enjoy momentous reception on an international level. I have tried to build a collection of artists's faces taken by the greatest Italian photographers. It's almost as if one world has helped to complete the other.

Aby Warburg devoted the last years of his life to *Mnemosyne*, an atlas of images and an archive of Western art works that spanned from the *pathos* of ancient Greece to Donatello and even beyond. Unknowingly, I have gathered these portraits with the same criterion in mind. Not to change the subject but building an archive and organising it (whether chronologically or otherwise) is also a way to put one's own existence in order. I had only recently met (and been deeply moved by) Hans-Peter Feldmann and his work. I saw in his method a photocopy of my own. We both make lists. We collect series of images. We organise them according to genre, category, period, age, content, size...

And thus my late-blooming passion for photography took me back to the time when I collected toy football players: an infantile way to complete one's own horizon, to define its contours, and to select one's own experiences.

The collection and organism that resulted was also the fruit of an 'edit' that gave the collection a cinematic nature. It takes only a few images to tell a story but a large body of images becomes a narrative with something more than a simple tale or chronology – a sort of stop-and-go, where the 'Don't Walk' sign and the motionless image create a caesura, a pause, and an expectation. How will Mario Merz be depicted by Mussat Sartor? By Mulas? By Colombo? By Abate? By Catalano? When viewed, read, and interpreted by different photographers, the same artist reveals different facets of his destiny. The different photographs of the same artist created a rhythm and an energy – I have to admit it – took me by the hand, regardless of financial or philological concerns.

This 'slice of life' culled from somewhere between the modern and contemporary will give the unflagging investigator of signs an unexpected cross section of the world of Italian art. Photography often tells us more than the author intended. With his film *Blow Up*, Antonioni showed us this masterfully, as had Fox Talbot before him when he pointed out that long after the image was captured, the photographer often discovers things that he did not note at the time. Mario Dondero's Twombly in the shadow of a portico or Mussat Sartor's photo of him from behind tell us the same thing about the character that Carla Lonzi reveals us about him and his silent self-negation in *Autoritratto (Self Portrait)*. But they add a touch of suspense and a whiff of mystery: that detective's white raincoat and that beggar squatting...

I only realised a year after I began amassing this collection that it represents a history of contemporary art – not using art works but rather using faces, poses, and expressions. Contemporary art is an attitude and a way for the work of art to position itself in time and in communion with the overarching themes of the moment. The greatest tension in

contemporary art is achieved not with the physical work of art but rather with its author. The artist lives in his own time. He interprets it, he gives it voice, he builds it, and he defines its spatial and temporal contours.

I have enjoyed this space and its unexpected experiences, its diverse techniques, its camera obscurae, its annihilated archives, and its computers for some images, boxes for others, and other receptacles for the most ancient photographs. The idea for a show, not to be held in a gallery but in museums and other Italian art institutes and abroad, came together a step at a time. The initial idea was to do a show of Italian artist portraits only but I soon began to slip into other related themes: Mulas captured by Scianna; Catalano photographed by Dondero; the faces of writers like Calvino, Pasolini, Borges, Sciascia, and Moravia; emblematic works of art by artists where the presence of a body is revealed; Marisa's little shows on the beach in Anzio in the poetic photograph by Claudio Abate; portraits of foreign artists who felt a connection to Italy, like Beuys, Warhol, Kossuth, and LeWitt; photographs of gallery owners, like Castelli and Amelio.

I even created a sub-section for the great queens of art, like Marisa Merz, Meret Oppenheim, Carol Rama, Carla Accardi, Louise Nevelson, Agnes Martin, Niki de Saint Phalle, Giosetta Fioroni, Titina Maselli, Marina Abramovic...

The collection became an opportunity to shuffle the deck and create interchangeable castles, forks in the road, and halls of mirrors and domino effects that expand around a principal but unconstrained idea. One day I found myself in a room full of wonders, a panorama of extraordinary images, with the famous faces of artists and masters of photography and the dark room. Italian photography presents itself here in all of its glory, even if from a highly particular visual angle. It's no small accomplishment: no other nation has produced such a wide range of great photographers who have not only portrayed but also worked on the same level as the artists of their generation. Beyond giving a face to these already well-known *auteurs*, this show offers the viewer a cross-section of Italian photography during this

period and reveals the extraordinary capacity for interpretation that the one of the two parties has to offer to the other.