

Contemporary art in Italy

The new Medicis

FLORENCE

The supreme Renaissance city is learning to love contemporary art

WHEN Arturo Galansino returned to his native Italy from a post at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2015, he soon realised that the zeitgeist “was exactly the opposite of what was happening in New York and London: the art of the past was having more success than contemporary art”. Italy could boast some of the most influential cutting-edge artists and collectors. Yet enthusiasm for their efforts was confined to a small minority.

Nowhere was that truer than Florence, where Mr Galansino had just become director general of Palazzo Strozzi, a prime exhibition space. Though his reputation as a curator had been built on shows of Old Masters at the Louvre and Britain’s National Gallery, he set about lending the Palazzo’s substantial reputation and resources to a fledgling movement that is turning the supreme Renaissance city into Italy’s liveliest arena for contemporary art. Since 2016 Palazzo Strozzi has hosted ambitious shows by Ai Weiwei and Bill Viola.

On April 19th Mr Galansino will take a more provocative step when the latest installation—or is it an experiment?—from a German scientist-turned-artist, Carsten Höller, opens at Palazzo Strozzi. Devised with help from an Italian neuro-biologist, Stefano Mancuso, it involves one of Mr Höller’s trademark spiralling chutes, two cinemas and some bean plants (it would spoil the fun to say why).

Two days later, the new director of the Museo Novecento, Sergio Risaliti, will unveil an exhibition of sculptural designs, including sketches by Louise Bourgeois and Rachel Whiteread—the first in a string of new initiatives at the only museum in Florence earmarked for modern art. Among other ideas, Mr Risaliti hopes to put large contemporary sculptures in the magnificent square separating the museum from the Basilica of Santa Maria Novella. Not long ago, such a suggestion would have provoked outrage. “But the city has finally understood that it can’t just look back at the glorious past,” says Mr Risaliti.

For that, he himself must take much of the credit, along with two imaginative mayors: Matteo Renzi, who went on to become prime minister, and Dario Nardella. It was Mr Risaliti who in 2014 used the Forte di Belvedere overlooking the south bank of the River Arno for a ground-breaking exhibition of work by Giuseppe Penone, an *Arte Povera* maestro. Antony Gormley and Jan Fabre soon followed Mr

Penone into the 16th-century fortress.

In 2015 Mr Risaliti—in collaboration with a public-private partnership, Mus.e—set a gilded Jeff Koons statue alongside the copy of Michelangelo’s David in Piazza della Signoria (see picture). He compares his activities to “prodding a dormant body”. This jabbed a finger at the most inert bit: a square in which the last original statue was installed five centuries earlier.

The metallic surface of the Koons statue reflected the works around it, capturing a special quality of Florence’s contemporary boom—its opportunities for interaction between the creativity of past and present. “It can seem as if artists cancel what went before them,” says Mr Risaliti. “But in fact they never do.” Mr Galansino aims to “put together the two things and see how much of the contemporary is old and how much of the old is contemporary”.

The show dedicated to Mr Viola, who lived in Florence in his 20s, was a striking attempt to do that. Some of his best-known videos were set alongside the Renaissance masterpieces that inspired them, by Masolino, Pontormo and Uccello. Mr Galansino says one factor that encouraged him to gamble on contemporary art was that he could count on the foreigners who visit the city as tourists or students. It speaks volumes about the success of Florence’s new departure that 85% of tickets for the Viola show reportedly went to Italians. ■



Roll over, Michelangelo