

# Tales of the Italian Diaspora

At the Italian American Museum Our Immigration Seen Through a Women's Photo Dialogue

by Maria Lisella

The numbers may vary, but we have all seen some version of them: 60 million Italians living in Italy and just as many living abroad. From 1870 to 1970, some estimate that 27 million people emigrated from Italy settling all over the globe from Latin America to Canada to the U.S. and other European nations.

The stories behind these movements are eternally fascinating not only to scholars and historians, but to the people who stay behind or go for the gold in faraway places. The drama of the Italian Diaspora is equally compelling to younger generations who inherit these stories as an intrinsic part of their identities. As such, any creative work or scholarly discoveries stand a good chance of attracting people of all ages.

Emigrations from Italy to the U.S. in the words and photos of the women who were separated by the Italian Diaspora are the subject of an upcoming exhibit that will be installed at the Italian American Museum February, 14 2005- March, 11. This photo dialogue was created by Jessica Chornesky, a professional award-winning photographer whose "70 UP: New York Women in their Prime," exhibited at the Museum of the City of New York two years ago won accolades and acclaim in countless publications.

The current exhibit, "Something Borrowed, Something New" intimately documents the lives of 30 women. These honest portrayals offer insight into the incredibly difficult decision of choosing to live abroad in America, and of the relatives



Left Jessica Chornesky

an audio history, a method that won her just praise for the 70 UP exhibit.

Chornesky has also traveled extensively in her professional and personal lives. Her journeys have taken her from Barnard College for Women to a career in music management until she followed her passion for photography and became a professional photographer. Chornesky went to Bosnia in the mid-'90s to run a photography workshop for displaced Muslim children and snapped the elders in their refugee camp, which inspired her impulse to study age in the 70 UP project.

As for Italy, Chornesky confesses to a love affair with the country and its culture marrying her love for oral history, photography into a marriage called "Something Borrowed, Something New."

"Something Borrowed, Something New" will also be shown at the Queens Museum of Art and Brooklyn Borough Hall also in 2005—dates to be announced. The Universities of Palermo, Catania and Rome also want to show this exhibit.

For now, the project has been limited to these 30 women, but Chornesky would like to expand its parameters. As an independent photographer, Chornesky must not only develop concepts and creations, she must also hunt for funding. She credits the National Italian American Foundation as her primary patron and secondarily, the National Organization of Italian American Women, but to take the show on the road, Chornesky will continue knocking on doors to raise funds for what promises to be a fascinating exhibit focused on a subject that has often gotten short shrift in tales of the Italian Diaspora.

Chornesky.

Interviews were conducted on both sides of the Atlantic among sisters, cousins or other counterparts reflecting their personal visions, but also their attitudes in rapidly changing worlds both in Italy and in America.

Sound domes will be installed overhead so viewers will see the photos, read the words and hear the voices behind the stories.

Excerpts of Chornesky's interviews with the subjects will provide visitors with insights into her subjects' attitudes about the old country, the new one and their sisters and relatives who did not accompany them on this journey. Essentially, Chornesky created

who chose to stay in Italy, or those who attempted to settle in America only to return home. "I am hoping people will rethink their own cultural biases surrounding Italian women as I believe their histories have been underrepresented due to their gender," says

## At the Italian American Museum

### Rita Passeri's Uncommon Women

by Joseph Sciorra

It's the hands you notice first. Large, calloused, almost arthritic. The women Rita Passeri paints and draws have clearly led a life of labor. Passeri's naturalistic paintings and drawings are tributes to workingwomen who toiled on Umbrian farms and in New York factories. She depicts the women individually and in a moment of quietude, looking resolutely and meeting the viewer's gaze unabashedly.

These are women Passeri has known intimately — grandmothers, aunts, her mother a next-door neighbor. They have touched the artist directly, having demonstrated their compassion, generosity and support over the years. There is her great aunt Anna who bought her books as a little girl and her neighbor Adalgisa from her family's apartment building in Rome who encouraged Passeri to travel abroad as a young woman.

These portraits represent what

Passeri calls "uncommon women," everyday people who have exhibited personal strength, integrity and resolve in their daily lives. Depicted without husbands or children, these freestanding figures are studies of dignified and powerful personages. They are life-size holy cards of the mundane, visual hagiographies of working women who have struggled against life's obstacles and survived.

Born and raised in Rome, Passeri was influenced at an early age by the rich legacy of Italian figurative painting and portraiture, from the elusive Etruscans to the Renaissance masters. She moved to New York City in 1983 and currently resides, among her women, in a loft apartment in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Passeri often paints on recycled lumber and found objects like barn doors, incorporating the irregular surfaces into her overall design.

Passeri has shown her growing collection (there are fifteen images to date) in various solo and group shows, but probably the most unique exhibition of her work occurred in the Arthur Avenue

Market, in the Belmont section of the Bronx. As part of Columbus Day festivities held in 2000, Passeri hung her paintings from the rafters of the LaGuardia-era indoor market. Suspended above the tripe, the soppressata, and the broccoli rabe, these elevated avatars of female fortitude and perseverance were transformed into refracted mirror images of the uncommon women shopping below (Originally printed in *Primo Magazine*, March/April 2002.).

"Uncommon Women," an exhibition of Rita Passeri's paintings and drawings curated by Joseph Sciorra, will be on display at the Italian American Museum from March 21- April 19, 2005.

The Italian American Museum, temporarily located at 28 W 44th St. 17th fl., has received widespread support from Italian Americans. The Museum is dedicated to exploring the rich cultural heritage of Italy and Italian Americans by presenting the individual and collective struggles and achievements of Italians and their heirs to the American way of life.



"Nonna Maria" by Rita Passeri



Milisenda's "Dennis, Rose, and Sal: Family Portraits" has been displayed in over 125 photography exhibitions. His work comes to the Italian American Museum on January 10, 2005 - February 8. Milisenda's current project is researching his paternal ancestors' history in the lower east side and Racalmuto, Palermo.

The Italian American Museum, which is in transitional residence at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute and is affiliated with the City University of New York, is located at 28 West 44th Street, 17th floor, Manhattan. The Museum is dedicated to exploring the rich cultural heritage of Italy and Italian Americans and its influence on contemporary culture.

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