

Architecture of Devotion: Italian American Religious Expression in New York City Photographs by Larry Racioppo

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The Italian American Museum and the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute/Queens College, The City University of New York, will present a new exhibition, Architecture of Devotion: Italian American Religious Expression in New York City-Photographs by Larry Racioppo from April 25 through May 20, 2005. The opening reception of this exhibition, curated by Dr. Joseph Sciorra, will be held on Wednesday, May 4 from 6 to 8 p.m.

When viewing photographer Larry Racioppo's images, one feels transported to remote villages in Italy. The photos show elaborate gold shrines adorned with colorful figurines of Jesus and Mary, a winding path lined with statues of angels leading to a stone chapel, or a shell-decorated cross resting inside a blue-tinged grotto with its miraculous water. But if you look closely at the captions Lisanti Family Chapel, Bronx; Abate Family Yard Shrine, Williamsburg; the Joseph Pezza Shed at St. Anslem's RC Church, Brooklyn you realize that these religious sites are located in New York.

The show consists of 14 huge photographs (20" x 24" to 30" x 40") of personal shrines, sites, and structures of Catholic iconography, rituals, and feasts that have been built in various New York City neighborhoods. The exhibition is a walking tour through a sacred past, one that lives in the hearts and minds of generations of Italian Americans. Racioppo's larger-than-life holy renderings of rosary beads, angels, and statues of saints look both ancient and new.

"I'm interested in the way people express their faith by building things, says Racioppo, a Brooklyn native, born in 1947, who has taken photographs throughout the city since 1971. "I think it's an Italian American thing to want to build."

The exhibit depicts such sites as the Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Grotto, built in 1937 by Italian immigrant men in Rosebank, Staten Island, and now listed on the National and New York State Register of Historic Places. The exhibit also includes photographs of the Giglio Feast, which began in 1903 in Williamsburg by immigrants from Nola. In this ritual, 125 men lift a multi-storied, tapering tower known as a giglio (lily in English) and a boat structure throughout neighborhood streets. Racioppo's photographs also show the 16-square-foot Joseph Pezza shed, located in the parking lot of a Brooklyn church. It is decorated inside and out with religious imagery, toys, flags and photos by long-time attendant Joseph Pezza.

Shaped by his Italian American Catholic background, Racioppo is drawn to this subject matter on subconscious and visceral levels. The images bring him back to his childhood in the 1950s and visits to his grandmother, who prayed before her bedroom altar, crowded with saints and candles.

After stumbling upon the Abate family shrine in Williamsburg, Racioppo knew he had to find and photograph similar sights. The Abate shrine was built by 80-year-old Vincent Abate (the father of the current owner) in gratitude for his safe return from World War II. To this day, the large stone grotto with its statue of the Blessed Mother draws pilgrims bearing flowers who light candles in devotion. "I saw that and thought it was very moving," says Racioppo.

When he is not discovering these "amazing little pockets around the city," Racioppo works as a staff photographer for New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development. According to folklorist Joseph Sciorra, Racioppo is interested in "how people change the urban environment."

Racioppo, who holds a graduate degree from Brooklyn College, is deeply connected to his working class roots, which have greatly influenced his perspective on art. “My father is a retired longshoreman,” he says. “I believe that art should be accessible to all people.”

The Italian American Museum is open Monday through Friday from 10:00 am – 4:00 pm, and by appointment. The Italian American Museum is in transitional residence at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute/Queens College, The City University of New York. It is located at 28 West 44th Street, 17th floor, New York, NY 10036. For further information, please call Maria Fosco (212) 642-2020 or visit <http://www.italianamericanmuseum.org>