

MI RICORDO: ROMAN WATERCOLORS



HALLIE COHEN

FEBRUARY 26-APRIL 26, 2024



PASSEGGIATA

Francis Levy, novelist and essayist

All of Hallie Cohen's paintings in *Mi Ricordo: Roman Watercolors* were done at the American Academy in Rome between 2016-2024. Many of these were undertaken in room #249, the studio named for the painter Philip Guston—which he used when he was a Fellow at the Academy from 1948-49. Cohen studied with the painter Grace Hartigan at the Hoffberger School of Painting, Maryland Institute College of Art. Without overstating the connection, Guston's influence is undeniable if for no other reason that it paved a way for some abstract artists to employ figuration or combine figuration and abstraction as evidenced in these Roman watercolors.

The title of the penultimate painting in the show, *Passeggiata*, which translates as “leisurely stroll,” is deceptive. Her project was actually quite intentional, and from the start constituted a painterly homage and response to Italian cinema—in particular the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini. The paintings have the look of films inviting the eye to scroll from left to right as if on an old-fashioned Steenbeck, while also presenting what reads like a narrative in storyboard form.

In specific, the initial inspiration for the project derived from a showing of Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* at Film Forum. A seminal scene takes place at the Rebibbia prison hospital where the heroine's son, in a delirious state, is tied to a bed. Cohen recognized the reference to the Italian Renaissance artist Andrea Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ* in the shot. And thus was the idea of the project born.

Pasolini studied with the art historian Roberto Longhi in Bologna. And it quickly became apparent that many of Pasolini's shots were tableau vivants, paintings come to life. Part of the project entailed copious amounts of research. In company with the writer Francis Levy, the artist delved into the iconography of a number of the significant locations Pasolini employed in *Mamma Roma*. From the outset, the project was infused with both film and art history.

Some of the original locations where *Mamma Roma* was filmed were far off the beaten tourist path. Rebibbia prison is located at the last stop of Rome's B line. Pasolini's Rome is far removed from the glamour of the Via Veneto; playboys with blonds in Maseratis, an image propagated at Cinecittà, Rome's Hollywood, was not the director's palette.

The working-class areas or borghata on the outskirts of the city, where a bicycle was a luxury (as De Sica so forcefully demonstrated in *Ladri di Biciclette*), is the kind of terrain explored in a number of the paintings.

Videos with accompanying commentary create a dialectic between word and image. Research unveiled locations, which miraculously retained much of their original integrity decades later.

One of the intrinsic by-products of the project was the theme of mutability and immutability. Since these Roman scenarios existed before they became the inspirations for film, literature, poetry, then painting, they would hopefully continue to exist in their original sublime state waiting for the next creative mind who would pluck them up as the source of their “passeggiata.”

Over the years, the inspiration for individual paintings derived both from Roman antiquities such as the Circus of Maxentius, Hadrian's Tomb and Villa, and historical interpretations of classical notions exemplified by Mussolini-style architecture (the Palazzo della Civilita) in the EUR. Robert Rauschenberg's contact sheet of photographs of Cy Twombly navigating the Aracoeli steps from 1952 is juxtaposed with Aqueduct Park, a site outside Rome used by both Pasolini in *Mamma Roma*

and Fellini in *La Dolce Vita*. The helicopter with its suspended statue of Christ makes an actual appearance in *Passaggiata* (2023).

Ovid's *Metamorphosis* with its theme of transformation is the concept that informs the most recent of the *Mi Ricordo* series, *One Arte* (2024). The title references Elizabeth Bishop's poem, with its tone of loss and recollection.

From the outset Cohen has underscored central scenes from movies alongside antiquities and elements of urban landscape architecture. In the first of the *Mi Ricordo* series Anna Magnani dramatically walks through the arch in the Piazza Tommaso di Cristoforis, as she seeks to turn her back on her life of prostitution and poverty.

The ecclesiastical fashion show with nuns from Fellini's *Roma* which provided inspiration for the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit at the Met (2018), makes an appearance in *Mi Ricordo Teatro #5* (2019), along with Cinecittà, where Martin Scorsese filmed *Gangs of New York* and Fellini actually had an apartment.

These paintings, in one sense, can be seen as film clips. Surrealist juxtaposition becomes another animating idea as the notions of individual paintings become more complex. *The Unknown Masterpiece (Hadrian & Antinous)* (2020) is the storyboard for a totally fictive film in which the artist scouted

locations as a film director might, conceiving vistas or neighborhoods of Rome in filmic terms.

The Yupo paper on which the watercolor/inks are applied is a surface that requires a particular attention to control. Piloting a plane through a storm is a metaphor for the process. The artist is challenged with negotiating an increasingly labile and impermeable surface. The application and removal of the paint, so central to the technique, may also account for the fresco and stone-like quality of many of the images.

Freud looked at the archeology of Rome as a metaphor for the mind. *Mi Ricordo*, “I remember” invokes the mnemonic quality that infuses all the paintings. Each of them exudes its own sense of romantic yearning due to their reflective and recollective quality. In the process of creating this series, the artist herself has become a witness, osmotically recording the collective unconscious that creates the richness and beauty of the Roman experience.



WHERE SHE'S GOING: HALLIE COHEN IN ROME

Adrienne Baxter Bell, PhD, art historian

“*Mi Ricordo*”: I Remember. Hallie Cohen’s paintings illuminate her memories of Rome; they share those memories with us. She has woven memories in panoramic vistas of color and line and brushwork. How fitting that her inspiration in this process is Rome, the paradigmatic city of memory. Let us take, for example, *The Unknown Masterpiece (Hadrian and Antinous)*, a painting with a literary allusion in its very title. (The protagonist of Balzac’s tale, by the way, is the painter Nicholas Poussin, himself a champion of landscape as a catalyst for memory.) At the left of Hallie’s painting stands Hermes from the Canopus of Hadrian’s Villa at Tivoli, a structure designed to recreate and recall the ancient Egyptian city of the same name (“Canopus”) and the part of the Nile that runs through it. When designing the villa during the second century CE, Emperor Hadrian strategically recreated several famous ancient buildings, including the Painted Stoa in Athens, a favorite city. In so doing, he tipped his Roman helmet to Cicero—the Roman statesman and philosopher, and a well-known villa-building addict—who, two centuries earlier, had constructed a Hellenic Academy and Lyceum near his villa in Tusculum; there, he revived, through a

form of embodied memory, the Greek practice of walking and discussing philosophical topics. These architectural replicas left both sites, as the historian John Pinto artfully put it, “richly strewn with memories of the past.” Simon Schama articulated this idea as follows: “Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is a work of the mind. It is scenery built up as much from the strata of memory as from layers of rock.” Wander around a Baroque church in Rome and discover on its lowest level a Mithraic altar from the second century BCE; dine in the city and realize that the very restaurant you are in was built over the ruins of the third century Baths of Diocletian. Rome is nothing if not strewn with “memories of the past.” These memory-laden sites, or “landscapes of allusion,” spark retrospective contemplation. They invite us to reflect, as do Hallie’s paintings, on the infinite complexities of the ancient worlds, their commingling of virtues and vices, stoicism and hubris, ascents and collapses, and the inexorable passage of time.

Speaking of passages, let us consider the many doors and gateways in Hallie’s paintings. The ancient arches invite us in; the Pantheon’s oculus (seen in *Pussy Riot*) sends us out; steps lead us up; open windows on high floors of apartment buildings send us careening down to the street level. The window in *One Arte* plays a bifurcated role: it seems, at first glance, to invite

us into the space beyond the wall, or even through the wall, but then, it unceremoniously rejects us with its reflection of a building behind us. The silent, smirking little bug on the wall above the window (Kafka as roach?) won’t betray the secret. Doorways are symbols of possibilities—either accepted (as in an open door) or denied (as in the closing of a door or a refusal to open). They spur our reflection on all of the metaphoric doors and gateways of our own lives. In his reflective treatise on space, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard put it this way: “If we were to give an account of all of the doors one has closed and opened, of all of the doors one would like to re-open, one would have to tell the story of one’s entire life.” The painting *One Arte* shows us how Hallie’s Rome is a site of transitions and transmogrification, of Daphne’s foot turning into a laurel tree, of ontological shapeshifting. To pass through an arch in Rome is to traverse history, perhaps even to experience metamorphosis ourselves.

Hallie has captured facets of Rome—that strange, wonderful, and enervating *Eternal City*—with the loving but skeptical eye of a parent, a leitmotif underscored by the prominent eye (perhaps the artist’s autobiographical “I”?) in *Passeggiata*. Yes, the famous sites are there—the child’s trophies and blue ribbons and milestones. But so, too, are the child’s quiet revelations, tangled questions, and lyrical uncertainties—embodied in the wild grasses

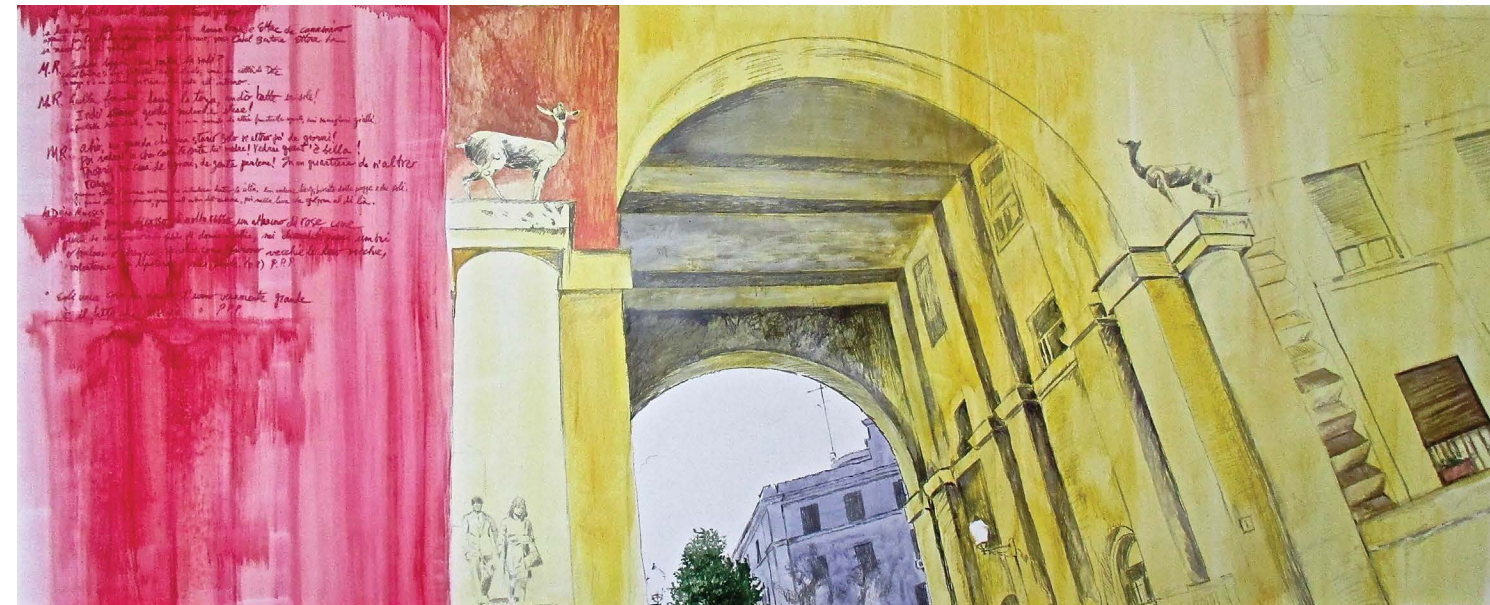
near the ruins of the aqueduct and the dialogue of the grieving and desperate mother in “*Mamma Roma*.” As with Emerson’s famous line “The glance reveals what the gaze obscures,” Hallie’s paintings prod us from our sleepy reliance on the Rome of tourist guidebooks, straight lines, and predetermined expectations. Through her pen and brush, a subtle and highly effective marriage of disegno and colorito from the Renaissance atelier, Hallie sees Rome from strabismic perspectives. Rauschenberg used this approach in photographing not the recognizable face of his friend and lover Cy Twombly but admittedly erotic fragments of Twombly’s torso, an experience to which Hallie alludes in *Mi Ricordo III*. By looking askance in this way, Rauschenberg and now Hallie opened the gates to delightful, surrealistic amalgamations—seen so often in the films of Pasolini and Fellini—of reality and fantasy and fear, of tragedy and humor and dreams, of Rome as a place and Rome as a catalyst for the imagination. From these fragments, we can construct a more compelling portrait of our desires, even ourselves. The process can be addictive. As we dive from the vertiginous heights of *Unknown Masterpiece*, or tiptoe gingerly across the words inscribed on the aqueous surfaces of *Mamma Roma*, or sneak into one of the artists’ studios on Via Margutta in *Teatro Cinque*, we find ourselves over and over asking that metaphysical and eminently Roman question: Quo vadis? Where are you going?

HALLIE COHEN'S ROME: MONUMENTAL AND INTIMATE

Beth Shipley, Associate Professor of Art, artist

The series of paintings, *Mi Ricordo: Roman Watercolors* were produced over several years at the American Academy in Rome, where Hallie Cohen and Francis Levy worked in the Visiting Artists and Scholars Program. The multi-year project encompassed research in the form of investigating and documenting various sites memorialized in the films of Fellini, Pasolini, Sorrentino, and others. It also included a more provisional type of research based on walking the streets of Rome and collecting in-the-moment observations of graffiti and other bits of ephemera.

For me, the title of the series, *Mi Ricordo* or *I remember*, encapsulates the spirit of the work as a record of time that locates past and present, the monumental and intimate, and the absurd to the desolate in a single expansive space. Within the sweeping scale of the compositions, there are wild juxtapositions and myriad references that recall places, films, poems, art, and artists. From this rich array of imagery, I see a personal story that pays homage to the ideas that awakened wonder, delight, joy, recognition of shared humanity, and, most of all, a lifelong relationship to the bounty and beauty of Rome.



“Housing is an eternal symbol of betterment. Next to cosmetology it is the way we create our image of beauty at least as far as self-conception is concerned.”

Mamma Roma
2016 • Ink on Yupo • 60”x144”



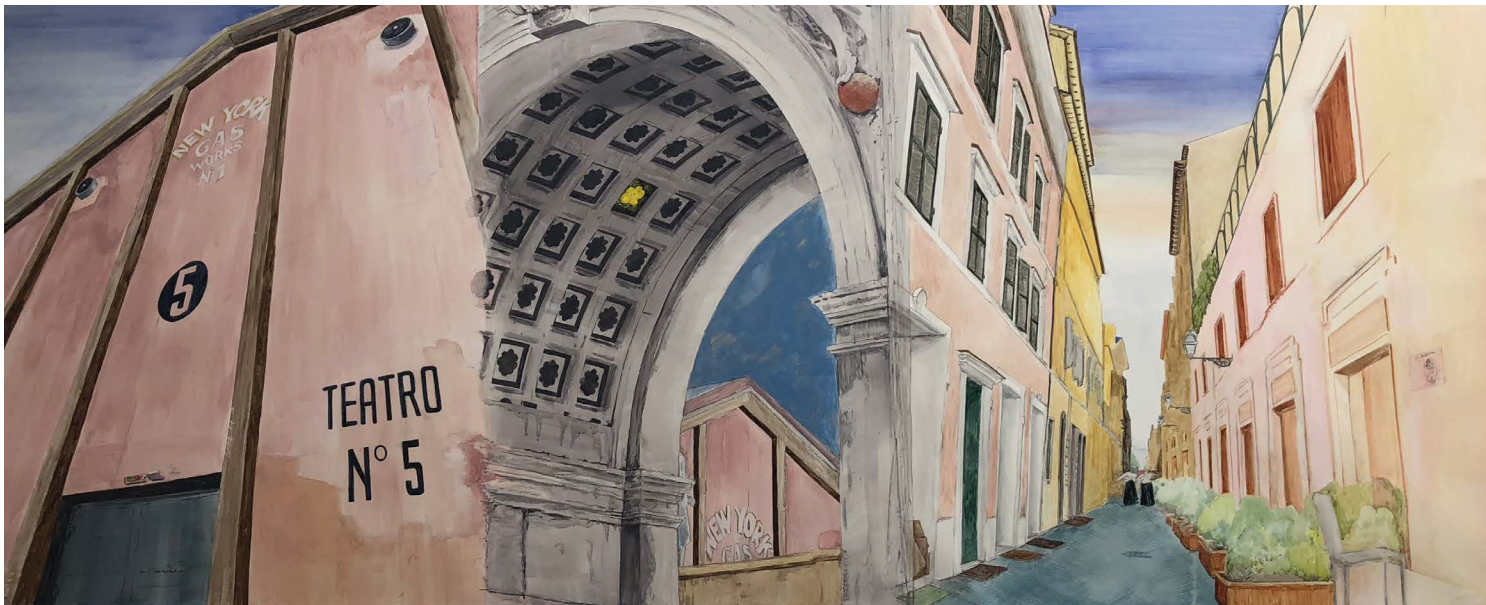
“Aqueduct Park is a race track in the Ozone Park area of Queens, but it is also a park on the outskirts of Rome where the sight of soaring stone arches is interrupted the appearance of speeding trains and in the distance Mussolini era style housing.”

Pluperfect
2017 • Ink on Yupo • 60”x144”



“Modernism is a purgatory filled with damned souls who are condemned to wander aimlessly while reexamining the world in the absence of any handed down notions of how human existence can be represented.”

Mi Ricordo III
2018 • Ink on Yupo • 60”x144”



“The movie is also an excavation both of memory and literally Rome’s subway system. It’s an esthetic archeological dig, where layers of the past are unearthed with artifacts, both recent and ancient—the collective unconscious of a city as it reveals itself, almost psychoanalytically, in the imagination of the director.”

Mi Ricordo Teatro #5
2019 • Ink on Yupo • 60”x144”



“Imagine an Unknown Masterpiece about the love of the Roman Emperor Hadrian for his youthful Greek subject, Antinous! ... Don’t miss it! The beautiful women, the heroic warriors! The lights, the cameras, the action!”

The Unknown Masterpiece (Hadrian & Antinous)
2020 • Ink on Yupo • 60”x144”



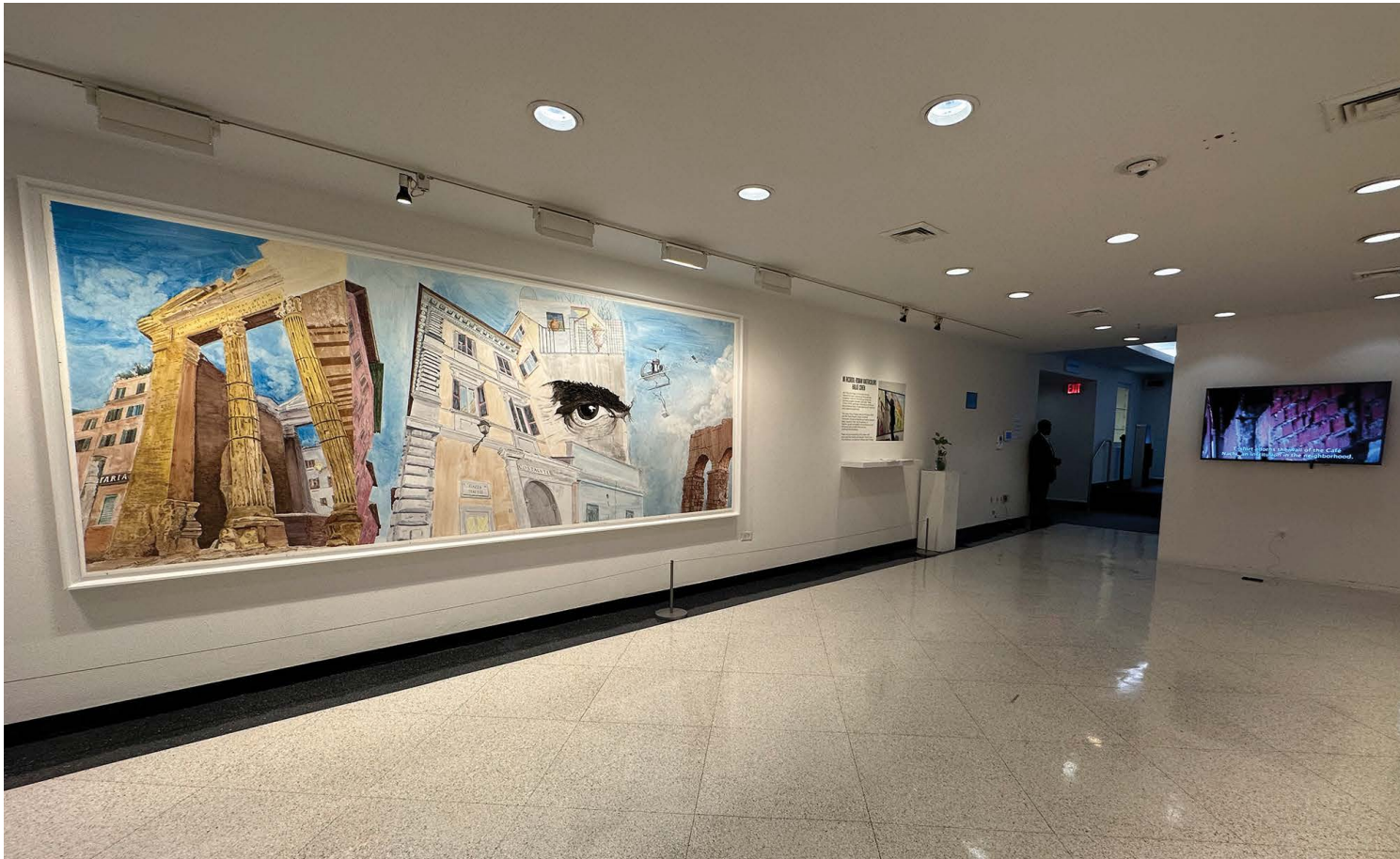
“Pasolini famously said ‘the eye alone is aware of beauty’ ...what’s distinctive about the mural of Pasolini’s eye by the artist Maupal is that it gives the impression of having seen you before you see it.”

Passeggiata
2023 • Ink on Yupo • 60”x144”



“Transformation was one of Ovid’s central themes and his work anticipates the labile nature of gender and identity that is so reflected in modern Roman society. In his own ‘Metamorphosis,’ Franz Kafka imagined a character who wakes up to find himself turned into a cockroach.”

One Arte
2024, Ink on Yupo, 60”x144”



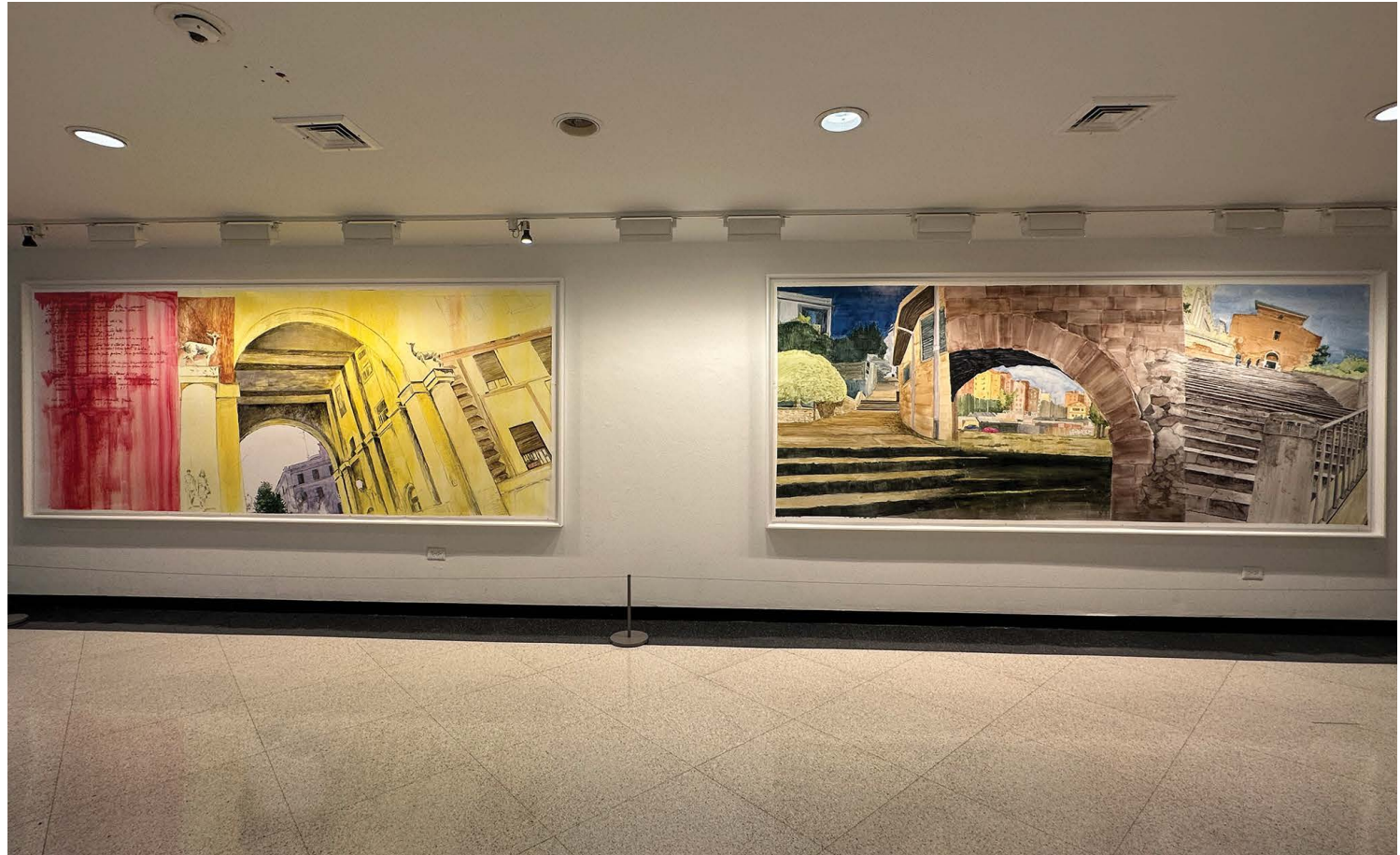
LARGE-FORMAT WATERCOLORS BY HALLIE COHEN

All of the paintings in *Mr. Ricordo: Roman Watercolors* were produced at the American Academy in Rome in the Visiting Artists and Scholars program between 2015-2024. These 12-foot x 5-foot paintings constitute an ambitious and immersive body of work dealing with memory and subjective experience.

The iconic films of Italian directors Federico Fellini and Pier Paolo Pasolini impart a cultural framework. Roman antiquities such as the Ara Coeli steps, Aqueduct Park, the Mausoleum of Hadrian, as well as Mussolini-era architecture and borrowed texts, provide historical and contemporary backdrops.

These are accompanied by short videos with voice-overs by novelist and essayist, Francis Levy. This exhibition is curated by Professor Beth Shipley.







Mamma Roma

Selected video commentaries by Francis Levy

2016 MAMMA ROMA

Housing is an eternal symbol of betterment. Next to cosmetology it's the way that we create the image of beauty—at least in so far as self-conception is concerned. Anna Magnani playing the part of Mamma Roma, a retired prostitute who's seeking a new life for herself and her son Ettore will face this majestic entryway which still stands at the Piazza Tommaso de Cristoforis. The very archway is the embodiment of yearning. It's poised in front of the vista of housing hidden behind the enticement of the opening. Each of the towers appears from the perspective of the plaza as a succession of jagged edges, that in some way resemble the profile of a statuesque model, an apparition quickly disappearing on the runway. Pasolini studied with the art historian Alberto Longhi in Bologna and each of the scenes of his classic study of Rome, in which he brands the city as an aging prostitute with a maternal instinct, is like a painting come to life, a tableau vivant whose iconography reveals the essence of his story. Using this location, Pasolini depicts the stolid stone fascist architecture of the Mussolini period. But the shot with its jagged corners is profoundly classic. In a painting it would be an essay in vanishing perspective— as his buildings appear within a frame composed of a cloud-filled sky. These buildings diminish in size as we peer into a self-contained world that seems so

composed and indifferent as to elude access to the aspirant, in this case his Mamma Roma, seeking a new home and life for her and a teenaged son—in what will be a failed attempt to become a part of the bourgeoisie. On a January day after the Christmas holiday, lights are still strung along the entranceway. In the distance a cedar looms over a darkening courtyard, in which an elusive warmth creeps through the crannies of partially shuttered windows.

2017 PLUPERFECT

The modernism of de Chirico set the stage for many of Antonioni's movies. And when you walk around the EUR, Espozione Universale Roma or E 42 as it was called in anticipation of being the site of the 1942 Olympics, which never occurred, you see the Italian futurism turned to totalitarian ends. Actually, the fascist architecture appears in many famous Italian films including Bertolucci's *The Conformist* and Rosellini's *Open City*. But the area is the reverse of everything Pasolini stood for. His is the world of the more gritty Borgate, the neighborhood around Aqueduct Park. His films with their heavily Marxist and Christian themes are critiques of inequality. And the monumentality of the architecture of the EUR, which subsumed men to a larger idea, constituted a universe that was inimical to Pasolini's vision. Still there are



Pluperfect



When Robert Rauschenberg photographs
Cy Twombly descending the Aracoeli steps



Mi Ricordo III

interesting intersections. For instance, the ancient arches of Aqueduct Park where Pasolini did a great deal of filming for *Mamma Roma* are hauntingly perseverated in Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. Here is what Pasolini himself said in 1962, the year in which he filmed *Mamma Roma*: “This part of the EUR always appeared the happiest to me, but now it is horror and nothing more. It seemed to be a working-class area, good for wandering unknown, and vast enough to resemble the city of the future. And here is a tobacconist, here a ‘bread and pasta shop. There is the face of the middle-class, dark of hair and white of soul like the skin of an egg, neither soft nor hard.”

2018 MI RICORDO III

Aqueduct is a racetrack in the Ozone Park area of Queens, but it's also a park on the outskirts of Rome in which the sight of soaring stone arches is surreally interrupted by the appearance of speeding trains and a horizon of Mussolini era public housing. Fellini used Aqueduct Park, which is near the famed Cinecittà studios, for the iconic shot from the beginning of *La Dolce Vita*, where Christ hangs from a helicopter. In his *Mamma Roma*, Pasolini chose Aqueduct Park as the setting in which the protagonist's son, an unsophisticated teenager earns his stripes, as a member of a gang of impoverished boys from the projects who embark on a life of brawling, petty

crime and predatory sexuality. The park is a statement in itself, a perfect contrast between the ancient and the new, in which the juggernaut of modernity eventually overshadows any of the deeper values that the ancient structures commemorate. The aqueducts by the way have names which create a feeling of impersonation. For instance there is an Aqua Claudia named after the Roman Emperor under whose aegis it was completed in 52AD. Today Aqueduct Park remains both as a kind of off the beaten path idyll, existing far out from the center of Rome a half mile from the Guilia Agricola stop of the A Line, and an important way station for cineastes eager to pursue the original locations in which two great masterpieces of Italian cinema were shot.

2019 MI RICORDO TEATRO #5

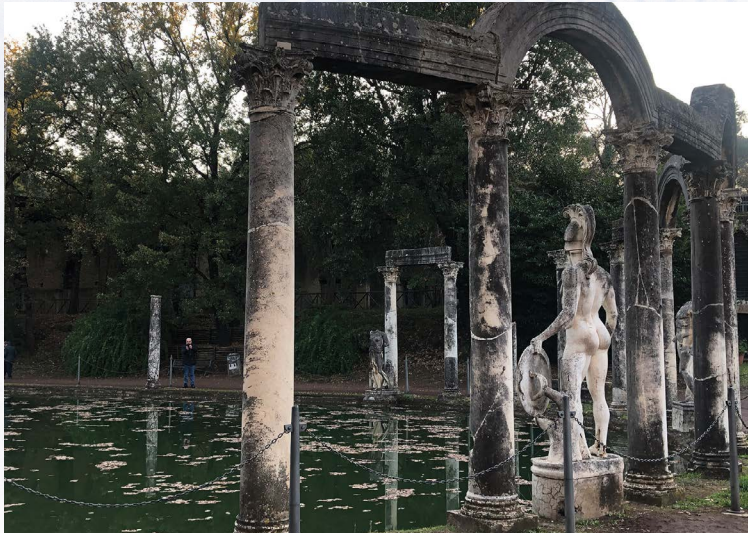
The Ecclesiastical Fashion Show is one of the most iconic scenes of Fellini's *Roma* (1972) and it was a highlight of the recent “Heavenly Bodies” show at the Met. The scene epitomizes the themes of beauty and decadence that run through out the film. *Roma* is a movie about the making of a movie and in the end Fellini portrays himself as a paparazzo failing his attempt to get a few words about Rome out of Anna Magnani. He does succeed however in an earlier scene with Gore Vidal. *Roma* is an autobiography replete with the classic Fellini mists of



The collective unconscious of a city
as it reveals itself



Mi Ricordo Teatro #5



memory as he shows the story of a young man coming to Rome from the provinces and having his first experience of art and sex (falling in love, as he does, with a prostitute he meets in a brothel). However, the movie is also an excavation both of memory and literally Rome's subway system. It's an esthetic archeological dig, where layers of the past are unearthed with artifacts, both recent and ancient--the collective unconscious of a city as it reveals itself, almost psychoanalytically, in the imagination of the director. At one point a character shouts "the air is destroying the frescoes" as a film crew follows workers digging tunnels. There are wonderful throwaways in the dialogue which exemplify Pax Romana to wit: "If you see people on their way to work, it ain't Rome" and "No matter what you eat it turns to shit and what you eat tastes like shit." The style of the movie is a mixture of Proustian memories and surrealist juxtapositions. A momentous animal tusk is discovered underground following a scene of wartime memories. A vaudeville performance culminates with the audience running into a bomb shelter. And the finale, a kind of mock Armageddon recalls Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones*, as motorcycle gang sweeps through the Campidoglio and the Aracoeli steps as they ride towards the Colosseum.



The Unknown Masterpiece (Hadrian & Antinous)

2020 THE UNKNOWN MASTERPIECE (HADRIAN & ANTINOUS)

Imagine an *Unknown Masterpiece* about the love of the Roman Emperor Hadrian for his youthful Greek subject, Antinous! Imagine a fabulously wealthy and reclusive aristocratic clan, collectors of major works of art which have been sequestered from humanity for centuries, setting out to produce a silent film epic with a cast of thousands totally for their own entertainment and pleasure! Imagine a work conceived over generations whose existence has been fastidiously hidden by the descendants of the original producer and imagine generations of directors, actors and supernumeraries whose careers have been frozen in time as a grand production continued on as long as there was a family to keep its secret! Don't miss it! The beautiful women, the heroic warriors! The lights, the cameras, the action!

2023 PASSEGGIATA

Pigneto, a once impoverished neighborhood on the southeast outskirts of Rome, has now become populated by a whole new generation of creatives. Street art and graffiti don't just adorn the walls. They cry out, representing not a form of desecration but a need to speak. There's an urgency to these inscriptions which can include the face of a transvestite or that of the



Passeggiata

famed Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini whose portrait with its “ma sto bene” tee shirt adorns the wall of the Bar Necci, an institution in the neighborhood. Pasolini was attracted to the underlife of Rome and it was here that he both caroused and gave birth to his classic *Accattone*, whose milieu is the world of petty criminals and thieves. There’s a series of photos of Pasolini shooting *Accattone* inside the Bar Necci. If you walk down to number 43 you will come to an unobtrusive B&B. Look up at the side of the building. You’re caught short by a portrait of Pasolini’s right eye replete with crow’s feet. The director famously said “The eye alone is aware of beauty.” The streets are narrow and not conducive to looking up say the way you would at a billboard in Times Square. And what is distinctive about the mural by the artist Maupal is that it gives the impression of having captured you before you see it. Pasolini’s eye is that of the voyeur looking at his subjects before they’ve even had a chance to react. Here’s a Pasolini quote found on a wall on the Via Pigneto accompanying yet another mural: “Non illuderti; la passion non ottiene mai perdono. Non ti perdano neanch’io, che vivo di passion.” “Don’t fool yourself the passion never gets lost for those who live the passion.”

ABOUT THE HEWITT GALLERY OF ART

The Hewitt Gallery of Art, located in the main esplanade and adjacent Black and White galleries, is a laboratory for and an extension of the pedagogy of the Art and Art History Department. In addition, it is an alternative exhibition space for contemporary art of emerging, mid-career, and established artists displaying a wide variety of media and styles. The Gallery provides opportunities for art majors and minors to gain first-hand experience in exhibiting their capstone and junior work, for students to curate and organize shows in conjunction with the Gallery Director and for faculty and alumni to present current work to the community.

Mi Ricordo: Roman Watercolors curated by Beth Shipley

Catalogue design by KellyAnne Hanrahan



MI RICORDO: ROMAN WATERCOLORS



Marymount Manhattan

THE HEWITT GALLERY OF ART

221 E. 71ST STREET • NEW YORK, NY 10021 • ART@MMM.EDU