



Public Art as an Antidote to the Mafia

By JAMES IMAM

Palermo presents works that remember and rebuke organized crime in Sicily.

PALERMO, SICILY — Until recently, this city was infamous as one of the world's organized crime capitals. Warring mobsters gunned down rivals in the streets and built ugly high-rise apartments with public funds while much of the historic center was left to crumble.

Palermo authorities have since managed to clamp down on the Mafia, and the city, Sicily's capital, feels like a different place today. Anti-Mafia posters are a common sight on the fronts of buildings, and the streets now throb with tourists. But Palermo's bounce-back is fragile, and many remain wary that the Mafia could stage a comeback.

A key point in Palermo's turnaround was the murder of Giovanni Falcone, a judge who pioneered new methods to combat Mafia influence and paved the way for the restoration of law and order. The Mafia had its revenge in 1992, killing Falcone in a bombing that horrified residents and united them against the mob.

To mark the 30th anniversary of Falcone's murder, Palermo on Monday unveiled a series of art installations reminding people of that city's grim Mafia years and encouraging residents to resist creeping organized crime influence.

The works are part of a public art program called Spazi Capaci, and they were inaugurated on a day when Palermo also hosted a remembrance ceremony for Falcone, attended by dozens of dignitaries, including President Sergio Mattarella of Italy. But the art initiative was anything but a stately affair. Instead, a number of the works generated heated debate.

The Spazi Capaci project has been organized by the anti-Mafia Fondazione Falcone, with funding from the Italian education ministry and private donors.

"We have always known that culture is

one of the best weapons against the Mafia," said Maria Falcone, the sister of the murdered judge and president of the Fondazione Falcone. "Repression alone is not enough," she added. "You also need social and cultural work for that."

One of the public artworks, Gregor Prugger's "Tree of Everybody" — a tall fir tree, laid on its side, with wooden figurines of Mafia victims grafted onto its bare branches — looks striking installed in the roofless Church of Santa Maria dello Spasimo. At the other end of the building sits Peter Demetz's "The Triumph of Memory," which consists of a carved wooden panel depicting Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, another magistrate killed by the Mafia. The carving is framed by a rusted metal stand and mounted in front of a milky-white LED pane.

"I wanted to represent Falcone and Borsellino looking towards a brighter, fragile future," Demetz said in an interview. "The work reminds us that we need to be strong because fragility is what the Mafia feeds off."

Across town, in the Church of San Domenico, which holds Falcone's tomb, Velasco Vitali's sculptural collection of over 50 life-size dogs — made from rusted metal, peeling concrete and stained paper — were mostly heaped in a pile near the entrance. Titled "Pack," the roving work had been displayed in several locations around Palermo during the past year before being moved to the church.

"As soon as the work crosses the threshold of the church, it will change meaning," Vitali explained by phone before the work was installed. The "contrast between the sublime and the profane," he said, would evoke "humanity's ugly nature, its capacity to reduce life to rubble."

At the Quattro Canti, a lavish central Palermo square, Arcangelo Sassolino's mechanical sculpture "Elisa" drew mixed reactions from bystanders. The work is made from an automated digger arm resting on a concrete base. As the arm slowly moves, the

metal crunches loudly against the cement, gouging the platform.

Ramon Romano, 34, a copyright lawyer from Palermo, said he found the work powerful and thought it represented the "Sack of Palermo," when the Mafia demolished numerous elegant villas in the city's green belt after World War II to construct ugly high-rise apartments. But Francesco Failla, 52, a City Hall employee, complained that the installation's mechanical arm clashed with its Baroque surroundings. "Don't get me wrong, I am absolutely against the Mafia," he said. "But this work is an offense."

Falcone helped liberate Palermo from the Mafia by collaborating with turncoats, investigating bank accounts and sharing information across borders. His findings culminated in a trial that led to more than 300 guilty verdicts in 1987.

When mobsters murdered the judge in revenge, Palermo reeled in horror. Huge protests took place throughout the city, and many residents hung white sheets displaying anti-Mafia messages from their balconies.

In an interview at City Hall, Leoluca Orlando, Palermo's mayor, who has held the office five times since 1985 and is known for his own anti-Mafia crusades, said that Falcone's killing was a watershed for the city because it united residents in a "popular revolt."

After winning a second, landslide election in 1993, Orlando limited Mafia influence with new legislation, revoking public contracts awarded to companies with Mafia links. He also increased funding for culture, including projects like turning the Spasimo Church, once a rubble-filled dump, into an arts center and reopening the Teatro Massimo, Palermo's opera house, after a 23-year renovation during which the Mafia siphoned off public funds.

"If you have self-esteem, you are not just against the Mafia," Orlando said, "you are diametrically opposed to the Mafia."

While Palermo's mobsters have long

abandoned their tactics of killing high-profile figures, the Mafia remains a threat, said Lorena Di Galante, a director of the Anti-Mafia Investigation Directorate in Italy. "The Sicilian Mafia's traditional clan structure remains intact," she said. "It is still active in extortion, money laundering, drugs trafficking, infiltration of public administrations and real estate."

The Mafia grew stronger during the recent coronavirus lockdowns, Di Galante added, by winning favor with vulnerable businesses and families by offering them work or financial support.

"We have lost two years to the pandemic," said Alessandro De IJsi, the curator of Spazi Capaci. "Now we have to return to the piazzas."

Palermo residents flooded the streets on Monday for the remembrance ceremony. The art installations drew interested passers-by, too. In the Church of San Domenico, where schoolchildren left flowers and personal messages on Falcone's tomb, visitors stopped to look at the dogs, some discussing the meaning of Vitali's work.

Davide Formisano, 32, who works at the church, said that Vitali's installation had generated contrasting opinions. "Many like the work, some are against it, some are annoyed, some are amazed," he said. "Some have even said it is heresy."

But it was good that people were debating the art and talking about the Mafia, Formisano concluded. "That, after all, is what Giovanni Falcone fought for," he said.

In Palermo, Sicily, clockwise from top: the unfinished, roofless Church of Santa Maria dello Spasimo displays Gregor Prugger's "Tree of Everybody"; Velasco Vitali's "Pack" in the Church of San Domenico; "Elisa," by Arcangelo Sassolino, stands in the Quattro Canti.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Data: 26.05.2022 Pag.: 42
Size: 530 cm2 AVE: € .00
Tiratura:
Diffusione:
Lettori:



PHOTOGRAPHS BY GIANNI CEFRIANO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Ritaglio Stampa ad uso esclusivo del destinatario. Non riproducibile