

CONTEMPORARY
LYNX

THE ART MAGAZINE ISSUE 2(14)2020



A falling down dictator is still convinced he's flying

useless drawings # 36.

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GENDER IDENTITY

A Voyage Through the Ettore Molinaro Collection

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'I consider my collection a "mirror", a psychoanalytical journey through the images,' says Ettore Molinaro about his expanding collection of around 200 photographs dated from 1850 to today, which includes striking images by the likes of Dora Maar, Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman and Roger Ballen, but also carefully selected emerging artists.

The Ettore Molinaro Collection is unique in its focus on subjects that, in contemporary Western culture, are strongly connected with social taboos, such as sexuality, non-conforming gender identities and death. The fascinating yet deeply unsettling collection uses photography to draw its viewers into an in-depth and complex exploration of the states and processes involved in the symbolic construction of personal and sexual identities.



Ettore Molinaro, courtesy of Collezione Ettore Molinaro

From grand finance to the art world

Ettore Molinaro, born in 1957 in Rome, Italy, comes from the world of grand finance. For two decades, he was active as a top executive for multinational companies in the banking and insurance industry. In fact, it wasn't until the early 90s that he gained an interest in art and started collecting photographs — at first without a clearly defined focus, following unexplained intuition. Meanwhile, the photography market offered him the possibility to buy masterpieces at reasonable prices. The lower stakes allowed him more comfort and leeway to make mistakes that, combined with his experience in finance, offered a sort of *protection* from his purely intuitive choices and the limited understanding of the art market he claims to have had at that time.

To overcome what he considered a weakness, he went back to university in Milan to study history of art. Through the course of his studies — which were followed by a four-year Grand Tour around the world's top museums — he gradually shifted his focus, time and activity away from his professional career and towards the art world.

Having combined his thorough experience in financial strategies with knowledge on art history and the art market, he managed to fund his collection on a solid base, delineating and sharpening the focus of his purchases. The collection's concept and the investment model for its expansion gained their final shape.

A strategy of diversification

Using insights from his career in finance, Molinaro pursued a strategy of diversification, whereby the collected pieces fall into three investment macro-categories: 'blue chips' (about 40% of the collection, representing works of acclaimed artists that gain value slowly but steadily, and have a positive risk-reward ratio), 'high-potential' (about 30% of the collection, which include photographs by mostly deceased medium-stage career artists, whose works offer potential significant returns in the middle to long-term, due to the likelihood of revaluation by the international market) and 'bets' (works of emerging artists that can be purchased at very reasonable prices, but represent high risk-reward and are difficult to sell due to the author's uncertain future path). In spite of the high risk factor, the works that provide the greatest personal satisfaction are those in the 'bets' category that successfully sell.

Molinaro's strategy allowed his collection to grow gradually and steadily, while taking advantage of the one-off nature of art investments. The Internal Rate of Return (IRR) of the collection, based on 20-25 years of acquisitions, equates to around 8% per year, while being occasionally boosted by a few great picks of works by international artists.

Finding the identity of the collection

The strategy of diversification can be applied not only to the financial plan behind the collection, but, importantly, to the conceptual structure of the collection.

Helmut Newton, *Masked nude by the sea*, Montecarlo, 1981, 40 x 36 cm, vintage gelatin silver print, courtesy of Collezione Ettore Molinaro © Helmut Newton Foundation



The concept of the collection is built upon five diverse, interrelated aesthetic categories. 'Eros and Thanatos,' 'Neutral Identity,' 'Fetishism,' 'Melancholy' and 'Uncanny' intertwine throughout the collection, while finding binding connections between the works of strongly individual and varied artists.

Here, photography foregrounds its strength as a versatile medium. It documents and illustrates inner tensions of borderline psychological states, fulfils the attempts of self-definition through self-representation, becomes a tool of a subversive interplay between exhibitionism and disguise, provokes and plays with the viewer's gaze as voyeuristic, and finally, subtly evokes a sense of discomfort for seemingly no reason — from the unsettling landscape of the collection emerge uneasy questions about identity, sexuality and self, which also query how we study these topics. When viewing the collection, the main context for identity is slowly revealed as Gender. Deeply embedded as ambiguous in Western culture, the subject becomes a motif for the collection and a prism through which the complex relation between identity and the body are researched.

The collection resembles a ceaseless reconstruction and re-elaboration of the self, made up of combinations, overlaps of motifs, associations and automatisms. Yet the act of collecting challenges not only the collector, but also the general public. What begun as Ettore Molinaro's personal introspection has grown to address social and political issues. In its current shape, the collection uncompromisingly unveils the conflict between queer desires and social conventions, almost tangibly confronting the unsolved and rejected relationship between the carnality of desire and death. Importantly, it unveils the complicated bounds between an individual's sense, shaping of the self, and the external world. Photography always involves and perplexes two perspectives: both the seeing and the sharing of one's point of view. It merges the act of looking at with sharing, participating or submitting oneself to the gaze of others. Focused on the medium of photography, the Ettore Molinaro Collection aptly connects the dilemma of the two-fold gaze. The photographs from his collection frequently involve self-exhibition, creation and transformation of one's image in response to external gaze and expectations. In the era of social media, YouTube and apps, the relationship between the sense of the self and its perception of others is undoubtedly one of the most contemporary subjects. The growing Ettore Molinaro Collection invites the viewer to embark on a journey of self-discovery while acting like a mirror that is there for all to examine themselves in, through a simultaneous and sincere reflection on the suppressed desires and hidden cues of human identity.



Andres Serrano, *A history of sex (Head)*, 1996, 102 x 83 cm, vintage cibachrome print, ed. 2/7, courtesy Collezione Ettore Molinaro © Andres Serrano



Erwin Olaf, *Lady D 1997, Royal Blood*, 2000, 75 x 75 cm, vintage C-print, A.P. #2, courtesy of Collezione Ettore Molinaro © Erwin Olaf

The theatre

The current shape of the collection, its themes and structure are the effect of a long-term evolution. It was only a decade after his first purchases that Molinaro started to intensely look for the links between his picks. The search for a common aspect led not only to increasingly more conscious choices, but also to questions about the future of the collection. The gradually extending Ettore Molinaro Collection will be installed permanently in the House Museum in Milan — an ambitious project that will gather Molinaro's research and install his purchases in a dynamic architectural space that has been designed to activate the experience of viewing and receiving the works. Together with the collection, the Museum aspires to be an autonomous oeuvre of the collector; the building, which used to be a silversmiths, is currently being transformed into an elegant post-industrial space that promises a unique experience for its visitors. Open to the public from 2022, and donated to an Italian private foundation for heritage conservation, the House Museum is designed to become a living international cultural hub with a dynamic programme including conferences, temporary exhibitions, and twinning with other institutions, with the aim of creating a global network to sustain research on the fluidity of Gender Identity.

It is no surprise that such a place would be a dream for many collectors. It not only aims to become a platform for discussion about the subjects undertaken by the collection, but together with the complex narratives behind the gathered works, it poses the question of whether the multilayered act of collecting might be considered an act of creation itself. ●

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