

William Papaleo Breaking Walls with New Exhibition

Joelle Grosso (April 21, 2017)



The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute is currently hosting a fascinating art exhibition entitled “Breaking Walls: An Emigrant/Immigrant Journey through Southern Italy” which features the work of American artist, William Papaleo.

For those who don’t know, [William Papaleo](#) [2] is making a wave in the art world by completely transforming the way Italians Americans perceive their relationship with Italy. The artist made a bold decision over 20 years ago to move to Naples, the land where his ancestors came from. However, his intention was not to rediscover the city of his great grandparents but rather to learn what modern Italy is all about. As the children of immigrants living in the United States, the connection to our land of origin is often distorted. Today, Italy is drastically different from the country it was just 50 years ago. Instead of being a land of emigrants, it is now a land of immigrants, with huge influxes of people arriving every single day from Africa and the Middle East. This change is what the oil paintings and ceramic pieces in Papaleo’s exhibition [“Break Walls”](#) [3] communicate to its viewers.



In Search of Truth

When asked about the inspiration behind this exhibition, Papaleo references protests that are currently taking place in Italy in defense of the 34-year-old journalist, [Gabriele del Grande](#) [4]. The Italian reporter was doing independent research on a book about the creation of ISIS by interviewing common people throughout the Middle East and then weaving their stories together in order to make sense of the geopolitical situation. However, instead of being awarded for such courageous and insightful work, he was put in prison upon his arrival in Turkey earlier this month. Italians are taking to streets at the moment with the hopes of having del Grande released.

Papaleo believes his journey is similar as an artist and says, “I started gaining political awareness just by being an artist, by walking down the street and listening to people. That’s the key. We’re bombarded with so much fake news but this is the way to get to the truth. You can figure out a lot of things with these basic soul connections, without having to be manipulated.”

The Stories Behind the Paintings

The work displayed in this exhibition are real depictions of the encounters Papaleo had with the immigrants he met living in southern Italy. From the hardworking olive picker who refuses to take a vacation to the ship builder who came to Salerno in order to escape the bombings in Libya, the authentic way in which Papaleo manages to humanize immigrants is absolutely remarkable.

Distinguished Professor [Fred Gardaphé](#) [5] adds, “viewing Papaleo’s work takes us beyond a fear based on not knowing, and to the realization that they who have been driven here, often for reasons beyond their control, are really not that different from us, in spite of their skin color, their dress, or their customs.”

For those who are interested in seeing these fantastic pieces up close, the “Breaking Walls: An Emigrant/Immigrant Journey through Southern Italy” exhibition will be on display at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute until August 31st. More information can be found at [John Calandra Italian American Institute](#) [6].

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Links

[1] <http://test.casaitaliananyu.org/files/papaleo3jpg-1>

[2] <http://www.williampapaleo.it/>

[3] <http://qcpages.qc.edu/calandra/>

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriele_del_Grande

[5] <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/calandra/fred-gardaph%C3%A9-phd>

[6] <http://http://qcpages.qc.edu/calandra/>