

# A higher education

From her father Gianni, Laura Mattioli inherited a magnificent collection of modern Italian art and a passion for teaching. The two come together at the centre she founded in New York, which aims to raise the profile of Italy's artists and reshape the values of the art world. By Lee Marshall

Photographs by Alberto Zanetti

Laura Mattioli at her home in Martigny with Fortunato Depero, *Motociclista, solido in velocità*, 1927

[ooo]



[ooo]



Opposite page: © DACS 2017. © 2017 Matthew Barney. This page: photograph courtesy CIMA, © DACS 2017. Opening pages: © DACS 2017. Following pages: photograph Walter Smaling Jr., 2015, courtesy CIMA, © DACS 2017. Artworks: private collection



Artworks in Mattioli's home include Fortunato Depero's *Flora e fauna magica*, 1920 (above and opposite right, where it is partially obscured by Matthew Barney's *Ancient Evenings: Khu Libretto*, 2009) and Depero's *Insetto*, 1920 (opposite, above the fireplace)

In February 2014, something new arrived on the New York art scene, and quietly began to change the rules of engagement. The Center for Italian Modern Art (CIMA) occupies an airy loft space in the heart of SoHo. It was founded by Laura Mattioli, a curator and art historian who is also the heir and custodian of one of Italy's most important collections of 20th-century art.

Her father, Gianni Mattioli, rose from modest origins to become a successful businessman selling raw cotton to some of Italy's leading textile mills. In 1943, he was finally able to begin collecting some of the artists he had been following and championing for more than two decades: Futurists such as Umberto Boccioni, Gino Severini, Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero; metaphysical painters including Giorgio de Chirico; mavericks like the reclusive still-life artist Giorgio Morandi.

It was the open, educational spirit of her father's collection that inspired Mattioli to launch CIMA, an exhibition and research centre whose declared mission is to 'promote public appreciation and advance the study of modern and contemporary Italian art in the United States and internationally'. Gianni Mattioli worked tirelessly to promote the Italian art of his time, sometimes in tandem with his cousin Fernanda Wittgens, the first woman to direct Milan's Pinacoteca di Brera museum. As early as 1949, he loaned items from his nascent collection, including a seminal de Chirico work,

*The Disquieting Muses*, to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A year later, he acquired a Milanese apartment solely for the purpose of displaying the collection, which was open to the public every Sunday, free of charge, with Mattioli himself acting as chief guide.

CIMA continues this tradition, opening by appointment on Fridays and Saturdays for viewings. But these are not typical gallery events. 'Installations' run from October to June, and serve as research tools for the centre's core fellows – typically four, of any nationality, chosen on the basis of the relevance of their work to the theme of that year's exhibition (a fifth travel fellowship to Italy is also offered). CIMA also resists the gallery parallel in its layout: it's an apartment, furnished with contemporary Italian design pieces. Visits begin in the kitchen, where one of the fellows introduces the show while a round of espressos is served.

After installations dedicated to the mixed-media Futurist Fortunato Depero and the modernist sculptor Medardo Rosso (here also represented by a group of rarely seen photographs and drawings), CIMA turned its attention to the Giorgio Morandi of the 1930s – a decade poorly represented in US museum holdings of the artist's work. It is now staging a dual exhibition that juxtaposes works by de Chirico with others by contemporary conceptual artist Giulio Paolini, for whom de Chirico has long been an inspiration and point of reference. »

A view of CIMA's recent Giorgio Morandi installation, including *Natura morta*, 1963, *Natura morta*, 1960, and *Oggetto in rame* (Copper object)

*Christie's Magazine* caught up with Mattioli to discuss her plans, both for CIMA and for the world-class collection of Italian greats assembled by her father, after a long-term loan of 26 pieces to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice came to an end last year.

**How and why did CIMA come about? Was it something you'd wanted to do for years?**

Pretty much. I started making regular trips to New York in 1994 with Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, a contemporary art collector and friend of the family who died a few years ago. We'd go to art shows and visit artists' studios. And fairly early on I began to realise that modern and contemporary Italian art was either completely unknown or not properly appreciated in that world. The dominant modern art narrative was Francophile; Italian art was thought of as a derivation from French models. At the same time, as I came into closer contact with the international art scene, I became aware that the problem wasn't just that contemporary Italian art was either completely hidden or explained wrongly; there was a divergence of critical method at the heart of the problem. Italian art critics are, by and large, very 'philological'; they deal with 'minor' themes, they know everything there is to know about certain very limited areas. Anglo-Saxon critics take more of a broad-brush, sociological approach, certainly when it comes to Italian art, which can lead to errors. This difference in approach means there's a lack of dialogue. One of the main aims of CIMA is to bridge this gap.

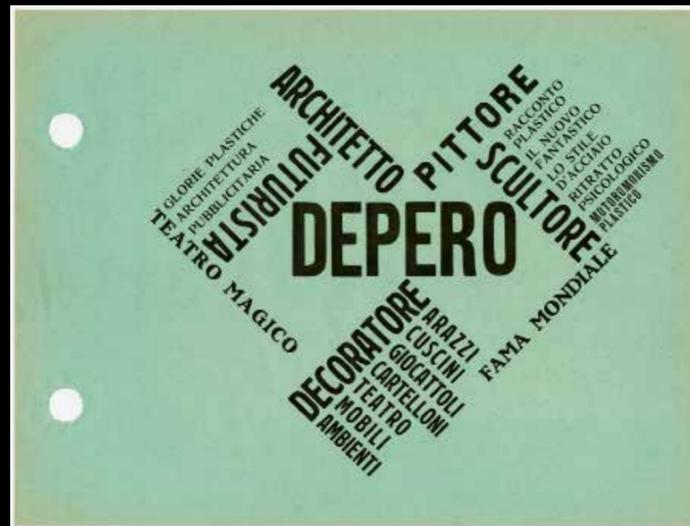
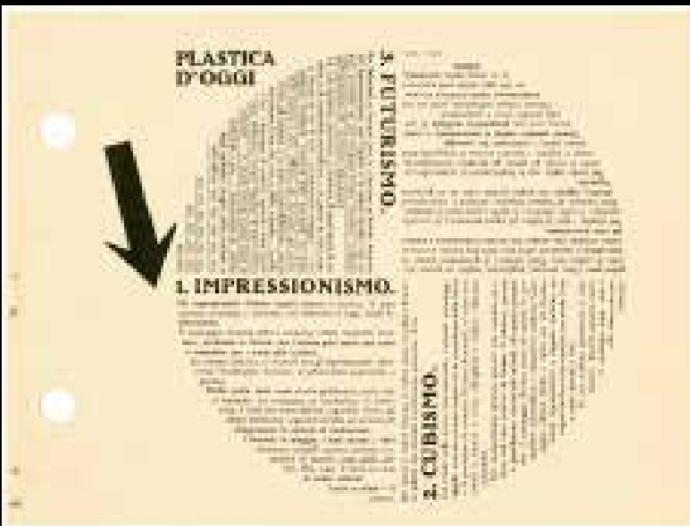
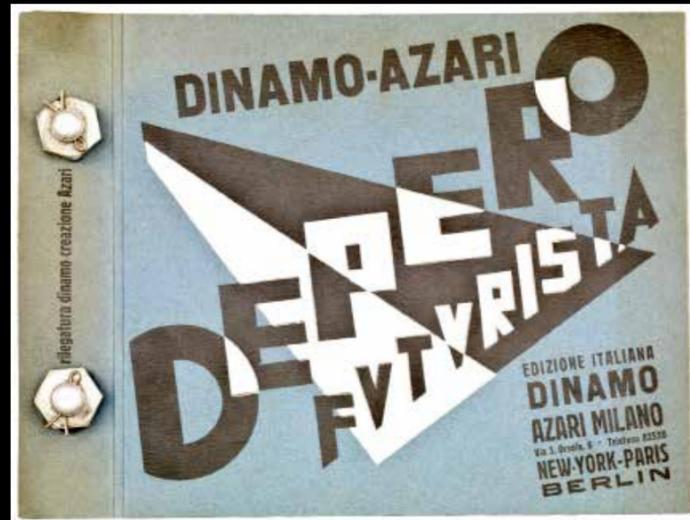
**What are some of the main misconceptions about Italian art of the 20th century, in your view?**

Well, let's take Futurism. There's a good case for it being more important than Cubism. That's a claim guaranteed to enrage my American colleagues, so let me explain. From a formal perspective, Cubism was a great revolution. But it was a revolution inside the world of painting, inside a very limited elite. What interested the Futurists, on the other hand, was their relationship to the public. It was a movement that sprang from the idea that art is a political force, which was entirely lacking in Cubism. The Futurists organised soirées that anticipated later Dadaist happenings. They wanted to cover every expressive form. This makes Futurism extremely relevant today. »

***'In the 1930s, Morandi found himself as a painter, and he started producing some real masterpieces'***







Opposite page: photographs courtesy Designers & Books and CIMA. © DACS 2017. Previous pages: photographs courtesy CIMA. © DACS 2017. Artworks: private collection. Following pages: DACS 2017

***'CIMA aims to be an incubator for educators. If all they find is status symbols, money, ambition, they're not going to have any values to pass on'***

**So CIMA's ambition is to rewrite the history of art in the 20th century?**  
That's our secret ambition, yes! We want to encourage a more multi-faceted approach. It's not easy though. Picasso is God.

**Once you had the idea for CIMA, was it difficult to put it into practice?**  
Not really. I'm somebody who likes to get things done. And I was lucky enough to meet some very talented collaborators like Heather Ewing, the centre's executive director, who came from the Smithsonian and who has been invaluable.

**Why New York?**  
Because it's the centre of the world. If you want to work on a wider canvas, to reach an international audience, it has to be there. And for the Italians who arrive there on fellowships, it's an opportunity to escape from a provincial mindset.

**Why SoHo?**  
I needed a loft, a space where everything was on the same floor. And lofts only exist in SoHo and Tribeca. It's furnished like a house: I wanted to set us apart both from galleries and museums, because we're neither one nor the other. We want to provide a more direct, personal way of relating to the works.

**You must have been influenced by early memories of your father's collection in Milan, which was famously open to the public every Sunday morning.**

Of course. I grew up with the idea that art had a social function. All sorts of people would come to the Milan apartment, from academics to schoolchildren to the general public. My father would be there in person to explain things to people who didn't know what this 'modern art' business was all about. At CIMA, we invite artists to guide visits too, to give their points of view on the exhibitions. They may have nothing in common with the artists on display, but it's another reading that we offer our audience. I've always tried, as an exercise, to see things from multiple points of view, to engage in debate, to try to understand things that may seem strange. I believe this is especially important now, at a time of great political inflexibility. It's a lesson in democracy.

**How do the fellowships you offer tie in with the exhibitions?**  
The fellows are chosen each year on the basis of the exhibition that will be running while they're in residence; you're required to present a CV and

a research project that is in some way related to the theme of the show and its artist. I don't want people basing their research on books and reproductions. I want them to develop a direct contact with the works. This is the great good fortune that collectors have: they get to live for a long time with a work, to look at it when in a bad mood or a good mood, distractedly, attentively, in the morning light, in the evening light, in many different ways, and slowly enter into it. When I was pregnant with my first son, I spent a long time looking at a Giorgio Morandi still life that was in my bedroom. And every day I found something new in it.

**The de Chirico/Paolini exhibition is the fourth to be held at CIMA since it was inaugurated in February 2014, after shows dedicated to Fortunato Depero, Medardo Rosso and Giorgio Morandi. What links these four exhibitions?**  
They're all very different. Maybe it's this very diversity, this richness that we have to draw on, that's the key. And what they reveal. With Morandi we focused on his output from the 1930s, which is very little known in the States, where it's his post-Second World War paintings that are known. In the 1930s he found himself as a painter, and he started producing some real masterpieces.

**What about Depero?**  
He was one of the greats. He was the only Futurist who actually went to live in the States. He was ahead of his time – he dabbled in advertising, he even did some things that were very close to Warhol. There's a cushion, which was in the exhibition, in which he had taken a famous photograph of Al Capone and reproduced it nine times. Exactly what Warhol would later do with the Kennedys – but this was 1929!

**Is the idea always to stay with one foot in the 'classic' period of Italian modern art? Would you ever, for example, display an artist like Maurizio Cattelan?**  
Not Cattelan, because he doesn't need us – we don't want to take on artists who are already well represented by others. But that doesn't mean avoiding the contemporary. We're planning an exhibition of a contemporary Italian artist, who I consider to be very good, using documents that recently came to light documenting her (or his) relationship with America – I can't tell you who yet, as we're still defining the details. What we're also doing, as with the Medardo Rosso show where we inserted two works by Cy Twombly, is to drop in a few works by a better-known international artist to provide a way in, a key to reading. »



Mattioli at home with Fortunato Depero's sculpture *Mangiatori di cuori* (Heart eaters), 1923, and a Guro figure from the Ivory Coast

**Until now, all of the exhibitions at CIMA have drawn in part on the collection of Italian modern art assembled by your father, Gianni...**

Our next show, from October, will focus on Alberto Savinio. I don't own a Savinio, and my father never collected him. But I consider him to be a really interesting artist - so we're including him. There's no identification between CIMA and the Gianni Mattioli Collection. We generally work on the first half of the 20th century simply because there are things to be found there that are less well known.

**Wouldn't it have been easier simply to open a museum for your father's collection?**

That's what one of my sons is always telling me, that I should have set up a museum in Italy. But I think there are already too many semi-open museums in Italy. Whereas the role of education is fundamental. CIMA aims to be an incubator - for educators, for those working in museums. If, in the art world, all they find is status symbols, money, ambition, they're not going to have any values to pass on.

**But how do you get to the people who need this message most? Take the New York art world, for example - isn't it a bit of a closed circuit?**

Yes. But everyone I talk to says what we're doing is different. The New York art world is dangerous, too, because it's a world of money, of appearances, of prestige, of ambition, of competition. We don't want any part of this. We are trying to rescue art from its role as a mere status symbol.

**So, with respect to its ambitions, CIMA is less like a private foundation, and more like a public institution?**

CIMA is a public charity and will be subject to the US government's test to prove it as such in 2018, by showing it receives support from a wide variety of sources. We are on target to meet that test, but I've always said that if we don't, we might as well close. I don't want to become the kind of foundation - and there are plenty in the States - whose function is to put a box around private assets.

**What is the current status of the Gianni Mattioli Collection? Will we get the chance to see the 26 works that were on display at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice between September 1997 and January 2016?**

Of course. I'm in the final stages of negotiating a two-year loan to Milan's Pinacoteca di Brera, where the works will be housed in the new Palazzo Citterio annexe, due to be completed in spring 2018. ♦ *'Giorgio de Chirico - Giulio Paolini/Giulio Paolini - Giorgio de Chirico' is at the Center for Italian Modern Art until 24 June. [www.italianmodernart.org](http://www.italianmodernart.org)*