ANTONIO PETRACCA

Identity Theft

ITALIAN AMERICAN MUSEUM
April 26 through June 16, 2006 • Curator Maria Cocchiarelli
As we approach the fifth anniversary of the birth of the Italian American Museum, the art of Antonio Petracca gives us the opportunity to reflect upon our identity, and to consider the reasons why it is imperative to have a museum to call our own. In the exhibition, *Identity Theft*, Antonio Petracca debuts his most recent work called *Pompeii Overlay Tagged*. In these works Petracca’s unique perspective depicts how Italian Americans are viewed in society. This work makes a statement and asks the questions, “Is this who we are? Is this how we want to be seen?”

It is these questions and exhibitions like *Identity Theft* which will help us to define ourselves as we move forward into the twenty-first century. Although we “found, named and helped to build America,” will we be recognized for contributions and achievements in years to come?

It is the mission of the Italian American Museum to help define our identity by exploring the rich cultural heritage of Italy and Italian Americans. We achieve this by presenting individual and collective struggles while highlighting the accomplishments of Italians and their heirs to the American ways of life.

Exhibitions like *Identity Theft* by Antonio Petracca will help us to accomplish our mission.

Joseph V. Scelsa
President
Italian American Museum
ANTONIO PETRACCA

Identity Theft

April 26 through June 16, 2006
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Interview with the artist
Maria Cocchiarelli

Identity Excavation:
Antonio Petracca’s Pompeian Series
Dr. Marianne Berardi

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Antonio Petracca is a thoughtful artist who ventures outside the boundaries of conventional art making in the exhibition *Identity Theft*, which opens April 26, 2006 at the Italian American Museum.

Petracca’s paintings and prints on view convey unexplored themes in contemporary American art history. As an Italian American male confronted with images of stereotypes that referred to his experience found in the media, Petracca began to analyze where fiction ends and truth begins. Although the idea of stereotype has been used regarding other ethnic groups in recent American Art, Petracca has discovered unexplored territory concerning the Italian American psyche. In his previous series of paintings and prints, *These are not my Shoes* (2004-2005), Petracca began to integrate art and social commentary within the same pictorial space. He did not need to travel far to find instances of skewed portrayals of Italian descendents living in America today. His method for inspiration combines intuitive skills as an artist with an unquenchable desire to communicate what filters through articles on the internet, television shows, movies, popular fiction, and newspapers. Although one may interpret his findings as a lack of responsibility on the part of filmmakers, writers, reporters, and advertisers; Petracca’s work cannot be understood so easily. For him, issues of censorship, freedom of expression and artistic license are held closely and in high regard. Just as the idea of being Italian American cannot possibly be understood as a superficial interpretation easily codified by a cartoon image or a stereotype, neither is Petracca’s message. In a series of informal conversations with Petracca, his voice reverberates with the same integrity expressed in his paintings and prints. In the following interview, Petracca explains how *These are not my Shoes* developed and evolved into his newest series, *Identity Theft* (*Pompeii Overlay Tagged*), which is making its debut at the Italian American Museum through June 16, 2006.

As we began to discuss his current exhibition at the Italian American Museum, we bantered back and forth on its possible title. I was struck by the amount of physical evidence of his creative process: stacks of computer printouts with facts concerning stereotypes dated as currently as today, posters from past shows at the Italian American Museum, and shelves of Art History and Sociology books lining the walls of his studio. Thinking out loud I commented:

Cocchiarelli: I am intrigued by some words that I am not able to decipher completely, something that read ________?

Petracca: But the Italians also fascinated America. I find much on the internet and also from the exhibitions at the Italian American Museum. *He Said She Said* is taken from the painting I did after reading the Franklin D. Roosevelt quote, “I don’t care about the Italians they’re a lot of opera singers,” in the exhibition, *Prisoners in Our Own Home*. (IAM, October 2002 through January, 2003.)
Cocchiarelli: That exhibition at the Italian American Museum explored the issue of how some Italian immigrants were considered enemy aliens during WWII in America and held in captivity, so President Roosevelt’s comment supported this fear. What is that statement that contains the word “Caruso?”

Petracca: Concerning Caruso—this came out of an article supposedly celebrating his 100th debut anniversary in the New York Times (11/23/2003), but instead recounted the time he spent a night in jail right before the debut at the Metropolitan Opera. I found it odd that this story appeared in an article supposedly celebrating his artistic achievements. The story reported that a beautiful woman accused Caruso of pinching her derrière. He was arrested and The Metropolitan Opera helped to release him. Here again, the stereotype was reinforced.

Cocchiarelli: How did your idea of using images and words in These are not my Shoes evolve from the series of works which preceded it, Terrible Beauty—wood relief paintings that depict the World Trade Center tragedy? In those you seemed more interested in space and architectonic relationships created by form.

Petracca: My work explores the wonder of visual relationships made apparent by architectural form within pictorial space. I had been working on this concept for many years through my work. I think I was intrigued by the fact that architecture has a rich history with many possible interpretations concerning its meaning and relevance within a community. In a way, I found a context that worked for me to use subliminally both painting and architecture to create a comment on society in general. After 9/11, as a resident of Battery Park City—which is adjacent to the World Trade Center—I experienced the disaster by witnessing it, being part of it. I felt responsible as an artist to respond to it. I wanted to express how the architecture of these two huge buildings had affected the landscape of New York City and to reflect how the remnants of this disaster continued to impact our daily experience. The revival was a testament to New Yorkers’ energy and our ability to overcome a tragedy of such magnitude and be able to move forward. The series Terrible Beauty combined elements of my previous work with the idea of commenting on the power of renewal. I believe this helped me sensitize my ability to express a new depth of understanding concerning social, historical, racial, ethnic and gender issues that exist within our society.
Cocchiarelli: How does that translate into the Italian American stereotype concept that developed out of this into the current work *Identity Theft* and the previous series *These are not my Shoes*?

Petracca: I’ve been aware of the problem of Italian Americans being accepted by the New York art scene for a long time. Sometimes, subliminally I would feel as though my motives were being questioned, and I wondered that if my name were different would it be the same. Also, because I grew up in Rochester, New York, in a heavily Italian ghettoized neighborhood, I witnessed stereotyping and bias in the workplace, school, and finally in college. As I experienced this, it affected me deeply and superficially. So, upon completing my 9/11 series—which dealt with issues of intolerance directly—it was natural for me to continue in this vein. However, I eventually changed the issue to that of the Italian American struggle in America. The American approach has been not to question the misinformation of Italian American identity that has created a distortion of who we really are. In some ways the Italian American individual is partly to blame for this. But again, the complexity of our history, contributions, psychology, patriotism, etc., negates a monolithic interpretation or even an assessment of blame.

Cocchiarelli: Why would you say that we are partly to blame for it?

Petracca: In many ways it’s a romantic thing, beginning with Al Capone, and it may go further back than him. He and other “mob” figures are romantic images to the average American. This is partly due to the fact that they are mysterious, with twisted morality, and yet they still tend to be neighborhood leaders, thereby gaining respect of people who would ordinarily walk away from them. Then, American cinema basically hero-worshipped them. So naturally some Italian Americans started relating to these views personally. Italian Americans started acting in these roles. To be truthful, it probably was difficult for actors of Italian American descent to land roles that had a positive image because these roles were practically non-existent. How would you turn down an acting job when one was offered? It is only a movie? Even John Gotti said that part of what he learned was from the movies, acting out, how to be a tough guy. Then on another level we have someone like Mayor Guiliani who said that some of his best friends are people who characterize mob figures in movies. He even wanted them to march in the Columbus Day Parade. I believe he must have thought that these are perfectly fine role models for the average American to emulate.

As an Italian American male confronted with images of stereotypes that referred to his experience found in the media, Petracca began to analyze where fiction ends and truth begins.

Although a symbol of national pride and patriotism, DiMaggio is painted with the use of sfumato, “out of focus.” Petracca deliberately obscures the hard edged definition of the forms so that the viewer begins to question his/her interpretation. DiMaggio’s father was labeled during WWII as an enemy alien, stripped of his business and forced to move from DiMaggio’s hometown of San Francisco.

Cocchiarelli: I was unaware of this.

Petracca: Yes, and the same thing happened...
with Mayor Bloomberg when he wanted some actors from the television series *The Sopranos* to parade in the Columbus Day celebration. They both missed the point. I guess they think the actors are just entertainers and not responsible for the roles they are portraying. Usually the Mayor makes good choices, so this surprised me.

**Cocchiarelli:** Yes, the problem with film is that as a medium it is defined by its ability to create an illusion of timelessness, so that once any stereotype is created it remains an indelible image in the American and international psyche—becoming very hard to erase. Therefore, how much responsibility do you think producers and directors have in portraying the truth about the Italian American experience—something other than this stilted stereotype (*that our only role is playing crime figures*)? Especially those actors of Italian American descent?

**Petracca:** That’s a tough question because there are many factors involved. In order to get the roles—to have a career—they choose these scripts. The actors see themselves as actors not the actual characters. I am not going to say that they shouldn’t produce or direct films that portray Italian Americans as criminals, but if more Italian American actors thought about the repercussions just a little more carefully, perhaps we would see more realistic portrayals of the Italian American experience. An example of someone who has rethought his role in all of this, I think, is De Niro because many of his later movies are not quite so mob related. Even Scorsese’s later movies portray less of a direct connection with violence and Italian Americans. I think that many of the older actors and directors are realizing how this stereotyping has affected the public’s awareness of who we really are.

A prime example of insensitivity is Spielberg’s *Shark Tales*. He is usually sensitive to ethnic issues, but apparently not those pertaining to the Italian American. In a way I feel he is victimized by the very system he is working in. He may feel that these negative depictions are so prevalent and entertaining in our society, why change them now? If Italian Americans are not vocal about being offended by these consistent stereotypes why should he? Actually, many activist groups tried to force changes but were not successful.

**Cocchiarelli:** How does your work reflect this understanding?

**Petracca:** In fact, my new series, *Pompeii Overlay Tagged*, evolved from a trip that my wife Kim and I made to Italy and Sicily. We visited Pompeii, where I took many photographs and was moved by the sophistication of this ancient culture. But in some ways it is a dead culture, in the sense that 2000 years ago these were our forefathers, our relatives now forgotten. Their advanced understanding of perspective allowed them to create spatial landscapes within a room that simulated the experience of being in a garden. A *trompe l’oeil* effect.

**Cocchiarelli:** What do you mean by our relatives? Do you mean they were our ancient ancestors?

**Petracca:** Yes, the unconscious pride this experience began to nurture within me was incredible. Before I knew it, I had a new series underway based on how the Pompeians understood painting, depicted real space, perspective and so much more. In college, I learned that it wasn’t until the Renaissance that perspective was understood. That was incorrect. I began to realize that the ancient Romans who painted these scenes over 2000
years ago understood the illusion of three dimensional space, figurative representations, the vanishing point and expressive use of color. They invented modern architecture and plumbing. Yet as their direct descendants, we know little or nothing about them. But we do know so much about Tony Soprano. What a waste of the television media.

So, I started to think that I should learn about these people. These are my ancient relatives—I should be proud of my history. The series on Pompeii began with a fascination with the architecture, the interior spaces of the Pompeian homes, and inspired a juxtaposition or overlay of typical stereotypes, from our American culture. I began to introduce symbolism as well. In many ways this is an outgrowth of These are not my Shoes, 2004-2005.

Cocchiarelli: I am looking at one of these works in your studio—is that a marriage hall? (See page 8.)

Petracca: No, it’s the House of the Small Fountain in Pompeii.

Cocchiarelli: Within your composition there is basically a trompe l’oeil of an interior room with a contemporary poster plastered onto its ancient wall. It seems to be advertising the television show The Sopranos. Placed in this beautiful space that represents pride to you at first suggests that the poster may belong there, visually, just comfortably within the composition. But upon further reflection it doesn’t seem to belong there. Its placement becomes uncomfortable at best. By the conscious placement of this image (a Sopranos poster) are you suggesting that this may possibly insult Italian Americans? The image itself is an advertisement for The Sopranos’ Family Cookbook with a gun on
Petracca: The wall in this villa in Pompeii (House of the Small Fountain) was found quite complete. The mural depicts a vista made to look out of a window into the landscape, and this is the back wall of a dark villa—it is so sophisticated and exudes an incredible amount of beauty. It was painted as a backdrop to their daily lives. I began conceptualizing the comparison of the act of creating a mural on a wall, in America maybe in a place such as Soho for people to enjoy. Then someone would come along and tag it with a poster to advertise a movie, a concert or maybe a graffiti artist adds his or her expression to what was already created. None of these acts acknowledge the craftsmanship of the original artist. It is a flagrant disrespect or disregard for the creative ability of the first person who painted the mural. In a similar way I did the same thing.

First I created a very detailed painting, true to the mural I had experienced in Pompeii—weathered and aged. Then onto this wall with its revered history I pasted a
The series on Pompeii, begun with a fascination with the architecture, the interior spaces of the Pompeian homes, which inspired a juxtapositioning with stereotypes from our American culture.
way she is addressing similar concerns—
commenting on the absurdity of stereotypes.
She is commenting on how stereotypes rob a
culture of its uniqueness. I believe we both
use a common strategy—we both show the
stereotypes in their completeness in order
to help people begin to think about their
relationship with the stereotype. If I were
from a different school of thought I would
go into an Italian American neighborhood
and depict through my work how nice it is
to live there by incorporating positive images.
However, I wouldn’t be challenging myself
or possibly helping to solve what I wanted
to solve. I want to be direct and honest in
my approach. I enjoy the positive approach
too, and go to many shows that deal with
up-lifting aspects of our culture, but it’s really
not how I see the world.

Cocchiarelli: In terms of your Pompeii series
who is the figure in the print Villa of the
Mysteries? (See page 14.)

Petracca: Toto. He is sort of the Charlie
Chaplin of Italy. He plays the bumbling idiot
(the Southern Italian). The image comes
from Vittorio De Sica’s The Gold of Naples.

Cocchiarelli: It is such a beautiful piece
because you combine an element of
contemporary culture with one drawn from
ancient Pompeii in a seamless unity. Where
does this idea come from?

Petracca: It was from an article about a
festival in Little Italy that showed the poster
of Toto the clown and his relatives shoving
pasta down their pants pockets. Although
funny, it was very negative to the point
that many Italian American politicians
complained in writing and newspapers
carried their grievances.

Cocchiarelli: Would you say that this was a
pivotal moment in your series?

Petracca: Yes, although I had other interests
at the time, this article and Mayor Bloomberg
wanting to have his friends from The
Sopranos march in the Columbus Day Parade
really bothered me. I remember remarks that
people made in print suggesting we (Italian
Americans) were too sensitive, that it wasn’t
such a big deal, etc.. It should be a big deal. I
was starting to get tired of it, and at the same
time, jokes my friends told... I remember
being angry at the relentless advertising in
magazines, newspapers, and television for
The Sopranos. Everything reached a climax,
and what transpired was a cathartic moment
in which I realized that I had the power to
change these images.

Cocchiarelli: What is it specifically about
The Sopranos television show that bothers
you? Have you actually watched it? I’ve never
watched one episode, and if someone were
to offer the opportunity to see it, I wonder if
I would.

Petracca: I have seen a few episodes because
I was curious. I did not want to comment on
them if I hadn’t. I watched a few and I was so appalled. They are despicable. They are also hard to watch. What upsets me most is that edge of danger. At any time, one of these characters might just knock off one of their best friends or beat up someone just for the fun of it. I remember feeling that it was so scary, so edgy. These people were killers on one hand and upright citizens on the other, interested in the well-being of their community, and the progress of their children’s studies. What type of lie is that? The script shows that the characters are good parents and belong to the PTA. The whole thing is just so disingenuous. I thought what a bad commentary on an ethnic group.

Cocchiarelli: I heard that the stereotypes of the wives in this show also require serious adjustment.

Petracca: The portrayal of women really offends me. The women on the show act as though they don’t know what’s going on, behave like dutiful mothers who have no idea that they are married to murderers. Or if they don’t portray an ignorant character, then they are simply powerless. Tony Soprano, the main character, is mostly estranged from his wife and is looking for other women, depicting base behavior of the lowest order.

Cocchiarelli: Recently, one actor from this show went on a crime and drug spree, clouding the distinction between reality and fantasy, and shot a police officer in the Bronx. How do you respond to this?

Petracca: Well unfortunately, that’s what is sad. He was a young actor who got caught up in who knows what. But now it is all over the internet and the news showing once again that these unspeakable horrors are perpetuated by a person of Italian descent. I wonder if anyone considers that he was an actor or just registers his Italian name. Now a lot of people are probably thinking, yes, Italians are dangerous people just like in the cinema and on television.

Cocchiarelli: We spoke about the audience response to your work, but in an ideal world how would you like your work to be understood within the context of the Italian American question. Are you a social radical in your art? In other words, are you attempting to alert society to an inequitable state that needs to be addressed?

Petracca: I don’t see my work as changing society, but I would like the viewer to think about his or her response to Italian American jokes or about the undervaluing of a colleague due to his/her ethnicity. It would be great if my imagery helps the viewer to empathize more and realize the harm created by the constant barrage of this degree of stereotyping. If I don’t look down on an Italian American, maybe the next person will stop doing it. Maybe if a person tells an ethnic joke, and I say no, I don’t appreciate that, I don’t want to hear any ethnic jokes, people would quit. I hope that eventually people will stop relying upon a stereotype to measure a person. Then for me, I would have accomplished something that would be very satisfying.

In Central Casting, Petracca depicts three female masks attributed to traditional female stereotypes portrayed through entertainment. Left figure, the “mob” daughter, middle figure, the lascivious singer, right figure the mourning “mama.” This work was inspired by the opera Una Danza in Maschera and its carnival theme.
Key to the Houses and Villas in Pompeii, Italy depicted in Antonio Petracca’s *Pompeii Overlay Tagged*

- **Villa of the Mysteries**
  Petracca’s print *Villa of the Mysteries* shows the junction of the north and east walls of the famous bacchanalian mural in the villa’s dining room (*triclinium*).

- **House of Ceii**
  Petracca’s print *North vs South* shows the animal hunt mural on the north wall of the house’s interior pleasure garden (*vividarium*).

- **House of the Small Fountain**
  Petracca’s painting entitled *Pompeii Mural Tagged* shows a mural in the house’s central space or *atrium*.

- **House of the Venus Marina**
  Petracca’s print *Last Spaghetti Dinner* shows a mural from the house’s *cubiculum* 4 (a small bedroom).

- **House of Octavius Quartio** *(also known as the House of Loreius Tiburtinus)*
  Petracca’s print *Pompeii Piggies* records murals and a shell-encrusted *aedicule* (an opening framed by two columns and entablature, and usually a pediment, placed against a wall, often containing a statue) on the upper terrace of the house’s elaborate southern exposure garden. The east end of the terrace visible in Petracca’s image had once been furnished with two parallel couches (*biclinium*) which were placed on either side of a channel (*euripus*). Petracca’s image shows the conjunction of the north and east walls of the *biclinium*.

- **House of Vettii**
  Petracca’s print *Costello Grande* records a view within the *atrium* of this famous Pompeian home looking southwest into the *peristyle*.

- **House of Menander**
  Petracca’s print *Inner Sanctum* records a view looking south into the *peristyle* of the house as seen from the *tablinium* (the main reception room of the *atrium* in a Roman house which is usually elaborately decorated).
Villa of the Mysteries
Archival print from the series Pompeii
Overlay Tagged
13 x 19 inches
Edition of 10
2006
IDENTITY EXCAVATION

Antonio Petracca’s Pompeian Series

By Dr. Marianne Berardi

New York artist Antonio Petracca’s most recent body of work, a meditation on the subject of ethnic bigotry collectively titled in this exhibition Identity Theft, was born of ashes—first from those of post 9/11 New York and subsequently from a visit to the ancient Southern Italian city of Pompeii, an ash-covered casualty of Mount Vesuvius’ cataclysmic eruption in 79 AD which killed 2,000 people, roughly 1,000 fewer than the number who perished in the 9/11 bombings.
Less than a year ago, in the summer of 2005, Antonio Petracca and his wife Kim visited Pompeii on the way south to Sicily—a journey aimed at locating the birthplace of his father Emanuel who emigrated from Palermo to the United States as a five-year-old boy on March 17, 1904. The impetus for the artist’s trip, however, ultimately had its origins in the events stemming from the World Trade Center bombings of 2001. Before the disaster, Petracca had never had any particular interest in rummaging around Southern Italy for vestiges of his heritage—either concrete or spiritual. Even in his art there was no inkling of such an interest. Petracca’s paintings focused on poetic slices of architectural space and form, often presenting urban views glimpsed from implied urban structures on elegantly crafted canvas-over-wood supports. These he constructed to suggest beams, cornices, and junctures of walls suggesting rooms in which we spend our lives. But after watching the twin towers collapse from the window of his Battery Park apartment, he, along with other New Yorkers who were close at hand, found himself physically and psychologically displaced. He lived in a hotel for two months, and was literally forced to view the course of response to the disaster from a new vantage point. For someone so keenly attuned to spatial concerns, the different viewpoint brought about a profound shift in what he wanted to express as an artist.

In the immediate aftermath of the bombings, people were at their best. They exerted boundless energy and compassion in a heroic effort to find the dead, mourn them, and rebuild. Inspired by the collective effort, Petracca’s first artistic impulse was to paint a response to the disaster, using the imagery of the disaster itself. It was very direct. The towers figured prominently on the artist’s long canvas-covered beams both as intact structures, their tops blinking against the sky, and as the torqued and mangled skeletons they became after the bombings. Petracca also threw his hat into competition for the 9/11 memorial project, which sought to deal with the great gaping hole in the middle of his world.

Over time, however, the artist saw how the powerful unity of people became tired, splintered and profoundly frustrated. Looking desperately for someone to blame, people around him lost their positive energy, and attitudes devolved into indiscriminate ethnic hatred and intolerance. “There was an intense fear of Muslims,” the artist recalls. “Anyone with a Middle Eastern accent was suspect. It was horrible. The result was a climate of fear and misunderstanding.” The artist came to realize that this human fallout, occurring long after the dust had settled, was an insidious repercussion of the tragedy.

Thinking about it day after day led him to examine for the first time the extent to which his own Southern Italian heritage had been mangled by stereotyping in this country—stereotyping he had encountered throughout his life, but had never confronted before either personally or in his art. After he saw it, he couldn’t un-see it, in the same way that one responds to those figure-ground optical puzzles. First you see only the two black profiles facing one another but not the white vase formed in the space between them. Then once you see the vase, you see it as well as the profiles forever. You see both. After recognizing the features of the Southern Italian American caricatures we have created in the United States—characters we fear to love and love to fear—Petracca began encountering them everywhere, overt and implied. Here they are, spread all over the media, in film, in politics, in newspapers and magazines, on the internet and on television—most notably in the stunning popularity of the recent Sopranos series which HBO advertises on huge billboards across the country: the dumb, uneducated, Mafioso thugs, molls and clueless wives, culturally unsophisticated, superficial, self-absorbed, and frighteningly volatile. One minute they are shamelessly weeping over the tender thought of a long-deceased mother and the next are plugging some unfortunate member of a rival famiglia with more ammunition than remotely necessary.

Petracca’s growing awareness of the pervasiveness of Italian American stereotyping radically redirected the content and tenor of his art. His first artistic response was a powerful series of paintings and prints entitled These are not my Shoes. The imagery was so effective both as art and as social statement that when the series was first exhibited at the Kim Foster Gallery in New York, it nearly sold out immediately. In these works Petracca selected images of well-known Italian Americans (Frank Sinatra, Joe DiMaggio, John Gotti and his daughter Victoria who now has her own television series), the Italian equivalent of our Charlie 16
Costello Grande
Archival print from
the series Pompeii
Overlay Tagged
13 x 19 inches
Edition of 10
2006
Last Spaghetti Dinner
Archival print from the series Pompeii Overlay Tagged
13 x 19 inches Edition of 10 2006
Chaplin (the famed buffone Toto), the incomparable Neapolitan tenor Enrico Caruso, and even artistic masterpieces by giants of the Italian Renaissance (Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa and Michelangelo’s ink sketch for the bronze David with the Head of Goliath, both in the Louvre, Paris). He then combined these immediately recognizable icons with reactionary quotes about people of Italian heritage by both obscure and high profile American figures. In one particularly potent painting entitled 78 Percent (2003), Petracca paired a fedora-capped Old Blue Eyes with a fragment of a startling statistic drawn from a recent public poll: 78% of Americans believe that all Italian Americans have some connection with organized crime. ¹ In another work, He Said/She Said (2004) a portrait of Caruso is paired with the now infamous FDR slam—i.e., not to worry about the efficacy of Italians during World War II since they were just a bunch of opera singers.

But one of the most profoundly damaging revelations addressed in Petracca’s work is that Italian American stereotyping exists increasingly not only outside the Italian American community but within it. Italian Americans who are the fifth largest ethnic group in the United States, numbering some 26 million, are buying into their own romanticized bigotry. The more they assimilate, the more Italian Americans find themselves wondering exactly what it means to be Italian. They (we) latch onto stereotypes because they are so seductively concrete, colorful, accessible. The Godfather with its riveting performance by Marlon Brando can be rented anytime at Blockbuster. The Sopranos’ Family Cookbook is available at Border’s, Amazon, and Barnes and Noble with a click of a mouse. A notable example of Italian Americans embracing their own stereotypes recently in New York City gave rise to the title work in Petracca’s series These are not my Shoes. Three years ago in Manhattan’s Little Italy, the organizers of an Italian food festival needed an image for the poster which would advertise their event. They chose a black-and-white still from the 1954 film, The Gold of Naples, by Italian director Vittorio De Sica. The film is actually a string of six plays unified by the character of Toto, the bumbling fool, who is taken advantage of by every character in the film. The still showed several figures seated around a table stuffing themselves with fists full of pasta. In its strong light-dark contrasts it resembles the early work of the seventeenth-century Italian painter, Caravaggio. To the side of this spaghetti bending fraternity stands Toto, ramming skeins of pasta into the deep pockets of his black shirt and sagging trousers. According to Petracca, “A group of the Italian Americans involved with the festival was outraged and wanted the poster pulled. It was a poor choice because it reinforced all the negative stereotypes.” Of course taking a still out of context, particularly one involving a clown, is precarious business since the clown is a loaded character, as Roberto Benigni, the well-known Italian comic actor was quick to point out in a fascinating 1998 interview. Although he’s the element of humor in the film, the buffo almost always functions as the opposite as well, humor and fear in one. “When the clown comes up close to you,” Benigni noted, “the smile becomes green because of the make-up and I was really impressed by this. So when I saw Toto for the first time, he scared me. Behind Toto’s shoulder under the makeup I could see the mask of the dead. That is why he is so strong, and such a wonderful character, because he can scare you.”²

Petracca realized that the comedy-tragedy, love-fear duality contained in the figure of Toto, or of any comic element, was closely related to the task he had set for himself artistically in These are not my Shoes—commenting upon ethnic stereotyping by incorporating the loaded stereotype itself into his art. The stereotype usually functions first as humor, something of which Petracca is keenly aware, and more than a little wary because its use can backfire, particularly when he pairs it with a slice of text or an image to which it seems to have no obvious relation. He is always in danger of being perceived as someone perpetuating the stereotype. But he persists with his tack, knowing it is human to laugh at absurdity, and his juxtapositions are often calculated to be downright silly. But it is also just as human to look for a pattern or a point of connection in seemingly unrelated things: why were these elements paired up in the first place? What’s really going on here? Petracca is working towards this second end, calling for viewers to take that closer look, and then perhaps go back and rethink their initial superficial response, snap judgment, faulty conclusion—an act that’s just like bigotry. In These are not my Shoes, Petracca juxtaposed the figure of Toto lifted from De Sica’s film via the Little Italy food festival poster, a snippet of text referring to Italians and their Bologna sausage, and a
marvelous sketch by Michelangelo showing a triumphant David standing in easy contrapposto on the head of the vanquished Goliath. Petracca’s point here? The images seem to have nothing in common. However, a closer inspection reveals that the very different looking figures are in fact standing in the same pose—one the clown and one the hero, one having performed well and the other stupidly. Both are also images created by Italians separated by 500 years. Things, and more importantly, people, Petracca stresses, aren’t always what they first appear to be. And, of course, everything Italian isn’t silly.

The artist’s visit to Pompeii followed on the heels of These are not my Shoes and inspired a body of work about stereotyping that was an outgrowth of the first. Pompeii was an eye-opener for Antonio Petracca because he discovered a level of sophistication in Southern Italian material culture he hadn’t recognized before. The quantity of magnificent wall paintings with their superb use of perspectival devices, the sophisticated domestic architecture perfectly suited to the blistering climate, the intricate mosaics, elaborate gardens, exquisite hand-forged silver vessels found in the basement of the House of Menander astonished him. Petracca quite frankly admits to having experienced a profound sense of pride, ethnic pride really, in his personal discovery of Pompeii and the level of sophistication he observed in the work of artists he considers his ancient ancestors. The artifacts unearthed from the 45 acres of this prosperous city more than 1,500 years after the eruption were far more elegant, nuanced, and fascinating than anything he had encountered in school. Why wasn’t it covered in any depth? Why was it left out of the curriculum?

Petracca took scores of photographs the single day he was there, recording a variety of villas and private houses, corners of rooms and motifs from the frescoes that interested him. Back home in New York, he began digitally combining this Pompeian imagery on his computer with the kinds of bigoted material generated by our American culture. Instead of doing it through side-by-side juxtaposition as he had in his previous series, he actually merged it with the photographs of the ancient works of art themselves. The words and texts were superimposed upon the ancient murals, while the images were overlaid in simulation of the trompe l’oeil effects employed by the ancient painters. The effects Petracca achieved are more subtle than in the first series, because the tagging actually appears to be part of the ancient works of art. This melding of the positive and the negative, the authentic and the parody underscores the insidiousness of interlocking truth and fiction, portrait and caricature present in ethnic stereotyping in general.

Petracca dubbed this suite of work Pompeii Overlay Tagged. Six of the digitally layered prints and the first painting he has produced thus far in the series (Pompeii Mural Tagged) are making their debut in the present Italian American Museum exhibition.

Petracca’s print Inner Sanctum records a view into the House of Menander, one of Pompeii’s largest and most luxurious aristocratic homes whose owner, Quintus Poppaeus, was related to Emperor Nero’s second wife. In the print we are looking south across the formal garden into the peristyle of the house from the tablinium (the main reception room of the atrium of a Roman house which is usually elaborately decorated). There, on the opposite wall of the peristyle, Petracca has inserted an image of his own painting These are not my Shoes. He locates it conspicuously, making it larger than it is in real life, as though it had been one of the homeowner’s most prized possessions, a focal point of his art gallery. At first, of course, this is funny. It’s the ultimate example of Petracca behaving like a bad cultural tourist, tagging something totally foreign, inappropriate, even vulgar on the face of an important historical site. But then thinking about it further, the act becomes quite sad. Petracca places himself in the role of the tourist who is trying to understand his own ancestral culture by trying to find touchstones within his own. So what are they? Italian American stereotypes at worst and at best his own art which is trying so hard to make sense of them. The result is a profoundly gutsy as well as a scathing indictment of the Italian American problem with public image.

In both his print Last Spaghetti Dinner and his painting Pompeii Mural Tagged, Petracca continues his tagging, this time using visual references to The Sopranos, which he admits to having watched a couple times “just to see what it was all about.” Its offensiveness was even greater than he had anticipated, and as such became a key symbol of Italian American stereotyping in
Inner Sanctum
Archival print from
the series Pompeii
Overlay Tagged
13 x 19 inches
Edition of 10
2006
Pompeii Piggies
Archival print from
the series Pompeii
Overlay Tagged
13 x 19 inches
Edition of 10
2006
the new body of work. A mural with a white field, a cupid and architectural motifs strung with garlands photographed in a small bedroom (Cubiculum 4) of The House of the Venus in a Seashell provides the setting for Last Spaghetti Dinner. Petracca tagged this mural with a newspaper notice advertising a play that was actually staged in Greenwich Village about the Sopranos' farewell dinner for Tony, the main character who is being sent up the river. Despite Tony's perennial philandering (to which the presence of cupid is a witty reference), his family and his wife nonetheless rally round to send him off in stereotypically loving fashion—with a big bowl of pasta. In this work Petracca shows us that The Sopranos are no longer confined to television. Their potency has now spawned a play. And then, to drive home the point even further, Petracca (thankfully only in his art) has brought notice of both manifestations of the Sopranos across the ocean to Italy, back to the place where these caricatures supposedly originated.

Petracca's painting entitled Pompeii Mural Tagged takes the tagging a step further. Upon a mural with poetic landscape motifs he observed in the atrium of The House of the Small Fountain, Petracca tagged the cover of the Sopranos' Family Cookbook. Rather than showing it whole and pristine, Petracca manipulated it digitally so that it appears to have already been partially torn off by someone who came along after him. Here his image begins to work on a matrix of levels: the artist shows he is cognizant of the fact that his artistic viewpoint isn't the endpoint in this argument about Italian American stereotyping. His view is one part of a dialogue with as many layers left to excavate as Pompeii itself, still partially buried under all that debris after 2,000 years.

One of the most successful prints in the series from a purely formal point of view is Villa of the Mysteries, photographed in the villa's spectacular dining room or triclinium which contains one of antiquity's most celebrated works of art, the bacchanalian fresco. Near the middle of long north wall of this electric painting, its rich red background showcasing the 29 life-size figures involved in an initiation ritual into the cult of Dionysus, god of wine and debauchery, Petracca inserted that infamous still from The Gold of Naples of food festival fame. He colorized it so that it blends in perfectly with the mural proper. Closer examination reveals that Petracca actually hung this still like a framed painting on top of the real work, obscuring part of it entirely and even casting a shadow on the wall. Here Petracca's “American style tagging” subtly changes one thing into another. He replaces the prelude to an ancient sexual orgy with a modern food orgy.

Petracca's print Costello Grande presents a view within the atrium of the House of the Vettii, looking southwest into its peristyle. One of the best preserved residences in Pompeii, the Vettii house belonged to two brothers, wealthy freedmen who made a fortune as wine merchants. They spent it on lavish embellishments for their home including an extensive trompe l'oeil style art gallery, as well as large numbers of highly entertaining pornographic frescoes. Petracca has “tagged” an image of Lou Costello, the American equivalent of Toto, on the wall above a “portrait” fresco of a laurel crowned figure in a toga. According to Petracca: “Lou Costello was a talented actor who made a living making fun of himself, making fun of how stupid he was, which of course he wasn’t. It exemplifies poignantly the kind of role open to Italian Americans, character roles, playing gangsters and buffoons. If you wanted to make it in show business, you basically could become great if you bought into these stereotypical roles. That's where the work was.” In this heart of the Vettii home, where the upwardly mobile brothers poured most of their money, Petracca placed his portrait of the great Costello in his baseball cap, hanging it a little askew, of course, since the actor had to tilt his talent to fit the available mold.

The print North vs. South features an elaborate fresco of an animal hunt painted on the north wall of an interior pleasure garden (vivarium) in the House of Ceii. A decorative border surrounding the main field of the painting creates the impression that the scenes of a lion chasing a bull and dogs bringing down wild boars are glimpsed through a window. What attracted Petracca to this painting as an image resonant with interpretive possibilities for his artistic purposes was its depiction of violence, something stereotypically associated with southern Europeans. Often rehearsed in school are the violent events in the Roman Colosseum, where humans were thrown to the lions and gladiators often fought to the death. Across one corner of this fresco, Petracca wrapped a turn-of-the-century text he discovered by Edward Lowry, commenting on the undesirability of Italian
immigrants from “the southern portion of the peninsula” over those from the north who make better (less violent) citizens.

In a manner similar to North vs. South, Petracca superimposed the text of a derogatory Guinea Pig joke someone had emailed him upon an exterior terrace wall in the House of Octavius Quartio (also known as the House of Loreius Tiburtinus). To create the illusion of the text being physically on the wall, Petracca showed it in the same perspective as the wall and also converted the font to one known as Herculaneum which is stylistically fitting. Entitled Pompeii Piggies, this print shows the marked contrast between the gauche portrait of the Italian American thugs in the joke and the refinement of the Southern Italian home upon which it is overlaid: the east end of an upper terrace overlooking the house’s elaborate southern exposure garden. The terrace had once been furnished with two parallel couches (biclinium) which were placed on either side of a channel (euripus). The fresco on the north wall shows deer while the partially occluded fresco on the east wall depicts Narcissus at the source, admiring his face in the water. A nearby grotto contained a fountain that sprayed water into the channel—not your typical setting for piggies.

Petracca’s trip to Sicily didn’t yield much about his father’s early life. However, the side trip to Pompeii awarded him an entirely new level of awareness and pride about Southern Italian culture. As a testament to that discovery, this new body of work uses the imagery of Pompeii as a metaphor for the artistic and intellectual contributions of Italians everywhere, most specifically in America where the negative stereotypes—the tags—richly deserve to be stripped away.

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1 The text on these statistics derives from “Italian American Stereotypes in U.S. Advertising” prepared by The Order of Sons of Italy in America/www.OSIA.org (202/547-2900).


3 The text is from Edward Lowry, “Americans in the Raw” from The World’s Work, 1902.

4 The essential text on Pompeian painting I consulted while preparing this essay was Giuseppina Cerulli Irelli et al, La Peinture de Pompei, 2 vols., Paris, Editions Hazan, 1993.
ANTONIO PETRACCA

Selected Solo Exhibitions
2006  'Identity Theft', Italian American Museum, New York, NYC
2005  'These are not my Shoes,' (Queste non sono mie Scarpe), Kim Foster Gallery, NYC
2003  'Intangible Presence', Oxford Gallery, Rochester, NY
2002  'Forecast: Sunny & Clear High in the Low 80s' Kim Foster Gallery, NYC
2000  'Space Constructed', Kim Foster Gallery, NYC
1999  'Architectonic', Galerie Bhak, Seoul, Korea
1997  'Back from the Future', Pyramid Arts Center, Rochester, NY
1995  'Objects and Apparitions', Oxford Gallery, Rochester, NY
1994  'Mysteries', Kim Foster Gallery, NYC
1991  'Chance Glance', Cleaver Callahan Gallery, NYC
1988  'Road Views', Mercer Gallery, Monroe Community College, Rochester, NY
1985  Shahin Requicha Gallery, Rochester, NY
1984  Tower Gallery, SUNY College, Brockport, NY

Selected Group Exhibitions
2005  'The City: Contemporary Views of the Built Environment,' Lehman College Art Gallery, NYC
2004  'Landscape 2' Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art, Sarasota, Florida
2002  'Voyage' Flowers East Gallery, London, UK
2001  'The Waking Dream', curated by Dominick Lombardi and Steve Lowy,
      Castle Gallery, College of New Rochelle, NY
1998  '4 Artists From New York,' Galerie Bhak, Seoul, Korea
1997  'Definitive Decade,' Aljira Arts Center, Newark, NJ
1996  'Neurotic Art Show', Artists Space, NYC
1994  'Isn't It Romantic?' curated by Michael Walls, On Crosby St., NYC
1992  'Message to the Future', SUNY College, Oswego, NY
1991  'The Other Landscape', Tribeca 148 Gallery, sponsored by Art Initiative, NYC
1990  'Contemporary Landscape', Cleaver Callahan Gallery, NYC
1989  'Altered Landscapes', Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, NY
1988  'Road Views', Mercer Gallery, Monroe Community College, Rochester, NY
1985  Shahin Requicha Gallery, Rochester, NY
1984  Tower Gallery, SUNY College, Brockport, NY

Commissions / Grants / Special Projects
2003/4/5  U.S. State Department, Art In Embassies Program, US Embassy in Caracas, Venezuela
1993  Putt Modernism, Artists Space traveling exhibit, miniature golf course hole #5
1992  Art Matters Inc.; grant recipient, New York, NYC
1986  Special Arts Award, Arts Council for Rochester, NY
1976-86  Founder and Executive Director of Pyramid Arts Center, Rochester, NY

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ARTnews, 'The Many Faces of Realism: The Real Thing?' cover story by Ann Landi, June 2002
Village Voice, Voice Choices, 'Elbow Room,' review by Kim Levin, August 8, 2000
New Yorker, 'Elbow Room,' review by Alexi Worth, August 6, 2000
ARTnews, 'Antonio Petracca,' review by Margaret Moorman, October 1997