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To the land of our fathers — Amicosante takes his art to Italy

By Reva Blau
BANNER STAFF

When Wellfleet-based painter Vincent Amicosante received an email requesting a submission for the annual Art Biennale in Florence, he assumed it was an Internet scam. Luckily, he opened the attachment anyway.

It turned out the message was an invitation to show a painting in the city of Dante Alighieri. With that invitation, Amicosante is about to fulfill a lifelong dream to show his work in Italy, the land of his grandfather. To paraphrase the opening of "The Divine Comedy," it has not been a straight path to get there.

Amicosante's grandfather was, as he describes him, "my main male bonding figure." Pasquale Amicosante was from a village in the mountains of Abruzzo, where local skirmishes and poverty made turn-of-the-century life harsh. Still in his teens, he arrived at Ellis Island alone.

More than 800 artists have been invited to take part in the 2009 Biennale Internazionale Dell'Arte Contemporanea from Dec. 5-13. It is the largest exhibition of its kind. Taking place in Fortezza da Basso, a former Medici palace, the Biennale has a festive, celebratory feeling that has been fostered in order to put Florence, considered an artifact of the Italian Renaissance, on the map of contemporary art. Performance artist Marina Abramovic and painter Shu Yong will be recognized as Biennale honorees. Throughout the week, the Biennale sponsors events and lectures.

To enter, Amicosante had to fill out copious paperwork and has spent more than \$10,000. He worked for a year on the triptych he would eventually submit. Already, he has sent two of his painted wooden panels that flank the triptych. Shipping costs for these alone were \$4,500. He has



Vincent Amicosante's "Transit of Love" is being shown in Florence, Italy.

rolled up the canvas that serves as the middle section and will mount that section of the painting there.

Perched on a painting stool before his trip, Amicosante explained, "My grandfather never went back to Italy, but he talked about it all the time." In the mid-'90s, Amicosante started visiting Italy, staying at a friend's villa, and he has returned every year since.

"The first time I was there was a revelation of all the things [my grandfather] had taught me. I understood the love for gardening, long lunches, the siesta in the hammock, the earth, the wine, the romantic side of life, not working 24/7."

Even before Amicosante went to Italy, Italy was ever-present in his work. His painting diverges from that of most contemporary painters on Cape Cod. Rather than emphasizing nature's ragged edge, in Amicosante's world, nature is seen through the lens of a romantic civilization. Indeed, in his work the world appears to be managed and patterned by great Medici-like patrons of the arts. Using the word



Vincent Amicosante travels to Italy for the Florence Biennale.

"magic-realist" to describe himself, Amicosante paints scenes pregnant with the fantasy of a world reborn as a place of art.

Amicosante's techniques point to old master gestures, including painting scenes within scenes. This framing, while post-modern, emphasizes point of view and narrative. But it is also old-world. Even the light smacks of the Italianate and features the full contrast of darkly lush green trees to robin-egg sky that

in late-15th century paintings made the city of Florence appear heavenly. His paintings often feature frames of a different light or perspective. These frames elevate the landscape to the status of architecture, endowing the objects or figures inside with an almost reverential interest.

Taking objects that mean something to him — a tricycle, an accordion, a passion flower — Amicosante makes talismans that repeat in his canvases like keys to decode them. Numbers are significant. And sources of reflection, such as baubles, appear as yet another baroque gesture.

For the Biennale, Amicosante, like countless Renaissance painters and writers, chose to paint an homage to the storied town itself.

Given a space of 9 by 10 feet, Amicosante painted "Transit of Love," a triptych of classical proportions that tells a narrative reading from left to right, inspired by paintings such as Sandro Botticelli's "Primavera," circa 1482, that allegorized the flowering of art during the Renaissance. The left panel, "The Birth of Spring," depicts a preg-

nant woman sitting on a large accordion with her legs tucked in back of her in a field of seven giant passion flowers. The larger middle panel depicts the three Graces — Joy, Charm and Beauty — sitting in a marble crypt. With the famous cupola of Florence's Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore in the background, a Florentine or diligent visitor could recognize the tiered gardens and cemetery that overlooks the city.

Amicosante culled ideas from 1930s postcards of nude women that he found in local antique shops. The right panel depicts a winged Renaissance statue that represents the Angel of Death. A figure dressed in a tuxedo, probably the artist himself, looks down on the Graces and plays accordion.

Amicosante found the model for the instrument in a stroke of luck at an antique shop in Eastham. He went in looking for an accordion and kicked something that turned out to be a box containing an Italian accordion from the '30s.

The erotic nature of Amicosante's work erases the line between the nudity in religious painting and images designed to satisfy purely lascivious desires. ("I'm sure they chose me for the sex," says Amicosante, referring to the judging committee who found him on an art database.) Yet, looking at the Botticelli painting, the figures in gauze are no less suggestive than Amicosante's Graces.

By placing his painting in this spot, Amicosante could not have imbued his work with more significance relating to a city proudly wearing plaques bearing passages of "The Divine Comedy," written in the early 14th century. But for all the history Florence is steeped in, for this particular artist, it's a way for him to return to Italy with his Italian grandfather, his boyhood hero.