

Catherine Wagner: "Catherine Wagner's Photographs Reveal, and Re-Make, the History of Rome"

By Robyn Wise

February 22, 2016



*Constantine Fragments (2014)*  
Photograph by Catherine Wagner

There's a saying in Rome: "Nothing is allowed, so anything is possible," notes San Francisco artist Catherine Wagner in a faux Italian accent. She's describing how, despite initial resistance—in the form of many formal meetings and lunches—she persuaded Rome's top museum officials to let her photograph treasured antiquities in their most intimate, often vulnerable backstage moments for her recent "Rome Works" series.

Her large-scale color photographs, conceived during the artist's 2013-2014 Rome Prize residency and exhibited at San Francisco's Anglim Gilbert gallery last fall, capture Classical and Renaissance-era sculptures in a conceptual way. "I deliberately sought objects in states of transition because they were undergoing conservation or being moved," says Wagner. "I used the packing materials and storage crates as strategies to literally and metaphorically reframe history."



Catherine Wagner  
Photograph Phil Bond Photography

Notions of museum convention and display methods, collapsed temporal boundaries, and how we understand the past and share knowledge across time are concepts at the heart of Wagner's work. For more than three decades, the 63-year-old Bay Area native has been investigating the constructs of cultural identity in her idea-driven photography practice.

One of the earliest pieces in her "Rome Works" series considers Palazzo Altemps's famous Artemis/Diana torso. "Artemis is written about as the huntress, a powerful woman who can't be tied down," says Wagner. "Yet here she is all trussed up. I wheeled her into a courtyard with streaming light and realized this couldn't be more perfect." For another work, she shot the back side of a Bernini angel at the Vatican while Pope Francis delivered his weekly address on the balcony.

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FAUSTINA MINORE



RITRATTO FEMMINILE III



BUSTO FEMMINILE II



RITRATTO FEMMINILE II



BUSTO FEMMINILE I



RITRATTO FEMMINILE I

*Bust Typology (Female) (2014)*  
Photography by Catherine Wagner

She also photographed the outsized fragments of Musei Capitolini's Colossus of Constantine, which, isolated in protective scaffolding during restoration, evoked a heightened sense of the fragmented historical narratives they hold. "Officials didn't want me seeing the piece that way and kept urging me to come back when it was finished," says Wagner, who told them she wouldn't care at that point.

Wagner is returning to Italy, but this time to Bologna for a new project exploring the shadows depicted in Giorgio Morandi's stilllife paintings, which she describes as "the ghost in his work." Closer to home, Wagner is creating a public artwork for Moscone Station that will feature six enormous granite panels laser-etched with images she made at the Moscone Center construction site more than 30 years ago. It's these elegant confluences of time and musings on the silent histories of our built environment that make Wagner eternally worth watching.

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