

La ricchezza di la terra

Chips Mackinolt

Sicilians are a cautious lot—little wonder. The largest island in the Mediterranean has been invaded more times than anywhere else in the world, by Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, French, Spanish, various Italian city states (including the Vatican) and the Americans in the Second World War. And now tourists.

Although still on the tourist trail, the Vucciria market is a shadow of its former self, and has been supplanted by the larger markets at Ballarò and il Capo. An ancient and arguably dying market area going back to Arab times in Palermo, the Vucciria doesn't seem to have much going for it.

The Shanghai restaurant, famous for food and politics—serving as a platform for communist politicians, among others—closed a decade ago. There are far fewer market food stalls, and many that remain have no obvious family successors. The legendary image of the markets, a painting by communist artist Renato Guttuso, is now sold as ersatz nostalgia in cheap reproductions in the second-hand stalls; it hangs in local restaurants, and even features on motorbike helmets. There is a famous photo of Guttuso at the microphone on the Shanghai's balcony in his campaign for the city council, along with anti-Mafia campaigner and writer Leonardo Sciascia, in 1975.

But...and there are always buts.

In the three years I have lived on and off in the Vucciria, I have always been the *straniero*—foreigner—and treated with caution even by those who may accept me as 'their' foreigner. Yet it was here, from late 2014, that I became immersed in the culture and language of the fruit and vegetable markets, and the politics of food production and distribution. The presentation of an extraordinarily beautiful bunch of gold-ribboned chillies by a stallholder, Pasquale Sampino, with whom I would drink most lunchtimes, led to an exhibition, *La ricchezza di la terra/La ricchezza della terra/The wealth of the land*,* which opened in Palermo, and travelled to Darwin, Sydney and Melbourne in 2016.

So I was introduced to an allegedly dying Vucciria by the very heart of its existence: the myriad small businesses that maintain their families and community. These are the backbone of food and other supplies for a shrinking population—a population that until the 1960s had its own unique dialect.

An acquaintance blames the slow death of the Vucciria on tourism—but this is bullshit. It's a lack of local residents. And that lack is through an insidious process of attrition.

Scores of buildings are empty—some in a state of collapse and decrepitude—others are restored, but

just to a certain point; many have been empty for years. It's hard to escape the notion that a combination of corruption and 'wait and see' by developers hoping for a change in the progressive local government of Leoluca Orlando—which would allow massive profits through gentrification—is the root cause of the community being starved of residents. There's room for 600 people to move back—but also a lack of will for this to be achieved.

Some blame the *movida*, the Thursday/Friday/Saturday-night invasion of young people who come to drink and socialise. But this is also bullshit: in fact many locals survive on the income from these nights.

None of the local people I knew came to my exhibition—held only 500 metres from the Vucciria. But who among them would go to art shows? Some were still at work when we were drinking wine and listening to speeches.

So, haphazardly, I started—initially on the exterior walls of a trattoria I eat at—to produce what has become an extensive series of paste-ups of images from the exhibition; incorporations of those images as designs on clothing; and general piss-takes of the district and its denizens (especially seagulls and pigeons!). It's been a way of giving my exhibition back to my neighbourhood, plus more. An early piece incorporated images of swordfish, along with the beginning of a famous saying in dialect, *quannu i balati ra Vucciria s'asciucanu...*, which loosely translates as 'the Vucciria will survive as long as the water from the fishmongers flows across the stone pavements of the market'. After its first pasting, each fishmonger in the area proudly ordered a copy for their stall, along with paste-ups of the *triglie*, *orate*, *polipi*, *seppie* and *sardine* they sell for a living.

The paste-ups are done in public: people are used to me walking around every Wednesday morning with my bucket of glues, roller and brush. Local passers-by watch and critique the work, make suggestions, or ask for new images for next week. There's been no suggestion of permissions or calling the cops. The locals take pleasure, it would appear, in their local community being celebrated rather than seen as 'dying'. There's caution about the doings of the *straniero*, perhaps, but support nevertheless.

Some of the images incorporated with clothing designs are critical of modern fashion, support local campaigns for street performers, or promote local Sicilian produce. One involves a very bad pun in Italian: it satirises the famous Dolce&Gabbana brand with images of *cannoli* (sweet desserts) and *gamberi* (prawns): thus Dolce&Gamberi. Locals take pictures of it and get a good laugh. Bugger me if someone didn't post it on Instagram—and Sicilian fashion designer Stefano Gabbana reposted and gave it a 'love', with no mention of litigation. **a**

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Chips Mackinolt is a Darwin-based visual artist and writer who has spent part of the last three years working in Palermo, Sicily. Across four decades he has contributed to more than 200 group and solo shows. He has also worked as a journalist for Fairfax and non-mainstream outlets. More of the Vucciria paste-up work can be seen on Instagram #chipsmackinolt. For more street paste-ups: @chipsmackinolt.

* The catalogue, with feature essay by Anita Angel, appeared in Palermitano, Italian and English.

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Quanno i balati ra Vucciria s'asciucanu, installed in all local fishmongers



Pigeons at the opening of another paste-up show



Installing a bottle of Nero d'Avola at the Taverna Azzurra



Armani jeans and 'poverty fashion'



Amuninni! (Let's go!) Sardines dashing to freedom



Polipo (octupuses) decorating an abandoned building



The local barber's **salone**, appropriately tooled up



Keeping up with seasonal produce opposite Pasquale's stall



Dolce & Camberi, edible fashion?



More for Pasquale and me to look at over a beer or two



Stairs leading down to the Vucciria



Passeggiata (promenade) of local pigeons



Orata—a tasty fish that I drew after lunching on it



Seppia (squid) and triglia with other street art, including Padre Pio



Street meat: text on the importance of knowing your butcher



Street food for the birds