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# You Don’t Know What Arte Povera Is? They Can Change That

By Elisabetta Povoledo
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Magazzino, a new space that will hold hundreds of Arte Povera works in Cold Spring, N.Y. CreditMarco Anelli

ROME — If you don’t know much about Arte Povera, the 1960s Italian avant-garde movement whose proponents created minimalist works using humble or organic materials, two New York collectors are hoping to change that.

Nancy Olnick and Giorgio Spanu see it as nothing short of a mission to expose to the American public the works of the small group of Italian artists who exhibited together in the late 1960s and early ‘70s.

That mission is about to materialize, in a stark, outsized industrial building in Cold Spring, N.Y. — about 60 miles north of New York City — where they plan to exhibit about 400 works from their substantial collection when it opens next year.

They call the space Magazzino, which means warehouse in Italian, an unassuming designation that intentionally avoids any association with museums, institutions, art galleries or commercial enterprises. “The name was not chosen by chance,” said Mr. Spanu of the self-financed project.

“We take pride in saying that we are independent and we want to remain independent,” said Mr. Spanu, who was born in Sardinia but has lived in the United States for almost 30 years. “We want the possibility to share in our own way,” making the collection “available to students and scholars and the public.”

Work has been underway on the imposing 20,000-square-foot structure in the Hudson Valley, where the couple also has a home. The space, which includes a vast library, will have year-round programming, and will be free and open to the public by appointment.

This week, Mr. Spanu and Ms. Olnick spoke with a reporter as they traveled in Italy to talk to some of the artists linked with Arte Povera, includingGiulio Paolini and Michelangelo Pistoletto as well as Margit Rowell, an art historian and expert in the art of Luciano Fabro (1936-2006), for a documentary that will introduce their collection. The movement also included major figures like Alighiero Boetti (1940-1994) and Mario Merz (1925-2003), as well as Jannis Kounellis and Giuseppe Penone, whom they hope to interview.

“It’s difficult for people to come in and just look at art that is so conceptual, you have to give it some kind of background to put it in context,” said Ms. Olnick. “These aren’t just pretty pictures.”

Indeed, many of their pieces are very large, proposing curatorial challenges that Magazzino is meant to assuage.

The idea of creating an exposition space for their collection was hatched about seven years ago, but “it took a few years to find the right location,” said Ms. Olnick.

Initially, they had thought to build Magazzino on their estate in Garrison, N.Y., where they live in a modern, glass-walled house designed by the Spanish architect Alberto Campo Baeza, “but not everyone in the neighborhood saw the interest of having an art space in a residential area,” said Mr. Spanu. Frank debates with local residents convinced them to look for another site.

“We’ve been in Garrison for 25 years and we love it there, so we appreciated the input,” said Ms. Olnick.

The perfect space turned out to be a factory off Route 9, just four miles north of their house, which was repurposed and redesigned by the Spanish architect Miguel Quismondo, who also built an addition.

Their love affair with Arte Povera began after a visit to the Castello di Rivoli,a contemporary art museum in Turin that has a significant collection, and a year spent in Rome with their daughter. “We fell in love and started collecting,” Mr. Spanu said. The core of the Arte Povera collection came via Margherita Stein, a Turin-based collector who died in 2003, and other works were bought at auction and from galleries.

Pieces from the Olnick Spanu collection have already been included in various shows of contemporary Italian art, and their Murano glass works — about 500 pieces dating mostly from the 20th century — has toured the United States, premiering at New York’s American Craft Museum in 2000.

“They were so enthusiastic about glass,” said Marino Barovier, an Italian curator and Murano glass expert who helped the couple create the collection, adding, “and they became so competent and expert, too.” When Mr. Barovier was unable to attend openings for the show in the United States, “they went instead, holding lectures and speaking to the public,” he said.

Arte Povera artists have steadily breached American galleries and museums, via collective exhibits and individually, “though there is still more to do,” said Bruno Corà, the president of the Burri Foundation in Città del Castello, which is about to exhibit a Jackson Pollock from the Olnick Spanu collection. Recent scholarship has secured Arte Povera a position “as the most important Italian movement in the postwar era,” Mr. Corà said, adding that the movement survived and prospered thanks to private galleries that understood its importance, both in Italy and abroad, and tocritics.

“We believe that Arte Povera is the last avant-garde movement of 20th century, and we think it has legs, and a future, if people know about it,” said Ms. Olnick.