

Rome home

"With time, I become more political," says Donata Pizzi. "More committed and more radical. I think it's necessary." Born in Italy, Pizzi studied fine art in Britain before becoming a photographer, first making portraits then working with Italian oil company Eni, travelling the world and also creating personal projects about colonial architecture in Libya, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Later she became a picture editor and archivist for editorial titles *L'Espresso* and *Giunti Editore*, then ran the Rome office of The Image Bank. Today we are discussing her next great adventure, which she started more than a decade ago when she turned 50.

Noting the lack of recognition for Italian photography, and wondering how she could help, she sold her house and started a photography collection; in particular, she began collecting work by Italian women, from the 1960s to the present day. "Having studied in London and travelled abroad – and even at home – I always found that Italian photography was not known and not studied, despite being very interesting and full of original approaches," she explains.

"I knew photography from many angles, having been a photographer, a picture editor, then working with The Image Bank; I thought about opening a gallery, but I knew I didn't

With photography made by Italian women from the 1960s to the present day, plus archival material and a photobook library, Collezione Donata Pizzi is niche but powerful. Words by Diane Smyth



1 *Medusa*, from the series *The Modern Spirit is Vivisectiva*, 2014 © Francesca Catastini.

2 From the series *Gulu Real Art Studio*, 2013 © Martina Bacigalupo.

have any commercial aptitude. I decided a collection would be more fun, and then when I thought about what I wanted to collect, it was all by women. So I found this small niche, and actually that was the trick – it works because it is specific.”

Women’s work

Collezione Donata Pizzi now includes nearly 350 prints from close to 100 image-makers, three generations right up to the present. Pizzi emphasises it is a private collection, guided by her taste but, aided by former photographer and NYU Florence lecturer Alessandra Capodacqua, has charted

a women’s history of photography via some of the most important work of the period. The collection includes committed documentary images shot by Letizia Battaglia from the 1970s to 1990s, for example, showing the Sicilian Mafia in its most bloody years; it also encompasses experimental art by Milli Gandini, co-founder of the Gruppo Femminista Immagine.

More recent artists include Francesca Catastini [1] and her series *The Modern Spirit is Vivisective*, which experiments with old anatomical images, slicing bodies and revealing their interiors; the archive also includes Silvia Rosi (featured in *BJP* #7921),

and staged self-portraits repicturing her parents’ migration from Togo. Not all of the work is explicitly feminist, but Pizzi describes the collection as feminist, partly because of its time frame post-1960s (the start of a new era of feminism in Italy), but also because it is by women.

“In the 1970s we discovered ‘the personal is political’,” she says. “So all of the work is feminist to some degree. A male friend warned me that certain artists wouldn’t want to be part of a feminist collection, that they would see it as a ghetto, but that hasn’t been the case at all. They have all been very sympathetic and very helpful.



Many of these artists have been personally important to me and I've been able to meet them, talk with them, and explain our aims."

Collezione Donata Pizzi has also been able to support them in return, buying prints and, for the last five years, helping to fund new projects such as photobooks. Pizzi and Capodacqua offer advice too, and Capodacqua says this has often most benefitted the older and apparently more established women. Where younger artists may have studied abroad, and have an understanding of international art markets, plus supporting networks, older photographers may not have the cultural capital, or have been forgotten or overlooked.

Battaglia made much of her work for newspapers rather than the fine art market, for example, and was in her eighties before galleries picked it up; over the last couple of years, the Collezione has loaned her work to large retrospectives, shown at Fotografie Forum Frankfurt, curated by Celina Lunsford, and at Fotogalleriet in Oslo [6]. In fact Pizzi and Capodacqua have collaborated with many exhibitions over the last 10 years, helping create shows at the Italian Embassy in Lisbon and the Italian Cultural Institute in Edinburgh, as well as institutions closer to home, such as the Triennale Milano and the Palazzo Esposizioni Roma [4].

Beyond prints

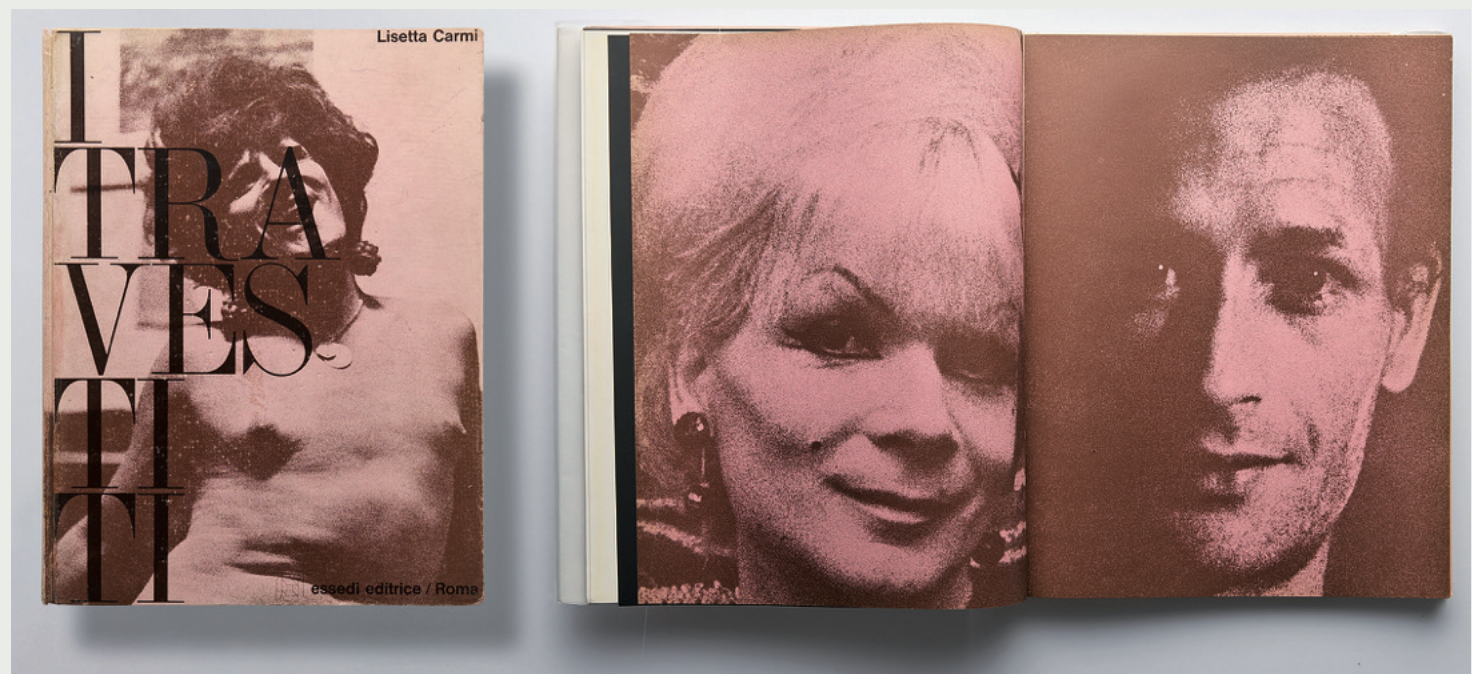
Collezione Donata Pizzi includes archival material, magazines and a sizable photobook library as well as vintage and contemporary prints, and always advocates for these elements to be shown, even if they are

**“The collection is a tool. We do whatever we can do. We are there to resist, to speak out – the collection is militant in that sense”
Donata Pizzi**

fragile or rare. A recent exhibition at Palazzo del Duca in Senigallia [5] included a selection of vintage and contemporary photobooks in several vitrines in the gallery, plus videos flipping through the pages inside. “It meant people could see the actual content, the layout, and also the size of the publication, even if they couldn't touch it,” says Capodacqua.

In fact the collection includes some very rare books, including *I Travestiti* [3], published by Lisetta Carmi in 1972, but almost immediately hard to find. “It's a beautiful object, very special, but they could not sell it because it featured a naked transvestite on the cover,” says Pizzi. “Bookshops were selling it under the counter, or trying to hide it with a dust-jacket – we have the dustjackets too. That still didn't work, so a friend of Lisetta's collected the remaining books and stored them at her place, but those copies were damaged in a flood. So in the end it's a very rare book; we're very happy to have a copy.”

Pizzi and Capodacqua are also keen to create new books, preferring to work with institutions that make exhibition catalogues, and drawing on the collection to make publications. In 2022 Collezione Donata Pizzi published the first issue of *Quaderni*, which aims at creating new paths for interpreting the collection. Titled *Re-enactment* and made in collaboration with Fotodok in the Netherlands, it focused on an Italian-Dutch perspective featuring work by Marilisa Cosello, Moira Ricci, Pippilotta Yerna and Mariken Wessels. *Re-enactment* also included essays by Daniele De Luigi and Jorne Vriens





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and interviews curated by Capodacqua with publisher Steve Bisson and curators Daria Tuminas and Lisanne van Happen.

Pizzi and Capodacqua also speak at academic institutions, Pizzi having very recently returned from a three-day conference in Bologna, *Photography and Feminist Aesthetics*. “It was rewarding, we were mentioned many times!” she smiles. “Making the collection is fun, but it’s also a lot of time and energy, so it’s nice to see it recognised.”

Permanent collection

Pizzi is keen to ensure the collection stays useful, and to this end has created a permanent home for it in Rome. A 400-square metre space, it houses the whole collection – prints, archival material and photobooks – and also has space for small exhibitions. It will be open to the public by appointment, but Pizzi envisions it more as a resource for curators, writers and academic researchers, including students from the nearby Sapienza Università, who will win credits in exchange for collaborations.

“This connection with a university is important to me,” she says. “And I really like the idea of working with foreign academies. I could have based the collection in Milan, but chose Rome because there are so many international institutions there. The cultural environment is more open. I’m very excited to have this space, I’ve been wanting to have the prints hung, the books out, the whole thing exposed and accessible.”

With this thought in mind she and Capodacqua are fizzing with other plans too, including publishing a new issue of *Quaderni* drawn from the collection on photographs made in Africa. Nearly two years in the making, it includes six authors from three generations, and images and texts stretching from the revolution in Angola, to Ugandan identity photographs, to research on post-colonial debate and beyond. Like the rest of the Collezione Donata Pizzi and its projects, it showcases the underrepresented and overlooked, the unfairly unheard stories and narratives. “The collection is a tool,” says Pizzi. “We do whatever we can do. We are there to resist, to speak out – the collection is militant in that sense.” **BJP**

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3 Cover and spread from *I Travestiti* by Lisetta Carmi.

4 Installation view of group exhibition *L'Altro Sguardo* at Palazzo Esposizioni Roma, in 2018.

5 Installation view of group exhibition *Mise en Scène: Images and Books from Collezione Donata Pizzi* at Palazzo del Duca, Senigallia, in 2025.

6 Installation view of group exhibition *La Passione* at Fotogalleriet, Oslo, in 2024. Image © Jan Khür/Abtrakadabra Studio.