

Taking photos with Caravaggio

ON DISPLAY / 'It's almost as if I'm there in the room while he's painting'

Serafin LaRiviere / Toronto / Wednesday, January 25, 2012

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Some paintings are so realistic they could almost be photographs.

One can only imagine what great painters like Caravaggio would have done if they'd had access to a Canon digital camera. Would classic images like *Sleeping Cupid* or *David and Goliath* be as rich and alive on film as they are on canvas? Toronto photographer Franco De Simone is endeavouring to find out in his new series *Between Two Worlds: A Photographic Homage to Caravaggio*.

De Simone is probably better known as one of the city's leading hair stylists – working his magic on posh celebrities like Dionne Warwick, Lee Remick, Joanna Lumley and Pamela Wallin. As his work began popping up on TV and in print, De Simone became interested in working with a camera as well as his scissors.



Franco DeSimone used his hairdressing career as a launch-pad to explore film and photography.

"At first it was just about documenting my work," he says. "I always felt it was important to record everything, even my bad work. Sometimes you can get a little cocky with yourself, so having a reminder of how bad you can be really brings you back to earth."

De Simone gradually became more confident behind the lens, eventually venturing into the world of independent filmmaking. He wrote and directed his first film, *Pathos*, in 1982. A documentary entitled *You're Not Alone* followed in 1987, premiering at the Carlton Theatre to enthusiastic audiences and solid reviews.

Having explored the drama and theatre of film, De Simone began to wonder about strengthening these elements in his still photography. Feeling the need for a stronger foundation of knowledge, the self-taught photographer took part in a series of workshops and courses, spending several years learning not only about the technical aspects of capturing the right shot, but also the growing world of digital photo-manipulation.

His unique and eye-catching photographic creations soon began popping up in hair and fashion magazines in both Canada and his native Italy. It was while searching for new subject matter that De Simone received a suggestion to further explore the classical themes already present in his work.

"There was this English professor who knew about my work and said it reminded him of Caravaggio," he says. "So in one of my workshops I tried to mimic Caravaggio's *David and Goliath*, using real models."

That one photo sparked inspiration for an entire series based on the master's most iconic works. Like Caravaggio, De Simone finds his models from everyday life: clients, friends and even people he meets on the street. But even as he pays homage to the painter, De Simone sees his own art in a different light.



De Simone's interpretation of Caravaggio's Narcissus.

"I consider myself more of an artisan because I have too much respect for the true artist," he says. "It's almost the reverse of how Caravaggio worked, using modern tools."

Fourteen prints and 26 canvases later, De Simone has created a comprehensive representation of some of Caravaggio's most famous paintings. Works like *Narcissus* and *Judith Beheading Holofernes* have been reimagined in photographic form, as though capturing a stolen moment between the master painter and his models.

"I'm not only trying to imitate the painting," De Simone says. "It's almost as though I'm there in the room while he's painting and I pop in between him and the model and snap a picture."

The Deets:

Between Two Worlds: A Photographic Homage to Caravaggio

Fri, Jan 27–Fri, Feb 24

Carrier Gallery, Columbus Centre

901 Lawrence Ave W

A special opening reception is planned for Thurs, Feb 2, 6:30–9:30pm, with the artist in attendance.