

A seahorse, a caravel and large quantities of concrete, stone, fill, topsoil, tiles, piping, trees and other plants

FRANCESCO SIMETI

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CONTEMPORARY
ARTS
PROJECT

VIZCAYA
MUSEUM & GARDENS

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Vizcaya was conceived as a modern and distinctly American interpretation of an Italian Baroque villa, and the result is a unique estate with gardens that are particularly striking for their location in central Miami. Wandering through these formal gardens, visitors may stumble upon something that appears incongruous, but strangely plausible. A variety of creatures—a seahorse, a peacock, an alligator, a dragon lazily spouting water—float precariously in one of the fountains. These creatures are surrounded by an assortment of odd things—a rollercoaster from the past, a large tree laying on a barge, a pirate boat, water lilies, “walls” of trees and mangroves and fluffy clouds. Everything is white, out of scale and seemingly adrift in the water. Together, they create the impression of ghostly toys at play.

Francesco Simeti combined his own sculptures with found objects and assembled them in a way that transforms Vizcaya’s east semicircular pool into a theatrical stage. Though seemingly unrelated to one another, each sculpture explicitly speaks to Vizcaya’s history and mythology, the monumental effort to build it and its great fragility. Uncanny and funny at the same time, *A seahorse, a caravel and large quantities of concrete, stone, fill, topsoil, tiles, piping, trees and other plants* provides visitors with the keys to create their own interpretation of Vizcaya, its relationship with history and its ongoing preservation.¹

While developing this project, Simeti searched Vizcaya’s closets and storage spaces for objects left behind from the time when James Deering, Vizcaya’s owner, occupied the estate as a winter home. In the exhibition room of the Main House, Simeti created what feels like a dusty attic, where these long-forgotten objects are dimly illuminated by a flickering slideshow of historic photographs of Vizcaya’s construction. For the first time, visitors have access to a selection of this extraordinary material that documents the building of Vizcaya and provided visual inspiration for Simeti.

Throughout his career, Francesco Simeti has explored ornament and decoration as vehicles for subtle political and cultural critiques. He captures our attention with visually arresting collages of found images from disparate locations. Upon closer inspection, his work reveals haunting details of war, destruction and environmental threat. Nothing is evident or glaring. Born and raised in Sicily, Simeti’s visual culture was shaped by the region’s Baroque art. At Vizcaya, Simeti explores, updates and reinvents core principles of Baroque aesthetics, including surprise, marvel, theatricality and the play between nature and artifice. Paul Chalfin, Vizcaya’s artistic director, along with architect F. Burrall Hoffman and landscape architect Diego Suarez designed the estate as a collage of existing Italian houses and gardens through a process that is not so different from Simeti’s.

Elaborate mechanical devices, known as automata, were a crucial element of the Baroque gardens that inspired Vizcaya’s designers; they also captured Simeti’s attention and shaped his approach to the Vizcaya project. These hidden mechanical devices might have triggered elaborate water jets that would drench the spectator, allowed plants and flowers to sing and play music, or simulated natural phenomena such as volcanic eruptions. Complex mechanisms designed to amuse and enchant, automata were also serious scientific projects that advanced physics and engineering. Early in his collaboration with us, Simeti found parallels between these automata and Vizcaya, seeing both as playful, but rigorous, metaphors of the eternal human ambition to control nature. As we well know, this is ultimately a futile ambition and, over time, nature has transformed many grand endeavors into melancholic ruins. Simeti plays upon such melancholy at Vizcaya, creating an assemblage that might be mistaken for the remnants of an automaton and placing them in a once-ambitious fountain whose pumps and pipes have decayed over time. His playful “ruins” nestled in Vizcaya’s deteriorated fountain system capture the irony and ephemerality of our dreams to conquer nature.

Simeti also collects and reassembles ideas, particularly ideas about nature as they developed in different times and cultures. This investigation coincided with the commission at Vizcaya and greatly shaped his project. Exploring historic architectural plans and construction photographs of the house and the gardens, Simeti concludes that the desires and processes associated with making a place like Vizcaya may, in some ways, be as compelling as the reality of the finished product. In Deering’s time, visitors to Vizcaya could find a Renaissance secret garden, a Baroque parterre, an 18th-century “theater,” a picturesque lagoon, and even a Japanese bridge with peacocks, the latter a tribute to the 19th-century fashion of exoticism.² And the visitor would discover this collage after having crossed through the wilderness of the preserved hammock (native forest), yet another idea of nature. Vizcaya’s designers wanted not only to mold a subtropical environment into an Italian villa with a formal garden, but also to create an environment that could not exist “naturally” anywhere in the world—an entirely artificial place characterized by the co-existence of many different notions of the domestication of nature. In this respect, Simeti reminds us that Vizcaya falls along a continuum of human fantasy, somewhere between the Baroque garden folly and the 20th-century theme park.

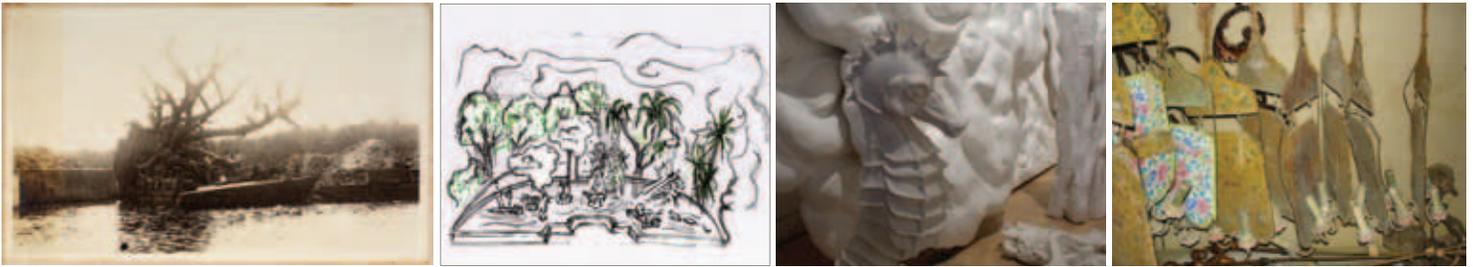
Flaminia Gennari-Santori, Deputy Director for Collections and Curatorial Affairs

¹ Simeti’s title is inspired by a description of the garden’s construction in W. Rybczynski and L. Olin, *Vizcaya: An American Villa and Its Makers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

² The Lagoon Gardens and the outbuildings were part of the south property that was conveyed in 1945 to the Archdiocese of Miami.

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Francesco Simeti is best known for his wallpapers—collages that introduce politically and socially charged images from the mass-media into the private sphere of the home. At the core of Simeti’s work is the investigation of nature and artifice, from Renaissance and Baroque garden architecture to the manufactured lures used to hunt living animals. Simeti is currently working on several permanent projects for New York City’s public schools and subway system, and he has created site-specific installations for the MACRO/ Museo d’Arte Contemporanea Roma, Rhode Island School of Design Museum (Providence), ART&IDEA (Mexico City) and Columbia University (New York City). His work has been exhibited in the United States and Europe, including the Galleria d’Arte Moderna (Bologna), Musée de Design et d’Arts Appliqués Contemporains (Lausanne) and the Institute of Contemporary Art (Philadelphia). His wallpapers are part of the collection at the Smithsonian-Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum (New York City), the Victoria and Albert Museum (London) and the Fabric Workshop and Museum (Philadelphia).

A conversation between Flaminia Gennari-Santori, Vizcaya’s Deputy Director for Collections and Curatorial Affairs and Francesco Simeti.

FGS: When we invited you to develop a project at Vizcaya, what struck you the most about the estate and the grounds?

FS: At the time, I had just started investigating ideas of nature in different cultures. I was reading about the philosophy behind Italian gardens, the English aesthetic of the picturesque, and the notion of wilderness in American culture. When I came to Vizcaya, I suddenly realized that all these ways in which we have reinvented and domesticated nature throughout history were present here. Particularly striking for me was the contrast between the formal garden—an eminently cultural approach to nature—and the surrounding tropical jungle. This tension became the main theme of my project. I dove into the history of the estate, looking particularly at the hundreds of photographs that documented its construction. I was fascinated by the fact that Deering, who is considered an “environmentalist,” declared, on the one hand, that he would not cut trees on the property and, on the other, dramatically transformed the site. He uprooted fully grown oaks from other locations, put them on a barge and replanted them at Vizcaya. He cut canals and built artificial hills that hid a reinforced-concrete structure.

He even re-created a Mediterranean microclimate, planting cypresses in a southern garden that is no longer part of Vizcaya. It is this fantasy of creating a place that could not exist “naturally” anywhere in the world that captivated me.

FGS: How did these ideas shape your installation in the garden fountain?

FS: For a long time, I have been fascinated with the artificial re-creation of nature and, in particular, with automata—mechanical apparatuses that simulated natural phenomena in European Renaissance and Baroque gardens. But, aside from being perfectly engineered jokes, automata were the materialization of an ambition: to artificially fabricate nature and thus dominate it. But that’s a doomed ambition, and its inherent failure interests me. When I started thinking about Vizcaya, my first idea was to create an automaton—one could easily picture such a surprise-inducing device in the estate’s formal gardens. Instead, I turned a fountain into an artificial landscape where vignettes, that to me are symbolic of what happened here, float in the water. I placed in the fountain the symbols of the house, like the seahorse and the caravel; sculptures of images that I saw in the construction albums such

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as an oak brought over on a barge, or the tracks that were built to deliver the construction material; or the objects, like the dragon and the peacock, created to decorate the place. Moving clouds and walls of mangroves and hammocks surround these drifting elements like the wings of a theatrical set. There is only a faint suggestion of the automata that remains. My installation is very low tech, and its movements are not directed. On the contrary, they are haphazard and accidental.

FGS: We have said that your installation transforms the fountain into a theatrical set, filled with iconic elements that refer to the history of Vizcaya and its natural environment. However, these elements are adrift in the water—there is no play, nor is there a director. But, is there a story?

FS: I designed the installation as a spectacle, with a stage on which the action is performed as well as a back stage where one can glimpse the mechanisms that set the clouds in motion. This representation is my interpretation of what happened at Vizcaya. A hurricane in 1926 greatly damaged the property. The images of that hurricane are incredibly similar to the images of the building of Vizcaya, almost as if Deering was another hurricane! Construction and destruction can look alike and this installation is a metaphor of that confusion. But, the possible references are not limited to Vizcaya. Usually what's adrift in the water is trash and these sculptures, many of which are made of plastic, might evoke other, more contemporary and

haunting images, such as the enormous island of garbage floating in the Pacific Ocean. To re-create elements of the estate, I used a toy caravel that I found on eBay and an alligator that is, in fact, a plastic decoy. These plastic toys could easily be part of that island of garbage. But, if one looks at the caravel, which was sold as a pirate ship, and the alligator, one could imagine that Peter Pan is hiding somewhere in the fountain. In other words, if there is a story, it is entirely open, a suggestion rather than a plot, and it does not end at Vizcaya.

FGS: It's ironic that you used cheap mass-produced plastic toys to remake elements of Vizcaya, where every detail was so carefully designed and realized and where sophistication, luxury and uniqueness were the guiding principles. Why did you make this choice?

FS: Actually, for me, the driving principle behind the creation of Vizcaya was not so much a commitment to luxury and sophistication, but rather a meticulous plan for having fun, a great deal of fun. Their game was to create an environment that had never existed—a collage of visions—and they had the means to do it. Even if they spent extraordinary amounts of money, they were still playing and they would not have stopped if money had not eventually become a concern. To me, there is nothing "serious" about Vizcaya, except, of course, the fortune that they spent on it. I guess that this imperative of "fun" infected me and, in fact, I too had a great deal of fun developing this project in total freedom, a condition that is not common with commissioned

projects. In the fountain, I played with the notion of scale: everything is out of scale, the way things appear in a dream, a memory or through the eyes of a child. I wanted to give the installation this flavor of childhood. In a way, it's a big toy. Isn't Vizcaya a big toy as well?

FGS: How does the installation in the garden relate to the installation in the Main House?

FS: I thought it was extremely important to show the historic construction photographs. They are not usually accessible to visitors and they provided the inspiration for my project. Still, I wanted to exhibit them not as historical documents, but as visions, as glimpses. Buried in the archives, we found an old projector and an equally old set of slides of these photographs.

I thought it was the perfect way to show the historic photographs: faded slides flickering in the dark. The rest of the installation came about as a result of my explorations of the estate and my collaboration with Vizcaya's curatorial team. I was curious about the discarded elements, the broken fixtures, the things left behind. I was given access to every storage area and every closet. It's amazing what is hidden in there: hundreds of lamps, dozens of screens, countless flowerpots, as well as decapitated stone peacocks, remnants of beautiful wrought iron lizards and frogs that once decorated a fountain. These objects tell so much about the passing of time and the transformation of this place, that I just wanted to open the door and let the public in.

Conversation with the Artist: Francesco Simeti

Wednesday, February 29, 2012

7:00 p.m., Courtyard

Susan Cross will join Francesco Simeti in a conversation about *A seahorse, a caravel and large quantities...* and the wider implications of site-specific commissions. Cross has been the curator at MASS MoCA since 2006, where she has worked with many artists who have created new work for the museum. Cross has authored and edited numerous exhibition catalogues and books including *Sol LeWitt: 100 Views*, which was published in conjunction with *Sol LeWitt: A Drawing Retrospective*.

Visitors are invited to explore the exhibition in the garden and in the Main House from 6:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. Tickets \$5; free for Members, Seniors and Students with ID.

Contemporary Art @ Vizcaya Guided Tours

Sundays, March 4, April 15, May 13, 2012

3:30 p.m., South Terrace

The creation of Vizcaya and its gardens caused a massive transformation of the environment. In his project, Francesco Simeti explores Vizcaya's eco-history, from the invention of a "picturesque" tropical landscape during its construction, to the impact of hurricanes and urban sprawl. Join Vizcaya's curators in exploring the estate's eco-history and its interpretation by Francesco Simeti.

Reservations required as space is limited. For additional information or to reserve, please contact CAP at cap@vizcayamuseum.org or 305-860-8423.