

***Home // Making: A Curatorial Study of Representations of Home in Contemporary
Italian Canadian Diasporic Art***

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis will investigate the design of Italian diasporic homes in Toronto, considering how these residences reflect and negotiate cultural identity, heritage and adaptation. Asking, what can/do representations of Italian diasporic homes in Ontario tell us about collective and individual diasporic identities?

Through an interdisciplinary approach, combining interior design/architectural analysis, and cultural studies this research aims to offer insight into the ways in which Italian Canadian homeowners design their living spaces to preserve and reinterpret their cultural heritage in a new geographical context.

Toronto has seen significant contributions to its urban fabric from the Italian diaspora. Like other immigrant communities in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the Italian diaspora has developed a unique design identity, especially pertaining to how they reside. By focusing on interior design elements and spatial arrangements of Italian diasporic homes, this research seeks to understand how homes serve as sites of cultural expression and preservation.

Land Acknowledgement

OCAD University is situated on the treaty lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. These are the ancestral territories of many nations, including the Anishinaabeg, the Haudenosaunee and the Huron Wendat, who are the original owners and custodians of the land. Toronto is also home to many urban First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

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My heartfelt thanks to my family who supported me on this journey. Without your encouragement and support this work would not have come to fruition.

Dedication

To my parents who settled here and overcame so much to build a new life for us.

To my husband, who supports all my endeavours - I am so grateful to share this life with you.

To my children, whom I love with all my heart.

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Preface

“the graft – a small shoot of bud of a tree or plant inserted into another tree or plant where it continues to grow, becoming a permanent part.” Kahil Rabah

Where and how we live has remained a constant theme in my upbringing and shaped my professional career. As an interior designer, questions surrounding the representation of home and identity have shaped my approach in both residential and commercial projects. In the early 2000's, I was working on an interiors project for a college dormitory in Toronto, Ontario. My perspective was the space needed to be minimal in design, allowing the students inhabiting the space to define their own sense of home rather than be influenced by the traditional representations of home. My proposed scheme for materials was quickly rejected by a more experienced, senior designer who stressed in their objections that, “the students needed to feel at home, not in a gallery!” Consequently, my choice for a flat non-descript, modern baseboard was substituted for a more ornate profile, reinforcing what is perceived as a traditional residential aesthetic. This experience marked a turning point in how negotiating *home-making* takes place in the minutia of design. The assumption that a particular design detail could universally evoke a sense of home completely overlooks the diversity of backgrounds and lived experiences an individual carries with them into a space and prevails upon their belongings. Home is not a singular, uniform concept but a fluid and deeply individual experience. Attempting to replicate a specific aesthetic with the hope

of evoking a shared emotional connection to home is inherently flawed, as the meaning of home is diverse and impacted by cultural, personal and historical factors.

Introduction

I was raised in a house that my father built. He was an Italian immigrant and arrived in Toronto in the late 1950s. He worked in construction, as did most Italian immigrants at the time. Our family, including my grandparents, moved into the house he built with my mother in 1980. My mother still lives in the house they built together. It is very ornate, and its design is typical of the Italian immigrant home adopted by the Italian diaspora in Toronto. Growing up I was keenly aware that our home, and the homes of our relatives in the Italian diaspora had a similar style and aesthetic, and this aesthetic was very different from my friends who were not of Italian descent. In particular, the Italian diasporic homes in Toronto and its neighbouring suburbs, contain several similar qualities: the basement second kitchen, a cantina, a garden, ornate finishes and furnishings, and religious imagery. What is curious about these qualities, aside from the garden and religious imagery is, these features did not exist in the homes my Italian family and relatives left behind when they emigrated to Canada. Mainly because, like most of the Italians who left Italy in the post war period between 1945 to 1955, they experienced extreme poverty. They lived on farms, tending land, and often had no running water or electricity in their homes. So how did they come to define themselves with a uniform aesthetic ubiquitous in the diaspora? What drove the need to have a

second basement kitchen with a main floor space that was pristinely maintained unused, and untouchable in a “museum” like state?

As a first-generation Canadian with Italian immigrant parents, I understood and experienced the negative stereotypes associated with the Italian diaspora in North America. ...*Uneducated, hot-tempered, loudmouth, mobsters....* For most my life I have tried to distance myself from these characteristics and traits that aimed to define Italian immigrants and their descendants. I feel these reductive portrayals fail to define Italian-Canadian immigrants and their descendants. Such stereotypes not only obscure the contributions of Italian immigrants to their new society but also erase the nuanced ways in which all individuals negotiate their heritage, challenging and redefining what it means to belong in a society or community.

Methodology

My aim through the *Home // Making* research and exhibition was to investigate the design of Italian diasporic homes in Toronto, highlighting how these residences reflect and negotiate cultural identity, heritage, and adaptation. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach that combines autoethnography, design analysis, and cultural studies this research aims to reveal how Italian-Canadian homeowners create living spaces that preserve and reinterpret their cultural heritage within a new geographical context. As the Italian diaspora has significantly shaped Toronto's urban fabric, this

study will examine the unique design identity developed by this community. By analyzing materials, layout and furnishings in Italian diasporic homes, the research will demonstrate how these residences serve as vital sites for cultural expression and preservation, ultimately reflecting the dynamic interplay between identity and culture in the immigrant experience.

The *Home // Making* exhibition explores the representation of the Italian diaspora through artistic mediums such as video, collage and painting by contemporary artists Sara Angelucci, Tonia Di Risio and Amelia Filice. Angelucci uses video to express notions of “home and exile set against the immigrant dream of America the Paradise.” Di Risio, builds upon her family heritage and her connection to the home she was raised in, her grandmother's home. She uses collage and artifacts to create a composition representative of the space her grandmother decorated and maintained as a method of expressing their “progress” in immigrating to Canada from Italy. Through her painting, third-generation Canadian Amelia Filice expresses the conflicting representations and lived experience of a Canadian raised in an Italian diasporic home.

While Angelucci’s work considers the struggles of the Italian emigrant, and nostalgia for a culture left behind, Di Risio focuses on the material objects acquired by the Italian immigrant in Canada – specifically centered on her grandmother’s house. During a studio visit with Di Risio, we discussed the origins of her tracings work and her

upbringing. Di Risio explained her family lived with her grandmother when she was born, and she always felt very connected to her. She went into detail describing the interior furnishings and décor of her grandmother's home and identifying the objects she inherited from her. "Meticulous," was how Di Risio described the condition of everything her grandmother cared for until she died. Much of Di Risio's work is an expression of her relationship with her grandmother and plays tribute to her memory of being raised in the home of an Italian-Canadian immigrant. She explained the origins of her initial *Tracings* exhibition (in 2007), and described how this work began as paintings of silhouettes of her grandmother's furniture and decorative objects directly on the gallery wall. This resulted in what resembles a ghostly patina on the walls tracing the silhouette of objects and furnishings which may have occupied the space and are no longer present. Years later, this notion of tracing furniture was revisited through vintage flocked wallpaper (found in 2012) that reminded her of home. When Di Risio's grandmother passed away in 2017, she returned to the idea of the tracings installation and began working on "Tracings Re-Visited." This work served as a means to connect with her deceased grandmother, to honour her grandmother's memory and to express her grief. Di Risio used the original furniture templates she used to paint on the gallery walls for the *Tracings* exhibition to create cut-out silhouettes from the vintage wallpaper. The artworks in the *Tracings Revisited* exhibition consist of cut-outs of large-scale furniture silhouettes along with personal items and vintage furniture sourced from thrift stores. The personal items on display in the exhibition reflect on the role of material objects as communicators of memory and cultural identity. In "Objects of the Dead: Mourning and

Memory in Everyday Life, “Margaret Gibson reflects on the survival of material objects through generations and the importance of stories associated with the objects. Through her interview in the book the interviewee contemplates, “you can pass on an object, but can you really pass on the feeling you have for that object?”¹ By including personal belongings, passed down to Di Risio by her grandmother in her collage work Di Risio has elevated these objects as storytellers. They convey a “sense of living history bridging the gap between past and present.”²

Exhibition Review

When I came upon the *Tracings Revisited* exhibition at the Red Head Gallery at 401 Richmond in Toronto, during Fall of 2023, I was immediately flooded with memories and a sense of familiarity. The artworks in the exhibition represented my experience of home as a child of Italian immigrants. The objects and materials assembled in the artworks transported me back to my childhood home and the homes of my family and relatives in the Italian diaspora in Toronto/GTA. This exhibition led me to thinking and reviving the questions; what was it that made Italian immigrants represent themselves in such a similar manner? Why did the collective represent themselves in a particular way? How was this reflected in comparison to the homes they left behind?

¹ Margaret Gibson, *Objects of the Dead: Mourning and Memory in Everyday Life* (Melbourne University, 2009). P. 41.

² Ibid. P. 41.

Variations of these questions and contemplations were further developed through examining *A rose gives its fragrance even to the hand that crushes it*, an immersive exhibition held at the Doris McCarthy Gallery in January 2024. The exhibition was facilitated by the arts collective Waard Ward and in collaboration with Anne Campbell, Nicolas Fleming, Reza Nik, Darren Rigo and Alize Zorlutuna. It is described as an exhibition that “honours the memory of lost land, while exploring the ways that community can support the pursuit of familiarity and homemaking.” This exhibition served as a launching point to help me formulate ideas about immigration and homemaking that would inform my thesis research and exhibition.

The members of Waard Ward are: Syrian florist Abd Al-Mounim, community organizers/Syrian newcomers Hanen Nanaa and Shoruk Alsakni, educator Laura Ritaccia, curator/educator Patricia Ritaccia and artist Petrina Ng. Members of Waard Ward describe the meaning behind their name as a romanization of the Arabic word for flower and propose the idea of a diasporic flower district: *A flower ward or flower district*. The emphasis on flora as the key figure in the exhibition is evident not only because of the title but also upon initial approach of the gallery. Outside the entrance to the gallery, vitrines display flower arrangements created during workshops Waard Ward led for Arab-speaking newcomers. The cut flowers, now wilted, contained in the vitrine are separate from the rest of the exhibition and left to die behind the glass. The wall is painted to suggest it is an exterior wall with a stucco finish, hinting to the courtyard reference within the exhibition.

Inside the gallery a scalloped plywood arch marks the entrance into the first of two rooms in the exhibition. The room contains a site-specific garden installation titled *Roses for those who dream of return*, by Reza Nik and Alize Zorlutana in collaboration with Waard Ward. The room consists of a large sculptural plywood bench with an integrated platform centred in the room, a few potted plants on the floor along the perimeter wall, a full height curtain along the back wall with a single sheer panel embedded with rose petals, and a vase on a wall mounted plywood shelf that matches the arch and bench in finish. I was impressed by the interdisciplinary elements of the exhibition, particularly the sculptural plywood bench serving multiple uses in the space; to reflect on the architectural language of spaces left behind and incorporate and artwork in the exhibition.

The sculptural plywood bench and platform by Reza Nik, is finished with decorative ceramic tiles along the top of the platform, adorning the openings for two plants and a small water fountain. The ceramic tiles and fountain are by artist Alize Zorlutana. These two elements, the plywood bench/platform, and ceramic tiles, are designed to elevate the central focus of the room, two potted plants. The plants are damask roses, native to Syria, and planted by Waard Ward through a land-based residency with UTSC Farm. These roses now take centre stage in the exhibition. The hope was these plants would survive the cruel Canadian winter and bloom in the gallery. The roses, both in the exhibition and title, serve as an analogy to people who

move across continents seeking to re-establish roots and thrive in a new environment. Moreover, the emigrant community tending to the flowers in the flower arrangement workshops, come together to create new flower arrangements and keep the roses growing – symbolic of how immigrants adapt together to create a new identity based on their heritage in a new country.

Interviews

The interviews for *Home // Making* were conducted with family members who engaged with my primary residence from age four to twenty-nine years of age. This home was constructed by my parents, Italians who emigrated to Toronto in the 1950s. The home has served as a primary residence for four generations of family members since its completion in 1980. The interviews conducted provide insights into decisions made during construction and the implications of some of the design decisions on cultural expression through the generations of the home's inhabitants.

Through interviewing family members of different generations living in the same home, I found their sentiments matched those expressed by Pascali in her essay "The Italian Immigrant Basement Kitchen." When I interviewed my mother to ask her why they felt the need to build a second kitchen in the basement, her response matched that of the essay and research conducted by Pascali. She felt it was far more convenient and comfortable to use the basement kitchen due to its adjacency to the cold cellar, the

laundry room, and walk-out to the back yard. These adjacencies facilitated an ease of house-keeping – a role my mother dutifully fulfilled as a stay-at-home mom from 1967 onwards.

When my niece and nephew – second generation Canadians of Italian descent - were asked to name their favourite part of the house, the response was unanimously “the basement.” Interestingly, my niece said it was her favourite because “the kitchen is there, and that is the heart of the home.”³ My nephew’s rationale as to why it was his favourite space; “because it is where I have the best memories of [gathering] with cousins.”⁴ These responses offer both a glimpse into the ascribed gender roles that continue to persist in the home today and how the home layout helps to enforce them.

Conclusion

This research has expanded upon my knowledge of Italian diasporic identities and illuminated the ways in which Italian diasporic homes in Toronto and its surrounding neighbourhoods serve as sites of cultural identity, adaptation and preservation. By examining design elements, décor, furnishings and spatial arrangements of these homes I have gained a deeper understanding of how immigrant communities construct

³ Nadia Cannataro and SF, Second Generation Interviews, other, n.d.

⁴ Nadia Cannataro and AF, Second Generation Interviews, other, n.d.

and express their sense of belonging in a new country. The Italian-Canadian home is not a replica of the homes left behind but rather a reinvention, shaped by nostalgia, assimilation and socio-economic opportunities presented by migration. Elements such as, the garden, the second kitchen in the basement, the meticulously maintained and preserved main floor living space and the ornate décor are not just stylistic choices but deliberate acts of identity negotiation. These decisions reflect both a longing for tradition and a redefinition of cultural pride in a new environment. Furthermore, it has affirmed for me that homemaking is not only a reflection of physical space but more so, it is about storytelling and the interplay of past and present. The design choices of the Italian diaspora tell us a larger narrative of resilience, adaptation, and the ongoing negotiation of cultural identity across generations.

This research has also shifted my understanding of home, identity and memory within the field of interior design. Through the exhibition and interacting with interviewees and scholarly research I learned the deep ties to representation and identity that both objects and our environments contain. By acknowledging the storytelling power of objects and the agency they hold, interior designers can create spaces that foster belonging and identity for diverse populations. I have also learned that our identities are not fixed but rather a continually evolving complex interplay of temporal values shaped by memory, migration and lived experience.

Home // Making

“Home is a place, a site in which we live. But more than this, home is an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings.” A. Blunt & R. Dowling

Home // Making explores the design of Italian diasporic homes in Toronto. Interrogating how these residences reflect, negotiate and adapt cultural identity and heritage. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach that combines design analysis and cultural studies, this exhibition contributes artist-led research revealing how Italian Canadian homeowners create and adorn living spaces in ways that preserve and reinterpret their internal and material identity. The exhibition asks us; *What do/can representations of Italian diasporic homes in Ontario tell us about collective and individual diasporic Italian identities?*

The Italian diaspora played a formative role in shaping the urban fabric of Toronto, Ontario. Toronto has been recognized as “one of the most important Italian cities outside Italy, as hundreds of thousands of people in the metropolitan area are descendants of immigrants from Italy.”⁵ This period of migration marked a significant

⁵ Agnoletto, Stefano. *The Italians Who Built Toronto: Italian Workers and Contractors in the City’s Housebuilding Industry, 1950-1980*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2014. Print.

shift in Toronto's demographic landscape, challenging the city's predominantly Anglo-Saxon and Protestant character.⁶ With the 1950's witnessing the largest influx of immigrants, the majority of Italians arriving in Toronto after World War II, were from southern Italy and of low economic status; people Agnoletto characterizes as peasants or artisans.⁷

Their migration was driven by mass poverty, the devastation of World War II, and the belief that leaving their homeland for North America would result in economic opportunities and lead to prosperity. The residential patterns of these immigrants contributed to the formation of Italian enclaves in neighbourhoods, now known as Little Italy, Corso Italia and later suburban areas like Woodbridge. Within these communities, the home served not only as a personal familial space, but also as a crucial site for the preservation and transformation of cultural identity. The material culture of these homes - the furnishings, décor, and arrangement of domestic spaces – reveals the ways Italian Canadians maintained traditions as they adapted to their new socio-economic conditions. By analyzing the contents of Italian diasporic homes such as furnishings, cherished objects, and their placement, use and display, *Home // Making* offers a

⁶ Iacovetta, Franca. *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*. 1st ed. vol. 12. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993. Print.

⁷ Agnoletto, Stefano. *The Italians Who Built Toronto: Italian Workers and Contractors in the City's Housebuilding Industry, 1950-1980*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2014. Print.

rumination – critical and in ways poetic – on how homes serve as vital sites for cultural expression and preservation. Furthermore, the artists in this exhibition - Sara Angelucci, Tonia Di Risio and Amelia Filice – powerfully and tellingly reflect, the dynamic interplay between identity and culture within the immigrant experience. Each artist, through their choice of medium and creative strategies, offers a powerful commentary on a group of people in place and time. Their artworks together also speak to the collective experiences of emigrants, the transposition of culture and the processes of settlement, and the adaptation to new and changed circumstances. These are processes of settlement and helped to precipitate and preserve visions for the future of Italian Canadian life.

Sara Angelucci uses photography and video to express what she describes as “the complex and rich cultural history inherited by the children of immigrants.”⁸ Whereas Angelucci works with stories through photo and moving image media, artist Tonia Di Risio-works with collage and artifacts to create a composition representative of the aesthetic character of her grandmother’s house. For Di Risio, the furnishings and objects of the familiar and domestic interior provide the creative basis for her work. It comments on her family’s social and economic progress - a result of emigrating from Italy to Canada. Di Risio’s artworks express the phenomenon of “Italianization” or how Italian emigrants developed an accentuated, in a way hyper-performative visual culture

⁸ “<https://www.sara-angelucci.ca/>,” angelucci.ca, accessed March 25, 2025, <https://sara-angelucci.ca/filter/Projects/American-il-Paradiso1997>.

in their new homes. The processes of assimilation in Toronto were not reliant upon the replication of homes and lifestyles left behind but rather on the creation of a sensibility both referential and exaggerated. The tensions, and at times conflicts, between these types of representation of Italian diasporic home life and Canadian life are expressed in the painting of artist Amelia Filice. Through these artists the exhibition provides a visual registration of the Italian emigrant experience and their subsequent representations in both their new country and in the generations who followed.

The upending, debilitating and destructive consequences of World War II served as catalysts for the mass migration of Italians to North America. The decade after 1945 was a key moment in the history of the Italian south. “Between 1951 and 1961 close to 90,000 Italians settled in Toronto, while in the following decade 72,000 more arrived.”⁹ Italians who remained in Italy after the war would often say, those who left went to “find paradise” or a better, easier life than the one left behind. Suggesting a schism in Italian identity and underlying subsequent tensions between the idealized vision of migration and the reality of displacement. Angelucci’s video *America, Il Paradiso* (12:31, 1997) uses a combination of storytelling, imagery, and music to reflect on this sentiment. The inclusion of “La Casetta in Canada”, - written by Mario Panzeri and Vittorio Mascheroni in 1944 - expresses the tension between the idealized vision of migration and the reality of displacement.¹⁰

⁹ Iacovetta, p. xxi.

¹⁰ “Casetta in Canada,” Second Hand Songs - A Cover Songs Database, accessed February 1, 2025, <https://secondhandsongs.com/work/7789>.

Lui fece un'altra casa piccolina in Canadà Con vasche, pesciolini e tanti fiori di lillà	He had a little house in Canada with ponds, minnows and a lot of lilac flowers
E tutte le ragazze che passavano di là Dicevano: "Che bella la casetta in Canadà"	and all the girls that passed by said: "What a beautiful little house in Canada!"
E tante, tante case lui rifece, ma però Quel tale Pinco Panco tutte quante le incendiò "Allora cosa fece?" Voi tutti lo sapete Lui fece un'altra casa piccolina in Canadà	But one day, for spite, Pinco Panco set it on fire And walking, poor, without a home he rest. "So what did he do?" You all ask, He made another little house in Canada

However, beneath the upbeat melody and idealized vision of perseverance and resilience in immigration lies a more complex reality – one where the challenges of displacement, cultural negotiation, and identity formation often contradict the romanticised narrative of opportunity and success. In Angelucci's video, a compilation of images showing assorted, perhaps stereotypical activities, frame smiling happy families: sharing a meal or attending a church service. Accompanying the montage are the voices of both female and male narrators. The narrators first speak in Italian then in English. Each narrator expressing through their commentaries, mournful and crestfallen struggles the emigrants endured. In Angelucci's video, the smiling faces are masking pain and difficulty. Phrases such as "it broke my soul", "trying to make things better for us," and "it was very hard, especially with a new language," reveal truths of the experiences lying beneath the surface of the imagery presented. This is a lived reality, very distant from the notions of paradise imagined by and for the diaspora. The photos,

video clips, narrators' stories are imbued with nostalgia but also highlight the lived experiences of the diasporic people, often difficult and marked by feelings of displacement, regret, and struggle.

At the same time and despite these challenges, the strong familial bonds that Italian-Canadians carried with them continued to inform life in a new and initially foreign country. These bonds and connections are witnessed in the video: imagery of grandparents and grandchildren playing powerfully capture the cross generational workings of culture. Such is especially evident in the final scenes of the Angelucci's video where the screen fades to black before cutting to a scene with her own grandmother¹¹. In consequence of her grandmother never having learned to speak English while living in Canada, Angelucci accepted the role of translator when English was required (speaking, for example, with the non-Italian neighbours). This dynamic between grandparents and grandchildren was common during the post war period of Italian immigration in Toronto. The tendency of Italian immigrants to form communities meant the language barrier was only an issue when communicating with non-Italians outside of their newfound communities. As a result, women who stayed home to raise children and maintain the family home were slower at assimilating and learning English. Comparatively, assimilation for both the men and children was more seamless as they were more active in the community through work or attending school.¹² Yet, as

¹¹ "<https://www.sara-angelucci.ca/>," angelucci.ca, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://sara-angelucci.ca/filter/Projects/American-il-Paradiso1997>.

¹² Emily P. Weaver, "The Italians in Toronto," essay, in *The Ward: The Life and Loss of Toronto's First Immigrant Neighbourhood*, vol. 1 (Toronto, Ontario: Coach House Books, 2015), 103.

Angelucci's video reveals, the emphasis on the indelible bonds of families and the connections defining the communities of Italian diasporic families meant learning English was not prioritized. Rather, intergenerational strategies for existing in Canada supported life in which Italian-speaking families could continue to thrive.

Angelucci's visual references to the home hint at the ways the Italian diaspora dwell. Through these scenes, and visual cues, the garden and basement are revealed to be two central spaces characterizing the Italian-Canadian identity. The garden, perhaps most powerfully, holds profound cultural significance for Italian-Canadians, with the cultivation of old-world crops being an overt translation of traditional rituals to new world circumstances. Vegetable gardens in the backyards of Toronto neighborhoods reflects the agrarian traditions Italian migrants carried with them to Canada mainly from southern Italy. These cultivated spaces not only function as practical sources of food but double as symbolic links to their homeland. The tending of gardens, an intergenerational practice, reinforces familial bonds and transmitting cultural knowledge. The persistence of these traditions within the urban and suburban landscapes of Toronto highlights the adaptability of the Italian diasporic identity, as well as the deep connections between home, land, and heritage.

Similarly, the basement holds profound significance in the Italian diasporic home. In her essay, "The Italian Immigrant Basement Kitchen in North America", Lara Pascali explores the relationship between the basement and the Italian immigrant home

in depth. As she explains, many Italian immigrants in Toronto, Montreal and New York added a basement kitchen to their homes in the post war era.¹³ She describes in depth the importance of household economy and saving money to add a second kitchen in the basement as a ubiquitous signifier of the Italian diasporic home, and as a “cultural phenomenon” with the possibility to provide “a lens through which to study Italian traditions and folklore.”¹⁴ The basement in Italian-Canadian homes, typified by a second kitchen, functions as an extension of the primary living spaces. The basement created the opportunity for the ease of everyday cooking, facilitating large gatherings with extended family, the space for large-scale cooking, and making seasonal preserves. Moreover, the addition of a second kitchen in the basement led to a less used and well maintained pristine main floor kitchen and living area. The basement kitchen became the work horse for food preparation and removed this burden from the main kitchen. This is an integral detail to note as it signifies a distinct separation between personal space and, public space in the Italian diasporic home. Pascali goes on to describe these segregated upstairs spaces as symbolic spaces to reflect both the homeowners:

Clearly the upstairs rooms, often filled with the best furniture and fine objects on display, are symbolic spaces and therefore spaces of identity, even if only for the homeowners themselves. They state that Italians have the means to beautify their homes and to carve out areas in which they can fulfil the dream, even if it is only a dream of possibility. And from this stems the importance of saving the more precious items from potential use or damage. If the rooms upstairs are to

¹³ Laura Pascali, “The Italian Immigrant Basement Kitchen in North America,” essay (Fordham University Press, n.d.), 49–61.

¹⁴ Laura Pascali, “The Italian Immigrant Basement Kitchen in North America,” essay (Fordham University Press, n.d.), 49–61.

be kept in pristine condition, then the rooms downstairs offer a more practical, convenient, and comfortable space for cooking, eating and living.¹⁵

As cultivated spaces, the gardens and basement, serve as signifiers of the Italian diasporic identity, through which the home represented a symbol of their success.¹⁶ The socio-economic expression of Italian diasporic identity Pascali references are evident in the work of Tonia Di Risio. *Tracings Revisited 03* (9' wide x 5' high x 2' deep, 2023) is a large-scale collage applied directly to the gallery wall. The collage is comprised of vintage wallpaper, furniture, a lamp, ceramics, and wood. Di Risio's work is rooted in her connection to her grandmother's home and, in turn, represents her family's history. Some objects in the work are personal items that belonged to her grandmother. Other elements in the piece are found materials, acquired by the artist, based on their resemblance to objects she remembers from her grandmother's home.¹⁷ A large silhouette of an ornate sofa cut from vintage red and gold flocked wallpaper features prominently in the installation. The sofa is layered with what appears to be a gold silhouette of a coffee table and the outline of what could be an ornate frame resembling a Rococo era mirror. A table, in three-dimension, appears in the installation cut in half and mounted to the wall. This suggests a hierarchy in the preservation of the items that belonged to Di Risio's grandmother and to those that did not: items that were thrifted are rearranged and reassembled and the heirlooms are preserved and honoured by display. With this work Di Risio "extends a decorative vernacular into a broader

¹⁵ Ibid., p.60.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.60.

¹⁷ Tonia Di Risio and Nadia Cannataro, Studio Visit with Tonia DiRisio, personal, November 9, 2024.

understanding of how one's experiences with objects, patterns and textures serve to shape memory and personal narrative."¹⁸ Moreover the work expresses the cultural representation of the Italian diaspora and the aspirations of the Italian emigrants. In particular, the collage expresses a visual representation of the complex Italian metaphor of "bella figura" or "to make a good impression". This metaphor is believed to capture the "public display of our inner dispositions."¹⁹ The pristine spaces and objects on display symbolized to the Italian diaspora the realization of a dream of success, social status, and their response to the cultural negotiation of "how a home should be."²⁰

In similar ways, Di Risio's *105 (found cookbook pages, marker on paper, 2023)*, extends her use of material culture in act of homage and critique. This work marks a shift in her practice, moving from cut-outs and collage to a more intimate act of tracing silhouettes of furniture onto cookbook pages for Italian recipes. Composed of 105 torn pages from the *New York Times Cookbook*, *The Joy of Cooking* and *Martha Stewart's Cooking* the piece interrogates the codification of Italian cuisine within the North American culinary canon. The recipe titles - *Parmesan Risotto*, *Navy Beans and Rice*, *Italian Style*, *Parmesan Risotto 101*, *Italian Clam Soup* - adorn the pages, evoking both familiarity and distance, presence and erasure.

¹⁸ "Tonia Di Risio," Tonia Di Risio's Portfolio, accessed February 20, 2025, <https://www.toniadirisio.com/tracingsrevisited-2023>.

¹⁹ Guano, Emanuela. "Respectable Ladies and Uncouth Men: The Performative Politics of Class and Gender in the Public Realm of an Italian City." *The Journal of American Folklore* 120, no. 475 (2007): 48–72.

²⁰ Laura Pascali, "The Italian Immigrant Basement Kitchen in North America," essay (Fordham University Press, n.d.), 61.

It is the operation and implication of memory that explains Di Risio's collage work. As a creative exercise that depends on fragments of larger things, Di Risio's experimentation with the physical pages of cookbooks function as physical representation of the palimpsest of memories and in turn, objects with the power to trigger recollections and associations. At first, the artist began experimenting by cutting out shapes and intentionally blocking out parts of the recipe. Then she tested various mediums and ultimately landed on a black sharpie marker to inscribe the shape of furniture on the cookbook pages. The resulting installation is comprised of 105 sheets of paper arranged in a grid pattern. Affixed to the wall only from the top two corners of each page, they sit loosely on the wall and flutter gently as viewers pass by or as they catch a breeze in the space. The pages from the various books, are relatively similar in size with subtle variations in hue from white to a warm yellow patina. Each page contains a recipe of an Italian dish and a black silhouette of period furniture. Various compositions and scales of chairs, grandfather clocks, and tables obscure the recipe on the page. This deliberate act of obscuring the recipe rendering the recipe's information inaccessible represents a loss of cultural knowledge and identity - traditions are filtered, diluted and often forgotten as they are passed down through generations.

In contrast, the theme of loss of cultural knowledge and disconnected identity is a thread connecting *Hail Mary, Forgive Me* (36" x 48", 2024) a painting by Amelia Filice. It reveals a connection between the Italian-Canadian identity, the deep ties to religion, and her upbringing. The work is included in *Home // Making* to demonstrate the role of

faith in Italian culture, both domestically and globally. The work's emphasis on religious imagery and ecclesiastical artifacts of Roman Catholicism are customarily present in the Italian diasporic home and serve to link communities at once ritually connected but geographically separate. Filice's painting, depicts the Virgin Mary with her eyes covered with moths. The concealment of her eyes in the painting, imply the Virgin Mary is either removed – perhaps even disconnected - or concealed from her surroundings and those in her presence. A painted neon under-colour and text are discernible beneath the deep burgundy background and reference the layers of concealed meaning about faith glowing through the edges of the backdrop and the figure draped in black. The visual concealment, of both the eyes and the text, suggests a complex relationship with faith, memory, and cultural identity. Filice's engagement with Catholic imagery reflects the significance of religious devotion in Italian diasporic homes. It is not uncommon to find sacred objects such as the rosary, crucifixes, and images of saints predominantly displayed in both Italian and Italian-Canadian homes. However, the obscured gaze of the Virgin Mary in Filice's work hints to the evolving relationship between younger generations and inherited religious traditions. It signals a shift from unquestioned devotion to a more ambivalent, perhaps strategic or selective engagement with faith.

The representation of home within the Italian diasporic community reveals insight into both collective and individual Italian diasporic identities. These identities are shaped by the complex interplay of memory, tradition, and culture. The representations of these domestic spheres, while tangible explorations of culture, are as much material exercises

as cognitive and psychological ones. In their adopted countries, Italian immigrants sought to recreate elements of their homeland through design and rituals, while their descendants - Canadian-born generations - often changed their performance of identity. The upheaval of migration and the urgent need to replicate a place of origin is replaced with a hybrid sensibility. Accordingly, the work of Sara Angelucci offers a poignant exploration of these themes. Her piece *America, Il Paradiso* speaks to the myth of migration—the promise of a better life abroad juxtaposed with the persistent longing for the homeland. Angelucci’s work examines the emotional duality of migration, where the dream of prosperity is accompanied by a profound sense of loss. With *Tracings Revisited 03*, the mixed-media collage evokes strong personal memories, mirroring the textures and materials ubiquitous in the Italian diasporic homes of settlers who arrived in Toronto in the post-World War II era. Di Risio’s work is representative of Italian-Canadian cultural representation and aspirations of the Italian diaspora. Additionally, her work explores the erosion of intergenerational knowledge experienced by emigrants as they face assimilation and loss of ancestors while navigating the complexity of a new linguistic and cultural identity. In Filice’s *Hail Mary, Forgive Me* it is evidenced there is a disconnect between the representations of Italian nationals and the Italian diaspora abroad. The work also alludes to a diffused or evolving expression of faith. Taken together, these works affirm the important role of identity in the experience of emigration and settlement while making clear each individual and family negotiated their new lives in their own ways. Whether in the privacy of the home or the comfort of

the neighborhood the relationship with the homeland (and the homeland with the diasporic enclave) was and remains in a constant state of flux.

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Appendix A: Exhibition Documentation



Figure 1. Installation image of 105 artwork in Ignite West Gallery, 2025. A person standing in a room with a step ladder and another crouched on the floor. Photo credit: N. Cannataro



Figure 2. Installation of Tracings Revisited 03, in Ignite West Gallery, 2025. Two people holding up wallpaper collage and pinning it to the wall. Photo credit: N. Cannataro



Figure 3. Overall image of exhibition in Ignite West Gallery, including all artwork and black seating for viewing video installation, 2025. Photo credit L. Breau



Figure 4. Image looking to the southwest corner of Ignite Gallery. Image includes video installation, black seating and two artworks. Photo credit L. Breau



Figure 5. Image looking to the northwest corner of Ignite Gallery. Image includes black seating and two artworks by artist Tonia Di Risio, *Tracings Re-visited 03* and *105*. Photo credit: L. Breau



Figure 6. Image looking at south gallery wall. Image includes a portion of the wall mounted curatorial statement, flat screen monitor playing Sara Angelucci's *America, Il Paradiso* and Amelia Filice's *Hail Mary, Forgive Me*. In the image foreground are two black chairs for viewing the video installation. Photo credit: L. Breau



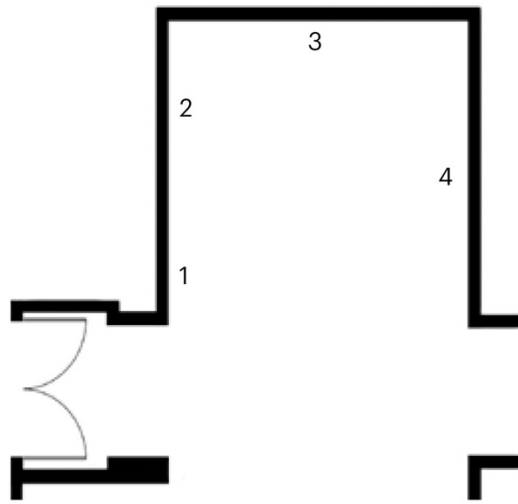
Figure 7. Image of Hail Mary, Forgive Me, an acrylic painting by Amelia Filice, 2023. The painting is mounted to door panels in the gallery. The panels were existing in the space. The artwork was centred on the panels. Photo credit: L. Breau



Figure 8. Image of *Tracings Revisited03* by Tonia Di Risio, 2023. The collage is centred on the west wall of Ignite Gallery. Photo credit: N. Cannataro



Figure 9. Image of 105, found cookbook pages 2023, by Tonia Di Risio Installed on the north wall of Ignite Gallery, 2025.
Photo credit: N. Cannataro



1. **Sara Angelucci**
America, Il Paradiso, 1997
Running Time: 12:31 minutes
2. **Amelia Filice**
Hail Mary, Forgive Me, 2024
36" x 48"
Acrylic on canvas.
3. **Tonia Di Risio**
Tracings Revisited 03, 2023
9' wide x 5' tall, 2' deep
Found wall paper, furniture, lamp, ceramics,
wood.
4. **Tonia Di Risio**
105, 2023
9' wide x 5' tall
Found cookbook pages, marker on paper.

Figure 10. Floor Plan of Home // Making exhibition with artwork details and artist names. Ignite Gallery, 2025

Appendix B: Artist Bibliographies

Sara Angelucci

Sara Angelucci is a Toronto-based artist working in photography, video and audio. Her work explores vernacular photographs and films, analyzing the original context in which images are made. Drawing attention to conventions of image making, her work foregrounds the cultural role vernacular images play in framing particular stories, creating histories, and memorialization. Her interest lies in drawing our attention outside of the image frame, pointing to the social and historic conditions which are the unspoken basis of the image.

Angelucci's work has developed from an examination of the family archive and immigration, to a broader analysis and interpretation of anonymous/found photographs. In recent photography, video, and audio projects, Angelucci draws from the history of photography, as well as natural and social histories. Recent projects have brought particular attention to the historic conditions of women's labour.

Sara Angelucci completed her BA at the University of Guelph and her MFA at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. She has exhibited her photography across Canada in solo exhibitions at the Art Gallery of York University, Le Mois de la Photo in Montreal, Vu in Quebec City, the Toronto Photographers Workshop, the MacLaren Art Centre, the Art Gallery of Hamilton, the Richmond Art Gallery, and the St. Mary's University Art Gallery in Halifax. Internationally she has had solo exhibitions at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, the Lianzhou Photography Festival and the Halsey Institute of Art in Charleston.

Her work has been featured in numerous group shows in the US, Europe, and in China at the Pingyao and Beijing Biennales. Her videos have been screened across Canada and abroad, at festivals in Europe, China, Australia and the U.S. She has participated in artist residencies at the Art Gallery of Ontario, NSCAD (Halifax), the Banff Centre, and at Biz-Art in Shanghai.

Angelucci is an Adjunct Professor in Photography at the School of Image Arts, Toronto Metropolitan University.

Tonia Di Risio

A multimedia artist living and working in Southern Ontario, she received a BA in Art and Art History from the University of Toronto and Sheridan College and an MFA from the University of Windsor. She has exhibited across Canada and has been the recipient of Canada Council and Nova Scotia arts grants. She is a member of the red head gallery in Toronto.

She employs time-based media including photography and video. Currently, her work has developed through ongoing investigations of gendered ethnicity in relation to domestic issues, including housekeeping, home maintenance, food preparation, interior decoration and relationships to the miniature.

Amelia Filice

Amelia Filice is an emerging artist whose work explores the many influences that shape her lived experiences. Raised within the Italian diaspora, she has been deeply influenced by culture, religion, and family – pillars that remain central to her identity. Her art draws from her cultural background and pop culture, creating bodies of work that reflect the internal and external forces that have shaped her journey.