



YOLO

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MEZZATORRE

Photographs and Words by Stephen Ringer

I'm sitting in the Champagne Room at Deetjens Big Sur Inn. I've come to see Patti Smith play at the Henry Miller Memorial Library. I've been wondering which of the rooms Marie-Louise stayed in when she was here at Deetjens, when she left thinking, as she put it in YOLO Vol 3, "It is truly my favorite place in the world." I'm supposed to be writing about my friend Marie-Louise Scio. Technically, the task is to write about the Mezzatorre hotel in Ischia, but they are inseparable. She's the beating heart pumping blood through Mezzatorre, Il Pellicano, and La Posta Vecchia. The artist and architect behind all three. The last time I was at Mezzatorre, I was standing next to Marie-Louise's sister when she said, while surveying the grounds, to no one in particular, "Wow she really is a genius." No hint of jealousy or surprise, just stating a fact. >

The task of capturing Marie-Louise's spirit (or her father Roberto's) feels certain to miss the heights. There's no capturing the feeling of having an early dinner with Marie-Louise on the terrace of La Posta Vecchia. Or watching her laugh with her childhood friends for more than ten hours straight at a kitchen table. Laughter heard even in the Roman ruins beneath the house, ruins she would skate past when she lived there as a young girl. These are things beyond me to explain well.

Stalling, I pick up a book I'm reading on the dresser. I've remembered to plan a visit to Tor House, the stone dwelling built by poet Robinson Jeffers in Carmel. The second poem of *Tamar* begins, "The storm-dances of gulls, the barking game of seals,/Over and under the ocean.../Divinely superfluous beauty/Rules the games, presides over destinies, makes trees grow/And hills tower, waves fall" and I realize that's probably the best phrase to describe ML's career as an artist. Divinely superfluous beauty.

Mezzatorre is the third hotel to be run by the Pellicano Group, but the structures date as far back as the sixteenth century. Apparently the Mezza part refers to the watchtower being unfinished. Finished or not, it has a presence of always having been there, not unlike the watchtower Jeffers built at Tor House out of stones from the beach below. A gift for his wife to satisfy her love of Irish towers. At the top, for a moment you are seeing the world as Jeffers did. The proximity is briefly overwhelming. Hawks fly overhead. The 2,000 trees Jeffers planted spread out before you. There is a small day room in the tower's interior fashioned for his wife, Una, complete with daybed and photos of W.B. Yeats. It's the kind of space Marie-Louise would design. It's also the sort of space she would inspire someone to build.

People travel from all around the world to see Marie-Louise's work as an architect of spaces, but really they come to listen. Her spaces speak of proximity to all she has seen and all the people she has known. Her vision is equally astounding at all three properties, all with fascinating histories she works alongside. Having been raised in two of the three, she knows their stories better than almost anyone else.

In *The Architecture of Happiness*, Alain de Botton beautifully explains how spaces have the capacity to shape or even heighten our spirits, while also being incapable of preventing humanity's worst instincts. Architecture cannot prevent governments from committing atrocities or couples from fighting, but it can give us a glimpse, at its best, of our possible purpose. "When we speak of being 'moved' by a building, we allude to a bitter-sweet feeling of contrast between the noble qualities written into a structure and the sadder wider reality within which we know them to exist. A lump rises in our throat at the sight of beauty from an implicit knowledge that the happiness it hints at is the exception."

It's not hard to point to the sadder, wider reality that we live in. It's also hard to visit a five-star hotel without constantly being aware this is the exception. A friend of mine recently remarked that he was tired of seeing photos of nice Italian hotels. I understand that feeling. Most of the famous Slim Aarons photos of Pellicano were made because he wanted to flee the sadder wider reality and his PTSD from the war. That's part of Pellicano's story, too.

I know Marie-Louise feels the same. I know she'd rather guests come to Mezzatorre to listen to the space than to photograph it, although the photographs in this piece are a testament to my >





desire to capture and hold onto the trace of that feeling of encountering the exception. I think that accounts for how common it is to see people photographing at Pellicano properties, the need to hold on. On the drive home from Big Sur, I'm listening to Patti Smith on a New York Public Library podcast. She's talking about encountering Virginia Woolf's walking cane and holding it. How it made her shake, the force of that proximity. Patti's polaroids are her way of taking that proximity with her through life. She admits, though, that sometimes when she visits a gravesite, in this case Sylvia Plath's, she might feel nothing much at all. Other times she may be moved to tears. I think if one visits any hotel enough times, whether Mezzatorre or Deetjens, there's the possibility in that moment of not being ready or able to listen. But in my experience there's always a reinvigoration of the love on a subsequent visit, the power returns and overtakes by surprise.

I met Marie-Louise on a visit to Pellicano, inspired by her coffee table book about its history. I longed for proximity to those stories and those images. One night this summer, on the terrace of Pellicano, on a whim, Marie-Louise turned to me and said, "Slim Aarons used to pay for his stays sometimes with his Leicas. If my father still has one, I'll give it to you." It probably wouldn't make sense to try to describe how much this meant to me. And how, for her, Slim Aarons is but one part of her story, as natural to her as the rosemary. If Patti Smith could travel with Slim Aarons' camera, what images could come from that power of proximity?

Sometimes I wonder what these spaces will be like in future generations when none of us are around. Will, like Tor House, people still come to marvel at Marie-Louise's artistry? It wouldn't surprise me. But her lively spirit won't be there, and that's the reason to go. I can see her now, inside the Mezzatorre ground floor, her own self made version of Una's room, perfect posture, designing. She has taught me a lot, both as a friend and as an artist. Many of the times I've felt like the best versions of myself >



have happened inside of her spaces. Her instincts are always right. She's funny like her wonderful father. Giving. Generous. Impossibly so. Hopefully in these photographs a small trace of that hovers. I wonder, looking at them, how many lives Marie-Louise and Roberto have shaped for the better. How much of their work is walking around with people the world over. I've seen mothers playing with their babies in the little basins adjacent to the pool designed to wash sand or seawater off one's feet with heavenly patience that I can only assume they find hard to summon most days. I've seen husbands lovingly look to the distance for their wives' arrival at the terrace for aperitivo hour. Couples playfully making their way through the spa circuit, in lively interactions, possibly for the first time in a long time. It all happens in a place not unlike Carmel, a place Una would like, a place fit for a watchtower. Recently, from just below the tower, Roberto, her father, posted a video simply stating, "I miss my friends Aly and Stephen." It moved me to tears, that he would be thinking of us. Divine superfluous beauty.

