

## Emma Hart: Mamma Mia!

Interview by Emilio Montevideo

### Collezione Maramotti

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Here, Emma Hart expands on the exhibition (previously on view at Whitechapel Gallery in London) resulting from having won the sixth edition of the Max Mara Art Prize for Women. The award took her through a six-month-long residency across three Italian cities—Milan, Todi, and Faenza—that gave her new points of view on the theorization of family psychology and refreshed her perspective on her practice with ceramics.

**EMILIO MONTEVIDEO:** Let's start with how your Italian residency was articulated, and how, if any, your research in the country percolated into the shows at Whitechapel and [Collezione Maramotti](#).

**EMMA HART:** My starting point for the residency was to think about how we relate to artworks. Can the audience get caught up in some kind of real situation or system of relationships with a piece of art? Thinking about this led me to want to understand how relationships and family systems actually work, and researching this in Italy brings in potential complications of history and stereotyping a national identity. It also brings in autobiography, as I spent six months in Italy with my own young family (this was the first time we had undertaken extended travel with my daughter). The first part of my residency was research based. I was in Milan learning about the work of Mara Selvini Palazzoli, a pioneering and radical psychologist. Palazzoli developed the "Milan systems approach," a school of family therapy. She theorized that individuals do not get unwell; it is their relationships or the spaces between them that need treating. It was very important for me to think through this and apply it to the encounter on offer with the exhibition *Mamma Mia!*

The viewer is caught up in a physical set of relations, rather than an external observer of a situation. The second half of the residency enabled a more practical approach, with me focusing on ceramics, specifically Maiolica. I first went to Todi, near Deruta. I wanted to design a pattern for a plate, so I talked to the Maiolica decorators about how they construct a ceramic pattern. I realized that the words they use to describe their strategies, such as "repeat," "fragment," "reverse," and "flow," were words I had already heard in the Mara Selvini Clinic to describe the habitual, often problematic, behaviors of families. In Milan I had been looking at patterns of human behavior, and now in Deruta I was looking at decorative visual patterns, and I suddenly understood there might be a link between these two types. Thus, visually the ceramic sculptures in the exhibition have been directly influenced by Italian Maiolica, but I hope the experience for visitors is also that the work is haunted by the power structures, complications, and stereotypical roles within the "family." This is different than the work being directly "about" these things. It is ridiculous to state that Italy is "about" the power of the family, but maybe less ridiculous to suggest that Italy is haunted by that power.

**EM:** Entering your exhibition at [Collezione Maramotti](#), I had the sensation of being thrown into a playful environment (the cartoonlike balloons of the projected lights, the chandelier becoming chatting heads). It also required my direct involvement to wander around and discover the patterns in the ceramics. At some point I had the slightly uneasy feeling of being in the midst of people talking among one another, maybe arguing, since the conversation balloons are "cut" by the cutlery on the ceiling and so on. Is this an ambivalence you created deliberately?

**EH:** The layout of the works at the [Maramotti](#) references a genogram. This is an advanced kind of family tree, where as well as relationships being indicated, the type of relationship (hostile, loving, et cetera) is also shown.

Red lines and zigzag lines represent hostility. The electric cables from the lamps/heads/jugs are red, and used to create zigzags down the walls. The lamps are all connected: actual power or energy runs through the cables that link them all. It was my intention to place the viewer within this family group, and this family group (as with all family groups), with their contemporary measuring jug heads, and knives, forks, and spoons, are based in the domestic. For me, the domestic is where we can feel every emotion possible, sometimes over a short period of time, for example over a meal. Conversations, most probably arguments, can quickly swing from love to anger, jealousy to humor, selfishness to grief, and take the mood and the atmosphere with them. In the exhibition there is a lot of detail, which different viewers may or may not see. Patterns sometimes harbor violent or funny details. Depending on the mood of the viewer, the degree of attention they are applying to the work, or whether their state of mind leads them to pick out certain motifs, the exhibition alters or shapes itself around their personal engagement.

**EM:** Would you say that your formation and studies in photography persist in any form in your work?

**EH:** I use photography as a way to think or to sketch. For example, in the book that accompanies the exhibition I included a series of family portraits taken across the residency. Each photograph is in a different setting—a bathroom, a restaurant, the beach. They track my travels through Italy, but also test my ideas about relationships. Each moment captured is an intimate private family moment (brushing our teeth, eating a meal) and by getting all the family to face the camera at the same time, the sensation is that we are looking at the viewer, and that the viewer has intruded into our private moment. The photograph is asking, Who are you? Photographs are often described as windows to look through, but here the photographs address the viewer, in quite strong terms.

