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Press release – 20 June 2019

## Elisabetta Benassi

### EMPIRE

**Museo Nazionale Romano - Palazzo Altemps  
21 June - 1 September 2019**

**From 21 June to 1 September the Museo Nazionale Romano - Palazzo Altemps** hosts the second stage of the project by **Elisabetta Benassi**, **EMPIRE**, winner of the third edition of the **Italian Council (2018)**, the call set up by the **Directorate-General for Contemporary Art and Architecture and Urban Peripheries (DGAAP) of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities** to promote Italian contemporary art worldwide. The **EMPIRE** project is promoted by the **Museo Nazionale Romano** in collaboration with the **Pontificia Accademia dei Virtuosi al Pantheon**.

Through the recovery and transformation of materials and symbols, the work of Elisabetta Benassi examines the relationship between the past and the contemporary era, questioning the condition and the identity of the present. The project **EMPIRE** forms part of this research right from the very title, which inevitably evokes the vast and complex story of the Roman Empire and its endless political and cultural evolution.

**EMPIRE** develops in an installation of six thousand terracotta bricks - especially made in Great Britain using black and violet clay by a brickworks located in the Royal Forest of Dean, in Gloucestershire - which have been embossed with the name of the work. In addition to these there are two bricks made of a bronze and gold alloy. On a formal level, **EMPIRE** reflects the basic building element of ancient architecture, the Roman brick, transforming it into an element with new aesthetic potential and meaning.

The term “empire”, with its varied and contrasting meanings, suggests figures of power and grandeur, and at the same time evokes dark scenes of coercion, domination and submission. Positioned at the crossroads between history and memory, between symbolic and political value, between verbal language and visual experience, with this project Elisabetta Benassi once again reflects on the dialectic relationship between the past and the present. Like a form of device that produces unexpected configuration, the work aims to challenge the idea of an Ancient era that is considered as accepted fact, instead presenting it as a conflicting plot, a form of resistance to the presumed inevitability of the present.

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The site-specific nature of the work allows it to be continuously re-designed in accordance with the context and the space it inhabits. Thus, with each exhibition, EMPIRE can evoke fantastic and ephemeral architecture, “castles” or stacks similar to those set up during the brick-drying process, with their fascinating and enigmatic structures, or even three-dimensional labyrinths that can be explored by the spectator, “curtain walls” and structures set out in diversely proportioned ways in order to create a rapport with the context in which the work is placed.

Following the Italian Institute of Culture in London, the first stage in the itinerary, where the installation was presented as a labyrinth, EMPIRE will take on a new form in the courtyard of the Museo Nazionale Romano - Palazzo Altemps. The work will then continue its journey to MOSTYN, Wales UK, to then reach its final and permanent destination at Museo Nazionale Romano - Crypta Balbi in Rome, at the same time as the documentative exhibition at the Pontificia Accademia dei Virtuosi al Pantheon.

«Part of a wider-ranging process of valorisation through an openness to contemporary art, EMPIRE is a demonstration of the particular desire of the Museo Nazionale Romano to attract a new audience, providing an instrument for discovery and new interpretations which favour a more widespread knowledge of the classic heritage that it holds» says Daniela Porro, director of the museum.

The catalogue published by Treccani Arte, with contributions by Stefano Chiodi, Alfredo Cramerotti and Gurminder K. Bhambra, and graphic design by NERO - Roma, will be presented on the occasion of the installation of the work in its definitive setting at the Crypta Balbi in Rome.

The project EMPIRE by Elisabetta Benassi has been made possible with the support of the Italian Council Directorate-General for Contemporary Art and Architecture and Urban Peripheries (DGAAP) of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities under the direction of Federica Galloni.

It is promoted by Museo Nazionale Romano in collaboration with the Pontificia Accademia dei Virtuosi al Pantheon, the partner Italian Institute of Culture in London and MOSTYN, Wales UK.

### Calendar for the exhibition tour of EMPIRE by Elisabetta Benassi

- 21 June - 1 September 2019 Museo Nazionale Romano - Palazzo Altemps
- 13 July - 27 October 2019 MOSTYN, Wales UK
- from 14 November Museo Nazionale Romano - Crypta Balbi
- 14 November - 12 December 2019 Pontificia Accademia dei Virtuosi al Pantheon

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## INFORMATION

### ELISABETTA BENASSI || EMPIRE

21 June - 1 September 2019

#### Museo Nazionale Romano – Palazzo Altemps

Piazza di Sant'Apollinare, 46

00186, Rome

Tuesday-Sunday 9 a.m. - 7.45 p.m.

[www.museonazionaleromano.beniculturali.it](http://www.museonazionaleromano.beniculturali.it)

#### Tickets

10.00 €; Combined ticket 12.00 € (valid for three days, it allows access to all four Museum areas); discounted tickets 2.00 €, supplement 3.00 € (obligatory in the case of special exhibition held in the Museum).

Ticket office opening times: 9 a.m. - 19 p.m.

#### Press contacts

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## BIO

**Elisabetta Benassi** (b. 1966 in Rome) is active on the international scene since the early 2000's. She took part three times in the Venice Biennale: in 2015 with *Personne et les Autres*, Belgian Pavilion, curated by Katerina Gregos; in 2013 with *Viceversa*, Italian Pavilion, curated by Bartolomeo Pietromarchi; in 2011 with *ILLUMInazioni | ILLUMInations*, curated by Bice Curiger. Among the great international exhibitions we remember the participation to *Manifesta*, Frankfurt, 2002 and *Il Berlin Biennale*, Berlin in 2001. She has presented solo exhibitions, most recently: *The Sovereign Individual*, Galerie Jousse Entreprise, Paris (2018); *It Starts With The Firing*, Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia (2017); *Passato e Presente*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Rome (2017); *Letargo*, Magazzino, Rome (2016); *That's Me in the Picture*, Gallery Jousse Entreprise, Paris (2015); *Voglio fare subito una mostra*, Fondazione Merz, Turin (2013); *Smog a Los Angeles*, CRAC Alsace, Altkirch (2013); *Soledad*, FIAC! Grand Palais, Paris (2011); *Art | 40 | Unlimited*, Basel (2009). Some of her group exhibitions include: *Untitled*, Peter Freeman, Inc. Gallery, New York (2019); *Archeologi*, Villa Lontana, Rome (2018); *ITALIANA, L'Italia vista dalla moda 1971-2001*, curated by Maria Luisa Frisa and Stefano Tonchi, Palazzo Reale, Milan (2018); *Deposito d'Arte Italiana Presente*, Artissima OVAL, Lingotto Fiere, Turin (2017); *MAXXI Collection. The Place To Be*, MAXXI Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo, Rome (2017); *Après*, curated by Eriq Baudelair and Marcella Lista, Galerie 3, Centre George Pompidou, Paris (2017); *A House, Halfway*, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin (2017); *More Than Just Words [On the Poetic]*, Kunsthalle Wien, (2017); *Please Come back. The world as a prison?*, MAXXI, Rome (2017); *Par Tibi Roma Nihil*, Palatine Forum, Rome (2016); *Todo o Património é Poesia* curated by Filipa Oliveira, Fórum Eugénio de Almeida in Évora, Portugal (2016); *SubBrixia*, produced by Brescia Museums Foundation, Brescia Mobility and the City of Brescia (2016); *Industriale Immaginario*, Maramotti Collection, Reggio Emilia (2015-2016); *NERO SU BIANCO*, curated by Robert Storr, Lyle Ashton Harris and Peter Benson Miller, American Academy in Rome (2015); *Corsaro*, performance realized at the exhibition *Non Basta Ricordare* curated by Hou Hanru, MAXXI National Museum of XXI Century Arts, Rome (2014); *Newtopia: The State of Human Rights. Exhibition for the City of Mechelen*, Mechelen, Belgium (2012); *Mutatis Mutandis*, curated by Catherine David, Wiener Secession, Wien (2012). Elisabetta Benassi is a member of the Pontificia Accademia dei Virtuosi al Pantheon.

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## MUSEO NAZIONALE ROMANO - PALAZZO ALTEMPS HISTORY AND COLLECTIONS

**Set up in 1889, Museo Nazionale Romano**, which was originally located in the Baths of Diocletian, holds one of the most extraordinary artistic collections in Italy, which between 1995 and 2001 was subdivided among another three museum venues: Palazzo Altemps, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme and Crypta Balbi. Four locations offering the opportunity to discover the history of Rome, from the first settlements in the Lazio region to the splendours of the Imperial era, right up to the Renaissance passion for ancient Roman works that led to the emergence of collecting.

**It is the branch of Museo Nazionale Romano in Palazzo Altemps** that provides an excellent example of the emergence of collecting in the 1500s and 1600s. The passion for beautiful objects, as well as the desire to demonstrate the financial strength and political power of the family, drove Rome families to collect masterpieces. The city's aristocracy, undoubtedly favoured by the archaeological wealth of Rome, competed in creating splendid collections. This is demonstrated by the numerous works conserved in the museum and originating from the collections of sculptures belonging to the Altemps, Boncompagni Ludovisi and Mattei families, as well as the marble reliefs from the Brancaccio and Del Drago collections. Palazzo Altemps was purchased in 1982 by the state for the Ministry of Cultural and Environmental Heritage of the time and restored by the Archaeological Superintendence of Rome. It has been open to the public since 1997.

In more recent years it has also held exhibitions of **contemporary art** with the intention of attracting an ever-wider audience, a strategy that it has followed with increased attention since, in 2017, it became an autonomous institute directed by Daniela Porro. The projects are defined in line with the permanent collection. The initiatives featured include the works by Maurizio Donzelli (June-July 2015) and Matthew Monahan (April-May 2016), the exhibitions "La forza delle rovine" [the strength of the ruins] (October 2015 - January 2016) and "Citazioni pratiche [practical quotes]. Fornasetti a Palazzo Altemps" (December 2017 – September 2018) as well as the installation "Alfredo Pirri. Passi" [steps] (September 2018 – January 2019).

**Marco Sittico Altemps**, nephew to Pope Pius IV and ordained as Cardinal in 1561, after having purchased the palace in 1568 collected numerous masterpieces of art, as did his nephew Giovanni Angelo who, in particular, set up a prestigious library.

**Between 1621 and 1623, Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi** purchased from the Altemps family a part of the 450 sculptures to decorate his splendid villa and gardens on the Quirinal hill. Those currently present in the museum of Palazzo Altemps include Hercules in the painted hall, or the Room of the Painted Perspectives, and the twelve Caesars shown in the beautiful loggia painted with *trompe-l'œil* pergolas and playful putti, where the full splendour of the 16th century courts is displayed. In the hall frescoed with the stories of Moses is the splendid face of Juno, described with enchanting words by Goethe and Schiller, set alongside the famous **Ludovisi Throne**, a masterpiece of the 5th century B.C. representing the birth of Aphrodite.

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The **Ares Ludovisi** hall - the home of the famous sculpture restored by **Gian Lorenzo Bernini** - also holds a fresco which represents a dresser displaying precious vases. The painting, of rare refinement of composition, dates back to the circle of **Melozzo da Forlì**.

The large Galata hall, with the monumental fireplace in coloured marble crowned by a portrait of Cardinal Altemps, holds the sarcophagus known as the **Grande Ludovisi**, with battle scenes showing the victory of the Romans over the Barbarians, a detail of which was repeated in the large frieze along the banks of the Tiber by William Kentridge, a contemporary example of the evocative strength of the permanent collection of the Museum, capable of breaching the palace walls. At the centre of the hall the group of the **Galatian Suicide**, which has become the iconic image of the entire collection of the museum.

**The great political and religious importance of the Altemps family** is undoubtedly clear in the church of Clemenza and Sant'Aniceto, famous not only for the extraordinary wealth of gilded stuccoes, coloured marble, paintings and mother or pearl inlay, but also because it is the only church in a private abode to hold the relics of a saint, that of Saint Anicetus, one of the first pontifices. To honour the memory of the saint, the artist known as **Il Pomarancio** (Antonio Circignani) and the creator of the frescoes with the story of the martyrdom of Anicetus, was called on. It is here that in 1883 **Gabriele D'Annunzio** married Maria Hardouin di Gallese, the last family to inherit Palazzo Altemps before it became the property of the Holy See in 1887.

**Since 2013** the exhibition of part of the archaeological **collection** of **Evan Gorga** has been **open to the public**. The museum thus opened to the theme of early twentieth century collecting that draws from the antiques market, and from the important digs of the time.