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Packed with his own original artworks and an assemblage of modernist designs, the storied surrounds of a former 18th-century Cistercian monastery in Sicily have been given a new chapter by collector-turned-artist Sergio Fiorentino.

By Annemarie Kiely Photographed by Filippo Bamberghi

THIS PAGE in the entrance porch of artist Sergio Fiorentino's studio in his home in Noto, Sicily; 1960s Eros **table** by Angelo Mangiarotti; 1950s **chair** by Harry Bertola; **plants** from Vivai Giannuso; brass **ceiling lamps** designed by Massimo Carnemolla; **artworks** of the two Madonnas, and *Migration* *By Aguglie* sculpture, all by Sergio Fiorentino. Details, last pages.





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SERGIO FIORENTINO



THESE PAGES, FROM
TOP LEFT in the
bathroom, 1950s
Sant'Ambrogio y de
Berti **mirror**; 1950s
Stilnovo **lamp**; early
1900s cement **tiles**.
In the loft, 1950s
Stilnovo **wall lamps**;
1950s Arredoluce
lamp. In the studio
work zone, Medea
chair by Vittorio
Nobili for Fratelli
Tagliabue; 1960s
side table; 1970s
Riflessione **lamp** by
Claudio Salocchi for
Skipper; **artworks**
in progress, all by
Sergio Fiorentino.
Details, last pages.



THESE PAGES in another view of the studio, Charles sofa by Antonio Citterio for B&B Italia, enquiries to Space Furniture; DU 55 chair by Gastone Rinaldi for Poltrona Frau, enquiries to Cult; salvaged Medea chair by Vittorio Nobili for Fratelli Tagliabue (hanging, on left); Aguglie cabinet by Sergio Fiorentino; 1950s Arredoluce floor lamp (next to cabinet); Stilnovo floor lamp (next to sofa); *The Dreamer, The Portrait of a Saint* (2019) and *Portraits Without a Look* (2019) series artworks, all by Sergio Fiorentino; painting (on floor) by Fiorentino's daughter Alice.





THESE PAGES, FROM LEFT a view of the bathroom, kitchen and loft, sliding brass **benchtops**; aluminium **cabinets**; custom **stools** designed by Sergio Fiorentino; **artwork** (2018) by Sergio Fiorentino; steel blade **stairs**; brass **cabinets**; 1950s Stilmov Sputnik **chandelier**. In the dining area, **table** by Angelo Mangiarotti; **chairs** by Carlo Ratti; 18th-century Caltagirone turquoise lace **ceramics** (on table); olive wood **head sculptures** (on bookcase) by Paolo Gagliardi; 1950s **floor lamp** by Giuseppe Ostuni for Oluce; plaster draft **sculpture** of a 1930s athlete (seen behind window); existing cement **tiles**.





The small city of Noto, found stepping up the sun-soaked coastline of the Syracuse province in Italy's southern island Sicily, is an unspoiled jewel of the late baroque that savvy travellers dare not share for fear it be corrupted and commodified by the tourist hordes.

UNESCO concurred with this protectionist view in 2002, slapping a World Heritage listing on the limestone city as a site of 'outstanding universal value'; a cultural currency measured by its historical circumstance — Noto was levelled by the 'great' Sicilian earthquake of 1693 — and the unprecedented homogeneity of its rebuilt architecture.

It is a masterpiece of Sicilian Baroque; a flamboyant blending of Italian, Spanish and French influences boiled down to a regional base flavour and poured into an innovative grid plan by the 'starchitects' of the day, Paolo Labisi, Vincenzo Sinatra and Rosario Gagliardi.

Proud Noto resident and artist Sergio Fiorentino ponders the relevance of this place and its dramatic past to the works produced inside his studio-home — a restored refectory within a former Cistercian monastery designed by Gagliardi in 1713.

"What moved me about Noto was not so much its baroque richness as its metaphysical dimension and its palette of white stone and blue sky," says the late-40s artist who, after schooling in art, detoured into dealing in modernist design. "The beginning of my artistic activity takes place in Noto, exactly 11 years ago... After many years of researching and collecting design, I felt the need to start creating and painting — something that I had not done since [studying]. The stimulus to change my life was given to me by the beauty of Noto."

Presenting as a Dolce & Gabbana panorama of yellowing citrus groves, Sicilian blue skies — bouncing from sea to silent cloister — and blanched architecture alchemising into gold in the afternoon sun, Noto has an otherness that Fiorentino asserts "naturally selects very interesting creative personalities" from the farthest reaches of the planet.

"This is what I try to transfer onto my canvases," he says of a "magic realism" felt pulsing through its streets and people. "I speak of men; faces and bodies placed in a non-place, far from reality. I try to paint a model of classical beauty but [in] revealing it, I try to protect it."

Plucking his subjects from real life (including eight-year-old daughter Alice), Fiorentino submerges them in the anonymity of Noto blue — "the water in which my characters are born and breathe" — to rebirth them as diving dreamers, dividing twins and modern deities. They possess a defined physical reality in a super-shallow foreground that reminds of the art of Cimabue and Giotto.

"You have captured a period that I love and that moves me deeply," he says of the 13th- and 14th-century masters who radicalised spatial rendering in western art. "What I try to do is isolate my characters in an amniotic dimension and let them breathe inside my beloved ultramarine blue... there is never a reference to place or time, they could be people of today or yesterday." Or, tomorrow, it suggests of the haloes that, when cast in the light of his living room's Sputnik chandelier, assume the iconography of space helmets.

Crediting his Belgian friend Giovannino with the discovery of the storied refectory, Fiorentino bemoans the found reality of an unsympathetic 1970s renovation. "An apartment had been created," he says of its structural and stylistic erasure of history. "The false ceiling lowered the full height of the room, the arches and windows had been bricked up, and concrete covered the stone floors and plaster of the [original] time."

Thankfully, an early encounter and easy affinity with Noto architect Massimo Carnemolla, the founder of +CStudio Architetti — a firm that similarly feeds off the city's limestone liminality —

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OPPOSITE PAGE homeowner and artist Sergio Fiorentino, in the studio, with his daughter Alice; 'Alice is the subject of several paintings and they are the only ones I've never sold,' says Fiorentino. 'They are part of her small collection.' 1950s velvet sofa by Federico Munari; **Water artwork** by Sergio Fiorentino.

moved Fiorentino's dream to the next-stage restoration and dismantling of 12 rooms. Within its new "positive suspended energy", Carnemolla conceived Fiorentino's home as a series of subtle inserts and overlays.

The insert of a mezzanine floor within an arched alcove created a commodious sleeping loft for which Fiorentino designed fine-legged, 1950s-inflected brass credenzas (doubling as balustrades) that echo the sensual simplicity of vintage wall sconces from Stilnovo. The architectural deference to monastic precedent extended to the denial of media.

"No, I don't like technology very much," says Fiorentino of his concerted effort to enshrine sensory quiet. "At home there is no television and no wi-fi. I try not to get distracted."

Nesting under the loft is a compact bathroom and a galley-style kitchen conceived "as a sort of workbench with sliding brass countertops that close it off and hide the sink and burners". It abuts a seating area surveyed by his works *The Portrait of a Saint* (2019) and *The Dreamer* (2019) — a sleeper whose auric atmosphere seemingly gilds another Fiorentino-designed cabinet called the Aguglie.

"It is brass parallel-piped with silver needlefish inserts," he explains of a materiality specific to 18th-century Sicily and a decorative arts school in the city of Trapani in the west. "Like furniture of the past, [it] has a sort of secret — in each of the nine pieces, the opening is a different needlefish; by moving the fish, within a system of balance and equilibrium, it opens."

Sitting in happy correspondence with Fiorentino's collection of 20th-century designs and anthropomorphic Sicilian majolica from the mid-19th century to the 1930s, it speaks to the simple lines of a 1960s table now centred where the Cistercians monks once dined.

"It could be the big table of the old refectory," says the artist, imagining meals shared under the pious gaze of his *Twins* (2017) series — a diptych of one identity that the monks might have read as the dual face of divinity, but the modern diner could deem a critique on the narcissistic culture of the selfie. Such fluidity of time and translation delights Fiorentino, who says that both he and Carnemolla have never sought to force addition but rather a subtraction. "A digging, until you find the soul, the essence of things that, as the famous phrase [puts it], are 'invisible to the eye.'"

sergiofiorentino.it





THESE PAGES in the studio, 1960s dining table; Medea chairs by Vittorio Nobili for Pratelli Tagliabue; 1950s coffee table (in foreground); ceramic heads, part of Fiorentino's collection of mid-19th century to 1930s anthropomorphic Sicilian majolica; original ceiling, and walls finished in limestone with traditional techniques; chandelier and artworks by Sergio Fiorentino, including the *Ticino* (2017) series diptych (on wall).

