

Rebecca Rose 'A lullaby with resonance',
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ARTS

MAXMARA PRIZE

A lullaby with resonance

Margaret Salmon won the women's prize with her exploration of motherhood. Rebecca Rose reports

When MaxMara and the Whitechapel Art Gallery announced their collaboration on the MaxMara Prize for Women at the Venice Biennale in 2005, it sparked the usual debate about women's prizes in general. "Why do we need another?" people asked. "If there's a prize specifically for women, shouldn't there be one for men too?" But such quibbling is quickly forgotten on visiting the prize's luminous inaugural show of work by its first winner, the American-born, UK-based artist Margaret Salmon.

Salmon's moving and intimate film triptych *Ninna Nanna*, a 10-minute study of the daily lives of three young housebound Italian mothers, was selected by a panel of eminent judges. Each judge was invited to put forward five up-and-coming female artists working in the UK whose art they thought would flourish as a result of the prize: a six-month residency in Italy. The artists in turn presented suggestions for a work that they would complete during the sojourn; the judges – Jennifer Higgie, editor of *Frieze* magazine, the gallerist Victoria Miro, the artist Gillian Wearing, the collector Anita Zabudowicz and the Whitechapel's director Iwona Blazwick – picked the 31-year-old filmmaker without hesitation.

Salmon's idea was to make a trio of films on the universal theme of motherhood. The judges' decision took account of Salmon's previous work, notably two edgy films that are also on display in the current show. *PS* and *Peggy* are intense and daring studies of humanity, shot in grainy monochrome on a 16mm hand-held camera. *PS* darts between a man pensively weeding in his unruly garden and shots of the same man eclipsed against a firework display; it is set to a muffled soundtrack of a disturbing argument between a man and a woman. *Peggy* is a heart-pinching portrait of the quiet daily routine of a woman nearing the end of her life; it is set to her semi-rasping, semi-hummed, semi-hopeful rendition of "Amazing Grace". As with all Salmon's work, these pieces are uncomfortable to watch, partly because of the editing, which is deliberately erratic,



One mother among many: a still from the film 'Ninna Nanna'

but also because of the way the artist plunges the viewer into close-up confrontation with other people's fragility.

It is not surprising that the Whitechapel is backing experimental film-work of this sort: about to embark on a £10m expansion, the gallery is one of the UK's most successful contemporary art institutions. It has also always been forward-thinking in its approach to women artists, and has promoted important figures such as Frieda Kahlo, Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman.

The Italian fashion house might perhaps have been expected to go for something slicker, or more comfortable – like its belted coats. But that would be to underestimate it. The Maramotti family, which started the company in 1951, has been involved in art projects in northern Italy and has influenced public installation of works by big names such as Sol le Witt and Richard Serra in its home town of Reggio Emilia.

The idea of a filmed triptych commenting on modern motherhood was instantly resonant for the Maramottis. It brought together important

Italian themes: religion, as in triptychs of the Madonna by Masaccio and other Renaissance masters; the tradition of Italian cinema; adoration of *la mamma* and Italian family life. And where more suitable to contemplate such themes than in the Whitechapel's airy, white, churchlike space?

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We see the women in their apartments in Italy (north, central and south) as they wake, wash, feed, rock and change their babies (all of slightly different ages) at different times and in slightly different ways; we see moments of ennui and moments of joy. Salmon cites Italian cinema as one of her main influences, and says she was transfixed by a *ninna nanna* scene in Fellini's *8½*. There is certainly a realism apparent in her approach to film – that flickering black-and-white and the way that everything appears to be allowed to happen in its own time.

MaxMara has presented the aim of the prize as "buying time for the individual". Salmon herself was a young mother when awarded the six-month residency and was, she says, grateful for the "time, funds and energy to make something new". *Ninna Nanna* is a bittersweet homage to that state – to the all-encompassing nature of motherhood.

Margaret Salmon's work is on show at Whitechapel Art Gallery, London E1, until February 11. Tel 020 7522 7878

Ninna nanna means "lullaby" in Italian, and the film is carried along by the three women pictured singing a Florentine *ninna nanna* – alternately, together, and at times in a round. The effect of this soft, repetitive singing is otherworldly – especially as the camera sinks in and out of scenes in an almost hypnotic way.