My new Italian art renaissance, with computer graphics

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I am an architect from Italy with a passion for photography and creative writing. At present I work as an Architectural Visualiser in London, UK, for a studio called Pixelflakes.

I moved to London from Europe, in mid 2019 to advance my archviz career as I believe London is the home of archviz. Since relocating, I have continued to connect with a growing number of Italian women working in Architectural Visualisation across Europe, as well as a sizable community in London.

In 2019 at an industry event, I was asked by a director of a famous international studio, *"Why are there so many Italian women working in the industry now, what's the secret?".*

"Why are there so many Italian women working in the industry now?"

This took me by surprise. I had never thought about this, and especially don't consider this an Italian phenomenon!. It's true that there are many 3D artists working in London who are Italians, so, as this is my background as well, it's always best to write about what you know.

This essay is my personal experience and views on women in the industry. My hope is you relate to my creative journey, no matter which part of the world you are in or nationality.

To help me get a better overview of archviz, I reached out to a selection of industry professionals, asking them a series of questions.

"Are there really a lot of Italian women in the industry in Europe and if so, why is my country different to others?".

We cannot ignore the statistical fact that all creative professions, including architecture and archviz, have a very low gender-balance, and remain very male-dominated. Globally in architectural education less than 50% of undergraduates are women whereas in the workforce this drops to around 15%.

Extensive research goes into studying workplace gender inequalities and I don't wish for this essay to focus on this. In archviz the last global survey was conducted by CGarchitect in 2015 which revealed only 7% of the industry's 3D artists are women. A shocking statistic which, given the places I've worked in over the past 5 years, seems out-of-date.

I asked a leading educator Fabio D'Agnano, *"Is the industry getting better and more diverse?"*.

As Director of the Digital Architecture Post-graduate Master's Course (MADI) and Three Dimensional Modelling, Electronic Prototyping and Representation at the Architecture University of Venice (IUAV), he is uniquely qualified to answer such a loaded question.

"I assume that today we have a good balance regarding male and female students in Architectural Visualisation. This makes us really proud. Over the years the number of female students has increased and I think (but I don't want to make any strict judgement) this happened also because this profession became less technical and more artistic and in this way, percentages change as well".

"È vero!", I answered. It's fantastic to learn more women are training than before. It's possible, that advances in software technology and ease of use, has allowed more women to feel it's an accessible career choice for their artistic talent.

© Silvia Valentina Patussi. Ex. MADI Student.

The Delivery of the Keys fresco, 1481–1482, Sistine Chapel, by Perugino (1481–1482), features both linear perspective and Brunelleschi's architectural style

The art of communicating design with images

The communication of a project has always played an important role in architectural design. One of the first three-dimensional representations of architecture appeared in the 14th Century, with the Italian inventor, Filippo Brunelleschi, named the re-inventor (SIC) of the Linear Perspective.

Design and representation are inextricably connected. The drawn image is both a document of the unbuilt design with a pre-figurative role, and also a record of existing built form.

It was inevitable that at some point some architects would begin to feel a deeper affinity with the representation and communication of a project, possibly more than with the physically built project itself. It certainly gives me faster gratification seeing a spectacular clients masterpiece come to life as an image rather than wait 10 years to see it build, if at all!.

Thanks to advances in software and hardware, new methods of representation are allowing designers to explore ideas in greater realism. With today's visual technology we are able to recreate Architecture and Interior Design in a near perfect way. It has become harder and harder to distinguish virtual images from digital photographs.

Every discipline evolves as technology advances. I feel that this happened in Archviz because there is a certain way to learn, to acquire technical skills. However, over the years, having reached a high quality skill level, it's possible many Architectural Visualisers may also feel the need to focus on the emotional element of images, or its narrative.

Narrative Stories make the Image

During my time at Pixelflakes, often when I'm creating an image, my boss Matthew Reid will remind me, *"narrative, Vale, narrative!".*
In my personal work I have always attempted to tell a story following the principle of art? I had been of the opinion that commercial work is something else?

© Pixelflakes

Narrative, tell a story, try to create viewer engagement or emotions. Why is this so important?

ArchViz is not just the best way to sell a good or even a bad project. The imagery is a 3D snapshot or record of the future design.

Imagine an image of a residential living room at Christmas. A small child sits quietly in front of a decorated tree surrounded by gifts. The final marketing image may resonate with a young married couple dreaming of their future together.

Storytelling, narrative, emotions…I believe that's art, in its pure form?

I asked Eleonora Galimberti, Senior 3D Artist at The Boundary, how important story-telling is when she creates her work.

"It is massively important to create inspiring, impactful images. Even the most basic marketing image has the potential to tell a story. Sometimes the client, especially for very high-end projects, provides little to no creative freedom, in which case it can be very challenging to add something 'yours' to the images".

© The Boundary

When I think about story-telling, I've considered if there is a perceivable difference in the approach to creating images between men and women. Is there anything different in the way both problem-solve and visualise a solution?.

Michela Tonelli, founder of MTSYS, an Italian architectural visualization studio based in Florence, shared with me her point of view about this specific topic.

"In MTSYS our vision is a good balance of creative ideas, mine and Valentino Donnini's, my partner in the studio. Our work is the result of a mix of sensitivity, empathy, pragmatism, filtered in different ways and I believe this is a unique value.

If asked why we are different, probably I would say that as a woman I am more sensitive and Valentino usually takes more care in the detail.

I would not like to list a series of clichés but, just to subvert one of the many clichés, the most technical person in the studio is me!".

© MTSYS

Michela's suggestion that having a collaborative team with different strengths and inputs makes for better artwork is a recurring theme I have experienced at all the leading studios I know of.

It's also statistically proven that a mixed team with at least one woman, is collectively more intellegent!

At Pixelflakes, we have a team of 16 artists with 50/50 gender balance, (plus two female dogs!). We have a great respectful team all working as one.

When I questioned Pixelflakes director, Matthew Reid about workplace gender balance he replied,

"This is such a sensitive subject. The way I view things and the way we have always run this company when it comes to hiring, promoting people etc, has nothing to do with anything other than talent. I don't think I have ever really been aware of the male/female differentiation".

He continues,
"I completely understand archviz is a male dominated industry, for now. I do feel we need to raise awareness, which is actually what is happening in the industry, and this is fantastic for everyone.

The more balanced the industry becomes, the better for everyone, as males and females do approach things a little differently".

So, are we experiencing a new Renaissance in Art, Architecture and Technology?

The values of proportion, balance, symmetry, geometry and perspective that grew in importance during the 14th C art renaissance, remain in play today, with artwork created using computer graphics, playing its part as a modern interpretation of perspective drawing.

I caught up with the extremely famous and talented Lucia Frascerra, senior artist at Secchi Smith, in London. We discussed her views regarding the connection between Architectural Visualisation and Art.

"I totally believe that ArchViz is a form of Art. One of the reasons I decided to join this industry in the first place is that I love Architecture and I love Art, and I found ArchViz to be the best of both worlds.

I feel we are in an era where technology is our bread and butter, we couldn't live without it. Archviz has plenty of it but, without turning it into a merely

technical subject, and that's one of the things I love about it.

I agree that we do find ourselves currently in a kind of Digital Art Renaissance. Every day we are discovering new ways to use technology to make 3D Art, but at the same time, we understand how beauty needs to come first as our priority".

Lucia's conversation got me contemplating my homeland, Italy, and our past art history.

Is Archviz 3D Expressionism?

Visual arts have always been an important part of the artistic Italian expression. Painting, filmography and photography have always been cultivated with great passion within the Italian art scene. It's possible today to imagine the reason why many Italian women have entered the world of ArchViz may come from the visual and cultural heritage of our past.

The academic and traditionalist curriculum, typical of Italian universities, have the tendency to exclude education for real world architectural practices, to gain direct experience in construction sites for example, focusing instead on teaching traditional subjects, and paramount to them all, architectural representation (drawings, sketches, models and 3D).

Aside from architectural schools in Universities, Italy does not have many Architectural Visualisation Schools teaching Archviz computer graphics. Among the few are MADI and State of Art who are both are world-renowned. They both have the credit of having spread this digital culture in Italy.

MADI offers a great after-graduation-program where students are offered internships in some of the most important architectural or visualization companies all over Europe, with very few employed in Italy.

I asked Fabio D'Agnano what he thinks about our system in Italy and why so many young artists move abroad to build their professional careers.

"Architectural companies in Italy are vitiated. There are many young graduates and not enough money".

He continues,

"The biggest problem is to constantly compete with new interns knocking at the

door. Also, I would say that in Italy we are not really counting on the productive aspect of Architecture, but mostly on the speculative one. We have a weak internal market, not so many constructions and a profession, the Architect, which is getting further away from the practical side of this job".

This is even more true for women, because although they have great creativity and excellent technical knowledge, there is always a certain difficulty in entering working environments that have always been occupied by men. And, knowing my country, it is disappointing for me to admit that Italy seems lagging behind northern European countries in workplace-equality.

That's why, as an Italian woman, I decided to move to London. I enjoy working for a company that allows me to grow, gives me freedom in experimenting and space to be creative, all within the client's brief. It is the best that I could have ever hoped for.

And looking wider afield, thanks to the community Facebook group, Women in Arch Viz, I have been able to connect with thousands of women around the world who share my passion for 3D art and architectural visualisation.

One in particular, Cristina Patanè, another Italian, manages her own studio in Sicily.

She is a great example of an artist with a sensitive approach to imagemaking. I asked her about the changes in our industry and the visible increase of women artists.

"I believe that the future possibilities of this industry have to be deeply related to the authenticity, the imagination and the creativity, all together building the content of our images.

At the same time, I feel that men and women have different approaches and I would like to keep seeing these differences and the industry able to respect each other's visual language".

© Cristina Patanè

Judge my artist credentials, not my gender!

There has been quite a bit of debate and discussion recently comparing women and men in the industry. It's true there is considerable evidence of work-place inequalities, but as I noted earlier, this essay isn't going to dive deep into that topic. For one, I am an 3D artist and not an expert in this field. If you wish to know more about this, please check out the relevant organisations and websites in the reference appendix at the end of this essay.

Lucia Frascerra speaks for many women when she talks about her experience.

"Archviz is definitely male-dominated, but there are a lot of women in this industry. An issue is they don't generally self-promote as much as the guys.

Men get more visibility and therefore they are more likely to be selected for a job, conference panels or judging boards.

Of course, the industry should always encourage diversity, without tokenism. I personally would be very offended to discover that I was a token woman, rather than being selected for my credentials as a good artist".

As a role model artist, Lucia represents a growing number of female 3D artists excelling in the 30 year old, male-dominated CG archviz industry. She is an advocate for change and along with me, wishes to see more women thrive in this artform.
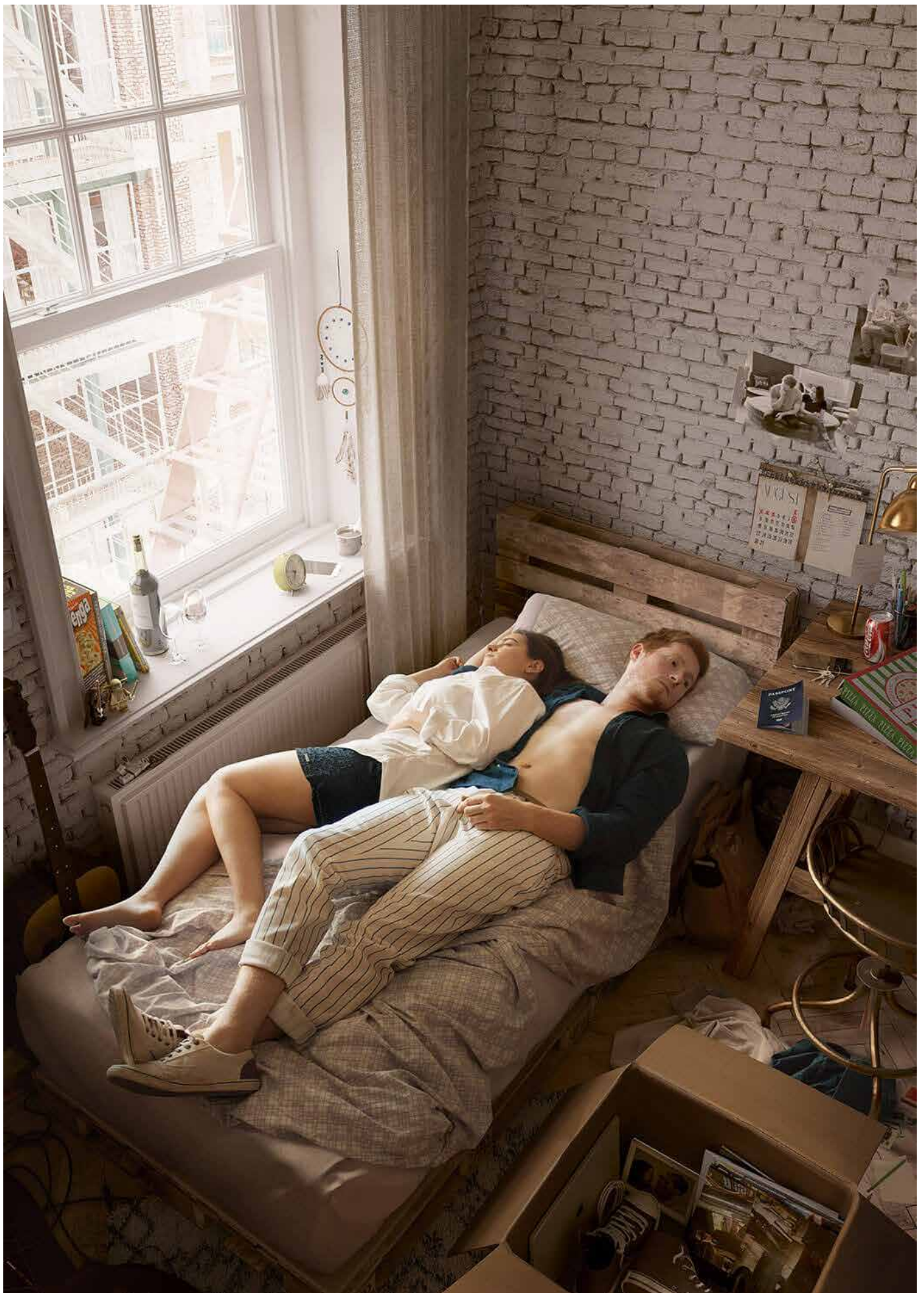
"Don't be afraid to showcase your work, there is nothing wrong in doing so!

If only all women would promote themselves as much as men, we wouldn't have such a gender gap, it would be much easier for a woman to be chosen in a conference panel, or as judges for a competition.

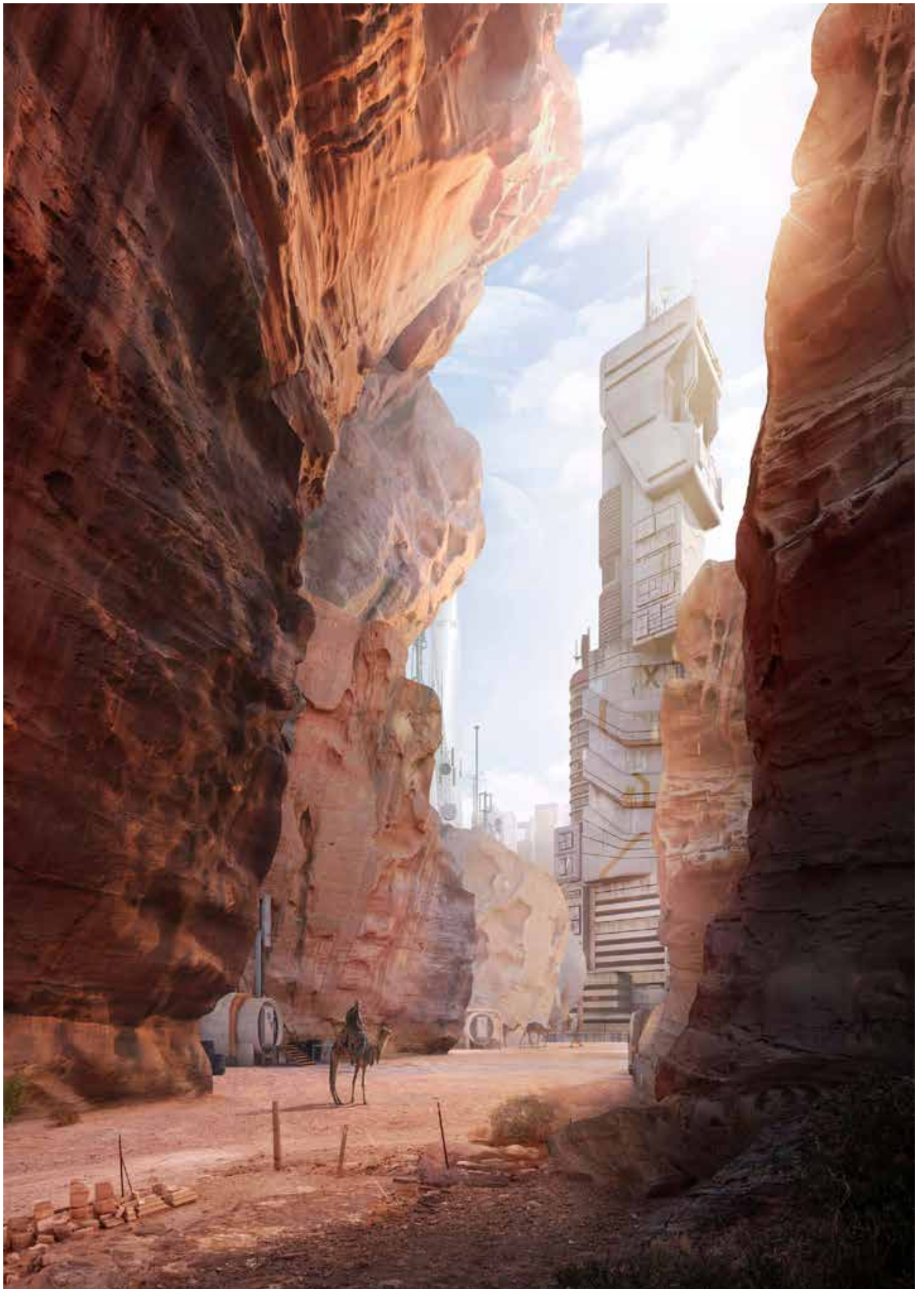*There are so many talented women out there but nobody has ever seen their work!".*

- Lucia Frascerra, 3D Artist

© Lucia Frascerra

It's reassuring to learn there is so much support and encouragement within the industry.

With architectural visualisation, I have personally discovered that many things are possible. Computer graphics is the best tool for me to create images that only exist in my imagination. It is an outlet for me to engage my inner-child, allowing me to create a fairy tale, or inside a life capsule or chasing the pureness inside a mausoleum. All images I've dreamed up.

© Valentina Baruffo

Finally, if I could return to the night in London in 2019, where I was asked, *"Why are there so many Italian women working in the industry now, what's the secret?"*, I believe I've learned a lot from the people I have interviewed for this essay.
Maybe the answer isn't as direct as one thinks and not intended to be a gender specific question at all. I imagine it was simply an observation that more women are visible and active in archviz today.
It's true there are more role-models I identify with. There are more women visibly winning awards, judging international competitions, keynote presenting at conferences, in leadership positions in the worlds best companies and building their own successful studios.

It would be wonderful to think in the exciting decades to come, I will look back at my career and be thankful for my artistic choice and will have enjoyed the journey and experience of being a digital 3D artist. I look forward to sharing my journey with my fellow industry friends and 3D artists.

Together, let's make this our 3D ART RENAISSANCE, worthy of its place in future art history! - Valentina Baruffo

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