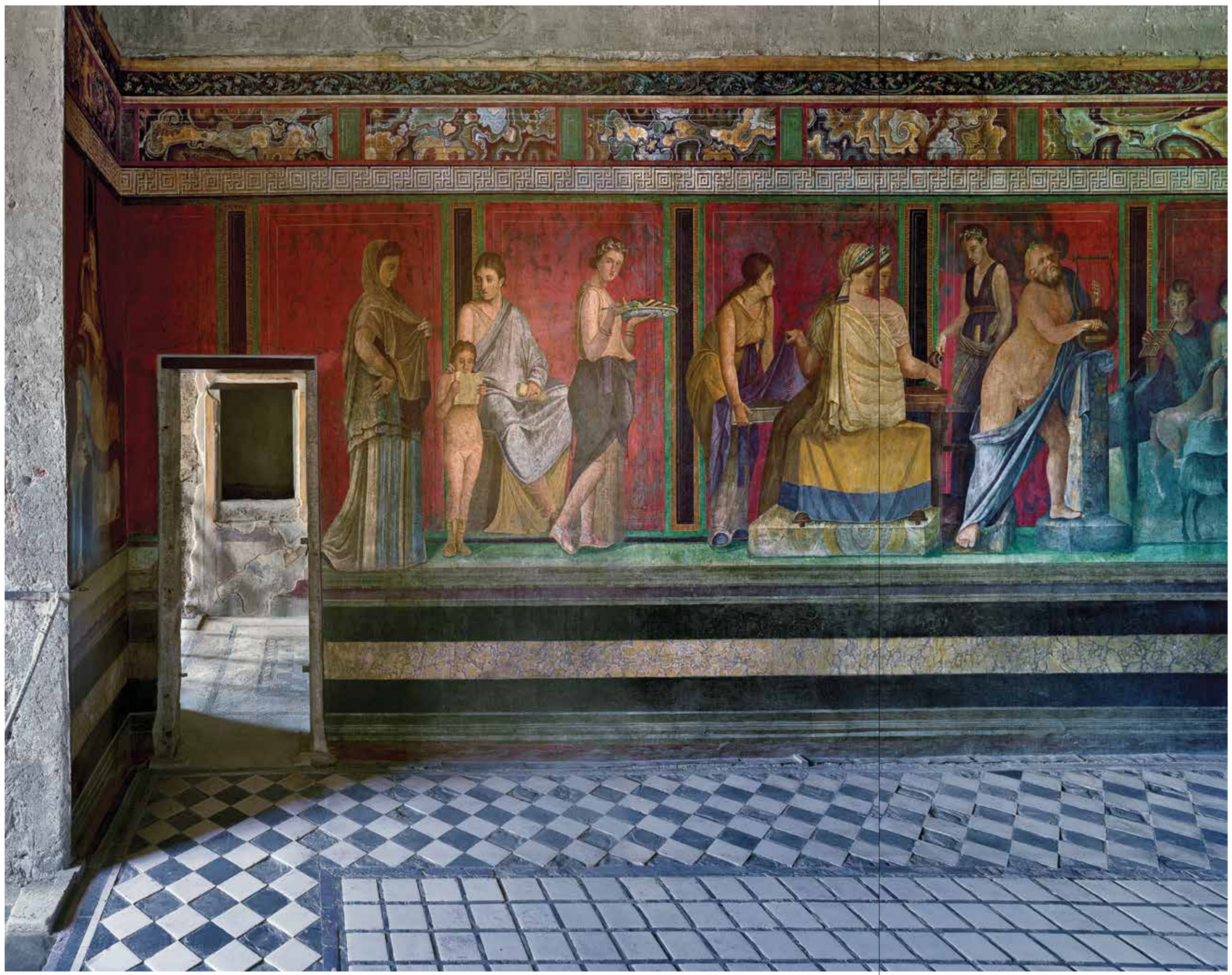


# WHAT

Robert Polidori's photographs of Pompeii and Oplontis are part of a lifelong project to explore memories hidden within surfaces.

# LIES

BY TONY PERROTTET
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT POLIDORI

# BENEATH

**ANCIENT WONDERS**
A scene believed to depict a young woman being inducted into a cult, from the Villa of the Mysteries, one of several frescoed mansions unearthed in Pompeii.

**IN A CAREER** spanning five decades, Robert Polidori has accepted only two assignments for ad campaigns. One of them, in the fall of 2004, held a surprising revelation. "I was brought to Italy by a company that makes electrical systems," he recalls with a wry laugh. "I never understood the concept. They were tying their designer fittings in with high fashion." Although the goal of the advertising project remained a mystery ("I'm not a product person"), Polidori was given a car and driver to travel across Italy. The itinerary included Naples—his first visit to the southern coastal city. Polidori swore to come back alone.

"Napoli was a much more sinister place back then," he says of the mafia's former grip on the city, "but I knew there would be a lot to photograph." Lying in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius, its ravishing bay is encrusted with history from the Greco-Roman era, the Renaissance and the metropolis's centuries-long run as the capital of its own wealthy kingdom, a combination that has inspired generations of travelers to declare, "See Naples and die!"

Polidori has long made a habit of traveling around the globe to document haunting, abandoned sites: bullet-ridden Beirut hotels, crumbling mansions in Havana or the ghostly apartment blocks of Chernobyl. In Naples, his imagination was fired by the ancient Roman remains of Pompeii and the bay's other seaside towns, like Oplontis, that had been buried by the eruption of Vesuvius's volcano in A.D. 79. He was particularly drawn to the exquisite frescoes in the villas of wealthier residents, which depict mythological scenes, pagan rites, animals and landscapes, and were excavated after they were rediscovered in the 18th century with their brilliant colors and details intact. The Roman images, which he had first encountered in books as a schoolboy, tapped into Polidori's fascination with the way memory can be embedded in surfaces. It took time, but the result was a photographic series shot in the summers of 2017 and '18.

The artistic roots of the Vesuvius project can be traced to the beginning of his long career. Born in Montreal in 1951 to a French-Canadian mother and a father who had immigrated from Corsica, Polidori moved to the U.S. in 1960 when his father was recruited to work as an engineer for Boeing Aerospace. He grew up between Seattle, Southern California, New Orleans and Florida.

Empty rooms have fascinated Polidori (who has shot several previous stories for this magazine) since 1969, when as an 18-year-old at the University of South Florida in Tampa, he saw Michael Snow's underground cult film, *Wavelength*. Although revered by film buffs as a structuralist classic, it has never been a crowd-pleaser: A 45-minute-long shot of a bare New York apartment where obscure characters wander in and out of the frame, the work culminates in a close-up of a photograph on the wall of a rippling ocean to a wailing soundtrack. But it changed Polidori's life, inspiring him to quit college and move to Manhattan. The film would reverberate through his career, opening his eyes, he says, to "temporality"—the secret histories that lie within ostensibly vacant spaces.

"A lot of my work deals with surfaces that reveal the traces of many layers of the past," he says. "Rooms are the most apt metaphor for notions of memory. They are filing cabinets where internal life resides. People put on the walls of their rooms signs of who they think they are or who they want to be."

In gritty, Mayor Lindsay–era New York, Polidori at first devoted himself to cinema. In time he found himself living in a Tribeca loft, eating at the Odeon (then a diner for Irish telephone workers) and working at the Anthology Film Archives with Jonas Mekas, a Lithuanian immigrant who is remembered as "the godfather of avant-garde American cinema." Soon he was making 8- and 16mm experimental films that were screened at the Whitney. In the early 1980s, Polidori gave up the moving image for still photography, in part because he grew weary of cinema's "jittery" movements, which he felt did not document vacant spaces effectively. ("The grain vibrates," he says of analog film. "It moves like a swarm of bees.")

He also tested large-camera formats, both for higher resolution and artistic control. "I thought, Why don't my photographs look as good as those of my heroes? I realized I needed a 4x5-view camera with perspective control. Art history shows that camera movements on three axes are needed to perform perspective corrections." His touchstone was Italy: "It all goes back to the Renaissance, with the camera obscura"—the pinhole boxes used to project images upside down. "Canaletto would use it to trace images with paper. That's where the laws of perspective come from."

Within a few years Polidori had progressed to an 8x10-inch camera, an unwieldy contraption that resembles the field cameras of the Victorian age, mounted on a tripod with a lens plane that extends like an accordion and requires exposures of up to five minutes. The resulting images were extraordinarily detailed and could be blown up to sizes that were larger than life. He regards himself as a vessel for the images: "Artists think they are creators. I'm not a creator, I'm a medium. Things are brought to me through a camera. I look at photography as a divinatory process. I point the camera, I ask a question, I need to decipher the answer."

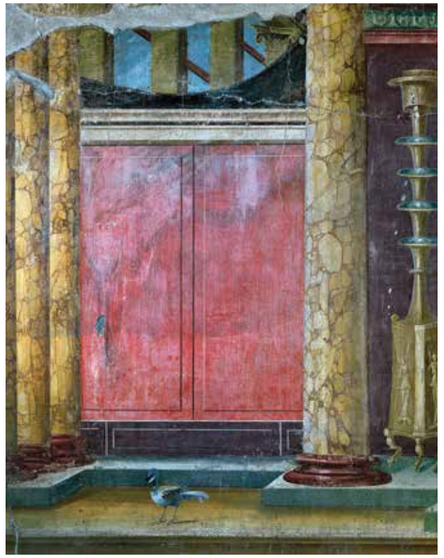
**POLIDORI'S** first visit to Italy did not occur until his late 30s, when he was invited in 1988 to shoot the residence of fashion designer Enrico Coveri in Florence. Over the next 20 years, he was on the road constantly, he says, but returned to Italy whenever assignments allowed. "I wasn't born rich," he says. "I was dependent on jobs. Photography is an industrial art; it's expensive."

In Sicily, he photographed the grand Palazzo Biscari in Catania and the Villa Niscemi, former home of Duke Fulco di Verdura, in Palermo. In and around Rome, he spent a month shooting the imposing Rationalist architecture of the Mussolini era. The scenes were devoid of people, but included textures—decaying paintings, a stain, peeling paint—that evoked generations of habitation. At the same time, Polidori was exploring the wider world. His evocative series on post-Katrina New Orleans, shown in an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2006, was described by architecture critic Michael Kimmelman as "our modern Pompeii."

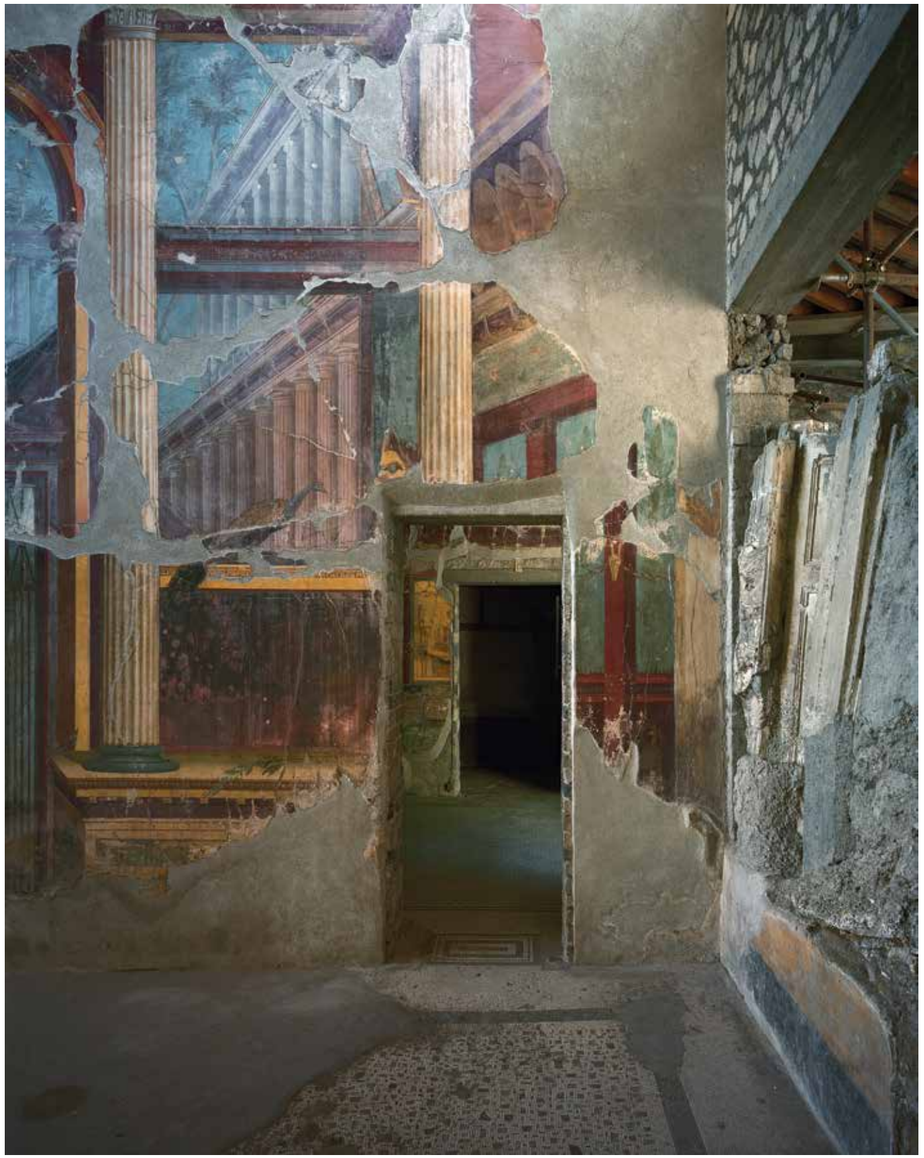
Polidori's interest in the real Pompeii was revived in 2008, when he returned to Naples with the help of Eduardo Castaldo, a then-little-known Neapolitan photojournalist whom Polidori had hired as his assistant. (Castaldo has since made a reputation for himself covering the Middle East and as a set photographer for the HBO







**SPEAK, MEMORY**
Four images from the Villa Poppaea in Oplontis, one of the towns carpeted in lethal volcanic ash during Vesuvius's eruption in A.D. 79. The villa was thought to have been owned by Nero's second wife. Opposite: Polidori with his large-format 8x10 view camera, which requires long exposures up to five minutes. Portrait by Brittany Sanders.



**FEAST YOUR EYES**
A fresco from the triclinium, or formal dining area, of Villa Poppaea demonstrates a sophisticated sense of perspective. "Interiors are metaphors for the states of being of one person or culture," Polidori says.



adaptation of Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*.) The pair had an inauspicious start in Naples, as Polidori tried to document the city's garbage crisis. "It didn't go very well," Castaldo says with a laugh, especially when they entered a city dump controlled by the Italian military without permission. "Robert was bitten by a dog," he says. "And then detained."

The visit improved dramatically when Polidori was granted access to the National Archaeological Museum, then in a state of disrepair. Created in the 18th century by Bourbon monarchs to house antiquities from the Kingdom of Naples, including Roman relics unearthed after systematic excavation of the bay began in 1738, it included lurid erotic images of lovers and phallic deities, for years kept off-limits from the public in a special room (the notorious Gabinetto Segreto, or "Secret Cabinet"). Polidori was particularly struck by chunks of frescoed walls that had been cut out from villas and transferred to the museum intact. "One piece of wall would be exhibited on another wall," he marvels. "It was like taking the skin off something. I was fascinated by the surreal qualities of the images."

He also made his first day trip to Pompeii, about a half hour by car from downtown Naples, as "a psychic break" from the colorful but often menacing city. He'd always had superficial interest in Neapolitan art and antiquities, he says, "but up-close scrutiny gave me a much deeper understanding." For a start, the frescoes of Pompeii "appeared strangely contemporary," he recalls. More important was what lay just under the surface: "Upon first viewing, they seem like elaborate decorative motifs. On closer scrutiny, the images have a deeper psychological content. That's what I want to draw out of them."

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> —ROBERT POLIDORI

The frescoes brought him back to New York in the 1960s, when *Wavelength* had led Polidori to a once-popular 1966 book by the English historian Frances Yates called *The Art of Memory*. Yates championed classical mnemonics, a key part of Roman education considered as important as reading and espoused by the orator Cicero. Its central principle was that human memory can be visualized as an empty house where myriad facts are mentally placed in rooms for easy recall. Yates's idea endures in popular culture today: In the BBC TV series *Sherlock*, an updated Holmes played by Benedict Cumberbatch visits his "mind palace" to retrieve arcane information.

Polidori saw ancient frescoes as iterations of memory systems. Some scholars agree: An academic study on the so-called House of the Tragic Poet shows how a visit to the villa would unfold like a cinema montage, as guests wandered past a series of mythological images, including scenes from Homer, in the order chosen by the host. Other classicists consider the idea provocative but impossible to prove. "It has to be speculation," says Paul Cartledge, professor emeritus of Greek culture at the University of Cambridge. "Art history in the ancient world was purely about form, not content. We can't even say for sure what the Parthenon friezes represent, because no single text tells us what the artist Phidias thought he was doing."

After his Naples visit, Polidori went to Florence to document another series of frescoes by the Renaissance artist Fra Angelico in the Convent of San Marco. For Castaldo, the shoot was an education, as he observed Polidori's meticulous, contemplative and hugely time-consuming process. "I was a wire photographer, taking hundreds of news images on a 35mm digital camera," Castaldo recalls. "Robert was doing the complete opposite, creating just one or two images a day on color negatives. It was a great experience to see him working. Large format forces you to really think about each image. You don't release the shutter if you are not sure. With digital, you shoot nonstop, even if you are not sure."

After collaborating in this spiritual setting, Castaldo later suggested to Polidori that he return to Naples to photograph its sacred sites. Some 150 survived in the city center from the 15th to the 18th centuries, when Naples was the opulent heart of its (often besieged) southern kingdom. "I photograph people, not empty places," Castaldo says. "But it was a perfect subject for Robert."

By 2017, when Polidori set himself up in the city with his wife and daughter, "the ambience in Napoli had completely changed from ominous to user-friendly," he says. As he took photographs, the continuity between the Christian imagery and the pagan frescoes of Pompeii leapt out. "It dawned on me that Christianity is a foreign cult imposed on Italy," he says. "The frescoes were the traces of the original local Greco-Roman people's culture."

After gaining permission from Italy's Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Polidori went on a series of day trips to Pompeii and other ancient sites around the Bay of Naples, where security guards ushered him into sites normally locked to the public. There were discoveries: One of the most lavishly decorated villas he found was in the lesser-known town of Oplontis, a summer beach resort for aristocrats when the bay served as a summer escape—the Hamptons of antiquity. It's believed to have been owned by Poppaea Sabina, the second wife of the Emperor Nero, who suffered a tragic fate: According to the historian Suetonius, she died after her crazed husband kicked her in the stomach while she was pregnant.

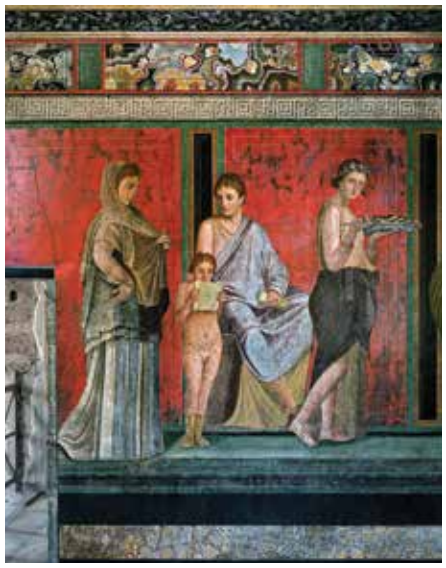
After Polidori visited again in the summer of 2018, Studio Trisorio exhibited his ancient Roman images alongside the abandoned Christian churches. The show went over well in Naples, says Castaldo. "In Italy, we are used to seeing these amazing places all the time. But it is also important to observe them from the outside. Robert arrives with a virgin eye."

While Italy has been an inspiration for Polidori, it is not an obsession. "Italy has had two important lives," he says, "the Roman period and the Renaissance, which is rare in world cultures. It has been at the top of its game twice. It's also great going there. But there are a lot of places I find interesting. I have an interest in the totality of human culture. I photograph all over the world."

Polidori's other artistic focus, which won him a Guggenheim Fellowship this year, is in some ways the complete opposite of his more famous images devoid of people. He has long documented "auto-constructed cities"—urban spaces built by their own inhabitants. They include the favelas of Rio de Janeiro; settlements in Mumbai; and areas in Amman, Jordan, inhabited by Palestinians expelled from Kuwait during the first Gulf War. (Polidori had hoped to start traveling the globe this summer to extend the project, although his plans are on hold as the Covid-19 crisis unfolds.) "In the U.S., slums take over abandoned neighborhoods," he says. "But in the so-called Third World, people from the hinterland—subsistence farmers—flock to cities as laborers. They squat and build shacks and settlements." To capture these, as many as 22 photographs are digitally "stitched" together to create enormous panoramas documenting a sense of organic order that to a casual eye might look like chaos.

Although people do appear in the sprawling new images, one of which extends 40 feet, like an enormous Chinese scroll, Polidori sees continuity with his work on empty rooms: "The interiors are metaphors for the states of being of one person or culture. My new work is about the external, nesting characteristics of a collectivity. Each house is next to another house, like books on a bookshelf. But each has its own little world inside." ●

EXTRA



**RITE OF PASSAGE**
A detail of a fresco from Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries. It may depict one of the "mystery cults" that survived in southern Italy from earlier Greek times.