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Pieranna Cavalchini, In the studio: Luisa Rabbia with Pieranna Cavalchini



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Luisa Rabbia working on the drawing *Under the Same Sky 2*, 2009. Courtesy the artist.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
 "Luisa Rabbia: Travels Under the Same Sky" in Turin at the Fondazione Merz, June 18-Sept. 20.

IN THE STUDIO LUISA RABBIA

WITH PIERANNA CAVALCHINI

WALKING INTO LUISA RABBIA'S SIMPLE STUDIO is like entering a white monastic cell, with a broad open window, gulls wheeling in the bright Brooklyn sky and the salty smell of seawater wafting in from afar. The indigo of Rabbia's porcelains and drawings, which line the walls and rest on the floor, is as distinctive in the searing natural light as it is in the darkness that surrounds the projection of her recent video, *Travels with Isabella*. Travel scrapbooks 1883-2008, which she completed during a 2007-08 residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. This is the blue of Munch's nocturnes and Picasso's early paintings of beggars and itinerant performers, the denim blue worn by factory workers, the commercial blue of ballpark pens, the blue of melancholy and abstract thought. It is also the blue of blood-rich veins, which in Rabbia's drawings become the forking roots and branching trees that signify life. Landscape functions for her as a metaphor for the human condition, for the human spirit. Rabbia works in solitude in this studio, tirelessly repeating precise graphic gestures as she maps the multiple connections among human beings through drawing, which is her principal medium, whether the "support" is paper, porcelain or digital video.

Rabbia has a nomadic soul, and divides both home and studio between her native Turin and New York. Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that as an artist-in-residence at the Gardner Museum she became interested in the 1883 journey through China of the collector-patron Isabella Stewart Gardner, specifically the journey's documentation in annotated travel scrapbooks filled with commercial studio photographs from the 1870s and '80s that Gardner gathered along the way. Working with these and her own photographs of Brooklyn and Boston, and adding a digital animation of proliferating blue root forms, Rabbia created *Travels with Isabella*. Travel scrapbooks 1883-2008—at 26½ minutes her most ambitious video to date. The piece debuted at the Gardner and will be featured in a major show of new work in Turin at the Fondazione Merz [June 18-Sept. 20]. A presentation of the video will follow in the fall at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice. Rabbia, who began exhibiting in the early 1990s, is represented in New York by Massimo Audiello and in Turin by Giorgio Persano. During my recent visit to the studio, where Rabbia is preparing the drawings and porcelain elements for Turin, we discussed her process, the symbolic nature of her work and the upcoming shows.

PIERANNA CAVALCHINI You grew up in a small country town on the outskirts of Turin, a city with a vibrant contemporary art scene. What made you come to New York?

LUISA RABBIA I love New York, have always loved it, and was interested in the cultural mix. Starting in 1991, I tried to come here every year for two weeks to see shows. So when the opportunity arose to be in a group exhibition in 2000, I jumped at it, and eventually decided to stay longer and then to immigrate.

PC You live part of the year in New York and part of the year in Italy. Do you travel with your studio on your back? How do you do it?

LR The main studio space is in my head, and I carry it with me in Italy or in New York. But the studio is also the place where I can sit, think and make my thoughts real. Every time I travel, I am inspired by the place I am going or by the act of traveling itself, but what really matters is the experience, not the studio I am working in. I had a studio at the Gardner

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Museum where I could think, I could draw. It doesn't really matter where I am. What matters is that the space has a good energy so I can focus.

PC Looking at the drawing on your studio wall, I see a beautiful blue shopping cart overflowing with blankets, bundles, roots and a sleeping human figure. It is called *Immigrant*. Is this a self-portrait?

LR I had not thought of this drawing as a self-portrait, even though I am an immigrant myself. But in the past couple of years I have been thinking about roots and the idea of carrying parts of yourself as you travel. I can say it especially started at the Gardner Museum with the video. Before, roots had just been another part of the drawings, of other objects, or other things. So this is not a self-portrait. It is my vision of other people traveling. Every time I go to Turin I see all the immigrants moving to Italy. The landscape, the culture is changing very much, and that has been inspir-

ing. It's one thing to be the immigrant yourself, and another to see others immigrating. I like to be able to experience something, but also to see things from the outside. It gives you two different points of view.

PC In the new work that you are preparing for the Fondazione Merz in Turin, you are using images from Romania, Turin and Morocco, which

you have juxtaposed in a panoramic view. These, too, embrace the idea of travel from different viewpoints. Here the viewer will travel between the city, the countryside and the desert.

LR True, but it is also about inner landscapes. I am always very interested in the psychological aspects of things, and I think of the landscapes as journeys into ourselves.

Above, *Immigrant*, 2009, white pencil and acrylic on paper, 45 inches square. Courtesy Fondazione Merz and Galleria Giorgio Persano, Turin.

Right, stills from *Travels with Isabella. Travel scrapbooks 1883-2008*, video, 26 1/2-minute loop. Source material courtesy Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Archives, Boston. Courtesy Galleria Giorgio Persano.



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"DRAWING IS FOR ME A WAY OF WRITING, RECORDING MOMENTS, THE PASSING OF TIME. . . . YOU CHANGE IDEAS SO MANY TIMES WHEN YOU ARE WORKING, AND I LIKE THAT I START FROM SOMETHING AND NEVER KNOW WHERE I AM GOING TO."

PC You are constantly challenging yourself to work in different mediums. Tell me more about that.

LR I am not sure if I use many different mediums.

PC You create sculpture, video, drawings.

LR Yes, but I draw on different surfaces—porcelain, paper, video. Drawing is the main thing. Drawing is for me a way of writing, recording moments, the passing of time. Porcelain for me has the qualities of paper, but it breaks and cracks naturally, and I like that the surface records on itself the passage of time. Of course video is another medium I use to tell a story. If I say I am a writer and somehow telling stories, then in video the stories are animated, brought to life.

PC Your work has many different narratives. Rational forces enter into dialogue with fantastical ones. So tell me about the source material of your narratives.

LR My surroundings, what I see, what I read. . . .

PC You deal with solitude, alienation and time.

LR Yes, this is what I see. I spend a lot of time just looking at people. I sit on the subway and look at people, trying to perceive what they are thinking, their feelings, the way they move their bodies. I am fascinated by human beings. And time, as you said, sure, time is an interesting element for me. It seems so vast, but it's made out of so many little moments. This is what I like about working with time, because at the end you can only think about the

final image, but if you look carefully, it is made of seconds and hours. A drawing itself is a record of the development of an idea. You change ideas so many times when you are working, and I like that I start from something and never know where I am going to.

PC With your drawing—especially the repetitive gesture—you seem to explore line itself, to be sensitive to changes in its rhythm, its feeling for the surface and for space, its life.

LR Yes, it is like breathing. One line follows the next and the next and the next. It keeps growing, and I never know the shape it will take until the very end.

PC So you do not know where your work is going. It changes. How do you deal with the angst of not knowing?

LR Well I try to see that as part of life, too. I hate those moments because I feel as if the ground under my feet is breaking, but at the same time I have to say that those moments are really, really important. For instance, only a week ago I felt terribly insecure and weak regarding the project, and I was tense. . . . at some point I felt I was doing something wrong. It was a weird feeling, because I am working on something that I feel passionate about. And then I understood that I needed to make a change, to shift to a different idea. I could not just stick to the project as I had conceived it at the beginning. It needed to grow, to develop into something else, and so it happened, and creativity started flowing again.

PC The video *Travels with Isabella*

took about a year to complete. What was it like to take that amount of time to finish a single work?

LR What is interesting about that particular work is that it became for me like writing my own diary. I had one year of my life recorded into her [Isabella Gardner's] scrapbook, because every day I chose an image, and it would depend on my mood, on something I had seen, something I had read, something that caught my attention and many other reasons. And so it became like a diary.

PC Has there been a change after a year spent working on *Travels with Isabella*? Has it influenced the new project for the Fondazione Merz?

LR The upcoming show will include *Travels with Isabella*. And the title of the show wants to embrace the earlier work and the new as well. The title is "Luisa Rabbia: Travels Under the Same Sky," because the panoramic work that includes pictures of Romania, Morocco and Turin is called *Under the Same Sky*.

In *Travels with Isabella*, for the first time I could see how my drawings could interact with images collected by someone else, and it was interesting for me to mix the two points of view because I could see a third reality. In the new work I am using images found online that have been made by someone else and mixing those images together to form a non-existent landscape. There is my vision of life expressed in my drawings, and the vision of landscape and life seen through the eyes of somebody else.



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PC Did the shift from drawing on a blank page to drawing on a photograph, as you are doing now, have something to do with the computer animation for *Travels with Isabella*?

LR Actually, the key is that I am no longer working by myself. I feel the presence of the other people. In fact, I write to them and ask their permission to use their online photographs in my work. I feel less alone in this work. I know there is another person, even if he or she has nothing to do with formulating the work itself. With a drawing it is more silent, because it represents a moment of greater solitude.

PC Incorporating images made by others, which began with *Travels with Isabella*, represents quite a big shift. And yet it feels so continuous with your previous work.

LR It is a big shift, that is true, but don't forget I used to merge photographs together in the same way in 1992. Those were details of female bodies, and they merged according to the chiaroscuro tones of the black-and-white photos. I used to juxtapose photographs exactly as I am doing now, with the images of the landscape. What is different now is the fact that the images are not mine, but come from the experiences of other people. I stare at the images a long time, and try to bring my own journey into their journey.

PC There is a strong sense of intimacy

in your art. How do you imagine the viewer will approach your work?

LR I expect the viewers will build their own story. Sometimes when working with the new images, especially after *Travels with Isabella*, I imagine myself to be a storyteller. Even when working with stills for the drawings, I imagine them moving. I could easily make a video out of it. There is somehow a story building up in my head, and it is my own story. But everyone has their own story, and I expect the viewers to relate to that.

PC Looking at the images you are preparing for the Merz Foundation, you appear to be making one gigantic panorama. How did you select these images? How do you choose to move from one landscape or cityscape to the next?

LR Who knows why you choose something and not something else? When I selected the images, I did not know that the photograph of the houses in Romania would merge with the photograph of Turin, and then on to the market in Morocco and the market in Turin. Every image chooses the preceding one because of the tone, the shape of the drawing and the shapes within the image.

PC Do you select individual images from the Web in relation to what you are building? For example, you've placed a photo of the Saharan desert next to the arcades that protect you from the rain as you stroll through Turin.

LR No, no, I select tons of images from the Web and put them in a folder. Then I just play with the computer and open some of them. Once I am interested in a specific one, I see how it can connect well with another one.

PC So it's almost like assembling a puzzle.

LR Yes, putting puzzle pieces together. Maybe they were once together! I am interested in finding connections between things that are far away from each other. Every day we see countries fighting, often over land and property. You cannot live in my country! You



Right, *The Following Day, No One Died*, 2009, white pencil, acrylic and inkjet prints on paper, 24 by 83 inches.

Below, *Under the Same Sky 1*, 2009, colored pencil, acrylic and inkjet prints on paper, 24 by 97 inches. Photos this spread courtesy Fondazione Merz and Galleria Persano.



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cannot cross the border! But in the end we are all under the same sky. If you look at things from far away, where does "Romania" start and where does it end?

PC Turin is a city of immigration.

LR Italy is not the same as it was when I moved to New York. Italy is a changing country, and every time I travel back I see it differently. There are so many different cultures mixing together now, which is something the United States and especially New York faced years and years ago.

In *Under the Same Sky* there are a few recurring themes, like that of the blanket, which were present in earlier works. Now the blankets become shaped like ropes and then turn into roots and grow into arteries or trees. I was especially interested in knots, in tying things together. Knotted fab-

rics are also roots. They warm those people up, but at the same time they strangle them or hold them stationary, which is exactly what roots do, what our origins do.

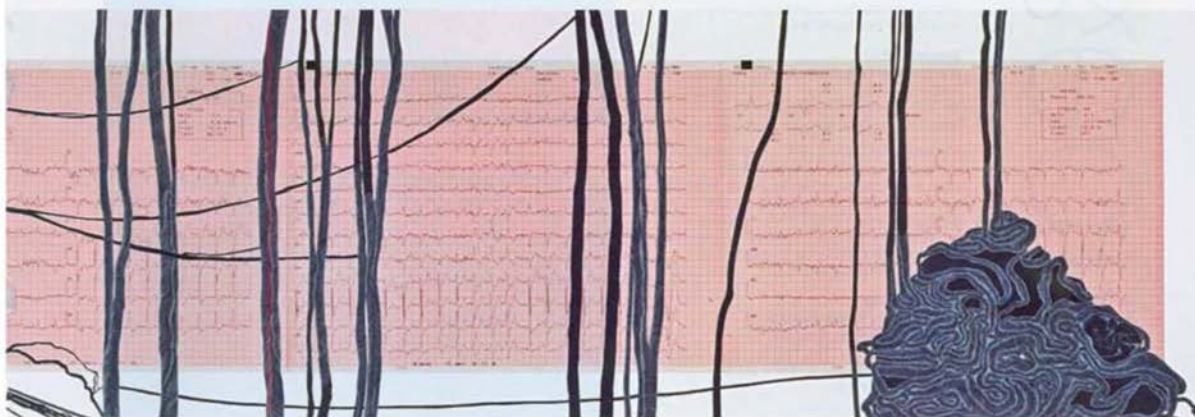
PC One of the challenges of showing work at the Merz Foundation is that often selected works by Mario Merz are placed in the same exhibition space. How do you feel about showing your work along with his?

LR I am very interested in that. I have to admit, I thought a lot about the work of Mario Merz in preparing this show. I had never realized before that my porcelain works with drawings of lines after lines could dialogue really very well with Merz's Fibonacci series. For me, the shape of each line is determined by the shape of the preceding line and determines the shape of the

what I think about my work." In the end, we all talk about life, death, time and our presence on Earth.

PC As you say that, I am thinking back to *Travels with Isabella*, to the final scene of the video, where the pulsating moon/heart disappears into eternity. And I look at the drawing called *The Following Day, No One Died* that is now on your studio wall and will be shown in Turin. It is a cardiogram, and it's as if the pulsating heart of one work has flowed into the new work.

LR Well, the cardiogram is a kind of drawing in itself. A drawing that is made not by a hand, obviously. It's made by a machine, but it is still the drawing of the heart, and if the heart could make a drawing, it would have made that specific drawing. The fact that the paper is gridded for a graph seems to further



following line. There is this progression of lines, thoughts and moments. Merz's Fibonacci numbers have a similar meaning, because each number is a result of the preceding numbers and determines the following one.

It is very interesting to build a dialogue between two different personalities, to see how artists develop similar ideas. In this case, Merz and I are coming from two different generations, yet we both talk about life, about time. So often I read the press releases for other artists' exhibitions, and I say, "Oh, this sentence matches

extend the drawing into infinity. Perhaps this is my impossible attempt to prolong that moment of May 16, 2007, the date of the cardiogram, when my late father was still well, to extend that moment into the present, that obsessive beat of line after line.

PC You also include a baby in the drawing. A sign of rebirth?

LR A baby is a cell of life, residing inside all the veins and arteries I have drawn. Perhaps death, like a video, is a threshold. Who knows if one is not reborn somewhere else?

PC Life is a loop?

LR Yes, maybe it is a loop. ☺

PIERANNA CAVALCHINI is the curator of contemporary art at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston.