

Conversation with Elisabetta Zangrandi and Alison M. Gingeras

Alison M. Gingeras is a curator and writer
based in New York and Warsaw

Alison Gingeras: How did you began to make art? Did you receive formal training? Did you make art as a child? Or did you start later in life?

Elisabetta Zangrandi: I live in the province of Verona, in Northern Italy. The country is Cerro Veronese, small and in the mountains, in a district of 6 houses, near the meadows, and I can go into the woods in a few minutes on foot.

I grew up in the outskirts of Verona (I was born in 1960, I am 60 years old). As a child I spent all the summers in the countryside with my maternal grandparents. They were farmers. There was the stable with the cows and the bulls, the hens, the hunting dogs. My grandfather had studied with the priests and told me so many things.

As a child my dad took me to the natural science museum in Verona. As a girl I went to Florence, Vinci, San Geminiano, Venice, Rome, Mantua, Gubbio, Cascia, Recanati, London. I visited museums and churches, botanical gardens, gardens. I know all the churches in Verona, every Saturday I went for a walk around the city. I saw all the operas in the Arena during the opera season.

I have drawn since childhood, very realistic flowers. A few years ago, I took a box of watercolors and painted stones that I collected on the paths. Structures such as cathedrals, churches, I could see the design already present on the stone, dug by the rain. One day I tried to paint on a wooden panel, but I didn't like it with watercolor because the color was too diluted. So I went to town and got some acrylic paints. In 2017, towards the end of the year, the first paintings I did all on wooden panels, given by a carpenter. I started painting on canvas in 2018, after the Outsider show in Manhattan.

AG: Why did you think to paint on stones? That is such a curious idea, also so uninhibited and playful. Can you tell me more about those pieces?

EZ: While I was walking in the mountains, there are many limestone

stones, called scojo here, some had a strong call, for their particular shape, decoration, motif and cavities that have been created with the passage of time and seasons in the tiniest details so I couldn't help but pick them up. I am fascinated by the atmospheric events that shaped them, over the millennia snow, wind, rain and ice have created ripples and waves on these hard Karst rocks with a determination that I greatly admire.

One day I saw all these stones that I brought home and at the supermarket I took a small box of watercolors. I put the color where the drawing was already clearly visible, I then become an interpreter of what is already there, what Nature provides.

In the evening, after dinner, while my husband watched TV, I painted my rocks in the kitchen.

I've got fruits boxes full of them. I kept bringing home rocks and I still do, it's stronger than me. You find this thing curious, but if you think about, it's not expensive and very fulfilling. Sometimes I find them and sometimes they find me. Images dances on these rocks and my joy is to consolidate them in color, the first with aquarelle, usually Acrylic and only very rarely sculpt something using simple tools.

AG: I have been thinking a lot about the imagery you began to make during the pandemic, particularly the Madonna and Child motif that you have revisited repeatedly. Are you a mother? I find it very telling that you would explore this timeworn theme—both as an Italian woman and considering the maternal desires and trope that this prolonged period of anxiety has generated in our collective imaginary.

EZ: I am not a mother, I would have liked to have children, but I have never been so attracted to sex if there was no sentimental involvement... I got married 2 years ago, my husband Piero is the son I never had. He has a central nervous system disease, he doesn't walk. He is very intelligent, and he has brought stability to my life. I have to have schedules to eat, for example, I would be unregulated and would eat occasionally, when I paint he calls me to inform me that it is time for lunch or dinner. I put the brushes in the water and go down to the kitchen.

I started painting a Madonna last summer after seeing a post on Instagram, it was a capital with Pietà, in Sicily, the photo struck me deeply, there was the Madonna pierced by a sword in the chest, with a dramatic expression, I have never seen such a tragic representation, I think typical of the South. I wanted to paint that capital immediately, I had no painting canvas in the house and no

wooden panel. I cut a card stock, but it wasn't that stiff, so I thought I'd cover it with a piece of old fabric I saw in a drawer. I glued it with acrylic plaster. I started painting that the plaster was still damp. I liked the rough effect, different from the canvas, even if I applied the color several times, but always while the plaster was wet. A kind of fresco on fabric. Then I made others on fabric glued by me on wood and sewn, because I like the roughness it conveys.

AG: It is interesting to me that as you progress in this series, there is an ambiguity between the archetype of the Pietà image and the Madonna Child scene. Jesus' body in some of your paintings becomes child-like even if you depict him as an adult man, on the verge of death. It also reminds me of the "homunculi" of Medieval miniatures....

EZ: Sometimes the body of Jesus comes small to me, in a capital there are 3 Madonna, a very young woman looking up and an old woman, she too looks, and Jesus is still a child. But always human. It is a reflection on a doomed fate. I did not know "homunculus." I looked on the Internet, I'm telling the truth.

AG: Can you tell me about the fantastical architecture in your paintings? They evoke numerous styles from Romanesque to Byzantium?

EZ: The chapels I paint are the fruit of my imagination, or memories of some church bell tower. As long as I paint, I think, and many things come out. Nearby there is a Romanesque church from 1100, in Verona there is the Church of San Fermo, in Gothic style. I think I mix many styles.

AG: Tell me about the other figures in the paintings—are they often Biblical or more fantastical in reference? The nude females could be Eve? The animals

EZ: The figures, they are real animals, fantastic, or half animal people, I read the apocalypse and some figures come out almost by themselves, even the Devil, there is a fresco in the church of Santa Anastasia di Pisanello that I often remember. I have a photographic memory and I remember everything from childhood.

The female nudes, as a structure, could be me young, or my mother, or some maternal aunt. The most important female figures are the Madonna, Santa Chiara, my mother and her 4 sisters, all beautiful.

I had a Father Confessor who I was very fond of. And an Exorcist from the Episcopal Curia of Verona, I often went to see him in the Cathedral, he received me in a confessional entirely carved out of wood, before I left he blessed me in Latin, he called all the Angels to protect me, for 15 minutes,

and he put the soul, completely absorbed in its ministry, chased away the Evil One, and got angry!!

AG: Aside from the Catholic culture that you grew up with in Italy, is there a larger spiritual aspect to your work? There seems to be metaphysical tropes that recur in your imagery.

EZ: Alison, when I paint, I don't make metaphysical reflections. They just happen!

The fantastic places and characters that inhabit in my paintings often reveal themselves to me before being painted, almost suspended in their own magic. At other times, I relieve memories and translate them onto canvas or other supports. Recurring elements as my princesses, imaginary creatures, the rolling countryside, tall grass, and leaves are a crystallized part of my childhood memories, as well as everything else that enters in my world today and acquires meaning, soul and memory.

As I paint my thoughts roll and unfold, placing themselves in their own particular order. I find a spot for everything, and I am truly satisfied only when everything in a work returns the magic, I tried to instill in it.

AG: From many of your answers, it seems like so much of your work is autobiographical in nature. Yet your work also transcends those references, emanating a timeless quality. These scenes—whether human, animal, landscape—could almost come from any historical epoch.

EZ: In my paintings the state of being fluctuates in what I see as a constant present.

Memories unfold similarly, that's to say in the precise moment in which I live them and as they reveal themselves onto the canvas. Time is there, suspended, vivid and complex as it were still happening. That's when what I call my "intelligent oddities" emerge. They are the "memories" of events that have occurred or perhaps not, not yet, or have not yet manifested themselves. They give shape, color, shadows and backlighting to my characters, statues, and creatures, as well as to the atmospheres of deeply beloved places, such as the Cathedral of Verona.