



Return to Italy. Interview with Luisa Rabbia

By Domenico Russo - October 23, 2017

Luisa Rabbia is available for a chat during a preview on the occasion of her return to the *Belpaese*. She is the author of the exhibition *Love* at the Collezione Maramotti in Reggio Emilia. Which celebrates ten years of its exhibition activity.

How did the splitting of *Love* from the *Love-Birth-Death* project come about?

Looking into my works collected by [Maramotti](#) over the years I realize that they have preferred pieces that marked a turning point in my practice: for example, in this exhibition we see my first work on canvas, my first mural and *Love*, which is the first piece of a trilogy on which I worked in the last year. It is an ambitious project, each canvas measures 274 × 513 cm and is made of colored pencils on acrylic on canvas.

How did you conceive this exhibition?

Acquisitions have taken place over the years and naturally we had no way of knowing that we would arrive at this point. When the possibility to exhibit all the works together was raised, we realized that we had the opportunity to show what happened in my research between my solo-show at the Fondazione Merz in Turin in 2009 and today. This small retrospective is comprised of highlights from my work that the Collezione Maramotti has sensibly captured, and gives the opportunity to show how my work has developed since I moved to the United States in 2000.



Luisa Rabbia. Photo Dario Lasagni, 2017

There are works in the show from 2009 to 2017. What happened in these years?

If we look at the first work from 2009 we see that it is still figurative and the subjects are sleeping migrants. Sleep, as a moment of evasion from the surrounding, rather than as a space for dreams, has been central in my research for many years from 1997 to 2010, above all through the representation of homeless people isolated from the world around them. Since 2011, the skin of my portraits have begun to extend and merge into the environment, its veins marking paths within landscapes that sometimes conjure internal maps or infinite geographies. In these works, faces have been replaced by fingerprints which capture the uniqueness of the individual without revealing sexual gender or ethnicity.

What are the figures that inhabit the current imaginary?

In this moment I am interested in tracing connections between a journey within the body, and therefore the personal experience, and the outward and therefore collective landscape.

Fingerprints and pencil marks, intertwined in a complex arterial structure of membranes and tissues under the skin, remind of an acute perception of one's own body. Such a feeling can be raised in a larger apparatus of natural origin that includes everyone. In this long journey, which you have undertaken within the individual, what are you looking for and what interests you in particular?

I am interested in the encounter with the other, the empathy and the implicit journey to bridge distances, through a language that considers separation as much as fusion, and that belongs to the individual as much as to the collective. The other, in my work, is both human being and natural environment. The journey starts under the skin but extends to distant lands.



Luisa Rabbia, I Want To Be There, Too, 2015 (detail). Courtesy and © Luisa Rabbia. Photo Dario Lasagni

The theme of migration is present in your work not from a political point of view, but more from a socially and psychologically one. How did you come to work on this topic?

In the show there are several paintings that reflect on migration, on carrying our own personal and cultural experience that inevitably will blend with what is not yet known and awaits us on the other side. I'm

interested in dealing with contemporary themes that have distant roots in human history, reflect on stories that repeat themselves and on which each of us could be the protagonist. I prefer universal subjects so that the work changes and lives under the eyes of the experience of the observer.

This topic is related to your experience: you left and you faced the stages of an integration.

Of course, my experience helped me to develop a sensitivity and a language, but as you can see, I never talk about my personal story. The themes I face belong to humanity and its relationships, to the passage of time and to the accumulation of traces ... Like those of the fingerprints and pencils on the surface of my canvases.

***Another Country* is the mural you are working on in the Collezione Maramotti. This is the first time you have done a site-specific work on a wall. Can you tell me more about it?**

Another Country is the title of a book by James Baldwin that I believe refers to the desire to live in a utopian place where sexual and ethnic differences could be redefined or perhaps not defined at all. *Another Country* also refers to the change of our inner map after a long journey. But *Another Country* could also be those around us.

- *Domenico Russo*