

HYPERALLERGIC

Luisa Rabbia's Tiny Marks and Big Mysteries

With her series *Love-Birth-Death*, Rabbia addresses some of humanity's most enduring, universal enigmas.

February 17, 2018

By Edward M. Gómez



Luisa Rabbia, "Birth" (2017), colored pencil, acrylic, and fingerprints on canvas, 108 x 202 inches, photo by Dario Lasagni (courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery)

In these times of stridency and shrillness, how are works of art that speak with the softness of rustling chiffon in an overheated parlor ever to be heard amid a din of protest, propaganda, real news, fake news, politics-as-spectacle, or the staged, self-serving confessionals-as-entertainment that have become a mainstay of the media's mind-numbing echo chamber?

At its best, some art can — or should — provide both a potent response and a soothing antidote to the noise, offering the refuge — and sanity — of its

inherent truths while reaffirming what is most abiding, essential, soulful, or noble about the members of our big, bungling, forever searching human family (or one might just settle for something nurturing or common-sensical).

Now, with *Love-Birth-Death*, a distinctive — and, for any contemporary art-maker, unusually magisterial — series of large-scale paintings, the Italian-born, Brooklyn-based artist Luisa Rabbia has addressed some of this or any era's biggest themes, humanity's most enduring, universal mysteries. To take on the task of representing our sense of wonder in the face of them is to try to give tangible form to the ineffable.



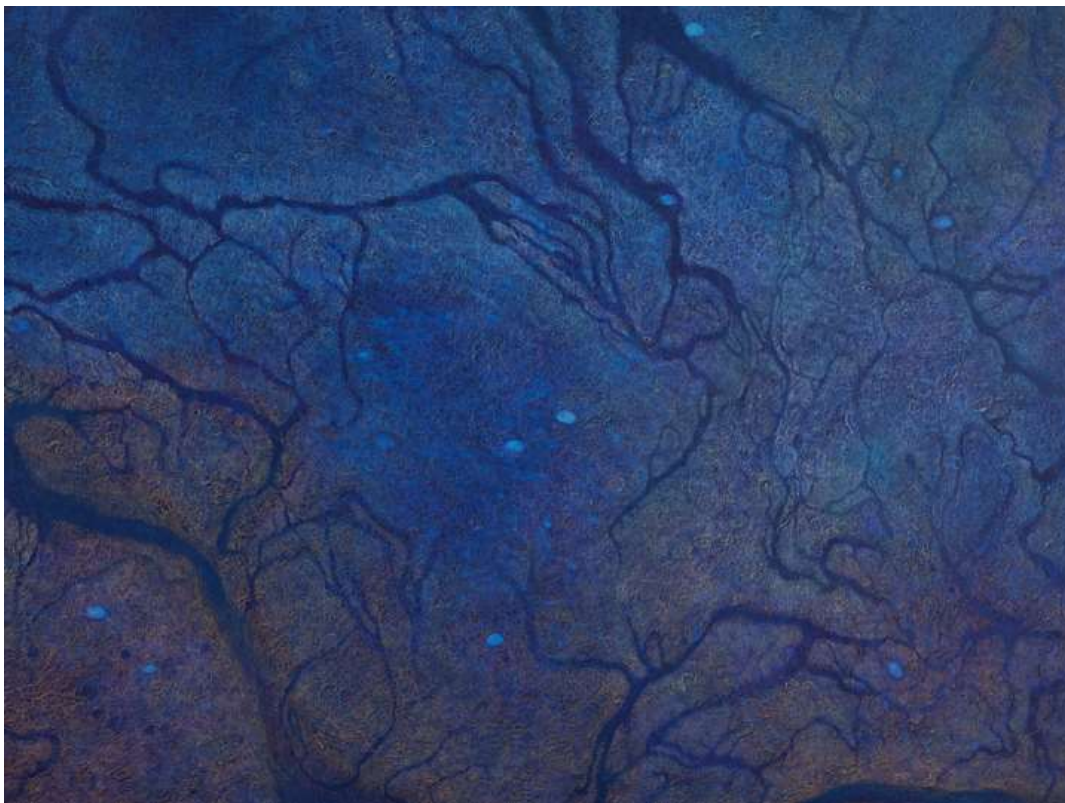
Luisa Rabbia, "Death" (2017), colored pencil, acrylic, and fingerprints on canvas, 108 x 202 inches, photo by Dario Lasagni (courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery)

Two of these big works, "Death" (2017) and "Birth" (2017), along with a few smaller, newer pieces, are now on view, through April 7, in *Luisa Rabbia: Death & Birth*, the artist's latest solo exhibition at Peter Blum Gallery (at its new location on Grand Street, in downtown Manhattan). However, to see "Love" (2016), the third work in Rabbia's trilogy, will require a trip to the Collezione Maramotti in Reggio Emilia, a city in northern Italy that lies between Parma and Bologna, where it is on display through March 25 in *Luisa*

Rabbia: Love. That concurrent show includes its title painting and other Rabbia works that have been acquired over the years by the Collezione Maramotti, an open-to-the-public, contemporary-art collection funded by the corporate parent of the MaxMara fashion brand.

“In making these works, I’ve felt as though I’ve been in a dialog — between myself and the surface,” Rabbia told me during a visit to her Brooklyn studio last year, as she was putting the finishing touches on “Love” before shipping it off to Italy. She was referring to her handling of her materials — gessoing and sanding a canvas before beginning to make any marks on it, including, notably, her own fingerprints. Her “Love-Birth-Death” paintings were all made with acrylic paint, colored pencil, and expansive agglomerations of fingerprints on canvas; each work is nine feet high and more than 16 feet wide, and each one’s pictorial space is saturated with an underlying, luminous-electric deep blue.

That powerful color shoots through each semi-abstract image to imbue it with considerable visual heft. Optically playing against that pulsating hue, Rabbia’s colored-pencil flicks and ticks, accompanied by her minuscule circular or linear strokes, swell into eddies of energized color that animate each surface as a whole. Words like “meticulous” and “painstaking” were invented to describe ambitious, skillful art-making like this; Rabbia is modest in describing her technique, noting that, to her touch, the texture of her dried-paint fingertip impressions reminds her “of fossils,” adding, “When I draw on top of them, they come alive.”



Luisa Rabbia, "Birth" (2017): detail, colored pencil, acrylic, and fingerprints on canvas, 108 x 202 inches, photo by Dario Lasagni (courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery)

Rabbia was born in 1970 near Turin, an important commercial and cultural center in northern Italy, and earned her degrees from its leading art schools. Since 2000, she has lived and worked in the United States. During her early years in New York, she recalled, she worked as a waitress in the East Village: "At that time, between taking orders, I was drawing human figures with ballpoint pens on paper napkins. I liked the way the blue ballpoint-pen ink set the mood, and the way the pens were sensitive to pressure. I thought they provided a great way to capture the feelings of my subjects." Some of her early works were abstract. Their inky-blue forms resembled far-away constellations or bright moons seen against the gaseous firmaments of patchy-blue night skies.

Eventually, Rabbia switched to colored pencils. ("Ballpoint-pen ink fades over time," she explained.) However, the lessons she learned from handling simple pens informed some of her later experiments, including her signature method of drawing with white colored pencil on top of dark-blue acrylic paint she had

first applied to support surfaces in broad swaths or contoured shapes. She portrayed cloth-swaddled human bodies, dream-world topographic textures, and a spindly tree whose leafless branches and runaway root system entwine in an orgy of fecund growth.

She also made sculptural mixed-media works, often using *papier mâché*, onto whose blue-painted surfaces she would draw faces. For example, in “Crowd” (2011), two gatherings of tall, totem-like figures wrapped in used-clothing scraps seem to be gazing simultaneously beyond the viewer and deep into themselves, with expressions that appear more vacant than forlorn. Such works, Rabbia has noted, were inspired by her interest in the plight of migratory people.

That sense of empathy is one of her art’s abiding, motivating impulses; it is a humanistic starting point from which much of it seems to flow — a spirit that both emanates from and envelops the paintings of *Love-Birth-Death*. Rabbia told me, “I am particularly interested in themes that relate to everyone, that are all-inclusive and belong to human history.” Among them, she observed, are “the beginning and ending of life, the connection between lives, and the connection between past, present, and future.” For Rabbia, symbolically, and maybe even literally, the “cyclic process” to which the titles and subjects of her three big paintings refer “starts and ends in a universe of fingerprints.”



Luisa Rabbia at work on "Birth" in her studio in Brooklyn, 2016 (photo by David Dixon)

In "Birth" and "Death," she explained, "the countless number of fingerprints that cover the surfaces of both paintings represent layers of marks left by humanity." "Birth," depicts "a woman's womb, where, potentially, life can begin." Here, a mother's womb becomes "the universe," and "the center of her belly button is a fingerprint that looks like both a cosmic Big Bang and the eye of a developing fetus." In "Death," two human forms, at the top and the bottom of the horizontal painting, seem to lie flat while hovering on parallel planes, one above the other. About them, Rabbia said, "It is difficult to discern whether they are separating, floating, or falling."

This kind of ambiguity is as much the stuff of these peculiar, haunting images as their inundations of fingerprints and wispy pencil marks. In "Birth," that one fingerprint to which Rabbia referred is a tiny dot of bright, white paint that, for all its smallness, anchors an entire cosmos. It is nestled in a womb-chamber filled with currents of blue that branch deeply into the enclosed space. That white speck and the immense, veiny network of energy streams surrounding it offer a vision of the immanent — a new life — and the humbling reminder that

the fullness, complexity, and unpredictable trajectory of any living thing begin with a mere cluster of cells.

The larger-than-life-size cadaver that lies flat on its back at the top of the canvas in “Death” is a mummy-like form quietly humming from the charge of a still-active spirit-energy system, whose veiny tributaries form a cascade of watery tendrils. Their jelly-fish transparency is punctuated with bright-orange fingerprints that stand out like flower petals caught in the current of a slow-moving stream.



Luisa Rabbia, “Lingam Yoni (1)” (2017), acrylic and colored pencil on paper, mounted on canvas, 74 x 48 inches, photo by Dario Lasagni (courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery)

Similarly, three smaller paintings in the Peter Blum show, all of which share the title “Lingam Yoni” (all were made with acrylic and colored pencil on canvas in 2017) are also meticulously crafted. Depicting stelae-like forms, each of which bears a discernible belly button, these images echo the life-cycle

theme of their larger mates. Each one alludes to a *lingam* and to a *yoni*, which are, respectively, in Hindu art, stylized representations of the omnipotent, masculine deity Shiva and of Shakti, a goddess embodying divine feminine creative power.

Symbolically, some forms of a *lingam* and a *yoni* may refer erotically to male and female sex organs. Recognizing such references, Rabbia said of these paintings, “I see them as portraits in which the masculine and the feminine merge.” Each one’s belly button, she said, might be that “of a mother or perhaps of a newborn, defining the space of a womb.” The arch-shaped tops of her painted forms, she explained, “define the shape of each *lingam-yoni*,” noting that they represent a human scale, “inviting an entrance or an exit, and again referencing birth and death.”

In their forays into the mystic, Rabbia’s paintings share something with works as diverse as those of William Blake (1757-1927), the French Symbolist Odilon Redon (1840-1916), and even Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918) — not so much for that definitive Swiss Symbolist’s more didactic images, but rather for some of his on-the-border-of-abstraction, late-career landscapes, in which vistas of lakes and mountains become strips of reverberating, highly charged color.

As for other modernists and contemporaries, Rabbia’s works find kindred spirits among some of the drawings of Louise Bourgeois and Kiki Smith. Curiously, in ways both thematic and technical, they also relate to those of the self-taught artists Hiroyuki Doi and Mehrdad Rashidi. Doi, who is Japanese, creates voluminous abstract compositions with multitudes of tiny circles, each of which, he says, represents a single human soul. The Iranian-born Rashidi, who lives in Germany, uses ballpoint pens on found scraps of paper to draw clusters of human faces and bodies that emerge organically out of each other.



Luisa Rabbia, "Love" (2016), colored pencil, acrylic, and fingerprints on canvas, 108 x 202 inches, Collezione Maramotti;
photo by Dario Lasagni (courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery)

Speaking of her relationship with her pictures during the course of creating them, slowly, over extended periods of time, Rabbia remarked, "A vision can find its way out when you work in solitude." So, too, may the messages and meanings of her paintings, works that are seemingly designed for contemplation, gradually emerge for those who take the time to dive into these pictures' reservoirs of psychic energy, penetrating their pregnant, primordial hush.

Rabbia's art is one of subtlety and resonance, her subjects as fleeting as they are timeless. If her raw materials appear to be paint and color, don't be fooled: they are actually the enduring, eternal mysteries that are the companions of any human soul.

Luisa Rabbia: Death & Birth at *continues at Peter Blum Gallery (176 Grand Street, Little Italy, Manhattan) through April 7*. Luisa Rabbia: Love runs through March 25 at the Collezione Maramotti in Reggio Emilia, Italy (*appointments available online*).