

INTERVIEW: ELISABETTA ZANGRANDI

James Barron: When did you first want to be an artist?

Elisabetta Zangrandi: I have always painted, since I was young, on any material, rocks, bottles, pumpkins, wooden crates. Last year I started painting my garden, outdoors. I felt the need to paint every day. I felt good, I could express myself through painting. My work is instinctive. I never make preliminary drawings or sketches. I begin making splotches of color and see what happens. I say, 'Maybe I'll put a tiger here!'

JB: Landscape in your work appears quite flattened. Can you describe the view from your home and study, and is there a similar flattening of depth and space?

EZ: The landscape near my house is deep and multi-level, typical of the mountains. I think it's a feature of my style to be flat. I believe in human faces.

JB: The image of the princess is dominant in your work. Can you tell us where this image comes from?

EZ: Princesses have been part of my imagination since I was a child; at Carnival, for example, I wanted to dress up as a princess, but I was never able to. However I always made up for it with something found at home and in my imagination.

JB: Sometimes in your figurative paintings, there seems to be a waft, almost like the image appears above a flame. What are your thoughts about that?

EZ: The wave of fire, when it arrives, is a disturbance whose impact is like a shock wave. Like the liberation of the soul. When the fire arrives the princess wants to dance, naked, without any imposition, free and light.

JB: Are there any artists you think of in particular? Do you see a relationship between their work and yours?

EZ: When I was young (13 years old) I saw an exhibition with Ligabue's paintings. He fascinated me with bright colors, nature, self-portraits, animals. Two years ago I was in Amsterdam and Vincent Van Gogh made my head spin. I went out on the fire escape because I had to cry, there was so much emotion. I love the Impressionists, but all painting fascinates me.

JB: I once saw a picture of Leonardo in your study. Do you think about Renaissance artists often?

EZ: I have a book on Leonardo, I like to look at his paintings, the shading (which I can't do) the colors, the facial expressions, the postures of the bodies. Michelangelo, too, his masterpieces. Yes, they are often in the back of my mind. In my city there are also many works that move me, the frescoes of Pisanello, and many other masterpieces. The city itself is a masterpiece.

JB: You usually paint on wood board. Why?

EZ: I paint on wood boards because the carpenter of Corbiolo (a small village nearby) gives them to me. He is very kind and has a nice workshop, I like going to see him and having a chat.

JB: You often paint rocks in your work. Where do you find the rocks? Please tell us about your process.

EZ: I see them while walking in the mountains, some are dug out by water and wind. I feel the need to collect them, because I already see the designs they conceal.

Sometimes I don't want to take them home and I say, "Not this time!" But then I put them in my pocket or my backpack.

JB: You've said how you would like to save our planet. Please tell me a little bit about your relationship with the Earth.

EZ: I grew up in the city, but I spent all my summers in the countryside at my maternal grandparents'. I learned about the colors of the earth, the scents, the sound of feet on the grass or on the dry leaves, the smell of fresh milk. The morning light with the dust that looked like gold, the warm smell of a freshly-picked egg. I have an intimate relationship with the earth, with water, with plants. A lady saw me walking in a wood (I don't follow the path but go where I want) and told me that I looked like a creature half-human and half-sprite. I would like all this bounty to be protected and not defaced. It's our home.

JB: As an artist, how have you put your work out into the world?

EZ: In Italy, nobody gives you a chance to prove yourself as an artist. I took some paintings to a gallery here in Verona. As soon as I opened my mouth and they heard that I was from Verona, they decided I wasn't worth their time. They didn't even let me take my work out. They don't work with local artists.

One day, I joined Instagram. I sent my work to [the art critic] Jerry Saltz. The next day he responded with the word "like" spelled out L-I-K-E. Then he followed me! I felt encouraged, and channelled that into my work. I still can't believe it. All my followers are from other countries. They're real people; I didn't purchase them! Without Instagram I'd probably be unknown.

James D. Barron
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