

INTERVIEW: VERA GIRIVI

James Barron: I love how some of your recent paintings seem to be inspired by Caravaggio. Can you speak to that?

Vera Girivi: To be inspired by Caravaggio or to emulate his works would be an outrage to beauty. I wanted only to color his visions, in which crude truth and divinity reflect his time.

JB: I also think of Alice Neel in relation to some of your recent paintings. What do you think of her work?

VG: Alice Neel greatly influences my work. Before starting a painting, I love to look at various artists to give me courage and the impetus to paint. I'm also curious about their lives.

JB: Is there a reason that mosaics and tiles recur throughout your work?

VG: Mosaics are an obsessive form that I use to fill spaces. Even in my house, the furniture almost prevents me from walking. I don't like sterile environments. They worry me – I have to feel somehow protected, as if I'm in a nest.

JB: In some of the paintings, the figure has become smaller and is placed in an angular room. What brought about this new development?

VG: A corner represents more protection, and the very small figure is safe.

JB: You've sometimes described a painting to me in the days before you painted it, and then when I see the painting, it's nearly exactly what you had spoken to me about. Is there some time of the day or a place where these images come to you before you paint them? How often are you actually just moving paint around on canvas as the image comes to you?

VG: It rarely happens that I imagine a theme and then paint it later. I don't like planning too much. Life surprises you every day, and if you want to make it go one way, the opposite occurs. It's true that I have sometimes planned my paintings in advance, but the gross errors that came out of those works worry me now when I look at them again. Working and expressing myself instinctively is the best thing for me.

JB: There seems to be a wider range of emotions portrayed in these new paintings, from laughter to loneliness to even anxiety or despair. It's obviously a difficult moment in our world. Could you please talk about that?

VG: Emotion is chemical, whether you're in love or in pain. There are people who have explosions of emotions, who are so sensitive that they feel their heartbeats in their throats. This is painful but necessary. Other people might produce little chemistry, and their bodies remain cold and not throbbing – therefore unable to feel life. Our world is experiencing a horrible tragedy, probably because many people's bodies don't pulse with emotions and life.

JB: How have your paintings changed as you have begun working on larger canvases? It seems like the subjects have more complex stories, and the interiors have become more complex too.

VG: When I need to express symbols and actions, the space must be large, but sometimes once the work has begun, I regret having chosen a large canvas. I feel insecure. I always want to occupy all the space on my canvas, and this is very demanding. I never like to leave a painting halfway finished. My spaces and my floors that twist and turn are always in motion, even if the women are still. These spaces have a beating heart and a mind that works and thinks.

James D. Barron
April 2022