

“There are many worlds that belong to me” Kikki Ghezzi

In Kikki Ghezzi’s artistic practice, painting, sculpture, drawing, installation, writing, printmaking, artist’s books, embroidery and textiles, traditions flow effortlessly. Different media and tools nurture each other along with a diaristic element suffused with a visionary quality and a total dedication to art, supervised by a constant introspection. There is her urgency to tackle a virgin canvas, her non-attachment when confronting a sheet of paper, and the powerful tool of the container. There is her deep immersion in an abstract, sacred space, and her study of Gaelic, under the guidance of expert linguists. In the constant wandering between a conception of art and life as a vigilant presence and corporeal materiality, to one of a metaphorical and spiritual dimension, we find not only the elusive archetype of the *coniunctio oppositorum*, but also the perennial dialectic of the great passive dualism in the history of Western thought. Kikki’s life unfolded in distant places: Italy, New York City, Kenya; and then more recently Cornwall, Scotland and especially Ireland: all places linked in various ways to the Celtic culture. The constant motifs in her work are home, identity, rebirth, dreams, memory, and above all nature, fueled by a kaleidoscopic set of potential linguistic references and the cyclical return to currents of symbolism, surrealism and Land Art. From the start of her creative process, Kikki’s focus on painting was accompanied by a performative aspect that gave absolute importance to gesture and the body. These explorations were soon followed by experiments in the refined delicacy of textile books and the implement of the briefcase. Vital nourishment for these practices and their evocative impetuses was on the one hand the result of a clash of emotions, and on the other, a persistent journey of self-analysis, with the aim of bonding with Self. During this search for a delicate spiritual, mental, emotional and physical balance, writing emerged. “Write on my work to know my Truth” a phrase repeated for years like a mantra, became the keystone of Kikki’s *My Cosmic Clock* project (2011- ongoing). Furthermore, the daily need to explore the power of color through various media produced a series of diaries that are now the subject of a retrospective investigation: a process that asks one to patiently record and interpret these materials, and to synthesize the personal record of time. Kikki’s artistic sensitivity is shaped by both European and African experiences and traditions. Her artistic education, as well as part of her prior law training, took place in institutions in the United States, the most important of these being the Art Students League, the New York Studio School, and Pratt Institute. For Kikki, plastic arts preceded painting, and thus it comes as no surprise that her most revered artists at that time included Matisse, whose latent sculptural activity was the focus of recent studies, and Cézanne, an indefatigable creator of volumes. Ghezzi’s early effort to model clay through the impressions of her hands quickly seeped into drawings, as though a kind of transcription had taken place. Soon afterwards, an attention to color emerged, with one eye on the impetuous brushstrokes of De Kooning and Joan Mitchell—reviving Monet’s gestural style—and the other, which for some time had been focused on Turner’s sublime work, carefully studying Milton Avery’s investigations into color relationships.

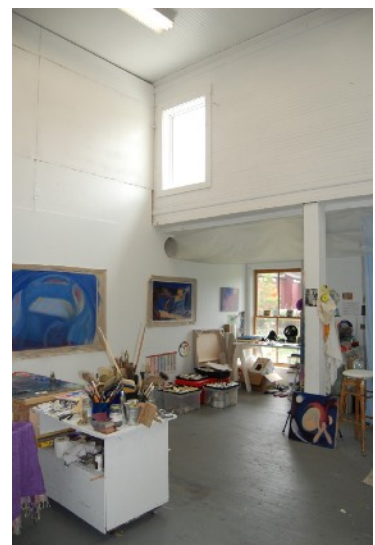
It was at this point that the generous teachings of artists such as Lar-



New York City, 1982



New York City, 2011



Vermont, 2012

ry Poons, Emily Mason, Albert Kresch led Kikki along a new artistic path. A fellowship to the Vermont Studio Center (2011/2012) allowed Ghezzi to work obsessively on dream-based autobiographical and psychological motifs, as well as to nurture her passion for the world of astrology. A magical world, perhaps comparable to the British surrealist Leonora Carrington, the paintings created in Vermont contain in their arcane themes and in their soft, tenuous brushstrokes, the seeds of interests and expressive modes that Kikki would develop later on. To express this inviolable game between dream, emotions and feelings on the one hand, and reality on the other, Kikki coined a well-chosen expression: “An alternate dream reality.”

The desire to engage with her emotions prompted Kikki to reflect on the nature of trees, and their tenacious roots sunk in the bowels of the earth. “I am a tree, whose strong roots reach deep into Mother Earth. When I look outside of myself for stability and safety I will not find them. I have to be my own tree to withstand heavy winds.” Such reflections were at the center of her work when she was a resident at the Tyrone Guthrie Center in Ireland (2014). This was Kikki’s first encounter with a country that would enchant her for years to come, and which gave her an opportunity to declare her love for trees. In fact, the tree motif took center-stage in a series of quadrangular works in green, blue, red, and yellow hues, in which broad, impetuous brushstrokes and an incisive vision prevail over a Mondrian-like analytical arrangement of stems, branches and vegetation. As in future residencies, Kikki established an empathic relationship both with the place and the studio assigned to her, transforming every stimulus into color, her studio becoming a sort of imaginary forest in which the trees multiplied as she painted them. During Kikki’s solo exhibition *Radici/Roots* (Bormio, 2014), painted roots and real roots were accompanied by a book full of critical and emotional testimonials. Paintings and drawings engaged in a loving dialogue with nature and testified her urgent desire to reconsider her biographical roots. Strong blues and purples contrasted with delicate pinks and Morandi-esque reds, running parallel to the metamorphic and metaphorical game, in which the root became an unrecognizable object with anthropomorphic, and at times fantastical, features. The following year the show *Sich einwurzeln/Radicarsi/Grounding* (2015), held at Projectspace 70 in Glurns, evoked the act of *enracinement*, of being rooted, which Simone Weil identified as one of the deepest needs of the human soul. Compared to the ancient mill in Bormio, Glurns provided a neutral context for the first appearances of *Femme Valise*, the equivalence between woman and house-suitcase, while also continuing the dialogue between the painted roots hanging on the walls and the real ones. In their recondite complicity with forms and the forces of nature, the roots personified the infinite metamorphoses of the female body. The vibrations that spread in the space – from paper to fabric to container – echo the concentric arrangement of the words on a number of printed texts enclosed in the suitcase; texts which in turn made visible the connection with Other. Apropos of this, Kikki mentioned throwing a stone into water: a natural gesture, but also one full of conceptual valence. This contrast between organic matter and abstraction, external and internal, dream and reality, distantly evokes the atmospheres of Georgia O’Keeffe and Louise Bourgeois. The contingent, ephemeral essence of *Femme Valise* and its mutation in the natural environment were heightened a few weeks later by its installa-



Vermont, 2012, with Emily Mason



Tyrone Guthrie Centre, 2014



Glorenza, 2015

tion in the evocative cloister of the Museo Civico di Crema e del Cremasco (2015).

Without renouncing her almost symbiotic relationship with nature, Kikki's work of introspection and excavating memories made its apt return in the series *La 24 Ore*, a project started in 2013 and presented at the Institute of Fine Arts (IFA, 2015) in New York City. This exhibition, entitled *La 24 Ore: Court of Memory* had its origins in the examination of the artist's deepest traces of memory and, concurrently, of the surviving relics from the childhood home she had to abandon after the death of her father. At the time, the recent past and the echoes of loved ones exacerbated her sense of loss, which could only be eased by entering a different state of awareness. As Kikki has pointed out: "*La 24 Ore* symbolizes a man's journey, who like the 'Alchemist' begins an inner quest. It is a container of life's artwork, enlivened by the experiences and encounters with other souls." This traditional symbol of speed and efficiency was transformed into an instrument of containment and reflection: familiar atmospheres and flavors assumed an alienating and metaphysical register, at times mystical and spiritual due to solitude and silence. Certainly, given his alchemical interests and intellectual perspective, Duchamp's name cannot be omitted, even if in these examples of *La 24 Ore* a sensitive, intimate register prevails, invariably characterized by color and impregnated with autobiography. The useful, versatile device of the container has been transformed at different times into a briefcase, suitcase, book or portfolio, and each version has been generated by Kikki's storytelling impulse and her need to include diverse experiences, rearranging and reactivating them as occurred in the ancient *Wunderkammern*. On the basis of copious psychiatric interpretations, Kikki describes her own experience of memories by comparing it to the annual growth rings visible on cross-sections of tree trunks: "Equipped with a briefcase full of memories, we periodically go back to the bindu, the dot, where we think for a moment about the round we just did before setting off again on a new cycle." For Kikki, working on *La 24 Ore* series involved dividing herself between imaginary journeys, physical incursions into the domestic setting, and a constant focus on graphic and compositional questions, such as those concerning which materials to use. Yet none of this meant setting painting aside. Indeed, 2016 saw further developments on the theme of "roots": transforming the remaining vestiges of naturalism, Kikki proposed a language based on gesture and color, the dialectic between surfaces and depth, and the dynamics of the confusion and separation of forms. Shades of pink and yellow alternate with tones of green, black, blue and gray, revealing centuries of art history sedimented and reinterpreted in a personal way. But it was above all during her second residency at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre (2016), preceded by a period of isolation and meditation, that she made a resolute return to brushes and colors. This phase benefited from a slow pace and extensive silent pauses. Her Irish studio saw the creation of a group of paintings that describe the adventurous resistance of small particles of matter. These are works dominated by a preponderant color tone, but whose slow evolution was based on a rigorous methodical, physical and spiritual exercise. As Kikki wrote: "The dialogue with the painting is necessary for its creation and evolution and color is the pantry, where Spirit chooses, like a chef, what is needed to create balance between light and dark, achieving



*Femme Valise*, Museo Civico di Crema e del Cremasco, 2015



*La 24 Ore: Court of Memory*, IFA, New York, 2015



*La 24 Ore*, 2013/ongoing

neutrality, or what Kandinsky calls ‘the white ray of light.’”

The artist’s conversation with natural elements undertakes a mis-ensemble in *Chi* (2015-17), created from the desire to care for an abandoned house on the Atlantic coast promontory of Cape Cornwall, now a National Trust heritage site. The result consists of a patient compromise between aesthetic convictions, symbolic elements, and practical needs that required Kikki to perform physically tiring acrobatic work, while being guided by the rhythm of the tides. Repeating the gestures of an attentive “mother-bird”, Kikki completely enveloped the building in blue fishing nets, thus blurring the boundaries between nature and architecture. *Chi* arose from a further confrontation with her own interiority and transformation through the art making process. It represented not only a search for wholeness, and an empathic connection with nature and Other, but also an awareness of the challenge in achieving it, since the artist had to confront herself with physical isolation and the fragmentary nature of the work.

If Kikki’s interest in Land Art continued during her residency at Hospitalfield in Arbroath, Scotland (Spring, 2019) and with the *Il Ciliegio Magico/The Magical Cherry Tree* project, the Cornwall experience was the cradle for two consequential works: *Fragments* and *Light*. Both works deal with the passage and transformation from a confused magma to the definition of a space. Both were resolved in the form of artist’s books, a decision motivated by the need to relate personal and diaristic experiences in an open and accessible register. Kikki’s constant introspection while working often became writing, and these extracts became an integral part of the artist’s book. *Frammenti* [Fragments] is a series of small canvases that Kikki painted during swift nocturnal escapes from her Cornish cottage, transforming the darkness into a creative gesture. The dominance of the color blue, synonymous with breath and light, was meant to evoke this psychic and emotional transformation. Short brushstrokes, calibrated in shades of blue, black, gray and white, structure compact compositions that almost resemble written pages, where the emptiness in the margins enhances the light and space. The sixteen painting fragments, cut into irregular quadrangular shapes, were later sewn onto pieces of white linen pillowcases to create a sort of grid. The pillowcases were not an anonymous support but part of her mother’s trousseau, which was embroidered by Kikki’s grandmother. In this special setting, the “fragments of darkness” acquired new light and *Frammenti* became an artist’s book that merges two of the essential places in Kikki’s life and research: Cornwall and Valtellina. It preserves the simple act, replicated throughout the centuries, of folding and unfolding a large bedsheet, and thus the book transforms the intimate and diaristic component of Kikki’s work into a universal reflection that gives voice to a unanimously shared fragmentation. In her remarks the artist explains the elusiveness of the fragment and the infinite potential contained within it: “a fragment will mirror our desire for unity; its nature, both proposing and denying wholeness, can never be fully grasped or exhausted.” Further progress on *Chi* also heralded work linked to *Luce* [Light], a second artist’s book that focuses on the affinity between painting and weaving. Besides the visual joy the colorful sequences generate, this work combines an essential narrative vein, a need to explore the deep meanings of color and light, the form of the square, and the increasingly active component of meditation and spirituality in Kik-



*Chi*, Cape Cornwall, UK, 2015



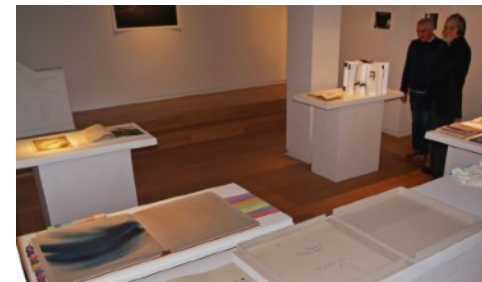
*Frammenti*, 2016

ki's aesthetic. The idea of loose pages and bands wrapping around the outer cover was inspired by an ancient seventh-century Coptic binding technique. Inside, twelve oil paintings on Belgian linen invite us to reflect upon the uplifting and healing vibrations of the twelve Divine Rays. Kikki devoted a considerable amount of time to painting studies in the color of each ray as a tangible sign of the progressive healing of the soul and gradual spiritual growth. After initial meditations Kikki integrated the twelve rays into a single organism: the book entitled *Luce* [Light], the ultimate objective of the transformation process as well as a synthesis of spiritual rebirth. The poetic index, printed by hand and painted in gouache colors, was also a choral endeavor, thanks to the responses given by fellow artists. Even today, Kikki never tires of elaborating on the potential of the dialogue and the maieutic method she has practiced on various occasions. For one of her first art history exams while studying at Pratt Institute, Kikki composed a one-act play entitled *Dialogue of Painting*, with characters that included Leonardo, Titian, Leon Battista Alberti, Lodovico Dolce, André Breton, Plato and Paolo Pino (the author, among other things, of a 16th-century book with the same title). By writing a play, she was able to simulate a dialectical exchange between some of her preferred artists, theorists and writers. Another example is when Kikki participated in the LTA program at the Guggenheim Museum, in 2015/16, where she facilitated a group meditation on a painting by Cézanne. At the end of the session, all participants noted how the tablecloth in the painting now seemed brighter to their eyes, not due to actual changes in the phenomena of light transmission but because of a profound, voluntary change in their individual visual perception. The twelve paintings that compose *Luce* embody for the artist a "descent into the light". Thanks to light, a dark-colored mass is transformed into a beating heart, while a magmatic, shapeless vortex allows us to perceive a credible space. The material and tactile pulsation of colors is the result of an irrational dynamic composition, a sort of ecstatic dance in front of the canvas in the relentless movement of addition and subtraction, followed by the slow sedimentation of layers of paint—a process favored by the use of oils and almost impossible to achieve with other techniques.

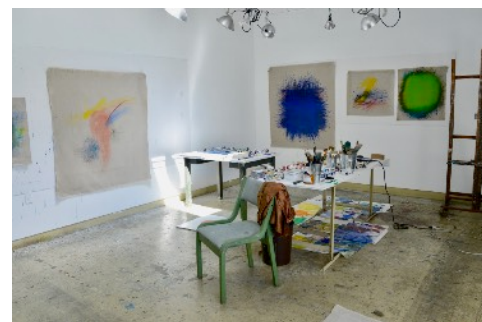
It was already evident in the summer of 2017 that the artist's book *Luce* had set the stage for paintings that evolved later, during Kikki's stay at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Here she embarked on a new pictorial investigation, poised as always between methodical dedication and an overwhelming urge to create. Guided by her emotions, she relied on the materiality of the act of painting rather than theoretical planning. Her physical relationship with the canvas, combined with her obsessive repetition of gestures and the resulting accumulation of lines, are comparable to the process described in the creation of *Chi*. Aware of how light and meditation are always at the center of her investigations, Kikki suggests an analogy between the luminous pulsation of these paintings and music: "My paintings have been described as increments of time and marks in a meditative moment, where the 'glow-time' is infinite in both directions: outward in accumulated, immeasurable brush strokes and inward towards a glow point. Music exemplifies it best — retaining previous notes to understand the whole body of music, my painting does something similar — back in time and forward in time." The results were in fact explosions of bright blues, greens, and yel-



*Luce*, 2017



*Luce*, Centro San Fedele, Milano, 2017



Virginia Center Creative Arts, 2017

lows, constructed with a combination of thick and narrow strokes, and frequently covered by more uniform and sometimes vaporous layers, all centered on the picture plane in a composition similar to the small canvases comprising *Luce*.

The state of connection that Kikki experienced in 2017 was the germinal seed for the complex project *Il Ciliegio Magico/The Magical Cherry Tree*, a synthesis which unites the directions of her research, from the more intimate and diaristic to the more extroverted and social. The return to Brianza, her birthplace, held in store a sense of irreducible connection with the land. The discovery of a wild cherry tree, described as “magical” by the local people, marked a new, expansive moment in Kikki’s career: a journey in time and a return to her roots. The discovery process evolved through an intense dialogue with a farmer (“the father of the cherry tree”), repeated visits to his farmhouse, and, concurrently, the rediscovery of sounds and words in the local dialect. Digging into the past surrendered to communication in the present. She temporarily entrusted her artistic practice to listening and receiving. In that same year, Kikki installed the first three *24 Ore* [Briefcases] and the book *Frammenti* [Fragments] in the Italian Embassy in Washington, D.C. Shortly after, she visited Villa Firenze, the Italian Ambassador’s residence in the capital. The discovery of a majestic cherry tree in the garden of the residence, and the memory of the tree in Besana Brianza, gave rise to Kikki’s dream of recreating a dialogue between the two centuries-old cherry trees, where her persistent exploration of countless shades of pink could also play a part.

The exhibition *Il Ciliegio Magico/The Magical Cherry Tree*, curated by Renato Miracco and installed in the rooms of Villa Firenze (2019/2020), revived Kikki’s dialogue with nature as well as her search for a connection between the roots of the past and those of the present, namely between her birthplace in Brianza and the patch of Italian land on American soil. Long silk draperies soaked in organic pigments extracted from cochineal, bark, and the flowers of the two cherry trees, floated freely from the hall ceiling. Perhaps the chromatic obsession that engendered the draperies, and especially their indeterminate materiality in an open space, retain some traces of the post-minimalist aesthetic of Eva Hesse, in particular of series such as *Metronomic Irregularity* from 1966 or *Contingent* from 1969, which recall the soft and deconstructed lengths of Kikki’s suspended pink draperies. The installation of hand-dyed silks and linens was completed by other works displayed in the spaces, following a harmonious and at the same time natural rhythm, as if they had always been in that place: sixteen cyanotypes, sixteen prints of gold leaves, sixteen white-on-white prints of cherry blossoms, screen prints and embroidery on raw linen, and finally *Bindu*, a painting that translates the joyful tones of spring’s green explosion into paint.

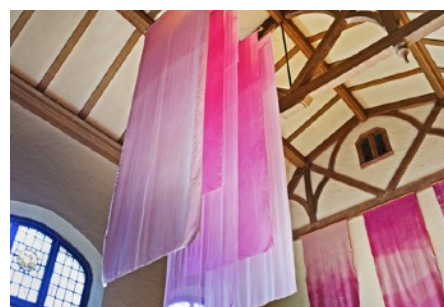
This immense work with natural dyes also permeated Kikki’s work at Hospitalfield, Scotland (2019), where her interest in Land Art deepened. Passing through Wales, the artist planned a visit to the Pentre Ifan dolmen in Pembrokeshire National Park, where Robert Smithson was photographed by his partner Nancy Holt in 1969. The project Kikki presented for the residency focused mainly on the creation of a textile book, which is now in the permanent collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.



La Brianza, 2017



La 24 Ore, Italian Embassy, Washington D.C., 2017



The Magical Cherry Tree, Villa Firenze, Washington D.C., 2019

The practice of dyeing has been added naturally to other media used by the artist. Kikki's exploration of color has found new expressive channels in textile art, a universal language that the artist has practiced since the start of her career. One example is when she tenderly wrapped her roots with red thread, following a tradition that runs from Maria Lai to the American artist Sheila Hicks. Now the tactile nature of color has been heightened and the awareness of it is more intense. Yet Kikki proceeds with her customary methodology and retains her obsession with time and harmony with nature, which at times have led her to the verses of Saint Augustine. In the artist's book *In Aula Ingenti Memoria Meae* (2020) the range of tonal colors placed in front of *Luce's* paintings appear again in a sequence of silk pages dyed in ethereal and earth tones.

Kikki's artist's book phase has had an important sequel during the past 15 years with the ongoing project *The Cosmic Clock*. Here, for the first time, the dialogue between the written word and the visual component has become close and systematic, building on the lyrical minimalism of her personal diary, *Il Ciliegio Magico/The Magical Cherry Tree*. The theme for *The Cosmic Clock* arose spontaneously from the notebooks that Kikki has been consistently compiling since 2011. As such, autobiographical and memory-based components are some of its fundamental ingredients. The result is the artist's book *My Cosmic Clock* (2011/2026), a sequence of poetic pages in which visually harmonious kaleidoscopic images alternate with enigmatic alchemical and cosmological symbols. The long and patient work of selection, transcription, and systematization has become the armature of a complex work in which diaristic intimacy is combined with astrological traditions, beliefs, and the supporting pillars of Kikki's aesthetic. Parallel to this, a personal measurement of time emerges the series *Gorgeous Nothings* (2025), a series of paintings, simple impressions of light on fabric fragments, reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's unique envelope poems. Thus, in Kikki's work, time, poetry, light and color take part in a complex and fascinating system composed of corresponding energies, luminous colors, planetary transits, and subtle bodies, in accordance with her passion for using different media. Kikki Ghezzi's work is part of numerous private and public collections including the Institute of Fine Arts of NYU, La Civica Raccolta del Disegno Museo di Salo', Villa Firenze and the Italian Embassy, Washington D.C., Museo Giuseppe Sciortino, Palermo, The Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Ireland, The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C.



Hospitalfield, Arbroath, Scotland, 2019



My Cosmic Clock (diaries), 2011/ongoing



Crema, 2025