

Kikki Ghezzi's Roots and Home  
*An Interview with Kyoung H. Park, April 2014*

Kikki Ghezzi's "Roots/Radici" is a homecoming—the grounding of her vision as an Italian painter currently living in Brooklyn, New York. In her studio based in Park Slope, Kikki shares with me her collection of tree roots, which she has gathered for the past ten years, roots that carry memories of her life in Italy and the United States as well as her travels across different countries in Africa and Europe.

"I did a few paintings of roots over a ten-year period, but I never really focused on them until now. I asked myself: how do I get to the point where what I'm painting and how I'm painting come together? Then I realized that roots have sculptural qualities which I respond to, because my paintings are sculptural, as well."

Holding a heart-shaped root that served as inspiration for several of her recent paintings, Kikki explains to me how she experiences their touch. "I feel like they're just waiting for someone to recognize them and say: 'Yes, you're here. You're part of the Whole.' They're alive. I like their simplicity — they have a soul. That's what drives me to paint."

Born in Milan, Kikki found an artistic haven in Bormio, a small community in the region of Valtellina in the Italian Alps that is home to families dating back thousands of years and to a transient community of Italian and foreign tourists who go there for their summer and winter holidays. "My parents went there on their honeymoon. I started going there when I was a child and some of the happiest memories of my late teens and twenties live in Bormio". Last summer, Kikki began her work on "Roots/Radici" in the attic of her friend Sergio Sertorelli. "In the beginning my colors were monochrome and delicate—pinks and blues—and evolved into colors that were increasingly more intense. As I progressed, I could see myself expressing a duality in myself—this more intense aspect, and a more vulnerable aspect, that are coming together in the artworks."

While painting this series, Kikki experienced intense grief over the passing of her parents. She remembers cleaning her father's untouched belongings and finding the shapes of things on the surfaces on which they had been placed. "I was so raw from these experiences that I could only put them into the paintings. It was grieving and it was a lot of judgment of myself, thinking about the things that I had to face."

"My tendency, before I started this series of paintings, was to work on something very excitedly and then see something else. I really had trouble focusing on one thing. I arrived at the roots after a year of being a hermit, painting in a cave, going inside myself and finding the root issues of what I felt are the essentials. I think 'Roots/Radici' are paintings of a dialogue I had while I was looking into myself. I needed to paint."

Observing Kikki's translation of these roots into art, it's fascinating to notice the level of abstraction through which concrete, sculptural objects become subjective—paintings expressing an emotional and aesthetic reality separate from the roots' own history or the memories they contain. "The colors I'm using are the emotions I experience while I paint".

"There's a group of paintings I like to refer to as 'Bird-Roots,' where I was thinking about the feminine and masculine qualities of color. The Bird-Roots started as really red paintings, but they're not red anymore. I mixed my colors and they evolved, and blues took over in the end."

While Kikki's work with roots is ongoing, there is a remarkable level of grounding achieved in this series. "With 'Roots/Radici,' my search has become about defining my own roots. I'm happy to live in New York, and it's nice to have little roots everywhere, but I have never felt settled. This series helped me deal with those fears. Sometimes, you blindly take a road, aware of the fact that you might have to turn back and change direction. Change and movement are inevitable, but at times you are afraid and keep asking yourself: where am I going? Trust necessarily comes in and assures you that everything is OK—that you are inevitably where you are supposed to be."

Coincidentally, the exhibition of "Roots/Radici" is taking place in a similar fashion to the way this series of paintings originated. Sara Fontana, an art historian and curator from Milan, met Kikki in Bormio, responded to her work and decided to curate her exhibition and publish her paintings in this publication. Just as Kikki finds and collects the roots that help her find a place and her story within them, "Roots/Radici" has found via Bormio and Brooklyn, its first home.

"When I paint, the work becomes an extension of what I hear the paintings telling me, as if they were mirror images. They signal something I need to look at and work out inside of myself, and the questions I ask myself become answers I can visualize by working on the painting"

Looking at the root she's holding in her hands, Kikki shares with me its story. "I found this one in Prospect Park. It had some really heavy energy. But now that it's been here in my studio for some time, this root feels light and clear. Roots like these definitely grounded me and I think that people who are attracted to these paintings will experience grounding as well."

About the author: Kyoung H. Park is the first Korean playwright from Latin America to be produced and published in the United States. He is Artistic Director of Pacific Beat Collective, an experimental theater company based in New York.