

KIKKI GHEZZI

ROOTS and SOURCES, ORIGINS, SUPPORTS, INTEGRAL STRUCTURE

Mulino SalaCrist - Bormio, Italy Via Italo Occhi, 1 from July 21 to August 10, 2014

Kikki Ghezzi's *Radici/Roots* series, exhibited in a former mill house in the medieval town of Bormio, Italy, includes both paintings and drawings focused on a subject that proves to be mesmerizing and diverse in its inspiration for paintings: the roots of living things. Working in oils on linen canvas and panel, Ghezzi brings a sculptural sensibility to her paintings, at times relating them to preparatory drawings, which are finished works in their own right, usually made with charcoal on paper, but taking on the hues of brown and grey as well as black. Grounded in the past, and flourishing in the present, Kikki Ghezzi explores roots, the physical remnants and buried places, revealing history, structure, and support for living things, be they trees, bushes, or other plant forms. As a painter born in Milan, who spent a lot of time in Malindi, Kenya, but now transplanted and living in Brooklyn, the subject of origins and roots is deeply personal for Kikki Ghezzi. Exploring her own roots, in addition to the natural forms that she finds while walking in nature, is an integral part of Ghezzi's practice, revealed in the luscious and sensual quality she brings to her paintings of the essential part of the plant.

Initially, Ghezzi trained as a sculptor, training her eye to see greater volume and tactile presence when she paints, and often there is a sculptural quality to her paintings. In the series of paintings about roots, all entitled with the eponymous, ROOTS, the works vary in tone and colors. Some roots appear to be animated, and full of movement. Others appear to be stuck in one single place, fragile and delicate, extending slim fingers out

into space. Others, reaching, multi-planar, textured, appear to reveal the form of a shape seen in sharp directional light, as if seen only at night. Her paintings are strongly colored, and each one is evocative of a mood, or a sensation experienced through the senses.

One elegant root, slate blue and grey, lands on a beach-like canvas of cement sand color background, with the remnants of a gentle wave beneath the belly, as if recently washed ashore. It forms a sea creature, with an open beak, or a curved arm with bent wrist and elegant hand, pointing further ashore, evolving.

Another root, interpreted in fuschia and purple, seems a bird of paradise, poised on a flesh colored stem. A blue one, brushy, and with a textured surface, leads into a white stem, with a shaft lined in gleaming yellow, and lit at the end like a wick with a red ember. One is a knot, supported on a knuckle-like nub below a furred fist, the fingers bent back into the palm. Roots take on many forms in paint through Ghezzi's imagination, but they reveal a world that is extracted, and removed from its flourishing universe, when a life force connected that root to the stem and trunk above it, as it lay buried in the earth, or when a flower or tree grew from its efforts below the surface. Ghezzi's root paintings are ultimately about the parts that lie below, and support the green plants above. She reveals the parts that are usually hidden, removes them from their original purpose, and exposes their raw power.

Roots of a plant or a tree need ample soil to start to grow, and they push into the dark depths of the earth, seeking nourishment and minerals, and a place to be held. If insufficiently covered with soil the roots cannot gain hold, the plant can topple, be weakened, or die, because of lack of support from below. Only when the roots are

established can a stem or trunk begin to form and flourish and support the flower or leaves that reach toward the sun above the ground. Some roots are edible, the parts of a plant that we know as colorful vegetables like radishes, carrots, beets, turnips, parsnips. Their rich colors inspire Ghezzi's palette, with its lavish vermilion, persimmon, gold, purple, and fuschia tones.

We say that someone "puts down roots" as if they land from an alien world to take hold of this one, finding a place in the dirt to hold onto. Or that they "return to their roots" when coming back to a career or a place in which they once were comfortable. Having started her academic life studying law, and become a painter later in her life, one might almost say that Ghezzi is returning to her roots in that regard, returning to creative expression from a more structured environment. Searching for roots while out walking in nature, and finding forms that appeal to her sculptural sensibility, Ghezzi has borrowed these woody pieces, brought them back to the studio to study and use as subjects, and then animated them with the colors and shadows that she applies in paint, giving vibrancy to the sinuous shapes against vivid backgrounds.

Her drawings, at times linear and appearing to be composed of a single continuous stroke, often recall the drawings of Chloe Piene, whose "Zeichnungskammer" exhibition at Gasser Grunert Gallery (NYC) May 11-June 15, 2013, included a series of line drawings in white chalk on black paper backgrounds, making close linear observations of the body, highlighting fragments of a living being in a disjointed, nervous linear description. Like Egon Schiele, or Piene's drawings, Ghezzi's drawings often appear to be made without lifting the pencil or charcoal from the page, adding a continuity of line from the

beginning point to the end. But where Piene or Schiele find the erotic tension and energy within the line defining a human form, Ghezzi turns that erotic line into a plant form, or a root study, probing the essential fundament of the tree or plant life, the engendering support from which it takes nourishment.

In drawings where she analyzes a root, rather than a trunk or stump or stem, the form is inhabited by the anima of a dead tree or plant ([JPG22](#)). A strengthened line near the top center of the drawing seems to reveal an open mouth, gaping, the tongue furled, the lips loose and curling downward. At the heart of the drawing, an open and vacant maw suggests a plane, left empty of lines by the artist, while surrounded by traveling and wiggling lines.

In another drawing, in charcoal on paper, forms build from the bottom as Ghezzi works up the dendrochronology of a stump, emphasizing the bark and the broken bits of the exterior by using darker or thinner lines to convey shape and volume. Almost composed of jigsaw puzzle jagged lines, there are soaring and towering blocks created by longer gestures, allowing the eye to travel upward into the empty space of the sheet above the stump. At that point, Ghezzi's lines trail off into the space behind and above the shape below, and faint, tabled forms end a trajectory that started at the midsection.

The surprising analogy of dead roots, separated from their stems or trunks, links Ghezzi's visual language to that of a master of abstracted forms, Georgia O'Keefe, whose studies of skulls and bones revealed the interior remnants of a living creature, making the skeletal remains into something of simple beauty. Where roots are the support of a

plant, usually hidden by a blanket of earth, O'Keefe's paintings of bones depict the hidden structure inside the flesh. In 1915, Georgia O'Keefe began to explore abstract forms by starting with charcoal drawings of her ideas, and she continued this process, working first in drawings, and then making abstract paintings, well into the early 1930s. Later, she explored the flower forms, and bones, that have become familiar.

Similarly, Kikki Ghezzi explores root forms in charcoal sketches that remind the viewer of these abstract explorations of form, working up a sense of volume with layers of shading and carefully arranged lines. Ghezzi's drawings, often preparing but not directly corresponding to her paintings, serve a similar purpose; exploring the volumes and gestural strokes that will then be filled with color in her paintings. O'Keefe's figurative studies of bones, skulls, or flowers, adapt natural forms as vessels for the exploration of complementary colors, and probe those forms as still life metaphors for structures and supports inside the flesh of an animal, or the rich and delicate combinations of transparent color within a flower. Cropping her images, or forcing them to the edges of the picture plane, O'Keefe transformed plant forms, flowers, and trees into pure form, making them semi-abstract. Like O'Keefe, Ghezzi paints roots, objects found in nature, as intermediaries for sensations of energy, emotion and color. <sup>1</sup>

Dynamic form, evoked by the root's shape of tangled, or smoothed wood, is vividly portrayed with lush strokes of thick oil paint and complementary colors that vibrate when placed adjacent to one another, like the orange and red of one root, placed on the

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Haskell, ed. *Georgia O'Keefe: Abstraction*, Whitney Museum of American Art, Yale University Press, 2009. Also see: [http://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/AudioGuides?play\\_id=237](http://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/AudioGuides?play_id=237)

canvas so that it appears to be growing vertically into the blue background. The turning branch of the root, making a crook in the center of the composition, is highlighted with pink and flesh tones, and undergirded with dark red against a sapphire surface devoid of any markers of horizon or relationship to the earth. Ghezzi's particular gift is to paint these hidden and subterranean supports as sculptures found within nature, revealed when separated from their purpose. Her choice to highlight these essentially earthy forms in intense and dramatic colors highlights their removal from the dark, where they were formed. She smoothes rough surfaces with the addition of colors that seem to express the presence of life within them. Ghezzi examines their separateness from leaves, or flowers, or continuity as demonstrated in a stem or trunk, and highlights the beauty of roots as elements of natural force and germination.

Lisa A. Banner, Ph.D.  
Visiting Associate Professor  
Pratt Institute  
New York