

Interview: Veronica Grossi (with Melissa Blatnik)

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Where/when were you born?

I was born in Mexico City.

What was your family like growing up?

We lived in the highest floor of a building two blocks from the main avenue of Mexico City, called *Reforma*. I often would look down the street from the big glass windows of our apartment. The walls of the living room were red and had lots of paintings on them. My father was born in Venice, Italy and had come to America to be a sculptor (he studied with the famous Francisco Zúñiga and met once Henry Moore) as well as to make a living or as the Italians say *fare l' America*.... So my father had always a passion for the arts. Back in Venice, he tutored Italian to Peggy Guggenheim. While in Mexico City, he also met the mother of Elena Poniatowska, the mother of the writer Elena Poniatowska. My mother, who was twenty years younger, has always had a passion, like my father, for the arts and literatures of the world. My mother worked from home as a translator for a press (she translated Anna Frank's diary). They both spoke various languages and read all the time. My mother took me to art classes since I was a child. I used to browse the art books of my father. My parents had lots of interesting friends, including artists, and very cultured people. Living in Mexico City has left me many memories. We had an extended family there. One aunt who had an antique car used to take us to the park and to concerts of classical music on Sundays. My mother would take us to the theater often. We would stroll in the beautiful French style avenues of *Reforma*. We would visit the house of the children of a famous film director, Fernando de Fuentes, married to Yolanda Varela, from Chihuahua, where my mother is from. They lived in a mansion in the highest floor of a building. They had lots of toys and the nanny would take us out to play and even shop! They had a chauffeur. The two girls, Yolanda and Gabriela, are still my friends!! We went to two different schools while in Mexico City. The schools were private and very strict. We were not rich. We were middle, middle class. My father built the house of his dreams in Guadalajara, where we moved when I was 8. It was in the outskirts of the city. It has now become one of the fanciest parts of town but back then, it was almost country, since there were only a few houses. My father, with the help of his older brother from Italy, designed a house that was almost like a Villa. It had marble floors, banisters of wrought iron, two terraces, a big living room where my father would play piano every night. And the most beautiful thing was that all rooms faced the terraces, the garden and the open country side. That is, there was a whole wall made of glass, on one side of the house overlooking the open country. I had my own room where I would sleep looking through the glass into the night, far into the lights of Zapopan that I always thought of as a sea. I used to go by myself to walk in the country, far into a ravine and climb onto trees. Back then, life was safer. I used to bike all over town, climbing steep, winding roads. The milkman would come every day and would scream LA LECHEEEE. It was a truck which carried metal containers with raw milk in them. He would pour it out with a ladle onto pots which my mother held. My mother would then boil the milk, and make butter with the cream... She would also make pound cake. The milk tasted

delicious. We used to go to a Mexican-French school. My parents believed strongly in education, and thus made sacrifices to invest everything they had for our education. Our house was full of paintings. When I was fourteen, my father lost his job... and this was a trauma for all of us. One of his former employers offered him a job in Stamford, Connecticut. It was another trauma to leave our beautiful home, which we rented, to go to live in a pretty hostile environment, since the neighborhood we moved into was not so good and they would scream at us hostile names, since we were Mexican... The High School I went to in Connecticut was excellent, I would say college level. The schools in the northeast of USA are excellent. So my art teacher, who is currently a family friend and is almost ninety now, left a big impression on me. She was my mentor and continues to be. Her name is Dorothy Soltanoff. She is a Jew whose family came from Russia and a very cultured and sensitive person, whom I had the fortune of having as a teacher and later a friend. When we came back to Mexico, fortunately, I continued having a passion for art... and thus began taking lessons with the Cuban painter José Fors. Some of his paintings are in galleries of the USA, including the art Museum of Austin, Texas. He was an excellent teacher who inspired me greatly. When I was a teenager, I began to paint with more passion and fury. I painted then some of the self-portraits I still have with me. I would create my own paint, with lead powder and linseed oil!!!! I had no idea lead powder was hazardous to your health. My art teacher also gave me as a gift (since I could barely get enough money to pay him for his classes) many oil paints that I still have!! I met then many artists that are now famous, and are still my friends. At that time, I began frequenting art galleries. One famous gallerist, a very knowledgeable and sensitive man, Carlos Ashida, whom I met during those years, died recently. I am still in contact with those in Guadalajara, Mexico who promote the arts.

How do you self-define? How do you describe your identity? What does that mean to you?

I am Mexican above all. The colors and sunlight of Mexico are in my first paintings and in some of my later ones. My perspective as an artist living in North Carolina is still Mexican since through my eyes and spirit I try to understand the different (foreign) shapes and colors that surround me. I am trying to capture in my paintings the light of North Carolina and how it creates a veil on things, on its colors. This gives me a sense of distance and melancholy but at the same time an intensified sense of beauty in time, lost in time, since the flowers I am currently painting, its rich, intense colors, do not last forever... they wilt. And thus my challenge is to capture them through the eyes of my spirit, while I paint them, in time.

What impact does your life have on your art?

A strong influence. My garden, which I take care of with my hands, has a strong influence on my art. I stare for long moments at the shapes and colors of my garden. This time of the year, the autumn, the light gives a particular intensity to appearances. The contrast of light and shade, sunlight and shadow, creates unique nuances. It is a privileged moment of the year, like spring. The kitchen has also a strong influence, since I stare every day at shapes of fruits and vegetables, and find them so appealing that I crave to paint them immediately. I also love the human figure. I attend an art group every week to draw and paint with live models. I also like to sketch my husband while he sits down in the living room. I have lots of art supplies in my office/art room. I wish I had more time to paint and paint, draw and draw. Since I teach literature full time, and I also clean and

cook in the kitchen, plus do the laundry, pay the bills and schedule doctor's appointments, I have limited time to do what gives me pleasure and oxygen!

What influences your art?

The art of other paintings, as well as my own formal and physical experimentation with the oil paints, which I am still learning to use. It is a very complex art medium. It offers so many possibilities but it also requires an artistic knowledge that it is difficult to command. It takes years and years of practice. Years and years of reflection, of refinement of how one sees things, its shapes and colors, under different lights. Of course my age affects my art. My eyes are not the same, for the good and for the bad. Having grown weaker at the same time they are more keen at catching the fleeting details of beauty...

How and when did you get started as an artist?

I was introduced to art when I was a child, by means of art books and art classes and by observing the art works in my house, including the sculptures and paintings of my father. I began to paint more systematically beginning at age 14. Then with a furious passion at eighteen.... Then when I was in college, while doing my doctoral studies, I retook painting and confirmed a strong sense of vocation, of destiny. That is, I am who I am when I paint, as much as when I write poetry or creative writing... I once participated in a theater group directed by my own art professor, José Fors. I did a monologue which impacted the audience strongly. People would call me at home to praise me for the magic I had conveyed while I acted. Back in high school something similar happened when I once recited before the entire English class, in my broken English, an excerpt from Romeo and Juliet. I acted it and then all of a sudden, the entire class was silent... And I felt these series of waves, of warm undulating currents flowing out of my voice and body onto the space beyond me.... and I was the voice I was speaking, I was Juliet in passionate love and pain for Romeo.. "Oh Romeo Romeo wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name, or if thou wilt not be but sworn my love and I'll no longer be a Capulet...

What is your style of art?

Figurative and at the same time abstract, it is a combination of both.

Are there challenges being a Latin American artist?

Yes, there are. The strongest is the isolation from our own cultural background, from my native surroundings, which keep on nourishing, inspiring my art. Also, the social isolation, away from my extended family and friends. Finally, the misunderstanding American society may have about what the art from the Latin American world is all about. Often they look down on it because they ignore the high level of complexity and sophistication of arts from Latin America. They only know stereotypes from commercial folklore. I commend the project undertaken by Queens University of Charlotte under the direction of Michele Shaul since she has been key in the creation of a community of Latino artists and writers in North Carolina. She has given them a space of public visibility and recognition. I like that she focuses on quality.

Do you have a favorite media?

Oil painting! Thank you so much for asking me these fascinating questions!!!