

**Interview published by Carlo Madesani for ArsLife, Italy, ( translated)**

*We meet Silvia Levenson at her home/studio in Lesa on Lake Maggiore, Novara province. The studio is made out of a decommissioning of a large paper mill, fractionated and converted into a few units. On the side runs a small stream, around dense forest vegetation, dead-end private road, lake view.*

*Silvia, you were born in Buenos Aires in 1957, what happened because you decided to come to Italy?*

In 1976 there was a military coup in Argentina that ended in the disappearance of 30,000 people. We say "desaparecidos" because at first the military denied their existence but they were killed after being tortured in clandestine concentration camps. My ex-husband and I were leftist militants and like so many Argentines we were persecuted. In '78 a paramilitary group came to pick us up at my in-laws' house, which was our formal address; fortunately we did not live there. During those years two of my cousins were killed and their mother, my aunt Elsa Rabinovich de Levenson was thrown from a plane during the terrible flights of death.

We held out until 1980 when we arrived in Italy after a boat trip. I was 23 years old, an 11-month-old son and a 4-year-old daughter.

We escaped but we did not want to feel like victims, we were very involved about the lack of freedom and the terror that the regime imposed on the population. We went to live in Vigevano.

*What are you doing here, away from everyone and everything?*

I wonder that myself from time to time! Here I can have a studio that I could not afford in Milan but I can enjoy absolute concentration, silence and more human rhythms. At first I thought that being so isolated would be an impediment to the development of my work. But back in 2000 I was working mostly abroad, so it didn't make much difference. Of course I travel a lot because I need to see the world.

*Your art is intertwined with the path of your life, full of symbols and references between tenderness and love, but also pain.*

It's true. I remember when democracy returned to Argentina in 1984 I had the chance to talk to my uncle, Gregorio Levenson who was very important to me. He told me the stories of my Russian grandparents who emigrated to Argentina in 1905 after participating in the first uprisings against the czars and who had come to Buenos Aires looking for a quieter place to live and raise their children.

I realized then that that journey that began in Russia had never stopped.

Another aunt, Raquel Levenson, had gone to Spain in 1937 to fight against

Franco but with the defeat of the Spanish Republicans she ended up in the USSR where her son was later born. It was at that moment, listening to those stories, that I felt the need to start a work that would make me reflect and understand what was around me.

I was not interested in abstraction or landscape but in my own feelings, in the experiences that dot each person's path, trying to represent the intensity of my emotions and the history of my origins.

*What do you remember about meeting Louise Bourgeois (published in Flair magazine in 2003)?*

In 2003 I was in NYC and attended one of the salons that Louise Bourgeois was organizing by making available her home and her experience as a woman and an artist. As usual, things happened to me without fully knowing the importance of them. I remember that Louise did not want to authorize the photographer to do a shoot because she preferred to document the meetings through videos of an artist she knew but coincidentally he was not there that time. He insisted and they eventually came to an agreement-the photographer was Elliot Erwitt! (who I didn't know who he was at the time). That meeting with Bourgeois was central for me. That Sunday he asked participants to introduce themselves and possibly show their work. I had a catalog and showed it to her. Normally when I would show my work on domestic tensions they would ask me if I had any problems, if I was married, if I had been beaten up, etc. etc. I always answered those questions by saying that through my work I was investigating a generic domestic reality and that I was not talking about my life, that I was not doing art therapy. I would always end the talk by saying that it was like imagining Agatha Christie as a potential murderess. I, too, I thought, had the right to practice my art without necessarily telling something about my life.

Anyway Louise Bourgeois, with catalog in hand, looked at me and asked if I had had a difficult childhood. It was the usual question but to HER, what could I answer? The same things I used to say? To THE very SHE who always claimed that her work was her life? Of course, out of the blue, I answered: yes, with tears in my eyes. She, in an instant, had unmasked me and removed from myself the unconscious pretense behind which I was hiding my fears in the fear that my personal emotions would never have to transpire. After that exchange I began to have courage to find a new way of communicating my work, about what I felt in my experiences without denying my emotions anymore.

By accepting to show what I was hiding in my unconscious I became stronger and more aware of my work and learned to speak more freely about my works jointly with my life. Thanks to the fabulous Louise Bourgeois and that extraordinary encounter.

*Doesn't the use of glass in its fragility limit the production and maintenance of the work itself?*

Of course as an artist I have many questions and few answers.

So many times I wonder if it makes sense to continue using such a difficult material as glass, moreover with a very old technique that predates glassblowing. But I am fascinated by its ambiguity. We use glass to protect and insulate ourselves in our homes, we trust it so much that we put it near our mouths to drink but we also know that it can break into a thousand pieces and hurt us-the ideal material to represent the ambiguity of human relationships.

Your sculpture can be described as figurative, sarcastic and tragic. The message of your works is ironic but with the subtle reference to human tragedy, the domestic one, the one of unbreakable roots, the one without a real why ... what narrative do you tell, what alert do you signal?

My works fit conceptually into a critically slippery zone. I allude to drama or difficult situations such as domestic tensions or violence can be but in a way that can be ironic or subtle. Glass serves as a way for me to distance myself physically and mentally from the dramas and generally my work is aesthetically "pleasing" because it is easier to dwell on the first sensation derived from the image while to intuit the deeper message it is necessary, as in all things, to dwell a little longer for more appropriate knowledge.

For example, to talk about daily difficulties I made the piece "Tea Time is back" where a teapot and cups have thorns like roses. I visualize something that I have experienced but do not normally talk about for fear of coming across as unpalatable.

*About what? Do we talk about it?*

It is that strange, irrational, seemingly unmotivated feeling that pops up from thoughts at any time, that bizarre, immasurable perception that posits a broader view of reality. For example, in the morning, when I wake up, so many times I am enveloped by thoughts of difficulties, I am gripped by that sense of tiring problems to be faced without having the certainty of being able to solve them. So maybe just when I am quietly enjoying a hot tea with a friend, the thought arises spontaneously that makes me mentally remove myself from where I am and with my imagination I see the thorns of life that I have to face. It is that inner emotionality, that vague, abstract, feeling of malaise, that makes me navigate to other spheres, far from the visible ones of that place in which I find myself, at that precise moment.

*Continued...*

Also in the "Still Life" series where there are little bottles of perfumes and medicines that promise happiness and beauty, balance, and anti aging. I allude to how our insecurity caused by social imperatives economically sustains the cosmetic and wellness industries that bill billions causing a widespread

sense of discomfort and inadequacy that forces men and women to alter their bodies, denying and hiding the evidence of their time.

*The little girl's shoes with nails and thorns elude a difficult childhood....*

This work also stems from a personal story because my mom used to buy me and my little sister little shoes that were supposed to last all year. With wear and tear a few little nails would emerge and start to bother a bit, but they could not complain or even rebel. With a rock or a hammer we would try to fix the discomfort, sometimes unsuccessfully.

I don't know if shoes were made that way in the Argentina of those years or if my mom couldn't afford to buy better booties. But the little shoes with nails that I make in my works were born from that memory, beautiful and poignant.

When the 24marzo association-which in Rome was following the legal processes against the military of Italian origin-asked me for images to use to support the work of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, I was surprised. I didn't think I had any. During the military dictatorship, the grandmothers had discovered that many missing women were pregnant and that their children had been given in illegal adoptions after being killed in prison camps, and they had identified 500 children missing from the roll call. Thanks to their work and the creation of the DNA bank, 133 daughters and sons of the desaparecidos recovered their identities. Only then did I realize (sometimes I'm slow...) that so much of my work was connected to those events: the little glass dresses, the empty swing, the barbed wire rug with a little chair in the middle....

Perhaps mine is a disturbing work that stems from this strong discomfort, a desire for vindication, a need to pay heed and attention to these abuses. A defense of Love. A defense of Love. For me, but perhaps for my entire generation, that violence was so rooted in the unconscious that I did not have the ability to see reality sharply focused. Perhaps this made us helpless, addicted to pain by accepting horror as a given, too internal to react with impetuous force. Perhaps this is also why my work can appear delicate in form but enigmatic in content.

In the works with the swings, the little dresses, the wigs, what did you intend to tell?

They are different works: when I was a little girl I liked to go on the swing and I remember wishing to fly far away but I also had a strong fear despite the intoxication of the feeling of freedom. So those works represent that ambiguity.

The little dresses, on the other hand, came about as a reflection on the inability adults sometimes have to protect children: that work, in the Collection of the Alexander Tutsek Foundation in Munich, Germany, consists of 133 little baby dresses representing the children, now adults, of people who have disappeared, who have recovered their identity.

In the case of the wigs I was alluding to the weight and fragility of the stereotypes that society often imposes on us in order to be accepted: to be beautiful women or strong men and to meet shared social expectations.

*How important is sex in your work?*

In our lives, sex is very important. In my work it is subtly connected to the expectations and rules that prevent us from living it as we best want but in my works it is not a determinate element, I prefer to emphasize the feelings and contradictions of the meaning of beauty that can allude to the desire for self-satisfaction to feel attractive, wanted and accepted, by others. Our society seems to be succumbing to the unbridled desire for con- pleasing as a fundamental element.

*Elegance and refinement of line. Your works are technically perfect, without smearing, precise, millimeter-like. How does your work begin, then how does it develop?*

I start with a confused idea, a vague thought, sometimes I try to make a drawing, but then I immediately feel the need to start by getting to work kneading my hands to make the project three-dimensional. I feel the need for the material, its solid concreteness, to touch, to move, to turn. "Inspiration, whatever it is, is born from an incessant not-knowing," said poet Wislawa Szymborska. I feel that not knowing, ignorance is the beginning of everything.

I think I can only live in this world through art. I can look around, focus on my feelings and turn them into objects or installations. A friend of mine wrote that we are all, in some way, survivors of a shipwreck. Here, I feel like that: a survivor and I am happy to be one. I think that through my work I create a space, a kind of bridge where people if they want can come in and share feelings. And that in my opinion is the mystery of art. There is nothing predictable or obligatory.

Consider that I have no artistic or even technical training, I am a graphic designer. I started exhibiting when I was 35 years old, learning the secrets of glass art on my own.

My origins are hybrid. On my father's side a very politicized Russian family and on my mother's side, a country family. My grandfather was a horse trainer and my mom grew up in the Pampas.

I never forget where I come from, especially when I receive international awards, maybe in some university college, and I think of my distant relatives who who knows what they think of me. Not having pursued traditional art studies, I never had any expectations related to the idea of success in the art world. Selling my work, exhibiting in museums, for me are absolutely unplanned experiences, I thought I did not deserve them. My feeling was that sooner or later it would be known that I didn't measure up and that my uncles

and cousins were riding horses through the pampas. Later I realized that that was the "imposter syndrome" and that there is absolutely no place where I should or should not be. I remember when I received an award, the Rakow Commission from the Corning Museum of Glass in the United States. That it was a museum highly specialized in glass works, I did not realize, and I had not even prepared a "speech" when I went to receive it. Instead, it is a very relevant award for an artist who uses glass as a material, an achievement that goes far beyond the purchase and permanent display of the work in the world's most important glass museum.

*What gallery are you working with?*

I am represented by RoFa Project in Maryland (USA), Galeria Esther Montoriol in Barcelona. In Italy by Punto Sull'Arte Gallery in Varese and Dr Fake Gallery in Turin.

*Can you make a living from your work?*

Until today I have managed to live off my work. I started exhibiting in Milan in 1995 in Maria Cilena's gallery and since then my sculptures and installations have developed in different directions. Besides that I am invited abroad to teach the technique I use (lost wax glass fusion): Japan, the United States, China, France, Germany, etc., and twice a year I hold workshops in my studio.

I love teaching, first because I never thought I could do it and second because it is an important way to be in touch with other people, to exchange experiences, stories and points of view. Otherwise I would be locked in the studio focused only on me.

*What ambitions do you have for your future?*

Honestly I live very much in the present and this is a special moment: I would like to reset my work. I don't really know how to explain it. When I started in 1995, I had prepared a specific project to present to the first gallery I worked with. After that it was a whirlwind of ideas and projects, of spaces asking me for exhibitions, and so I would develop sculptures or installations aimed at specific places. Of course with themes that arose from me, particularly the conflict zones that can be the body, home, family and borders. But I realized this later, I was not aware of it when I was doing it. I would like to go back to that moment in which I do without knowing where I am going.

*You always smile, you seem to have crystal clear confidence for the future.*

Ah, yes, this is the insane optimism of the Levenson family, we always like to think the worst is over.