

PAOLA GANDOLFI

Paola Gandolfi occupies a unique situation among contemporary Italian painters. Though nominally linked to the *Pittura Colta* (Cultivated Painting) movement that has exercised so much influence over the development of Italian art during the past two decades, she is in many respects much closer to the Surrealist painters of the first half of the 20th century.

In particular, she has an unabashed fascination with sexuality and an ability to invent emblematic forms reminiscent of the work of the great Belgian Surrealist René Magritte.

To this one must add the fact that she is a painter whose work has a strong feminist content, of a kind not common among her compatriots. Her feminism differs from that of the artists associated with the Feminist Movement in the United States not only because it is less directly political and more emotional and anguished, but also because it carries a strong religious overtone – a quality perhaps not always obvious to the artist herself. Anyone looking at the totality of Gandolfi's work becomes aware of elements in it that seem to refer to popular Catholicism. In particular many of her images seem to echo primitive votive pictures and other items left in churches by the faithful in order to give thanks, or to act as visible symbols of a prayer for help in curing some disability. In addition to the link to Magritte, there is also one to the work of Frida Kahlo, whose paintings were sometimes based on the retablos found in Mexican churches.

Nevertheless, there are also obvious «classical» elements in Gandolfi's work – for example, there is the acknowledged influence of Piero della Francesca, with his ultra-refined, subtly geometric forms. Gandolfi considers it essential for an artist to possess not only a sound technique, but a keen awareness of past, pre-Modernist achievements. She speaks, for example of the impact made on her by Piero's *Madonna del Parto*, and also by Pontormo's *Deposition* in Florence and Bronzino's *Allegory* (with Venus and Cupid) in London. It is worth noting that these are all three of them paintings with an element of intractable strangeness, of removal from ordinary life.

One might in fact say that the union between strangeness and its opposite – complete familiarity – is one of the most important characteristics of Gandolfi's art.

Like all children, Gandolfi enjoyed making drawings. One of her early memories is of the fate of these drawings, which were dumped in a large earthenware pot by the nuns who taught in her school, then burned. She remembers the smoke going up and thinking that God – who better? – would now be able to see her work. The motif of flames surrounding a body, sometimes seen in her painting (e.g, *Vertigine 3*, 1997) probably stems from this childhood memory, though a comparison can also be made with paintings by Magritte that show musical instruments in flames.

As a young woman, Gandolfi passed through a phase, like many Italian artists of her generation, where she was not making paintings, but was, instead, creating installations and performances – some of these were inspired by Antonin Artaud's writings on the *Theatre of Cruelty*. In particular Artaud's ideas about the fragmentation and recomposition of the body have obvious significance when one is discussing Gandolfi's imagery. Here, for instance, is an Artaud self-portrait in words:

Who am I?
Where do I come from?
I am Antonin Artaud
and I say this
as I know how to say this
immediately
you will see my present body
burst into fragments
and remake itself
under ten thousand notorious aspects
a new body
where you will
never
forget me.

When she began to make paintings, imagery of this kind was a natural resource, not least because it also had links to her inherited Catholic tradition. Among the first severed body parts to appear in her work were severed heads – and here one immediately thinks of all the representations, in Christian art, of the *Decollation of St John the Baptist*, and also of paintings illustrating the story of Judith and Holofernes, in particular two celebrated compositions, one by Caravaggio, the other by Artemisia Gentileschi.

The decision to move back into painting, made at the beginning of the 1980s, was a bold one, since many of the prevailing artistic currents were against it. In particular, many members of the critical and curatorial establishment believed, and continue to believe, that paint on canvas is a medium of expression that has had its day. However, Gandolfi had increasingly come to feel that the Conceptual orthodoxy that had triumphed in the course of the 1970s was too rigid – that it cut artists off from many things that were nourishing in the broad history of art.

In Gandolfi's case, the decision was perhaps a little mitigated by the fact that she has no desire to be thought of as a realist. For her, the anatomies she represents, whether complete or fragmented, are purely mental constructions, things that come from within. They have, she says both psychological and social validity, but are never intended as representations of real events.

Gandolfi is well versed in psychoanalytic doctrine, having undergone analysis herself. She sees her paintings, in one aspect, as therapeutic objects – therapeutic for herself but also therapeutic for the spectator.

Some of her imagery comes directly from dreams, but, unlike the original Surrealists, she regards these dreams as not being completely sacrosanct: that is, she thinks of them as being only part of the creative process, not as things that require completely literal representation. In an interview with the critic Miriam Mirolla, published in *Flash Art* (June/July 1998), Gandolfi noted that «The invention of a painting is something mysterious, which responds to pre-verbal logic and presupposes that the artist can take charge of his or her own libido and transform it in a symbolic statement».

She went on to say that, in her view, this process worked differently for men and for women – that women felt themselves to be naturally divided. Her paintings, therefore, are a form of acting out – dramatisations of aspects of feminine psychology. It is interesting to see how flexible and varied this visual language is. The images do not always rely on the idea of severance or division, though this is undoubtedly prominent in her work.

In *Apparizione di signorina*, for example, the device she uses is simultaneously simple and subtle. A female figure stands before us – fully clothed but barefoot, arms clasped behind her back. Her gaze is direct and candid, apparently untroubled. She is wearing a modest dress, with a high collar. It is this dress that tells the story. The fabric of her costume somehow insists on revealing every detail of the young woman's sex. In her own mind, this woman may possess many interests and attributes. For others, she is primarily a sexual object.

The symbolic language Gandolfi uses makes use both of figures and of inanimate objects. The inanimate elements are usually deliberately commonplace, but often take on double or triple meanings. An example is the electric cord that appears in *Legami elettrizzanti* and *Elettricità nascosta*. In the first of these images, the electric cord, wound round a naked arm, suggests the domestic entanglements that hamper women, and prevent them from exercising their strength and talents to the full. In the second, the meaning is different. The main protagonist is an innocent schoolgirl, portrayed in a way which is reminiscent of old fashioned story books for well brought up middle class children. Above her there appear two sets of bare female arms, manipulating electric cords. The significance seems to be twofold – first, there is the notion that the little girl is a puppet, who is manipulated by adult expectations. Second, there is the idea that she herself already conceals within herself the «electricity» of adulthood – the powerful hidden forces that will shape her character throughout her life.

One particularly important symbol for Gandolfi is the idea of doubles and doubling. This appears in simple form in the two versions of *Donna nasce da donna*. In these one figure grows, or, rather, is pulled, out of another. In the second version one of the figures is nude. This suggests that the free, unconventional personality is being forcibly drawn from a more conventional twin, like a sword from its sheath.

Profumo di violetta also makes use of this motif, but here the figures are not complete. Like Siamese twins, they share the lower part of their body and possess only one pair of legs. Their upper torsos, shoulders, arms and heads are separate. This monstrous double being is clothed in a dress patterned with violets, and one of the twins is apparently preoccupied by a single violet that she holds in her hand. Her sister strains away from her, and seems to look longingly into the distance. Here again one has an emblem of the divided self – of a personality that longs for the tranquillity offered by a purely conventional life, but who finds herself forced to reject this.

Another important symbol in Gandolfi's work is hair – long female tresses in particular. The erotic connotations of women's hair are well known. Orthodox Muslim insistence that a woman's hair must be concealed from the public gaze offers only one instance among many. In Arabic the word *zinah*, which strictly speaking means simply *ornament*, has come to be applied to hair, and the Koran says: «Say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty. They should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their ornaments». The Biblical *Song of Solomon*, on the other hand, celebrates the beloved's hair amongst her other attractions: «Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from Mount Gilead».

Gandolfi's two *Recherche de ma mère* compositions symbolise the absent mother through depictions of her breasts and hair. In *Natività* the reclining infant Jesus floats in a starry sky between tresses of his Mother's hair: the only signs of her presence.

As Mediterranean artist, Gandolfi has ready access to the immense wealth offered by classical legend. The three *Frammenti di Orestide* are comments on a story that inspired all three of the great Greek tragic dramatists – Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. As someone who has experienced psychotherapy at first hand, Gandolfi is undoubtedly well aware of the way in which this cycle of stories has been absorbed into the language of psychoanalytic discourse, providing therapists with archetypes for certain commonly encountered conditions of the human mind and spirit. In an ambitious triptych, the typical fragmentation of the body that appears in so many of her compositions is used to symbolise the dysfunctional nature of the relationships within the House of Atreus. Orestes, the son who is forced to kill his mother in order to avenge her murder of his father, is cut completely in half. From his naked torso protrude alien

legs and arms that enact the sense of struggle he feels within himself, while the wing of an aeroplane speaks of his exile from the family home, and his stealthy return to it.

Clytemnestra, the murderous wife, is also fragmented. There are two pairs of arms in the painting, not just one. One arm wears the sleeve of a man's jacket, and is the presence in the painting of Agamemnon, whom she has hacked in pieces. The others make significant gestures. One points an accusing finger; another brandishes a clenched fist; while the hand of the third and last is covered with blood.

Electra, the bitter princess living like a servant in her detested mother's household, is the only one of the personages in the story who is not fragmented. She hangs upside down, with a great mane of hair falling from her head like a waterfall. Tangled in her hair are the electrical cords that appear in *Legami elettrizzanti* and *Elettricità nascosta*. These suggest her domestic role. Gandolfi once made a man's tie based on this painting, adorned with real hair – a disturbing Surrealist object worthy of Meret Oppenheim.

Gandolfi's *Electra* can be described as «abject», in the sense in which the term is used by George Bataille (1897-1962). Bataille theorised that modern artists were repelled by but at the same time sacralised things which were commonly rejected and despised in society, culture and the human body. The artist's treatment of the body in the paintings devoted to the story of Orestes tends to confirm this view.

The crouching figure in *Cinema Alcyone* and *Santa Rosalia* fits the designation «abject» in a more direct and obvious way. In Greek mythology, Alcyone was the wife of Ceyx, who, grieving over the death of her husband, threw herself into the sea and was transformed into a kingfisher – a bird that was believed to have the power to calm the wind and the waves at the time of the winter solstice, when it made its nest on the sea. Gandolfi suggests the presence of the sea through a lattice-like wooden structure that seems to be the underpinnings of a pier at the seaside. It also suggests the kind of scaffolding that supports cinema billboards. The implication is that Alcyone's grief is somehow theatrical, a matter of creating a public display. However another, earlier painting, *La struttura del Cinema Alcyone* (1990) seems to offer evidence that the cinema is a real seaside building with a personal significance for the artist.

An absolutely identical figure appears in *Santa Rosalia*, painted in the same year (1998). Santa Rosalia, or «La Santuzza» is the patron saint of Palermo. She was a young woman of aristocratic birth, a cousin of King William II of Sicily. In 1159 she retired to a remote cave on Monte Pellegrino, high above the Bay of Palermo, to devote herself to a life of prayer and fasting. Nothing more was heard of her until 1624, when there was a serious outbreak of plague in

Sicily. She then appeared in a vision to a hunter lost of the mountain. She told him she would protect the city, and revealed the site of the cave where she had lived. The hunter alerted the Archbishop of Palermo and the leading men of the city. Her remains were found and paraded through the streets. Within three days the epidemic ended, and Santa Rosalia was proclaimed the patron saint of Palermo.

In this case the nude, crouching woman is shown floating in the sky over Monte Pellegrino, while disembodied hands offer a crown of roses and throw down roses from above. Though the main figure is exactly the same as that in the companion picture, the artist's attitude, here seems considerably more conflicted and ambiguous. Santa Rosalia is shown as an instance of ostentatious female self-abnegation, but she is also someone who is being celebrated, though admittedly with a hint of irony. This painting, made up of different «signs» – body, mountain, hands, roses – which are deliberately kept separate from one another, is one of those that most clearly recalls Mexican *retablos*.

Another example of the use of a symbolic language of this sort in Gandolfi's work is a triptych devoted to the legend of the Magdalen. The saint appears three times – each time as a single standing figure. In the left-hand panel she is nude, arms crossed across her body. Her stance and expression are self-confident, though her face seems a little melancholy. The lower part of her body is clothed – if this is the right word – with disembodied hands. Two clutch at her ankles, as if to hold her in place. Others clutch her thighs, and a pair cover her sex, making a gesture of modesty that she refuses to make of her own volition. The image is most easily read as being that of the independent woman who is doing her best to ignore the conventions imposed by society.

In the middle panel, the figure is fully dressed, though her feet remain bare. She is being stoned, but the stones fly by her without doing any harm. She holds up her hands with an orator's gesture, as if acknowledging an outburst of applause.

The third panel shows the Magdalene nude, but covered by her own hair, just as she is in Donatello's famous statue. The celebrated compilation of the *Lives of the Saints* made by Jacob de Voragine has this to say about the saint's later life, after the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ:

«Mary Magdalene desired meditation and went into the forest wilderness where she lived incognito for thirty years in a place prepared for her by the hands of angels. In this place there were neither fountains nor trees nor grass. This indicates that our Lord did not want to sustain her with earthly food but with heavenly nourishment. Every day she was led to the heavens by the angels – seven times for the seven hours of prayer – and with her own ears she heard the chants of the heavenly hosts. And every day she was taken back to earth with this sweet nourishment so that she never needed earthly food».

Living without clothes, her modesty was protected by the long hair that she had used to wipe the feet of Jesus after she had washed them.

Around this figure float four spectatorial heads – Gandolfi here, as so often elsewhere in her work, is preoccupied with the impact of voyeurism. *Lady Dito* (1998), for instance, alludes to the career of Diana, Princess of Wales, in the public eye. *Chiroghirlanda* (1996) takes the idea a step further. The title is a pun on the word «chirologia» – «finger-talk» – and the painting shows a nude female figure surrounded by detached hands of the sort that figure in *Santa Rosalia* and in many other works by Gandolfi. These hands proffer various objects – one holds a necklace, for example. However another simply points accusingly, while yet another holds a chain that is looped around the woman's ankle.

The *Vertigine* series carries Gandolfi's obsession with the fragmented body to extremes, with arms, torsos, heads and hands floating freely in space. *Vertigine 3*, featuring two torsos, one in flames, recalls not only, as has already been suggested, the work of Magritte, but surviving poem-fragments by the great Greek poet Sappho. Take, for example, these two stanzas from the *Hymn to Aphrodite*:

Then in my bosom my heart wildly flutters,
And, when on thee I gaze never so little,
Bereft am I of all power of utterance,
My tongue is useless.

There rushes at once through my flesh tingling fire,
My eyes are deprived of all power of vision,
My ears hear nothing by sounds of winds roaring,
And all is blackness.

The kind of emotion one finds in the poem also seems to exist in the pictorial image, which is about emotional disequilibrium.

Gandolfi's paintings seem to fall into two basic categories. There are the «learned images», such as *Cleopatra* (1997) and *Scissione di Paolina* (1996) – the latter a witty deconstruction of Canova's famous sculpture representing Napoleon's sister, Princess Pauline Borghese. And there are paintings where the image is purely subjective, as it is, for instance in *Peregrinazione verso me stessa* (1995), or *Fuori di sé* (1995).

A great many of works that fall into the second category seem to be attempts to come to terms, not simply with the life-experience of the artist, but with the female body, which Gandolfi thinks of as being in some way incoherent. The *Disgiunzione* series of 1995 expresses this feeling well. It also expresses feelings of social constraint. For example *Disgiunzione 2* features a hooded female figure bent towards the ground, blindly feeling her way. Above her floats a

cluster of heads, some female, some androgynous. It is not certain if these are the possibilities that the hood conceals, or if they are in fact simply witnesses to the main protagonists' distress.

Other paintings of the same period, such as *Tenebre visibili* (1995) seem to put the blame squarely on male-female relationships. Here a woman has her eyes and mouth covered by the hands of the man who stands behind her. Without his permission she can neither see nor speak.

There is a definite break between these more recent works and those that Gandolfi produced earlier, at the very end of the 1980s and during the first half of the 1990s. One of the earlier paintings included here is *Salomé* (1989). The subject rationalises, so to speak, the favourite Gandolfi motif of a severed head or heads. One interesting thing about the composition, however, is that this decapitated head is associated with shoes. In Freudian terms, decapitation images are a displacement – they are usually understood as metaphors for castration. Similarly, shoes, especially women's shoes, are a symbolic representation of the vagina (though, confusingly, they can also be stand-ins for the phallus). Salome, whose pose and expression are both conspicuously melancholy, is therefore contemplating, not so much the savage cruelty of the deed which she has been responsible for, but a failure of sexual relationships.

One feature of these earlier paintings that does not appear in the later ones is the fact that the figures are placed in «real», if obviously simplified settings. These settings can be referred both to Giorgio de Chirico's early paintings of deserted piazzas and to the early work of Carlo Carrà. A few of Gandolfi's paintings of the late 1980s, such as *Mercati Generali* (1989) are pure landscapes, without figures. Interestingly enough, the buildings she chooses to depict are always modern. Architecturally, they belong to a very specific tradition, which descends from the leading architects of the Fascist period, such as Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960) to Aldo Rossi (1931-1997). They represent an aspect of Italian landscape and cityscape which is intimately linked to the sensibility of the present day.

When Rossi was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 1990, the citation from the jury read in part:

«Rossi has been able to follow the lessons of classical architecture without copying them; his buildings carry echoes from the past in their use of forms that have a universal, haunting quality. His work is at once bold and ordinary, original without being novel, refreshingly simple in appearance but extremely complex in content and meaning».

This is true. Yet it is also true to say that Fascist and Rossi-esque buildings in the environs of Rome often have a strangely bleak and melancholy quality. Gandolfi uses them to convey a sense of displacement that is different from, and much bleaker than, the sense of displacement felt in De Chirico's early piazzas.

Good examples of this are to two versions of *Stazione Ostiense* (1990), both of which show a woman waiting alone on the platform of a suburban train station.

Not all the protagonists in this early series are female. *Pastificio Pantanella* (1990) shows a man with a bare torso who covers his eyes in a gesture familiar from other paintings by Gandolfi. One can comment that a surprising number of her images are about refusing to see what is there – a paradox in the work of a painter.

It is generally only in these fairly early works that one finds identifiably narrative elements. *Incontro Prenestino* (1992), where one woman restrains another, holding her companion's arm as she tugs to get away, is a case in point. The two women, maybe mother and daughter, since one is much taller and more solidly built than the other, encapsulate a narrative about a continuing mother-daughter rivalry – a struggle for control within the family.

This painting represents a road not taken in Gandolfi's work. Paradoxically, it is also one of the works that links her most closely to the main *Novecento* tradition in Italian art. There are even traces of the influence of Mario Sironi.

Gandolfi's choice of direction makes an early appearance in another painting of the same year, *Corsia di sorpasso* (1992). This shows a figure seated in the middle of a roadway, anxiously holding her face in her two hands, in the attitude of someone who is unable to reach a decision. Above her there are six outstretched arms – a very early example of the appearance of these detached limbs in Gandolfi's work. Three of the arms make gestures associated with the children's game «Scissors, Paper, Stone». This game is an effort to guess one's opponent's intentions – scissors cut paper, but break on stone; paper wraps stone, but is cut by scissors; stone breaks scissors, but is wrapped and made harmless by paper.

In the context of the game, all these gestures imply hostility. The other three arms, however, make gestures of a very different type. The left-hand middle hand offers a handshake to the clenched fist of «stone». The two upper hands extent fingertips in a gesture reminiscent of the encounter between Michelangelo's Creator and his Adam in the Sistine Chapel.

It is characteristic of Gandolfi's work that this compositional idea is re-employed in a different form later on. In *Santa Lucia* (1995), the female figure has her hands to her eyes, which, according to Christian legend were plucked out by her tormentors. A pair of arms holding these eyes appear above her, perhaps ready to restore her sight. Above these, again, is an additional pair of arms, one bearing a flame, the other stretching to take it. The fire symbolises the attempt made to burn the saint alive, which failed because the bundles of wood surrounding her were miraculously extinguished.

Here Gandolfi seems to identify herself with the sufferings of a female martyr, but it is also evident that she has an identification with Mediterranean, Catholic culture, as well as with classical myths and legends from the same region. St Lucy, like Santa Rosalia, is a Sicilian personage – she came from Syracuse. It is abundantly clear that the symbolic language of Catholicism is an important element in Gandolfi's art, and that even paintings that do not have overt religious meanings need to be read with an awareness of this fact.

In other paintings of the mid 1990s, the theme is not disembodied limbs but disembodied heads. As has already been said, images of severed heads are associated, in Freudian theory, with anxieties concerning castration. Freud argued that women could not suffer from anxieties of this sort because physically they had no phallus or testicles to worry about. This generalisation has been much contested since.

In Gandolfi's case, the anxiety does not seem to be anything to do with the idea of sexual potency, but, rather, with that of the integrity of the self. This is confirmed by some of her titles – for instance *Itinerario verso me stessa* (1993) and *Peregrinazione verso me stessa* (1995). In the first of these a female figure is seen seated on a chair in the middle of a highway, whose presence is indicated by a single white line. She looks back towards the horizon, and planted between her feet, placed on a small pedestal, is a head of indeterminate sex. In *Peregrinazione* the figure reclines in the roadway, looking upward with a mixture of fear and puzzlement, while above her float both male and female heads, together with some disembodied hands. These seem to be emblems of the various identities available to her.

By the mid 1990s, however, a subtle shift had begun to take place in Gandolfi's work. In the two paintings I have just discussed the symbolism could be described as essentially «external», in the sense that the female personage who is the principal subject is not herself fragmented, but is assailed by emotions and feelings, expressed in symbolic form, that seem to come from outside of herself. This is not the case with other work made at about the same moment, and often subsequently.

The paintings of the *Disgiunzione* series, as has already been noted, represent and enact Gandolfi's feeling that women are naturally divided. They also seem to me to be about something else: the tension of putting together a viable life in the context of the contemporary world. The body is not simply divided. It grows extra limbs *Disgiunzione 1*, (1995), or swells to monstrous proportions, as an alternative to becoming fragmented.

One of the truly problematic features of contemporary art is its relationship to the idea of subject matter. In the pre-Modern epoch the subject was perhaps the most obvious element in any art work – its actual *raison d'être*. This was self-

evidently true during the time when what we now call an «artist» and what we call an «artisan» or «craftsman» were not fully distinguishable. The artist worked for a patron, secular or ecclesiastical, and it was the patron, essentially, who decided what the subject of the work would be.

The decision was facilitated by the fact that this subject-matter was taken from a more or less standard repertoire of myths and stories. Where this was not the case, as with landscapes or still lifes, both artist and patron had a well-understood structure of artistic genres to offer a point of reference. A gradual rise in the status of the artist led to an increasing focus on the creative personality, as opposed to what was actually created. The meaning of the work was coloured and inflected by the spectator's knowledge of, and attitude towards, the personality that created it. Among the key documents for an understanding of this process are the biographies of Michelangelo written by Giorgio Vasari and Ascanio Condivi – contemporaries who actually knew him.

The shift in attitudes towards the personality of the creative artist then passed through several further stages – the stage represented by Caravaggio and Salvator Rosa; the stage represented by artists of the Romantic period, such as Géricault and Delacroix; the stage represented by immediate pre-Modernists, such as Van Gogh and Gauguin. Increasingly biography tended to triumph over product – or, to put matters more precisely, what the artist produced was increasingly seen simply as the validation of something with much wider implications – the independent creative personality locked in a struggle to understand the contingent universe.

The spectator – the person who experienced the artwork – became, not a patron nor even a community with specific social needs that the artist was asked to fulfil, but the essential witness to this struggle. In other words, what we call «art» in contemporary terms is increasingly a matter of intangibles. It depends on our attitude towards a particular person who claims to be an artist, and not specifically on any object that he or she may happen to produce.

One can compare contemporary attitudes to certain internationally celebrated artists, especially those whose reputation rests on performance work, installations or conceptual pieces, to those adopted by medieval society towards certain visionary saints. This saints enforced belief through charismatic personalities – and also because of the will to believe felt by those who surrounded them.

This, essentially, is the immediate background to Paola Gandolfi's career. In her case, several additional points need to be made if her situation is to be fully understood. The first of these, of course, is the fact that, having been a conceptual and performance artist at her beginnings, she elected to return to the traditional medium of paint on canvas – though more recently she has been making ceramic sculpture and videos in addition to making paintings. Can we

assume that, because she does this, she is in fact a kind of crypto-traditionalist, in revolt against the current of the times?

I don't believe that anyone who looks at her mature work carefully could believe this is true. The paintings are essentially a vehicle for a complex language of signs, whose main subject is the female body and the female personality. There are many instances in world culture of paint being used in this way. Some of the most specific occur in Africa, in the symbolic paintings made on the walls of sacred buildings and enclosures devoted to traditional animist cults. In general, it is not what western society thinks painting should be about. To work in the way she does is radical, not conservative.

Another point is that the «charismatic» artists I have mentioned, from Marcel Duchamp to Joseph Beuys, have almost invariably have been male. The very few women who might fit into this category, such as Frida Kahlo or Louise Bourgeois, all, at a second glance, reveal themselves as special cases. Kahlo, for example, only became a cult figure after her death, when she was taken up by the feminist movement in the United States. The fulsome praise lavished on her by her Mexican contemporaries, among them her husband Diego Rivera, contains an only half-concealed element of condescension.

Kahlo was unusual in coming from a Catholic background. On the whole, the art produced by the late 20th century feminist movement, the bulk of it from the United States, did not share this kind of cultural experience. Feminism, indeed, can perhaps be defined as essentially «protestant», in the sense that it challenges social norms and claims to know better than established authority.

Gandolfi is also extremely unusual in being not only a visibly feminist artist from a Catholic, Mediterranean culture, but one who actively refuses to surrender the benefits of that culture. She makes use of the best of its traditions without surrendering her own principles. At the moment, there is no Italian artist who is exactly like her. Her work stands alone in its courage as well as in its originality.

Edward Lucie-Smith