

SAGGI – ESSAYS

GIRLS' BODIES: OPPRESSED, FORGOTTEN, LIBERATED.
A CROSS-READING BETWEEN CHILD
AND GENDER PEDAGOGY

CORPI DI RAGAZZE: OPPRESSI, DIMENTICATI,
LIBERATI. UNA LETTURA INCROCIATA
TRA INFANZIA E PEDADOGIA DI GENERE

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We are born either female or male and become women and men through a long and arduous process of socialisation aimed at creating a clear and unequivocal link between sexual belonging and gender identity. A constitutive part of this gender-role training process is the disciplining of children's bodies, which is particularly oppressive in the case of girls. Starting from these premises, the essay will intersect the analytical tools of Childhood Education and those of Gender Education in the aim of investigating on one hand, the cultural and social cages that have historically moulded girls' bodies, and on the other, the unprecedented spaces of exploration and experimentation of diverse types of corporeity. More specifically, while drawing on the new "little girl" models conveyed by children's books, we will also look at contemporary figurative art and at the work of several female artists committed to deconstructing the stereotypes of feminine childhood.

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Si nasce femmine e maschi e si diventa donne e uomini tramite un lungo e faticoso processo di socializzazione volto a creare un collegamento netto e inequivocabile tra l'appartenenza sessuale e l'identità di genere. Parte costitutiva di questo processo di addestramento ai ruoli di genere è il disciplinamento dei corpi infantili, che risulta particolarmente oppressivo nel caso delle bambine. Partendo da queste premesse il saggio interseca gli strumenti di analisi della Pedagogia dell'infanzia e quelli della Pedagogia di genere per esplorare, da un lato, le gabbie culturali e sociali che storicamente hanno plasmato i corpi delle bambine e, dall'altro, gli inediti spazi di esplorazione e di sperimentazione di corporeità differenti. In particolare, da un lato si attingerà ai nuovi modelli di "bambina" veicolati dai libri per l'infanzia e dall'altro si guarderà all'arte figurativa contemporanea e al lavoro di alcune artiste impegnate nella decostruzione degli stereotipi dell'infanzia al femminile.

1. Moving bodies: girls in children's books

One is born female or male, one becomes a woman or a man, through a long and difficult path of socialisation which leads children to assimilate the features, roles and behaviour society expects from them (Gianini Belotti, 1973). The split between male and female destinies is structured from very early childhood, when we begin to weave a different biographical path for boys and girls through a series of small daily choices, which become almost automatic: buying a doll for the little girl and a toy car for the little boy becomes a simple routine act, as does scolding a little girl for being too lively and stimulating the little boy to be active, and again, mocking the little boy who cries because he behaves like a "sissy", while at the same time accepting as natural for the little girl to express her feelings and weaknesses (Biemmi, 2017, p. 39). The formation of male and female roles is so precocious that its effects risk being mistaken for "natural" when in fact they are the inevitable outcome of precise and proven pro-

cesses of socialisation and education that create a forced link between sexual belonging and gender identity (Batini, 2011; Ruspini, 2009).

A constitutive part of this gender role *training* process is the disciplining of children's bodies, which is particularly oppressive in the case of girls. The fact that we perceive sex-based differentiation of male and female roles as socially inevitable, something inherent in the natural order of things, is the clearest proof of the fact that it rests on sedimented and naturalised social patterns (Bourdieu, 1998/1999), absorbed from very early childhood. In this gender role training, children's books play a crucial role.

As we know, children's literature is a precious and inexhaustible heritage for the construction of identity and for the initiation into society of everyone, as well as for the formation of the individual and collective imagination (Cagnolati & Articoni, 2020; Cambi & Cives, 1996). The stories children are told greatly affect the development of their identity because they provide simplified models with which it is easy to identify. In particular, as far as gender identity is concerned, stories propose models of masculinity-femininity, and implicitly call upon their readers to go along with them by identifying with the character belonging to their same sex. The problem is that these models are often rigid, stereotyped, anachronistic and tend to confirm the gender imagery already internalised by the childhood world in the family environment rather than proposing alternative narratives capable of broadening the horizons of what is possible.

In this universe of the imaginary and the symbolic, the female world has long been obscured by a male protagonism and activism that has relegated women and girls to secondary roles of little interest. It is in particular female childhood that has been removed and marginalised in narrative (Beseghi, 1992), just as it has been – more generally – ousted from historiographic investigation for a long time (Ulivieri, 1999). The long silence that has shrouded the history of girls' education (Seveso, 2001) has seen children's literature as a faithful accomplice: the "paper girls" – those imagined and recounted in literature – appear as "pink

shadows" (Beseghi 1987), relegated to marginal roles of little interest (Lazzarato & Ziliotto, 1987), often represented in the guise of the «persecuted and oppressed little girl» (Ulivieri, 1995, p. 71).

Fortunately, not all publishing production for children fits this pattern. Indeed, one can trace a parallel path, studded with publishing series that present alternative visions and courageous books that experiment with "different" models of girls.

The first major publishing experience in our country that experimented with *counter-narratives* in the area of gender representations was undoubtedly that of the publishing house *Dalla parte delle bambine* ("On the Girls' Side"). During the feverish 1970s, the theme of the sexist imagery conveyed by children's literature found new spaces for investigation, reflection, and experimentation. The watchword became – precisely – "on the girls' side", an explicit reference to the book of the same name by Elena Gianini Belotti (1973) in which she ruthlessly denounced the sexist practices implemented daily in the family and at school, which overwhelmingly damaged girls' self-esteem, opportunities and, ultimately, their plans and dreams.

Dalla parte delle bambine ("On the Girls' Side") is much more than a book: it is a true manifesto that generated a cultural movement from below, capable of transversally involving civil society, schools, and even publishing for children. It was in this climate of cultural ferment that the small publishing house *Dalla parte delle bambine* was founded in Milan in the mid-1970s, active until 1982, publishing non-fiction books for adults (Gianini Belotti, 1978; Pizzoli, 1987) but also a successful series of illustrated books that for the first time in Italy presented the issue of equality between sexes to a very special audience: boys and girls. The project *Dalla parte delle bambine* aims to weave a link between the demands and claims of feminist political movements and the world of school and education: since girls, future women, have historically been the parties most damaged by sexist education, the project is expressly dedicated to them (although the ambition to involve readers of both sexes, and possibly their parents, emerges implicitly).

The historical publishing house stands out not only for its avant-garde content (some of the topics dealt with were taboo in those years: the conditioning of the girl child as a sex object, the family and the sexual division of roles, the male monopoly of culture, divorce, friendship and love between women) but also for its impact on the market: the books were translated in quick succession into French, English, Spanish, German, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish, achieving excellent sales results. The most successful illustrated books bear the signatures of Adela Turin herself and the illustrator Nella Bosnia¹. These stories offer a series of female heroines who are united by an uneasiness linked to their sexuality and, at the same time, by a precise desire to break the mould imposed by tradition in order to finally break out of those enclosures – even if gilded or “rose-coloured” – that limit their possibilities of playing an active role in the world.

The heroine par excellence of this saga of feminist fairy tales is undoubtedly Pasqualina, the “rebellious” little elephant protagonist of *Rosaconfetto* (Turin, 1976). The illustrated book focuses on the awareness of the discrimination suffered by the little elephant girl, and the desire for redemption and social liberation that goes hand in hand with the liberation of her body. This is the opening of the story: «Once upon a time, in the land of elephants, there was a tribe in which the females had large, bright eyes and skin the colour of baby pink. This beautiful colour was due to the fact that the elephants ate only peonies and anemones from day one. Not that peonies and anemones were exactly delicious to eat. But – this yes – they conferred a smooth, pink skin and beautiful, bright eyes». The only plan the elephant parents have in store for their daughters is the classic marriage design; but to find a husband, you know, you have to be attractive: «Little girls – said the fathers – if you don't eat all the anemones, if you don't finish the

¹ The best known are *Rosaconfetto* (1976), *La vera storia dei bonobo con gli occhiali* (“The True Story of the Spectacled Bonobo”) (1976), *Arturo e Clementina* (“Arturo and Clementine”) (1977), and *Una fortunata catastrofe* (“A Lucky Disaster”) (1977).

peonies, you will never become as beautiful and pink as your mother, you will never have bright eyes, and no one will want to marry you when you are older». This is why the female baby elephants spend their days in a small garden enclosed by a fence, eating peonies and anemones, cultivating their beauty, while the males – elephant grey – are able to «play in the fragrant savannah, eat green grass, spill water and mud on themselves, take siestas under the trees». This educational project reserved for the little elephant girls does not have the desired effect on Pasqualina who remains «that ugly grey colour that does not befit an elephant girl»². So the parents, disappointed and bitter, are finally forced to give up their plans for their daughter. Finally free, the elephant girl leaves the enclosure and begins to explore the world, just like the male elephants.

If we analyse picture book by focusing on the illustrations, we can identify two macro-themes that act as a red thread in the visual narrative: the first is the dichotomy of *enclosed female space vs. open male space*, the second is *female staticity vs. male dynamism*. Pasqualina and her friends are depicted inside an enclosure and live out their days doing activities (playing, eating) within this closed, circumscribed space. The movements of their bodies are thus restricted in space and movement: the elephant girls move slowly, gracefully, with gestures and movements that seem naturally delicate, when in fact they are the result of rigorous training imparted to the young elephant girls by the adults in the herd. Further restraining the little girls' bodies and gestures is a specially designed outfit for the females: pink slippers, pink embroidered collars, and a bow at the end of the tail. This makes the baby ele-

² It should be noted that this educational project aims to artificially create differences between males and females that are completely unnatural (since "Nature" created both grey), while passing them off as innate/natural. Turin's fairy tale goes right to the heart of an issue that is still debated today in the field of gender studies: the processes of the "biologisation" or "naturalisation" of the social that underlie those ideological paradigms that tend to justify both sexist and racist discrimination. For a critical study, I refer to Rivera (2010) and Campani (2000).

phants look “beautiful”, well-groomed, princess-like. The male elephants are protagonists of the open space: they are outside the enclosure and live freely in the savannah, playing with water, getting dirty, exploring the world without fear. All male elephants are depicted in dynamic positions, never static or contemplative. Unlike their female peers, they have no trappings or embellishments: beauty, for them, is not an important requirement. Pasqualina, in her action of claiming to be herself, breaks both moulds: she comes out of the enclosure and enters the open space with confidence and enthusiasm; she starts running, playing, jumping, and getting dirty in the mud puddles, indifferent to the canons of beauty imparted by society.

The publishing experiment *Dalla parte delle bambine* ended in the early 1980s, but the legacies of that experience are still alive. Firstly, because many of the illustrated books published under the *Dalla parte delle bambine* label have been reprinted and can still be found in bookshops today³; secondly because new publishing houses and children's book series have picked up the baton in recent years. From 2011 to 2014, publishing houses (Settenove, Lo Stampatello) and series (“Sottosopra” published by EDT-Giralangolo) were born in Italy, entirely dedicated to breaking down sexist stereotypes, promoting a culture of equality, eradicating the cultural roots of gender violence, and presenting new models of family and couple relationships. A survey conducted by Biemmi (2018) on a sample of illustrated books published in Italy between 1998 and 2017 shows that the undisputed protagonists of this little yet big cultural revolution are precisely the girls: cou-

³ *Rosaconfetto, La vera storia dei bonobo con gli occhiali, Arturo e Clementina, Una fortunata catastrofe, Le cinque mogli di Barba-brizzolata, Maiepoimai, Melaraconti, and Storia di Panini* were republished, from 1999 to 2001, first in France, in the prestigious series “Les grands livres” by Acted Sud Junior, and then in Italy in the series “i Velieri” by Motta Junior. In 2009, four of these illustrated stories (*Rosaconfetto, La vera storia dei bonobo con gli occhiali, Arturo e Clementina, Una fortunata catastrofe*) were collected in the book *Rosaconfetto e le altre storie*, and in 2016 *Rosaconfetto* was reprinted in a separate volume, again by the publisher Motta Junior.

rageous, enterprising, moving and transforming girls, eager to be known and recognised in their own identity and planning, outside the gender tracks.

I will focus on two booklets that are particularly appropriate for analysing the *moving bodies* of little girls: *Amelia che sapeva volare* ("Amelia who knew how to fly") (Dal Corso & Volpari, 2015) and *La principessa e il drago* ("The princess and the dragon") (Munsch & Martchenko, 2014), both part of the series "Sottosopra" (EDT-Giralangolo).

The first features the American aviator Amelia Earhart, who in 1932 was the first woman in the world to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. The author of the illustrated book, Mara Dal Corso, sketches Amelia's childhood in a poetic and evocative book, enriched by Daniela Volpari's illustrations. Amelia, even as a child, is well aware of her talent and passion, firm and tenacious in claiming her dreams: «My name is Amelia, I am ten years old and I can fly. In the mirror I look different, I put on my glasses and go. I have a notebook. I paste photos of women of great achievements into it. One day I will be there too». Amelia has the chance to experiment and make mistakes, and then try again, thanks to an open and encouraging family:

[t]he first time I flew I skinned my knee. With the help of my uncle I had built a launching ramp that went up on the roof of the tool shed. "One, two...three!" I can still hear his shout as he pushed me up to the highest point. The sky was big, blue. I felt as if I could smell the clouds. I spread my wings and flew. That time was short-lived, I landed with my knees on the grass. But I understood what I wanted.

The eleven double-page spreads that make up the book are a hymn to freedom, to pride in oneself and one's body, to the freedom to experiment and to make mistakes, perhaps even skinning one's knees. Amelia subverts the canons of "feminine" beauty and grace: yet, in her tomboy clothes, she is immensely beautiful, elegant, powerful. A strong aspirational model for girl readers.

Equally unprecedented and powerful is the character of Elisabeth, the protagonist of the illustrated book *La principessa e il*

drago (Munsch & Martchenko, 2014). The story tells of a beautiful princess, betrothed to a handsome prince, whose life is turned upside down by a treacherous dragon who tears down her castle, turns her sumptuous dresses to ash, and kidnaps her betrothed. But the princess does not give up: she manages to defeat the dragon through her cunning and free her betrothed, only to come to the realisation that it is better to continue the journey without him («And so it was that those two never got married after all»).

Michael Martchenko's illustrations nicely stage Elisabeth's metamorphosis: on the opening page, the young protagonist is portrayed wearing a crown on her head, neatly combed, smiling while wearing a splendid princely dress. In the scene immediately following – after the fire set by the dragon – Elisabeth is portrayed naked, with her hair scorched, her body blackened by smoke and a frowning look on her face. From the third panel until the end of the story, Elisabeth appears in her new guise: bare-foot, with a paper bag as her dress and the ashen crown on her head. And it is in this new guise that the girl is transformed into a true heroine: intelligent, courageous, ironic, enterprising. Once again, female empowerment is achieved through a liberation of the body. And as we will see in the next paragraph, the art of the Seventies will be a powerful detonator to this acknowledgement.

2. *Body art and body liberation through art*

«I am my own pain and my own fever»: Javier Marías (2002) used these to express – in a poetically exemplary fashion – the condition of the post-modern subject when faced by the laceration of being alive (p. 30). I choose them to introduce the theme of this paragraph, because they seem to me to aptly summarise the meaning of the body art experience for contemporary art and culture. Body art was a crucial moment in the second half of the 20th century and made a fundamental contribution to the rediscovery and recovery of the body as a vehicle for artistic and hu-

man expression in general. In Western societies of the 1970s, expressing oneself through the body could not fail to take on a political and highly polemical value. Artistic work with and on the body was in fact part of a broader collective movement of thought seeking the revision of socially acquired codes and conventions. In those days, stripping the body, exhibiting it naked and giving vent to its most intimate functions, presenting its sensory and erotic potential, meant, on a moral level, openly transgressing one of the most profound taboos upholding social codes and conventions. Denuding the body, exhibiting it, sharing it in the aesthetic experience of a performance broke all the interdictions which sought to regulate the dualism mind/body, culture/nature, logos/eros, and to redeem from its secular subalterity the carnal, material dimension of humanity. It meant deactivating the sense of guilt that accompanies transgression, thanks to which social sanction can effectively curb any impulse that deviates from the norm. Taboo channels towards pre-constituted social relations that ultimately require the individual to sacrifice his or her bodily dimension, to renounce inhabiting his or her body.

On the physiological level, the body of the boy and girl is from earliest childhood subjected to careful and thorough treatment and is the target of rigid and absolute conditioning: food is taken at predetermined and fixed times; they learn at an early age to control every vital process that concerns the body; erotic urges are soon associated towards specific and exclusive functions, and this to a more rigid extent for girls, with the absolute connection of erotic pleasure to the reproductive apparatus that they carry within themselves (Lonzi, 1974, pp. 77-140). Aesthetically, the body has been clothed, made up and "embellished" according to the canons of social conformism, which block it by transforming it into an object: the body is packaged and socialised, from a living body it becomes an artificial image or mask of the self. The adult body is a body socially set up so that it acts in an orderly and predictable manner according to the functions transmitted and assigned by the social apparatus. The body presents itself to

life already cut out like a ready-to-wear dress to be worn correctly and already appropriately mutilated of those aspects that would allow a dynamic, multiform, original personality to filter through, in a word, free.

In the 1960s-1970s, a sort of labour broke out that through a multiplicity of forms and experiences shook the prison of the body. This can be seen in psychology and philosophy, in pedagogy and sociology: there is a convergence towards a global revision of the social rhythms imposed on this fragile envelope, which in reality is not a mere envelope at all. The artistic disciplines make a fundamental contribution to this turmoil, showing in the most explicit and radical ways how social conformism has caged bodies to act on minds. What the performance of body art manages to provoke is the unleashing of an inner process. It is not trivially the philological critique of conservative values, nor is it the literal deconstruction of stereotypes or the questioning of the relationships of force and power that operate on a social level. It is rather the recomposition of that dichotomy through the recovery of the relational, communicative, social dimension of the human body as such. Through gestures and actions that wound, hit, cut or humiliate the body, the artist shows the wounds, blows, cuts and humiliations to which each of us is subjected by the fact that we live in a society that continually demands that we sacrifice the deepest and most human part of who we are.

When, in the mid-1970s, body art began to emerge on the Italian scene, Lea Vergine, one of the first critics ready to grasp its revolutionary scope, spoke of it in these terms (Palazzoli, 1974):

In general, it is women [...] who are less afraid of knowing their bodies, who do not censor them. They make attempts at rediscovery beyond acculturation.

These women have had political experiences, they have then moved on to feminist experiences that have provided them with a key to deculturising the conventional relationship with the body which, if in some cases it merely empties a culture, in others it succeeds in reaching that zero point, that blank slate on which it can be reconstructed (p. 54).

Here it seems appropriate to recall the work of three women artists who at different times have reached that “zero point”, giving us the experience of a blank slate on which to reflect. Since the 1970s, the condition of female subalternity has been at the centre of the work of Gina Pane (1939-1990), one of the most significant representatives of body art. In 1972, in Los Angeles,



Image n. 1a.
G. Pane, *White doesn't exist*, Los Angeles, 1972

of the spectators dressed in white and holding a bouquet of red roses in her hands and pulls out the thorns one by one, wounding her arms and letting the blood stain her dress. Blood is the central element of Gina Pane's performances until the 1980s: mutilating her own body was the most direct way of sharing women's pain and standing up to it in front of the spectators' eyes extends the experience by making it a political issue in the full sense of the term.

this artist staged an action entitled *White does not exist* (image on the left): in front of a crowd of spectators, Pane repeatedly wounded her face with a razor blade in an attempt to free herself from the aesthetic cage in which as a woman she was forced to live. Each self-inflicted cut symbolises the wounds, trauma, and abuse that every woman suffers due to aesthetic pre-conceptions. A few months later, she made the performance entitled *Azione sentimentale* (image on the right), in Milan in 1973.

The artist ap-



Image n. 1b.
G. Pane, *Azione sentimentale*, Milan, 1973

Nan Goldin (1953) is an American photographer who has been engaged since the 1980s in exploring the dimension of family, gender, and intergenerational relationships in her artistic work.



Image n. 2.

N. Goldin, *Nan one month after being battered*, 1984

Her most famous exhibition bears the title *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (image on the left). It was produced in 1985 and consists of a slideshow of around 700 photographs taken since 1979. Among the most significant photos are those depicting the artist herself one month after having been raped by her partner: a sort of ante litteram selfie

in which the bruises are shown, screamed at without any filter. If there is an image that proclaims the moment the private sphere broke into the stage, it is Nan Goldin's self-portrait with her swollen face and her gaze pointed at the observer. Everything that society refuses to see is exposed with crudity and disarming simplicity: a woman's face disfigured by a man's violence (Johnson, 2016).

The artistic trajectory of ORLAN (1947), a French performer, leads body art to some of its most extreme approaches. From 1986 to 1993, the artist was the protagonist of a series of surgical performances entitled *The Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN* (image on the right). Her studio was transformed into an operating theatre in which the artist herself underwent successive operations to modify her appearance, recording everything on video or broadcasting live via satellite. Through sculpting operations carried out by inserting prostheses to modify her face, she shattered the ulti-



Image n. 3.

ORLAN, *Omniprésence*, France, 1993

mate dogma: that of innateness, of the immutability of the body understood as soma, and with this on the one hand any stereotype of beauty was swept away, and on the other hand the possibility of giving expression to hybrid, fluid identities, always in transformation beyond any cage that wants to hold them back and hypostasise them, was opened up in the most radical way.

3. ...and girls' bodies?

If it is true that the androcentric structure of Western society is evident from the very analysis of language, then this also applies to the language of the figurative arts. Language is closely connected with thought, and we know that while we communicate with ourselves or others, we are simultaneously giving meaning to reality and a worldview. We know how historically speaking, iconography has been the producer of models and values, as well as the site of their visible manifestation. We have known this since Philippe Ariés' pioneering studies on childhood in medieval and modern art (1960/2002). For a long time, art and painting in particular was required not so much to imitate reality as to hypostatise it (Scolaro, 2004, pp. 34-36): it is not by chance that childhood appears late in life and when it does, it is mostly in the form of the portrait. What the artist can grasp of childhood is not the singularity of the child, its individuality, but rather the immutability of the archetypes of childhood that time and culture express in relation to the boy, and much less frequently to the girl. If the infant Jesus for centuries was not a child but a pure and absolute symbol, in the same way cherubs, angels and cupids have been symbols represented by resorting to idealisation. Much has also been written on this (Becchi, 1994/2002, pp. 37-85).

It took the revolution of contemporaneity and the discovery of the individual as the pivotal category around which the universe of culture, science and political and social doctrines are reorganised, for the allegorical in art to leave room for the expression of the unrepeatable and the singular. A supremely bourgeois

and 19th-century category on which a new ethics is built; and the portrait remains the form of depiction of childhood par excellence, but is now associated with the situation, the context, the circumstance that is not merely an abstract, metaphorical or symbolic background, but real, lived life: real children studying, playing, toiling, bored, in short, performing acts. From symbolic iconography to static frontality to portraits in situation: there is a slow and certainly non-linear becoming that goes in the direction of life; lime or marble icons that first become flesh faces framed in complex symbolism and finally individual bodies capable of moving, of acting, of doing. Obviously the how and the what rarely concerns them.

Finally, in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, art breaks down and becomes something other than itself: it deconstructs and interrogates rather than affirms the sense and meaning of reality, including, and indeed all the more so, individual reality (Desideri & Cantelli, 2008, pp. 535-538). The individual becomes the subject, and the discourse becomes complicated. Art even casts doubt on itself and the question concerns not only aesthetic theories, styles and poetics, and aims, if they are actually preserved. Art breaks down its limits and crosses unconscious and obscure dimensions. The unexpected breaks through and with it the disconcerting. Painting is increasingly an analysis, an excavation into the depths or towards the surface. In these scenarios, unprecedented and hitherto unthinkable possibilities open up: women in painting, artists capable of new looks at divergent subjects. And then, finally, the girl child. Or rather, the girl child in art. The contemporary visual arts scene is populated by the feminine, and it is interesting to see how they become a place of backward reconstruction of a subjectivity recovered through gender. Like literature in the 19th century, painting in the 20th century is a new frontier for thinking about and expressing the feminine (Beseghi, 1994, pp. 67-68). A central problem in post-modern reflection is the definition of a gender identity to be sought in the recomposition of the binomial nature/culture and biology/history. Also in art, as in every other cultural sphere of

the last quarter of the century, there are women who have opened a profound debate on this issue (Vettese, 2006). I therefore close this contribution by recalling the works of a number of women artists who have placed at the centre of their art an open critique of the stereotypes that fuel social representations of the feminine, working in particular on the basis of bodies.

In every society, the attribute of beauty is by no means ambiguous, but rather absolute: rather than a traditional value to be



Image n. 4.
K. Smith, *Wolf-Girl*, 1999

handed down early on to the young and very young so that they may take it on as a rule of life, today beauty seems the very essence of the feminine, in every sphere and from every perspective. Kiki Smith (1954), an eclectic artist and leading figure on the contemporary art scene, expresses her personal vision of feminine beauty in many works, turning its meaning upside down to transform it into its opposite. Take *Wolf-Girl*, for example, an etching that is part of a cycle of illustrations published in 1999 by the New York publisher Pace

Prints (image on the left): what does the portrait of a wolf-girl represent if not a eulogy of deformity that, by erasing sexual connotations, takes on a liberating characteristic on an existential level (Weitman, 2003, p. 25)? Here then, representing or self-representing oneself in the form of the monstrous emancipates from the insecurity of the obligation to beauty conferred by current conventional canons on the feminine: it is an authentic transfiguration of reality through its reversal into its opposite disvalue, a gesture that destroys the limits imposed on the free unfolding of female subjectivity in this time. In the massified and conformist society, built on hyper-consumption and the waste of stuff and life, dominated by plastic pseudo-values fed by the image industry that calls the authenticity of the body a defect, when not a disease, celebrating the hyperbolic ugliness of the wolf-child has nothing less than the objective of reminding us of our hu-

manity and, at the same time, confronts us with those dark traits of ferocity, wickedness and evil that representations inspired by childlike tenderness and innocence can at best exorcise, but never definitively erase (Hass, 2018).



Image n. 5a.
K. Dingle, *Wild Girls*,
1992

commonly accepted representation of the girl child. From *Wild Girls* (image on the left) in 1992 to *Two Wrestling Girls* (image on the right) in 2003, up to her most recent production, the Californian artist bewilders with works that challenge the stereotype to the point of provoking a

strong feeling of disorientation. The little girls that Dingle portrays in stereotypical female clothing, in white dresses made of lace and refined doll's lace, with cute hairstyles made of braids and ribbons, their facial features only hinted at, are reminiscent of Degas' ballerinas from afar, but here instead of dancing, these little girls perform actions of a completely different kind, unexpected, characterised by extreme violence and aggression. Although they look like dolls, those represented are not: they are living little girls, and life is expressed powerfully through violence, anger, fighting, as the artist explains, even when one is only three years old (Pagel, 1995, pp. 12-14). They are little girls who punch and fight fiercely, clutching at each other; they beat each other, scratch each other, fight, without us knowing why; the eye is disturbed, the entrenchment of a stereotype is inexorably laid bare,

A painter who has dedicated her entire artistic production to female childhood is Kim Dingle (1951): her paintings have girls as their subject and her entire artistic research seems to be marked by the intention to deconstruct the traditional stereotype of delicacy/sweetness, a central element in the



Image n. 5b.
K. Dingle, *Two Wrestling Girls*, 2003

to the point of shaking the predictable association of femininity with gentleness and delicacy, and even the absolutely unambiguous meaning that these qualities take on in the usual horizon of our thinking.

Among the strongest images of little girls in recent contemporary painting is certainly a painting by Marlene Dumas (1954), an artist who, as in the case of Kiki Smith, it would be reductive to call feminist, but who works with particular insistence on themes of female identity. In *The Painter* of 1994 (image on the right), her research reaches one of its most consistent outcomes in relation to the central question of female passivity. In the background lies the reflection developed since the 1970s in the historical-philosophical and socio-political spheres on the dyad generation/creation, *eros/logos*, and on the consequent division of the existential spheres of pertinence, which relegates the feminine to a condition of subalternity with respect to a masculine that has the privilege of unfolding itself in the world and in reality through the production of meanings, ideas, knowledge and artefacts (De Lauretis, 1996). In this work by Dumas, deconstruction of the stereotype of passivity takes place not through the negation of naturalness, but through its exaltation: it is the difference of the feminine that is translated with a surplus of meaning not compared to the masculine but compared to the definition that the masculine has historically given of this difference. The little girl painter, here again the artist's daughter, is portrayed as a pure force of nature, an overwhelming force (the painting is over two metres high), a creative force that is not merely biological, instinctual and reproductive; she is a creative female but not a mother; finally, the little girl is here the model, passive female par excellence, who takes on the role of



Imagine n. 6.
M. Dumas, *The
Painter*, 1994

the artist who, by painting, paints herself, reaffirming the strength of the gesture and the autonomy of her will (MoMA, 2007, p. 142).

The Portuguese painter Paula Rego (1935) has a personal history and career behind her that makes her difficult to compare with all the artists previously mentioned. Perhaps only Kiki Smith has as varied a production in terms of themes, approaches and techniques as Rego. Among the most recurring leitmotifs in her entire oeuvre, that of childhood is dominant. In this case, childhood is pictorially narrated from

autobiographical data. Children, in particular the little girl Paula, are a constant presence in the Portuguese artist's work. It is a childhood questioned in an introspective, almost psychoanalytical manner; personal events, memories filtered through time constantly surface among the themes of Paula Rego's painting. Many of the stories, because in this case we are dealing with an artist who does not portray but tells, and this



Imagine n. 7.

P. Rego, *The Family*, 1988

is an element of heterogeneity with respect to the other artists taken into consideration, have to do with the family, and here we find an interesting element for taking a further step along this path. Take *The Family* (image on the right), from 1988: what is happening in the scene that the artist describes? We are not let into the secret, since we are not part of the family.

What is certain is that the artist has intended to lift the veil that bourgeois hypocrisy has ideologically dropped on the family, interpreting and communicating it as an idyllic place par excellence; in this work, as always in Paula Rego's, relationships are investigated in depth in order to render all their ambiguity without dissolving it. Here, nothing is what it seems, everything can potentially be the opposite of what it appears and no outside specta-

tor can understand what role those characters are playing, the father, the mother, in particular the two little girls, nor whether we are witnessing a scene of joy, of affectionate playfulness or of revenge, of a violence that is oblique, so to speak, in which the roles of the masculine and the feminine are overturned, with the body of the man, of the father, once again the defenceless object of the manipulation and force of others (Bradley, 2002, pp. 38-39).

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Links with images

1a-1b. G. Pane, *White doesn't exist*, Los Angeles, 1972; *Azione sentimentale*, Milan, 1973. Images link: <https://performanceartbodyart.wordpress.com/2013/07/09/gina-pane/> [30/10/2022].

2. N. Goldin, *Nan one month after being battered*, 1984. Image link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/15/arts/design/bleak-reality-in-nan-goldins-the-ballad-of-sexual-dependency.html> [30/10/2022].

3. ORLAN, *Omniprésence*, France, 1993. Image link: <https://dublin.sciencegallery.com/perfection-exhibits/omniprsence> [30/10/2022].

4. K. Smith, *Wolf-Girl*, 1999, in Pace Prints Gallery, New York. Image link: <http://www.paceprints.com/artistportfolio/artistportfolio.php?alD=86&UID=902&offset=1> [30/10/2022].

5a-5b. K. Dingle, *Wild Girls*, 1992; Ead., *Two Wrestling Girls*, 2003, both at Art Resource Group, Newport Beach (CA). Links to images: <http://www.artresourcegroup.com/gallery.aspx?gal=all> [30/10/2022].

6. M. Dumas, *The Painter*, 1994, in MoMA, New York. Image link: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/687865> [30/10/2022].
7. P. Rego, *The Family*, 1988, in Saatchi Gallery, London. Image link: http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/paula_rego.htm [30/10/2022].