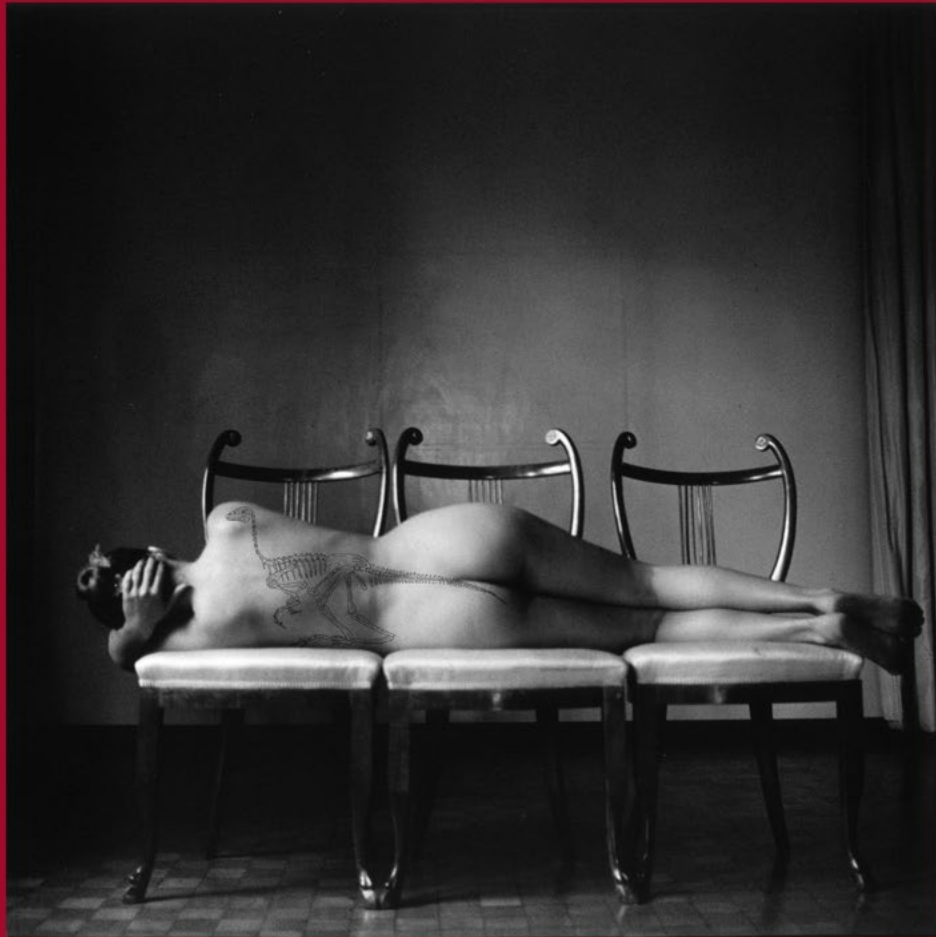


ISABELLA GHERARDI

B I L D E R



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With texts by
Wolfgang Becker
and
Achille Bonito Oliva



EDIZIONI POLISTAMPA

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Contents

Wolfgang Becker

7 Florentine artist Isabella Gherardi
and her photographic works of the last two years

Achille Bonito Oliva

9 Style of Beauty

Plates:

13 Bilder
35 Fayum Self-Portraits
52 Myths

80 Biography

81 Bibliography

Wolfgang Becker
Florentine artist Isabella Gherardi
and her photographic works of the last two years

Florence is a "story", that was written in the past, by Dante, Boccaccio, Michelangelo and the other men and women who determined the city's history. Several years ago Isabella Gherardi, who was born in Florence and continues to live and work there, published a volume of photography about this favorite Italian city.

But the work she became famous for in Milan and New York featured her whimsical, graphic revisitations of the greenhouses she found and photographed in Zurich, Geneva, New York and London. In these science-fiction-like sanctuaries of an ailing environment, the artist developed a conceptual perspective integrating the "cool" medium of photography with a yearning for primal origins and beauty.

In the photographs Isabella Gherardi is currently presenting, the icon of beauty and primal origins is no longer represented by plants in crystal spheres but by the softly lit mature body of a nude model in a neutral photography studio. The images are so precisely composed that one forgets the triggering moment in which they were captured as photographs. The objects in these pictures are arranged to appear as though they had only come together after the shot was taken. As a matter of fact the photograph entitled *The Blue Room* shows a nude back reflected off itself, as though these two lower halves had grown together at the hips. For photomontages of this kind Isabella Gherardi no longer uses manual collage techniques, but rather digitizes the photos and seamlessly manipulates the details. They retreat from the customary reality into a world of appearances that boarder on dreams.

Gherardi did not associate the voluptuous female body's sensual forms with a cello as Man Ray did but with an actual chair, though the string instrument is suggested by the lyre-like back of the elegant Empire style seats.

In the pictorial stages the reality of the chair approaches that of the human body so closely that we are very much surprised by a third element which Isabella Gherardi has only started using recently: black ink line drawings executed directly on the photographic prints. The

nude back of Jurassic Lover / offers its emblematic dinosaur like a tattoo, while in the series "Shunga," erotic drawings based in ancient Japanese originals appear like wallpaper on the back wall of the studio. In Shunga V and Shunga VI the artist splits the patterns into two panels whose appearance is primarily determined by their colors: the nude a dovelike tan while the ink drawings are set against a red background or inserted into a circle of gold foil.

Gold foil is employed by Isabella Gherardi in the same manner in the series "Fayum" and "Myths." "Fayum" follows the example of the gilded mummy portraits found in the Egyptian oasis bearing that name, while the "Myths" are elaborated in circular compositions — like the tondi of Renaissance Florence — their attributes and cryptography associated with famous women like Ophelia, Carmen, Marilyn, Cleopatra, Desdemona and Lady Macbeth.

Gherardi's photographs are so distant from the camera, the lens and the shutter that one could easily take them for paintings. And if they didn't bare the traits of this modern medium if they had really been painted — they would point nostalgically back to the history of art. The Florentine artist Isabella Gherardi lives in the dominating context of one of the greatest "stories" of human culture. Nowhere will she be better able to continue her search for undisturbed peace and beauty, for subdued light and the splendor of gold than in the city where she was born.

Aachen, September 1999

Achille Bonito Oliva

Style of beauty

The cycle of works presented by Isabella Gherardi has as its central theme feminine beauty and is photographically created in a way that does not so much document the scenic stage of the nude itself, as rather the transient complexity that it embraces.

The Florentine artist, aware of the frailty of the body and its beauty, removes it from the range of Time which pursues the future with interventions that rectify, and what is more, suspends its path.

The artist adopts the method of quoting the past by using symbols and elements that fill the scene surrounding the nude, referring to the 18th century and further back to the Ptolemaic Era of Fayum. All in all, time becomes involved by the elaboration of myth, technically evoked by focussing upon the image and the framework that holds it. Myth in art is always anything which is within the framework of art, in that it takes it out of the context of the flow of things and relocates it in a timeless setting, in an exchange between present and past.

Gherardi uses the photographic procedure which defines our present, but she concentrates its pure documentary and statistical attitude by means of technical assistance, thus elevating its results.

The female nude accompanied as well by linguistic reference to Man Ray and Magritte is found in a scene constructed by the artist using the decor and stylistic quotation of settings of the past.

The photographic lens centers upon the nude as a target of love and reproduces it with an intentional elegance of patina, which emphasizes its beauty and hope of endurance.

The actual moment of mechanical reproduction embodies architectural decor of the past.

In this way, the image becomes the place of contemplating iconography which expresses the desire for immutability, the everlasting quality of art.

Her photography embodies tattooing as well, the impression of a visible action underneath and upon the body, always female. Tattooing the space falls under the poetic intention of the artist who wants to impress a further spirit of elegance upon the image and so removing the image from the system of globalization which dominates our telematic epoch. This is created

by taking the nude out of the context and placing it on an intended level of decoration which supports it in the new context, the scene actually constructed by the artist.

The Florentine artist does not stop at a simple scenographic intervention, sometimes she also changes the configuration of the image. A thinning of the body seems to lend the female nude a Gothic air, which raises it to a dematerializing tension also characteristic to the 18th century.

The scene is never theatrically closed in upon itself. It opens a reference to nature with floral quotations, seeking a balance between the internal and the external.

Sometimes the Art Nouveau style is accompanied by a decor that quotes musical ornamentation, chair-backs in the form of lyres which create the stage for a reclining figure. Other times, the body is satisfied by its own beauty and poses calmly, accompanied by the iconography of memento mori: a skeleton reclining on a female nude which anticipates the irreversible future of death.

There is no drama here, only faith in the redemption entrusted to the linguistic elaboration. Art places itself at the service of the perpetuity of the present, the time in which the artist carries out the actual creative process. A process accompanied by intervening into the photographic procedure, enriching the nude two-dimensionality of the photographic image.

Gherardi sometimes works on the photograph with an indelible material, gold, which was defined by the ancient Egyptians as "the flesh of the gods". Thus, the flesh of art acquires an ulterior resistance to the frailty of matter. In this way, the image is driven towards myth, the everlastingness of a condition without time, but linked to earthly existence. Gold is extracted from the ground and it is reduced from matter to become skin and the armour of immortality. From this, there springs an explicit feeling of affinity between the artist and mannerism, originating historically from the same cultural background, Tuscany.

Oddity, eccentricity and elegance become natural characteristics of Gherardi, who actually adopts the armour of style, an elaborate language softened by a technique capable of simultaneously giving to beauty stability and nostalgia.

Certainly Isabella Gherardi creates a round form which is able to incorporate the modernity of photographic optics, the preciousness of material, and the desire for elegance, all of this amalgamated in a melting pot of unified and unifying style.

Art becomes an active elaboration of a loss historically suffered by the image. The image of

beauty is captured by the construction of a scene which gives endurance to its myth and, at the same moment, durability to an idea of a universe aesthetically moulded.

Gherardi's images are pieces of a mosaic, in which the past and present are interwoven into the actuality of an iconography which runs between photography and painting, architecture and design, documentation and expression. The value of style is predominant. The individual form which subtracts the nude from what is customary and hands it over to the beautiful forms of art.

Roma, September 1999



Bilder

Jurassic Lover 1, 1998
silver print, china ink drawing, 45 x 45 cm.
edition of 5



Jurassic Lover 2, 1998
silver print, china ink drawing, 45 x 45 cm.
edition of 5



Musical Chair, 1998
ilfochrome print, 30 x 24 cm.
edition of 5



Red Shunga, 1998
ilfochrome print, china ink drawing, 70 x 70 cm.
edition of 5



Shunga III, 1998
ilfochrome print, china ink drawing, 70 x 70 cm.
edition of 5



Shunga II, 1998
ilfochrome print, china ink drawing, 70 x 70 cm.
edition of 5



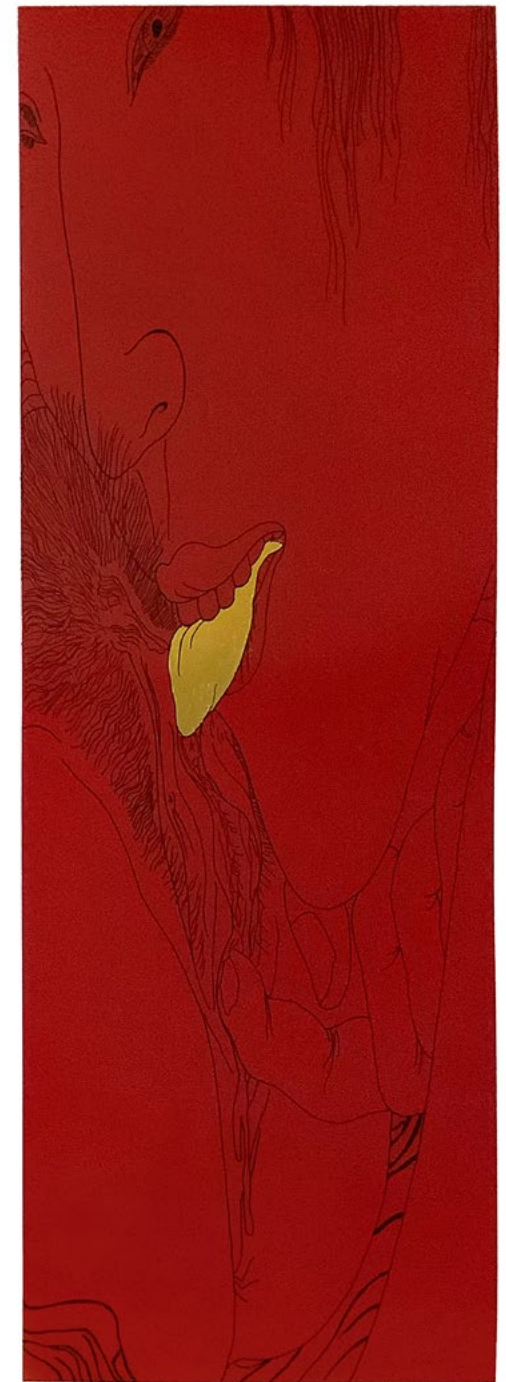
Shunga IV, 1998
ilfochrome print, gold leaf, china ink drawing, 58 x 74 cm.
edition of 5



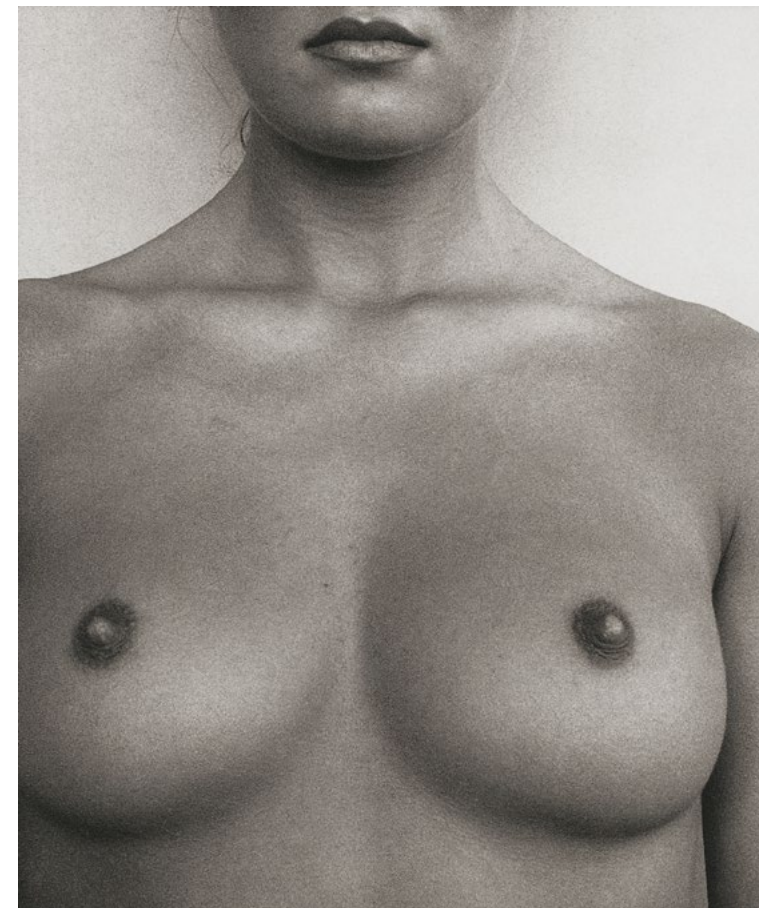
The Fisherman's Lover Dream 1, 1998
ilfochrome print, china ink drawing, 70 x 70 cm.
edition of 5



Shunga VIII, 1998
ilfochrome print, gold leaf, china ink drawing, 74 x 58 cm.
edition of 5



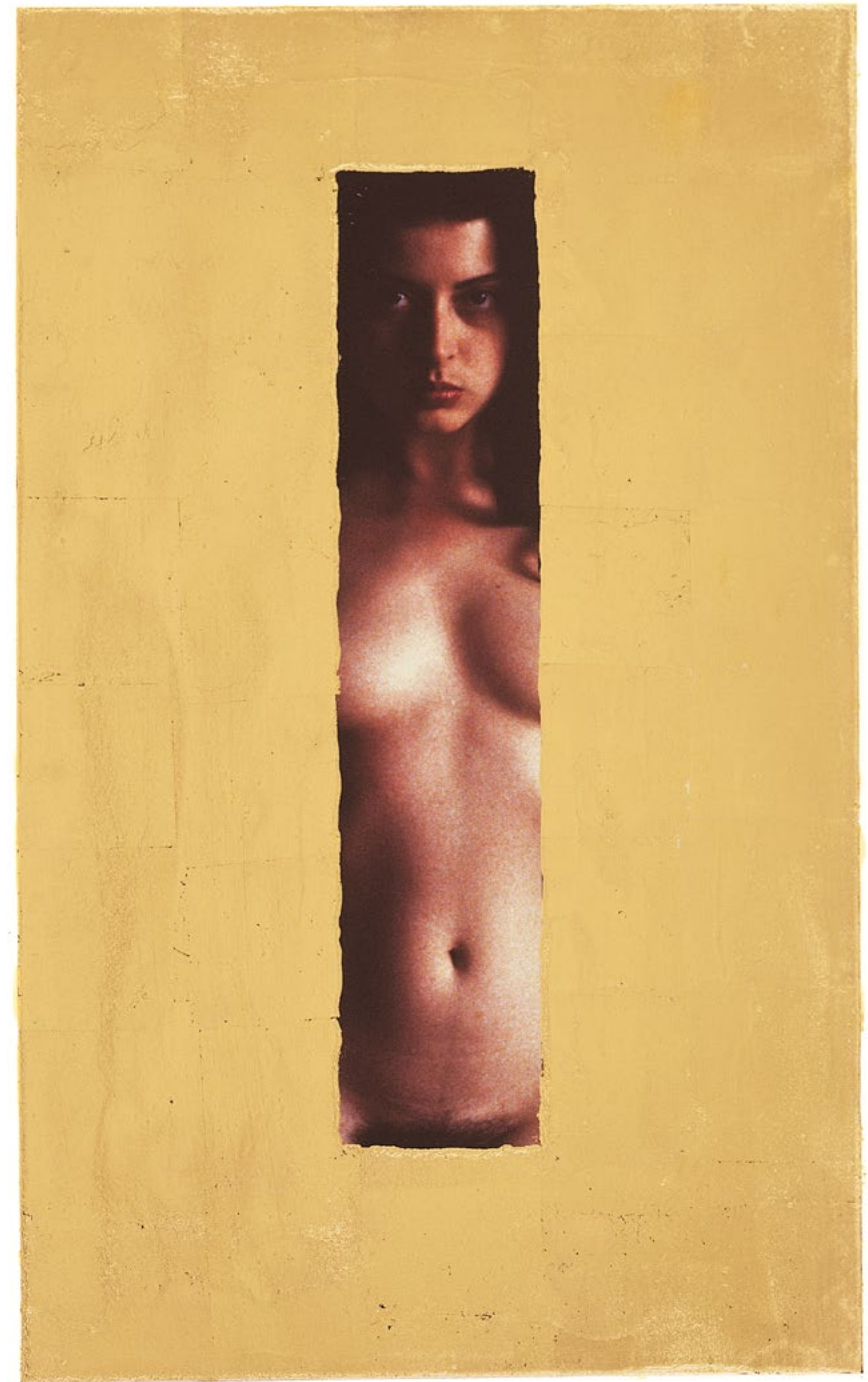
Untitled, 1998
silver print, 26 x 22 cm.
edition of 5





Fayum Self-Portraits

Fayum 1, 1998
ilfochrome print, gold leaf
edition of 5, different sizes





Fayum 11, 1998
ilfochrome print, gold leaf
edition of 5, different sizes

Fayum 6, 1998
ilfochrome print, gold leaf,
edition of 5, different sizes



Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman, 1998
ilfochrome print, gold leaf,
edition of 5, different sizes





Fayum 10 and 13, 1998
ilfochrome print, gold leaf,
unique exemplares, different sizes





Fayum 12, 14, 15, 1998
ilfochrome print, gold leaf,
unique exemplares, different sizes

Fayum 18, 1998
ilfochrome print, gold leaf,
edition of 5, different sizes





Fayum 20 and 21, 1998
ilfochrome print, gold leaf,
edition of 5, different sizes





Myths

Eva, 1999
ilfochrome print, gold leaf, 84 x 76
edition of 5



EVA

III



56

Carmen, 1999
ilfochrome print, gold leaf, 84 x 76
edition of 5

C A R M E N

X



58

Ophelia, 1999
ilfochrome print, silver leaf, 84 x 76
edition of 5

O P H E L I A

XII



DESDEMONA

XIII



CALLAS

XI



64

Isadora D, 1999
ilfochrome print, silver leaf, 84 x 76
edition of 5

ISADORA D

VII



EVITA

Evita, 1999
ilfochrome print, gold leaf, 84 x 76
edition of 5

XVI



68

Jeanne D'Arc, 1999
ilfochrome print, gold leaf, 84 x 76
edition of 5

J E A N N E D ' A R C

Lady Macbeth, 1999
ilfochrome print, gold leaf, 84 x 76
edition of 5



L A D Y M A C B E T H

XIV



BOVARY

IX



74

Castiglione, 1999
ilfochrome print, gold leaf, 84 x 76
edition of 5

CASTIGLIONE

VIII



76

Sappho, 1999
ilfochrome print, silver leaf, 84 x 76
edition of 5

S A P P H O

XVII



SALOMÈ

Biography

Born in Florence, where she lives and works.
After completing her degree in Architecture, she spent several extended periods in Mexico, where she studied the work of Alvarez Bravo and Tina Modotti.

Solo exhibitions

- 1999 “Isabella Gherardi - Recent Photographs”, John Weber Gallery, New York
“Isabella Gherardi - Photographien”, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen
“Con... Tatto”, La Posteria, Milan
- 1996 “Isabella Gherardi”, Studio Bocchi, Rome
- 1995 “Hot Houses and Emotional Life of Trees”, with Dorothea Rockburne, Tricia Collins Contemporary Art, New York
“Technological Arcadia”, Studio Bocchi, Rome
- 1994 “Serre”, Galleria Dina Carola, Naples
- 1991 “Serre”, Studio Spaggiari, Milan
- 1990 “Greenhouses”, Studio Casoli, Milan

Group shows

- 1998 “Over the Mantle, Over the Couch”, Tricia Collins Contemporary Art, New York
- 1997 “Conversion”, with Sal Scarpitta and Vic Muniz, Tricia Collins Contemporary Art, NY
- 1996 “Girl, Girl, Girl”, Tricia Collins Contemporary Art, New York

Bibliography

Publications

- 1999 “Con...Tatto”, exhibition catalogue, La Posteria, Milano, text by Francesca Alfano.
- 1995 1994 “Le Vieux Coeur du Nénuphar”, portfolio, text by Rosella Sleiter.
- 1991 “Serre”, exhibition catalogue, Spaggiari gallery, text by Getulio Alviani.
- 1987 “From Florence to Disneyland”, text by Pier Vittorio Tondelli, ed. Casa Usher.

Magazines

- Charles Hagen, “Isabella Gherardi”, The New York Times, May 26, 1995
- Ivana Kukan, “Isabella Gherardi e Dorotea Rockburne”, Tema Celeste, summer 1995
- Luca Picciocchi, “Isabella Gherardi”, Titolo, spring-summer 1995
- Giandomenico Semeraro, “Isabella Gherardi”, in Studi di Artisti, Alinea, 1995
- Franco Mollica, “Isabella Gherardi”, Tema Celeste, summer 1994
- Donata Negrini, “Jardin d’hiver per sognare”, Ville e Casali, december 1991
- Emanuela De Cecco, “Isabella Gherardi”, Flash Art, june-july 1991
- Alessandra Galletta, “Isabella Gherardi”, Juliet, april 1991
- Angela Vattese, “Giovane arte al femminile”, Il Sole 24 Ore, february 10, 1991