

Name: Gisella Sorrentino

Age: 36

Occupation: Photographer, visual artist

Originally from: Rome

In the US since: 2008

In your work you combine dance and photography. How did you come to blending the two together?

I have a dance background, because my mother was a dancer, I was never professional but it was always part of my life. That is where my work comes from. At one point, I started to use my body as an instrument to express myself in front of the camera. Then, I detached myself and started to collaborate with other performers. Every time we would choose a different theme. Everybody has a different body language, a different background, and they express feelings in different ways. I am relating a context in superimposing an image over the dancer. I use film and a very old camera, and I superimpose the images in the camera. What began as very experimental developed into a technique and personal language.

Could you tell us more about your self portrait series?

The self portrait series was the first experiment that I did mixing body movement and photographs. I was just experimenting. I did a series when I first moved to New York, me exploring and discovering the relationship with my new environment.

This is where I found the connection between body and space. It was not just the body, but the feeling and how you change and move to adapt to a new space, which for me is New York.

When did you come to New York?

I came here for 6 months in (2005) to learn English and study photography. I enjoyed it, and kept coming back for 2 or 3 years, then got my visa, and here I am now, and I am married to an American. I like to be here, and I also like to go back. I would like to expand my connection with Europe. My dream is to have a home base here and do project around the world and spend some more time in Italy, just to be close to family. But I do know that my life here is not done.

How was it to adapt to New York?

Oh, it was great! Of course it took time, but I liked it here from the beginning. I was tired of being in Rome, and I think New York is great because it gives you the opportunity to find what you like and you don't have to be on a certain track or in a certain circle to express your real self. In my case, of course, it is important to learn how to communicate in a new work environment and understand the market, there is a different type of communication here in comparison to Italy. Here you're thrown into a very professional and super positive environment. I liked it. I have found a niche for myself here. It is not just the city itself, but moving away and also finding an environment that accepts your vision and way of being, while also finding yourself. I think this place gives many possibilities for self reinvention. It can be tricky, because you can reinvent yourself all

the time and have 10 different faces. I come from Rome, where reinventing yourself is difficult. For women, for artists, for someone growing up there in a traditional home. When I came here I was amazed—"now i can think, I can do this, I can do that." New York offered me the flexibility to concentrate and move forward in my projects, it was a source of inspiration. I had a lot of ideas that were in my mind before, they were there but suppressed — but here I found a voice, and the nutrition for these ideas. I miss family of course. I am lucky to have two or three close friends who have the same experience as I do. Either they have husbands from here or work here, and were are all living in the same contradiction and adapting to a new mentality. It is interesting to compare our experiences with the American culture and lifestyle.

Is there anything you miss?

What do I miss in Italy... when I go there, I realize I am more comfortable and relaxed. People are much more at ease. Even in the work environment, people are more laid back. There is not as much stress "Ah, yeah," says this guy, "here are the keys to the gallery for three days, if you want to stay longer with your friend, by all means." Even if I am in another European country I feel that it is closer to the way I grew up... It is a challenge to understand America even though we know so much about it through movies and pop culture, but there are references that you aren't aware of, its a culture that you didn't grow up with. Also, English is not my first language, so I every day I have make an effort.

By now you must be a New Yorker.

Yes, I realized that I am so attached to this place and to the way people think in this city, and when I do go back to Italy, I see a big gap after being here for so long. I've had a different type of experience, but I like it. It is challenging. It brought me to places I would have never discovered, especially in my work. As I am an artist and a free spirit, I am not very practical on many levels, but here the system imposes on you the need to market yourself all the time. Here, the fact that you have to do it to keep up and be noticed was a big challenge for me, and since being here I've had to develop this "promotional" part of myself that otherwise I would have never had. Here, you have to really learn to believe in yourself and also show others that you believe in yourself and in your work. This has given me much more self esteem actually.

In New York what I like is that all media mix, especially in photography and visual art, there are always new ways of expression.

I think it is a very good moment in New York for photography specifically. As a developing artist/photographer there is a lot of space for experimentation, whereas from what I see in Europe, it has remained much more categorized; documentary, portrait, fashion, much more separated. Because of the overlap of different media that are always touching and mixing, it is a fertile ground for my work. I have done a photographic series with dancers, I've also done stage photography for dancers, and what was interesting this year was that two choreographers wanted to collaborate with me. I was asked for my images to be used for a production, and to create images for another. I also did experimental performances where a slideshow of my photographs were used as a backdrop, featuring stills of the dancer. The live dancer on the stage was re-improvising the movement in my photographs, and there was a projection of images on the dancer's

body as well. So there was a multilayered scene where the dancer was expanding, moving and recreating the motion in his own timing with his image in the background. Another dancer that I've worked with, Caterina Rago, she asked me to produce images for her new show "LABIR INTO" for IDaCo, the Italian Dance Choreographer platform in NY. She asked another Italian sculptor, Gianluca Bianchino to create an installation for the show as well. These projects are really getting more and more interesting, to see how my visual language can be used in so many different ways. I even worked with fashion: I recently worked on a project with Caterina Rago, a very talented and dynamic dancer. I like working with dancers — they do have a strong shape. She was *also* promoting clothing from Max & Co, representing a retail store in *Cosenza* in the south of Italy, so we did a photo shoot with her dancing. And in the *Nuovi Yorkers* exhibition I had to study the technique of the other exhibiting artists to create portraits of them. I am happy that right now everything is working together to bring me to explore other possibilities for my art form. This is not just like putting photos on the wall.

What was the idea of the Nuovi Yorkers exhibition?

The curator of the show who's also an artist, Sol Kjøk, is in touch with a lot of Italian artists. I did a series of portraits of Italian artists 6 or 7 years ago. They were environmental and formal portraits. Originally, we wanted to exhibit the Italian artists' work along with my portraits, but a lot of the artists were not here anymore, and my work has evolved as well, so she chose the two other visual artists and she asked me to portray them in my own manner, and that's how *Nuovi Yorkers* came together! There were two main ideas for *Nuovi Yorkers*: we are all Italian visual and performing artists working in New York City who use the human body as their principal vehicle of expression. Personally, I use the human body in my work by collaborating with performing artists and dancers. The second idea behind *Nuovi Yorkers* was an exchange between the artists: I had to inspire myself from the other artist's work. I studied their work, we decided together on the concept, we based the photos on the concept, then I used my technique of double exposure, and it goes on from there. So those were the two main things: collaboration between me and the other four artists, and that we all use the body in our artistic works. I've worked with two of the artists before. Fabiana Yvonne Lugli, for example, she's an old friend of mine. We've been working together for 10 or 15 years while we were in Rome, she's Italian Peruvian from Rome .

Do you think that your Roman roots come across in your photography?

It's funny, I've been told that, while not specifically Roman, my work comes across as Italian. I think it's the classicism, even if the work is abstract, there is an element of sculptural classicism. There is also a particular stone in Rome, the "san pietrini" stones. And this piece here is done in Brooklyn, in Dumbo, I used the railroad tracks and asphalt, and the most interesting was the cobblestone. Everyone thought that this was done in Rome. As for my work having an "Italian" quality, I had never thought about it... only when curators told me that "yes, your work is very Italian."