Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Postmodern Penelope: Conversation with Alessandra Bava

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, April 28th, 2021

Cultural Weekly's Associate Poetry Editor "Mish" (Eileen Murphy) recently caught up with Italian translator-poet-editor-biographer-visual artist Alessandra Bava—to find out how Alessandra "does it all":

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Mish (Eileen Murphy): *Your work first came to my attention on Instagram, where I loved the photos you posted of your home city, Rome. I am reminded that the great photographer Francesca Woodman also spent some time living there. What is it about Rome that is so enchanting and inspiring?*

Alessandra (Alessandra Bava): There is indeed no place like Rome. This city shapes people in ways I feel quite hard to describe. It is an emotional journey into Beauty that renews itself every day. It is love at first and every sight.

Francesca Woodman is a favorite. Woodman certainly knew the city well and loved it, but she willingly chose to portray its less iconic places, such as the Cerere factory, a former pasta plant, or Fassi, a famous ice-cream parlor. In essence, she was more interested in portraying her own self than Rome. But albeit being marginal in her photography, the Eternal City is still there.

Mish: *You are a translator (English to Italian, French to Italian, Italian to English), editor of a growing number of books, biographer, poet, and visual artist. How do you keep so many balls in the air at the same time?*

Alessandra: I guess multitasking is a real thing! The past ten years have been incredibly busy. One of the major projects that keep me involved is writing the biography of Jack Hirschman, emeritus SF Poet Laureate. I met Jack at Caffe Trieste in August 2010 and it was a real life-changing event. People who wonder why it takes such a long time are clearly not biographers. Being based in Rome does not help, since most of the material I require is physically in the States. I wrote to an endless number of institutions and libraries over the years. I have even found a lost manuscript in the process. Finally, interviewing people is a long and time-consuming process. Some people respond immediately, others take weeks or months. I feel like Penelope weaving and unweaving. Patience and stamina are key elements. Luckily, I have both.

As far as poetry is concerned, I am writing less poetry lately, but I am translating more, since I have become the Editor of a series, HerKind, focusing on contemporary women poets for the

Roman publisher, Ensemble. I am enjoying this immensely, particularly scouting for and discovering new voices both in Italy and around the world.

I certainly enjoy being creative, whether with words or images. During the lockdown, I have created many collages. I would do one a day. Sometimes more. My collages are old school: scissors and glue are all I use! As for the sources, I take great fun in giving old paintings a new life.

Mish: *What's a typical day like for you? Does it revolve around your life as a creative person or does your life as a creative person spring from your everyday comings and goings?*

Alessandra: There is no typical day for me! Working as a translator means no day is the same. I run a translation agency all alone, so there is a lot on my plate every day. One thing is certain: I do spend all my days dealing with words. It is a lucky thing as it triggers my creative side. I often work during weekends too but, whenever my job allows, I either write, translate poetry, or write the bio.

Mish: Your poems submitted to Cultural Weekly *were all poems you wrote/are writing to poet Anne Sexton. What takes your attention about Anne Sexton, when many people (not I) would prefer to focus attention on the works of Sylvia Plath, who's from the same era?*

Alessandra: Anne Sexton is an icon to me. I wrote a one-act play on her before writing these poems dedicated to her. It is a tribute to her person and her work. It shows how much she means to me as an artist and as a woman. I have written over twenty Love Letters to Anne Sexton. My goal is to write 50 and possibly have them published.

I am aware that most people prefer Sylvia Plath. Plath has inspired my work, but I feel a stronger bond with Sexton. Plath's poetry is more intellectual and Sexton's poetry more passionate. "My mouth blooms like a cut," writes Sexton, and that is precisely my goal when writing.

Mish: *Describe your writing process. For example, do you write every day? Do you prefer handwriting your first drafts or would you rather compose on the computer? Do you listen to music; if so, what?*

Alessandra: Writing every day is impossible to me. If I spend 8 hours a day translating, I am beat and unable to write even a single word after. If I am lucky the Muse visits me, and I write poems in a single sitting. I usually handwrite. I feel it is more congenial than writing on the computer. I seldom listen to music when I write. I enjoy it and it does not distract me, but I tend to focus on the words as much as I can.

Mish: *Tell me a little bit about your childhood—and is it in any way reflected in your creative projects?*

Alessandra: I have just finished writing a piece for a podcast which focuses on my young self, entitled "Tomboy." I had great fun writing it and connecting with my inner child. I also wrote several poems dealing with my childhood. I still connect a lot with that 70s kid, and doing it sparks my creativity. I was a tomboy of sorts. I was a headstrong girl, and I had a great bond with my dad. I certainly was not an example of filial obedience though! At a young age, we moved abroad to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. I attended American and International schools for 5 years. This explains why I mostly write in English.

Mish: *What projects are you working on right now? And what's next for you in 2021?*

Alessandra: For HerKind, I have just finished translating *Bright Stain* by Francesca Bell, in team with an Italian poet named Adelaide Basile. We are also translating *Four-Legged Girl* by Diane Seuss.

I am also proofreading an *Anthology of Contemporary New Zealand Women Poets* that I have finished translating in January. This Anthology will include twelve Maori and New Zealand poets, two of which are former New Zealand poet laureates. I am truly proud of all this work focusing on contemporary women poets. It feels a great privilege to be able to publish such amazing poets here in Italy.

Photo credit: I Can Wear Whatever I Like *(collage by Alessandra Bava from works by Tiepolo & Magritte)*

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