



Alessia Olivieri

This exhibition is the result of an invitation from Morgane Paillard and Audrey Zimmerli (co-curators at le Balkkon) to work on the theme *the body and the feminine*.

In response to this proposal, I question, through photography, various cultural traditions that have contributed over the generations to build the role and image of women. From gesture to use, from word to example, traditions endure, run out of steam or evolve, but often influence our unconscious. Beyond their respective values and if we dare to question them again, I wonder how this distant heritage still influences us today.

Among the meters of tablecloths received as a wedding dowry, the images you discover oscillate between still life and portraits. What they have in common is that they illustrate, in their own way, different customs that I was confronted with, just like my mother, my grandmother and their mothers before them.

Starting from my Italian origins, I have chosen to begin a reflection animated by the duality of feelings evoked to me by the cultural traditions linked to my condition as a woman.

Confronted with these traditions, I have often felt somewhat helpless by the strange balance that emerges from these customs. A mixture between a culture that I cherish and a certain aberration that I am confronted with today. Out of affection and respect for my cultural heritage and moved by the customs that bind me to a territory and to my family, I have rarely had the heart to become more aware of the shadowy side of some of these customs.

Unlike the true original version of the song *Bella Ciao* (written in the late 19th century by the women working in the rice fields of Piedmont), many traditions that still exist today don't sing of women's freedom, but on the contrary, too often confine them to their «unique» function as genitors or to what comes close to it when they don't abandon themselves to the superstition of the many dangers that a menstruating woman would represent!

In any case, it is not my intention to deny the whole of this cultural heritage. However, it seems necessary to me to question it and this in order to be able to make it endure in my turn, in a form that I hope to be able to reconcile with my contemporary principles and aspirations.





La metà della metà / Half of half

On the last night of the year, it is customary to share a pomegranate with one's spouse if one wishes to bear children in the coming year. Because of the multitude of grains it contains and its intense red colour, it is a symbol of life and fertility, as long as each half is eaten...







Rosso relativo / Relative red

Wearing red lingerie on December 31st brings luck and love, but for this to happen, the underwear worn must be discarded the next day. It's a way to get rid of all the bad things that the past year has brought. Lingerie brands take advantage of this tradition to trigger sales with arguments such as red goes as well to brunettes as to redheads, as to matt or pale skins; they make you sexy, bring boldness and self-confidence, at least from the 31st of December to the 1st of January.





Denti da latte / Milk teeth

It is often customary to keep children's and grandchildren's baby teeth. Worn as a pendant by grandmothers, they guarantee health, vitality, strength and fortune.

- Why do you only have 3 pendants when you have 5 grandchildren?

- I don't understand why either. We made one for each of you, but since the other two are boys, we had to be told that boys don't wear necklaces.









La ragazza con i panni / The young girl with sheets

- The way you laid out those sheets and tablecloths is not ok at all. Those are too old! If your grandmother saw that, she'd jump to the ceiling. And then you have to put the embroidered things out in plain sight, because this is valuable! Besides, these are not part of my «corredo da sposa» (bride's trousseau).



Torta mimosa / Mimosa cake

Around the world, 8 March is International Women's Rights Day.

In Italy, it is customary to offer women branches of mimosa as a symbol of post-war feminist movements and the struggle for gender equality.

In 1955, Angela Lodi was arrested with other demonstrators because they were distributing mimosa in front of the Ducati factory in Bologna, calling on women workers to demand the same rights as men, starting with equal pay.

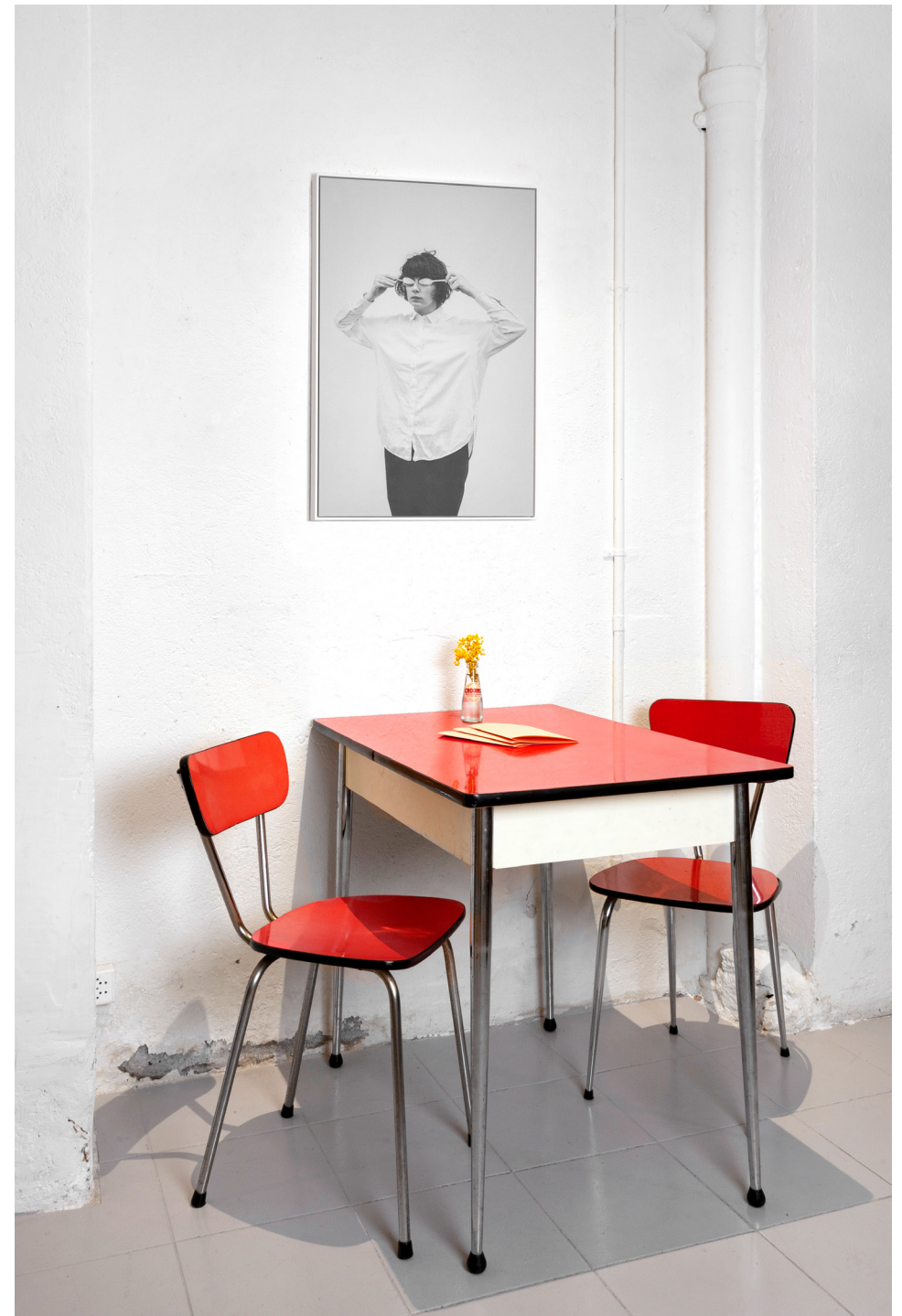
Having become a political symbol, the mimosa was initially chosen for its low cost. This flower also demonstrates great strength and ability to grow in difficult terrain. Moreover, it is an abundant and easy-to-pick flower, which can even be found on plates with the *Torta Mimosa*, a cake made with custard and sponge cake that is crumbled on top to remind the yellow flowers of the mimosa.

Sei più preziosa di me / You are more precious than I am

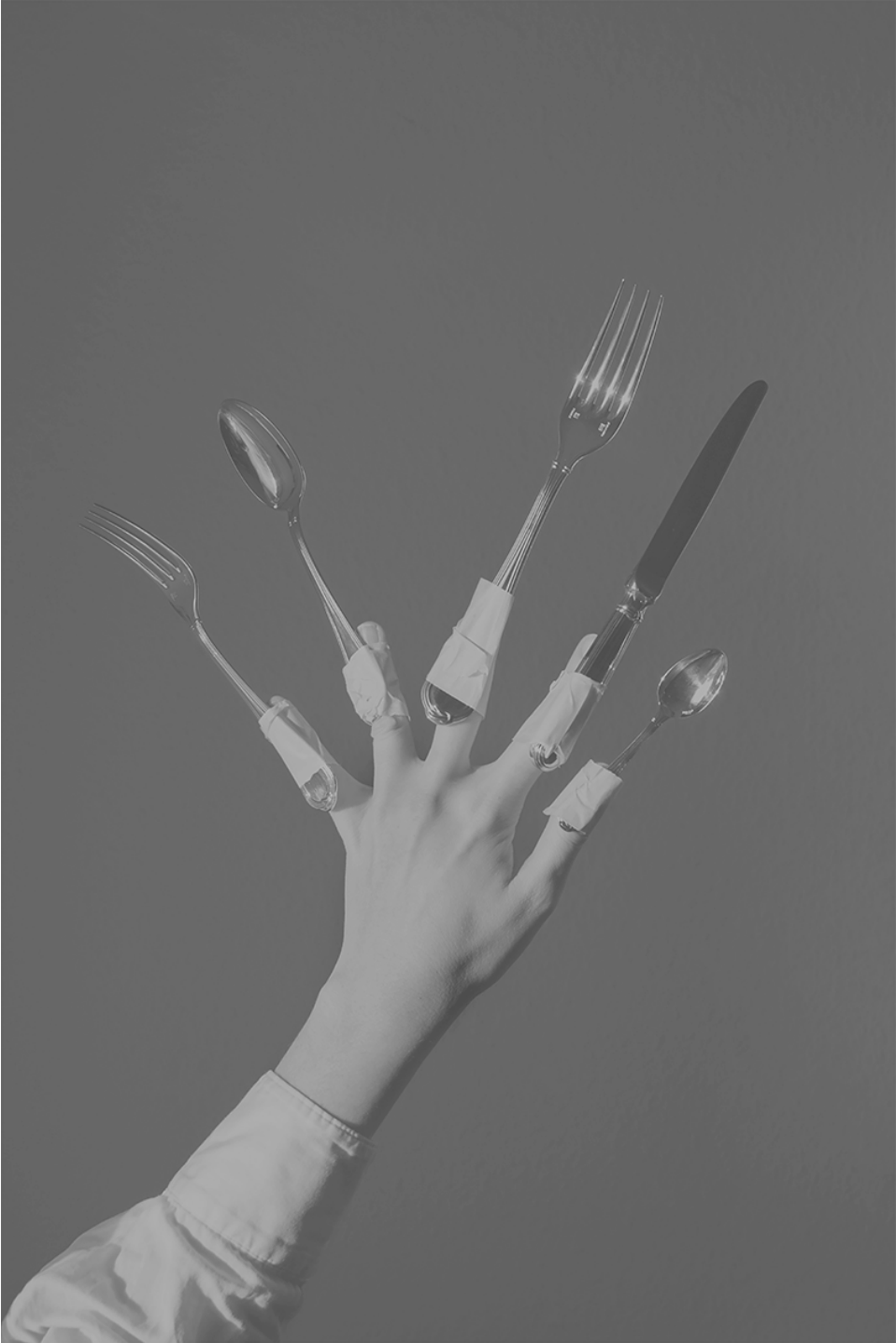
A *ménagère* is a set of cutlery with the same style and decorative motifs.

Often made of silver, it may include a set of pieces or instruments for each person called a cutlery set. It is designed for a certain number of guests, usually a multiple of six.

It is customary to give some to young girls on their birthdays so that they can bring the household necessities when they get married. The more unlikely it is considered that the girl will find a husband, the richer the marriage dowry is to increase its value.









Quasi la stessa / Almost the same

The wedding trousseau is the personal and household linen that a young girl had to have for her wedding.

As soon as a girl was born in a home, the women of her family and then the girl herself began to assemble her wedding trousseau by making and sewing a number of woven pieces. Once the trousseau was completed, the neighbourhood was invited to come and admire it.

The trousseau is made up of body linens (panties, caps, stockings...), bedding (sheets, pillowcases, covers...) and table linens (tablecloths and napkins...) embroidered with the bride's initials.



For me, Alessia Olivieri photographs as one examines, sometimes dissects. The title of one of her previous projects, *Corpusculatoire*, is a clear sign of this; she was exploring the disruptive effect of the observer on the very nature of a scientific experiment. Hence to say that the photographic act is undoubtedly disturbing.

Beyond the attractive surfaces and materials of her images, she considers the use of the medium as a laboratory experiment, and shows what is lodged in our cupboards, our drawers, our memories, our hushed thoughts... in a clinical way that goes as far as raw, even rotten. There is no room for complacency.

Fai la brava!

An injunction to goodness, courage or an assertion? A criticism addressed to the one who makes the proud? Being only remotely Italian, I needed Alessia to decrypt this title for me to grasp it. Now if the usual meaning is an injunction to behave in an appropriate way, in this work where she explores the roots of a femininity of the mezzogiorno that is above all hers, she also says that the common meaning of this sentence is not without a taste for limitations.

One has the sensation in front of each image, reading each text, that she shows what is woven into her roots to say that she really comes from there, that it constitutes her, while tracing, sometimes with a scalpel, what she frees herself from and underlines, through half a rotten pomegranate, that she cannot see herself as half of something, but as a whole that does not absolutely need another in order to exist.

The body, it often slips away, unfolds out of sight, from the back, appears only slightly through androgynous clothes, and reappears in the hollow of still lifes. It is the bodies that draw a filiation, but a filiation in which the one with the face - not without a sense of humour - is the author and she alone, we are therefore more in front of a self-portrait than in a family story with multiple voices.

In the manner of the Hungarian photographer Peter Puklus, who describes his family life in images that have as many forms and materialities as can be imagined in photography, but also through sculptures and installations that are the fruit of experimentation with his own existence and his links with others, Alessia Olivieri weaves her canvas with the aim of making this genealogical investigation the elliptical narrative of his identity construction.

And what if all the objects laden with stories that she has patiently collected turned out to be useless prostheses? They carry the metaphor of a body that frees itself from the weight of having been considered as an object. *E così, questa mattina si è svegliata!*

Léonore Veya

Exhibition *Fai la Brava* | Le Balkkon - Spring 2020

In reaction to the premature closure of the *Fai la brava* exhibition at the Balkkon (Neuchâtel, CH) due to the coronavirus pandemic, this catalogue was produced in March 2020 with the aim of making it visible and accessible in digital form.

I would like to thank Morgane Paillard and Audrey Zimmerli, co-curators at the Balkkon for this beautiful and enriching invitation, as well as the entire Balkkon team for its welcome.

Thanks also to Gabriella and Marco Cousumano for their delicacy and kindness in the realization of the frames — to l'Atelier 207 — to Léonore Veya for her precious words, her generosity and her advice — to Charles Frôté for his infinite support — to Léonard Rossi for his help — to Sandra Charrière for the proof-reading, as well as to all my family Della Rovere-Olivieri and the members of the Le Salon collective.

I would also like to thank Nicole Baur, Alexandre Lanz and Léonore Veya for their rich contributions at the round table on 5 March 2020 (*Corps-objet, corps-support?: Le corps entre représentations photographiques et traditions*).

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The price list is available on request

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