

SUZANNE SANTORO

Blood Roses

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Suzanne Santoro by Giovanna Zapperi (excerpt)

A young graduate from the School of Visual Arts in New York, Suzanne Santoro settled in Rome around 1969. There, she began to explore the exposition and concealment of women's bodies in the history of art across the city, where she searched for visual signs of an unseen female presence, and the hidden histories of female expression. Santoro was interested in looking at the ways in which the female sex had been hidden and stylized and therefore erased from representation¹.

While working in photography, sculpture, text, artist's books, and drawing, Santoro developed a visual vocabulary that was equally informed by the late 1960s "conceptual turn" and her participation in the Italian women's movement. Since the early 1970s, Santoro's work has unfolded within a set of ideas and practices that resonates with her personal experience of the Italian feminist movement. She became part of the *Rivolta Femminile*, a separatist group collective that Carla Lonzi – a prominent feminist thinker and former art critic – had founded with the artist Carla Accardi and other women.



Hermaphrodite, Black Mirrors, 1974
Photo on wood, polished polyester resin



Blood Roses, 2004
Tempera on paper

Santoro's series *Blood Roses* (2004–2009) is part of a decades-long inquiry into the repressed iconography of women's sexual

morphology. These all-over tempera paintings on colored paper are based on a single painterly gesture that starts as a physical impulse translating a circular form suggesting the shape of a flower. They pursue Santoro's ongoing research on female sexual expression and the attempt to articulate a new visual vocabulary able to translate the experience of being a woman.

Whereas her 1970s focused on the gendered structures of representation via juxtaposition of texts, photography, and drawings, in the late 1980s Santoro started to experiment with what she calls "organic gestures," in a larger body of work composed of several series exploring different aspects of the entwinement between painting and embodied experience. These series are organized around a pattern repetition in which the artist goes through singular gestures and corresponding iconographic motifs that range from biomorphic-cosmic imagery to the representation of the dancing female body in antiquity or objects such as vases and natural elements like flowers and leaves.

Santoro's conceptualization of "organic gestures" in relation to the creative process is strongly indebted to her activity as a child art therapist at the Istituto di Ortofonologia in Rome, where she started to work in 1986 as the head of the painting and graphic workshop. There she worked with deaf and autistic children and became interested in the cognitive development unveiled in the graphic process. This led her to conceptualize a sort of drawing impulse defining the language that articulates children's nonverbal self-expression before being put aside in favor of speech and writing. For the artist, the repression of drawing as a legitimate expressive language has to do with the hegemony of patriarchal rationality in adult life. Her idea of an organic gesture therefore refers to the repressed connection between bodily experiences and self-expression.



Suzanne Santoro, Exhibition view, Lovay Fine Arts, 2025

Whereas the relationship between the body and the act of painting is a recurrent feature in the history of postwar Western art, it takes a specific orientation in the framework of Santoro's reflection on female creative and sexual expression. Her *Blood Roses*, with their evocative shapes and hallucinatory power, are a search for

nonpatriarchal representations of women's sexuality. Santoro's predominant use of red tempera gives a visceral aspect to the flower-shaped forms, which intensifies the color's association with the female sex by its explicit reference to blood and menstruation.

Santoro's uncanny *Blood Roses* appropriate familiar tropes of femininity through a different gaze, with the woman enunciating herself as the subject of her own sexuality. Their repetition generates a form of heightened perception, in which the reassuring shape of the flower as a metonym for female beauty turns into its disturbing obverse. The *Blood Roses* unveil the menstruating female body as the *off-scene* of culture, suppressed from both discursive and visual representation. In their ambivalent reference to female sexual morphology, these works express aspects of women's embodied experience that have been historically obliterated. In her relentless search across the multiple tropes of female imageries, the *Blood Roses* represent a crucial moment in Santoro's lifelong endeavor to unveil a set of hidden meanings that acquire new significance through a contemporary feminist perspective.

1. Suzanne Santoro, *Towards New Expression / Per una espressione nuova*, Rome, Scritti di Rivolta femminile, 1974.