

*"I have a grandmother who's eighty-nine.  
A year ago she told me she gets a little melancholic in the  
afternoon  
and asked me for some little task to do.  
I told her I need an assistant.  
Since then she's been drawing for me every day."*

That was in 2002, and these were the words in the preface to "La Grande Madre", a limited edition coffee table book.

My grandmother's name was Ines Bassanetti, and I'd always had a special relationship with her, an affection so deep it was almost a secret between us. Maybe due to all the time we'd spent together when I was little.

A door in her house led to an old haberdashery where she'd worked all her life. That shop was better than any *wunderkammer* for me: zippers, toys, underwear, sweaters, soaps, notebooks, perfumes, balls of wool, buttons - maybe even rabbits, tropical plants, and magic lanterns.

There was really a bit of everything inside, in a precise disorder that only my grandmother could command.

In her old age, grandma had to close the shop. But she couldn't get used to living without working.

One day she mentioned this "melancholy" that filled her in the afternoons.

Melancholy, she said. Not boredom.

She asked me for something to do. Maybe she was hoping she could cook or sew for me.

The word melancholy suggested a possibility: Dürer himself had suffered melancholy, in fact.

So I told her I needed an assistant, someone to help me in my work as an artist, someone who could draw for me.

She looked puzzled. She'd never drawn a thing in her life. Nor did she know one thing about art. She'd barely finished primary school.

She thought it over for a moment before accepting.

The closest thing she'd ever done to drawing were the pot-hooks for the letters of the alphabet they'd made her draw the first day of school.

That was where we started.

The "La Grande Madre" Project was underway.

"Grande Madre" sounds like the translation of the word "grandmother from other languages into Italian.

The Great Mother is the goddess of Nature, fertility.

We started with leaves.

Entire pages were filled with leaves, one after another, in orderly rows.

Then came flowers, fruits, minnows, small birds.

I curated, or perhaps cured it all: my grandmother's melancholy and the project that was project gradually taking form. All top secret.

A year of work later, I gathered all the drawings and went to see Pasquale, my gallery director in Milan.

I showed him what I had. We set a date.

My grandmother had her first personal show at the age of 89.

The gallery displayed a selection of originals and the coffee table book that held all the work done over the year.

It was a big success.

Some become part of collections. There were interviews, newspaper articles.

There was also a slight problem: after producing "masterpieces" like these, what do you do next?

I had to think. And think again.

That's how her "Masterpieces" series began.

Grandmother tackled the masters of Italian art: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Caravaggio, and others.

Unafraid, because the names don't mean much to her.

OK, she's heard of Leonardo, but who's this Duccio person?

Other masterpieces were born, filtered through her eye, mastered by her hand.

She's becoming *bravissima* now. Even without using an eraser (banned from the start). She considers the blank page, pencils in a few reference marks, then gets right down to it.

I've got to think of something else. Maybe stop drawing entirely. Start her on reading? Writing?

Her "Amanuense" series was born.

I asked her to copy a few philosophy texts that deal with the concept of "time". Plotinus, Heidegger, and similar questions.

She begins. But then tells me these books are all a little boring; Her pages abound in spelling mistakes. Copying, she skips a word, even an entire line. Rereading her work, she notices. Then tries to fix the sentence up, sometimes adding a word of her own to make it read right.

These pages - beauties in themselves by her handwriting - conceal sudden turnings, makeshift repairs that subvert the original's meaning!

A few years of intense work have passed by now. A rite has been established. She draws every day. I lay out the blank sheets, every day, her favorite pencils alongside. Drawing has become a part of her life, as vital to her as food or sleep.

But there's something else again. Concealed. A disease has been advancing through her body slowly for years now.

We need something big, this time. Something truly grandiose  
Something that never ends.

As boundless as the sky.

She starts drawing stars.  
Stars every day, hundreds, thousands. Little stars,  
Sheet after sheet is filled with stars.  
She says she dreams of stars. "Dreams of gobbling them all up!".

She draws until her final day.

A private cosmos.