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LUIGI  
**ONTANI**

Interview by GINI ALHADEFF  
Film stills by LOLA SCHNABEL

LOLA  
**SCHNABEL**



Lola Schnabel is an artist and filmmaker and the daughter of Jacqueline Beaurang and the artist and film director Julian Schnabel. Having grown up in New York City surrounded by artists and poets, Lola first met Luigi Ontani at the gallery Exit Art on Broadway when she was fourteen. "Luigi had taken a liking to me and he dragged me into a photo booth." She still has the contact sheet of black-and-white portraits in which Luigi, holding a chihuahua – not his – takes a small apple out of one pocket and puts it on the dog's head and on the edge of his nose: "It was the perfect lure for a 14-year-old." Every time they saw each other in the following years and did something together, he gave her a gold-framed hand-tinted photograph of one of the many poses he had made in India with an assisting cast of young men. The one in which a boy crouches on the ground impersonating a lion, with Luigi as Saint Jerome, is the most recent on the wall of Lola's tenth-floor flat.

The art historian Leo Steinberg, who wrote of *Las Meninas*, Michelangelo, and of the sexuality of Christ, once told Lola, who was named after Lola Montez, courtesan, dancer, the lover of Franz Liszt and of the King of Bavaria, that she spoke in "anacoluthons", or changing syntax in mid-sentence. She herself defines it as "speaking very fast out of laziness, confusion, or excitement". She spoke of art, exercise, guardians and of her films made with and for the living legends she has drawn into her artist's path, be they venerable scholars or experts of pigment and finishes. Not long ago she wrote a script entitled *Exchanging Youth for Knowledge*, then made a film of it, starring as the youth. Her latest project: a film about the master of self-referential changing identities, Luigi Ontani.

Lola Schnabel is invariably well-dressed even when she's wearing a flower-patterned fleece jumper, khaki-coloured leggings to just above the ankle, no make-up, and her hair is pulled back. She opens the door. If one didn't have to talk about the film she is making with the artist Luigi Ontani, based on a Giacomo Leopardi text, one could spend two hours describing the different objects in her high-ceilinged room inside the Chelsea Hotel, with a terrace on one end, green tendrils encircling its perimeters, and four windows on the other, letting in splashes of bright sunlight. In between, a large, high bed has pillowcases and sheets edged in aqua green.

The kitchen is hidden away and its tiles are patterned and old – recovered from some hallowed ground about to be demolished, as all hallowed grounds in New York City are, including the very Chelsea Hotel where this interview is taking place and which may become a "hard rock hotel" with rooms themed after figures like Janis Joplin. There are three paintings by the poet and artist René Ricard. One says, "God don't let me cry in the subway", another, "Remember Lola/they're pigs/you're as innocent as a lamb", and the third offers a "Decoy dinner. This is an invitation so you can be somewhere else". The square yellow painting is by the actor-artist Vincent Gallo.

A small round table plays a clearly magnetic role at the centre of Lola's micro-universe. We sit. It is covered in a delicately embroidered table cloth. She speaks so quickly that my hand and pen need the assistance of a voice recorder. She turns on the one in her iPhone and the image of a reassuring microphone appears on the screen. (The news of Steve Jobs' death was on the front page of today's *New York Times*.)

Lola was at the Cooper Union, just before graduating, when a book by Giacomo Leopardi – the *Operette morali* – leapt off the shelf and into her hands. Her interest was caught by a dialogue between an Icelander and Nature. The Icelander asked many questions: "A soul walks in every kind of nature. He knows he's going to die. He asks why." At the end, two lions appear, "so worn out and starved" they hardly have the strength to devour the Icelander, though somehow they manage to do so, which allows them to survive one more day. In a second version, a strong wind hurls the Icelander to the ground and covers him in a mound of sand, drying him perfectly, like a mummy. He is later discovered by a group of travellers and placed in a museum. Lola thought that Luigi Ontani would make the perfect Icelander.

She refers to herself as lanky and uncoordinated but she is tall with wide shoulders, slim legs and wide soulful eyes she doesn't mind using to stare. When I interviewed her, she had just returned from Wyoming where she was doing research for the ending of her film. "I'm a city girl," she said. "I know nothing about being devoured by a lion."

*Gini Alhadef*: This is the first time in a film that Luigi Ontani, the artist, is seen wearing his own masks. *Lola Schnabel*: The film is a kind of moving painting. Luigi is the constant and everything around him changes. Luigi is always doing a kind of ritual. Even taking walks with him in Rome when I was 16, he kept gold-foil-covered candies in his pocket and he'd put them on top of statues. He took me to draw at the Villa Borghese and he would take me walking through the night to every fountain, and to look at Guido Reni and Piero di Cosimo.

He is in a way my guardian angel. We don't really speak the same language – his English is okay and I don't have any Italian – but we have another language that's basically intuitive. *Gini*: Luigi never talks in the film. *Lola*: But he talks through his body. There is one moment when he puts on a mask and is waving it back and forth. When I look at that I feel pain in my heart. *Gini*: Why is that? *Lola*: I think he goes into a trance and becomes whatever the mask is to him. His work is about his voyage with his own identity, with his own vanity... and human life... we are so insignificant... It's the scene where he's wearing a chequered costume and he's sitting on a rock with branches, swinging the lion mask, from side to side. *Gini*: It's a beautiful shot. That and the one where he sits in a fuchsia suit, his legs crossed, the mask in one hand. *Lola*: That's why I think I have to continue filming him with different masks in different-coloured suits. *Gini*: How did you come to film in the Yucca Valley? *Lola*: Luigi had a show at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and he brought his masks. I needed the desert landscapes of the Yucca Valley. *Gini*: Was it all filmed there? *Lola*: The sequences where he walks through a cave were done in Ronciglione, on the outskirts of Rome. And we filmed in the castle near Vergato that used to belong to a famous homeopath called Mattei, near Luigi's house. It should be made into a museum of Luigi's work. *Gini*: The rocky landscapes are in the Yucca Valley? *Lola*: Yes, and we had a remote helicopter on which we mounted a Canon 5D2. I told Luigi, "I have a helicopter coming" and he thought I meant a huge helicopter. But it was a small helicopter that you mount the camera onto to get an aerial view. It was so windy we only have one shot but it was actually pretty impressive. *Gini*: When you went to the Yucca Valley, did Luigi bring all his clothes out there? *Lola*: I had a friend drive him out to our location at three in the afternoon. We had been there since eight in the morning preparing the shot. He came dressed in a green suit that was the shade of green of all the spring desert flowers popping up just then – he couldn't have picked a better shade of green. His exhibition at the Hammer Museum had opened the day before with a performance. *Gini*: What kind of performance? *Lola*: Luigi had made a painter's palette out of rose petals and on each colour stood a student in a different-coloured robe, holding one of his masks. A group of Balinese musicians played. Luigi walked about. It was a kind of mirage – very beautiful. As soon as people arrived, he stepped out and all the students gathered behind him and he walked five blocks away from the museum. We followed him, walking forever, away from his own exhibit – how to lose your crowd! Then he came back and the students resumed their positions. He had found the students on the streets. If I had gone there a week before I could have helped him find his type of young boy that's dark-skinned. Anyway, their heads were covered by masks so it didn't really matter. For him it was about the youth and the students. Because they were kind of pimply redhead kids. *Gini*: So he came fully dressed. And you didn't have to transport his entire wardrobe. *Lola*: In Ronciglione he did come with many different-coloured suits and we'd decide together, "OK, for the cave, this violet-gold iridescent one." Then at the castle it was amazing because Luigi showed up in the morning with a big ivory-coloured leather trunk that opened and out came something that was more extraordinary than any Alexander McQueen outfit. It was the turquoise cape, almost a tent, that you see in the film, perfectly pleated like an accordion around the neck, with all different arrows in turquoise. Then he had a bug in a box that came with the costume and had a face on it which I placed on his mouth. *Gini*: He had prepared this for the film? *Lola*: It was at his country house, in Vergato, and he brought it. I'd seen him the day before but we hadn't discussed it. He just arrived with it. *Gini*: And now? *Lola*: Indonesia or India. *Gini*: Do you think you'll go to Bali? *Lola*: I would love to film Luigi standing in a rice field or in the mountains. A very strange thing happened while we were shooting. When I was filming him on moving image, he'd stay completely still like a photograph, and the moment I put the blue screen up and asked him to stay completely still because I needed him to just walk in place, he began dancing around and doing the things that normally work in a moving situation. Here I was trying to get a still photograph of him so that I could superimpose it onto different landscapes and he began dancing in circles, up and down, and sideways. That footage is completely unusable. I feel I'll have to shoot him on location though I can't really take him to Antarctica. *Gini*: This is your fourth film? *Lola*: My work is to take someone who is already a myth and to make them two-hundred per cent more so, as I did with my previous subjects – the artist David McDermott, who pretends to live in a pre-industrial time, my grandmother who is ninety-seven and lives alone, a homeless Jamaican lady who sings like a bird. Because they trust me I can raise them up, and they can be as subversive as they are... so that we're not all trying to be normal. I feel that there's a psychic pressure about the end of the world, the Mayan calendar ending in 2012. But instead of making a film about the end I wanted to make a ritual about rebirth. For Luigi, it's his constant: that he is so committed to his fantasy and has a permanent exit from reality.





