



*The girl
behind
Grasso*

As Victor Grasso prepares for his most important show, we meet the beautiful young muse behind his remarkable new paintings.

Interview by Diane Stopyra
Photography by Frank Weiss

Right: Victor Grasso and Bela Lotozo at Higbee Beach, a site that's been a long-time inspiration for the artist.

ARTIST Victor Grasso says he can paint his muse, 17-year-old Bela Lotozo, with his eyes closed. "Her beauty is relentless," he told us. "It's nonstop; it weighs on you like 40 tons of bricks. Her physical attributes are so symmetrical and stunning to me; she's exactly what I wanted. And because Bela was so young when we started this relationship as artist and muse, I don't think she realized just how beautiful she was, which gave her this reckless ability to do the things I asked her to do."

Victor first painted Bela last year, as a mermaid for the cover of an *Exit Zero* color issue, and then as Alice in Wonderland in a painting that was selected as one of 19 works from across the country as part of an Alice in Wonderland-inspired show at Stockton College's Noyes Museum of Art in Oceanville, NJ.

But this fall marks the apex of the pair's working relationship. Artist and muse have spent two years on Victor's newest, most important exhibition, "Fable", which depicts Bela as various characters from both well-known and obscure fables. The solo show will debut at the Noyes on October 4, and run through January 5.

Over the course of at least 15 sessions, Bela would arrive at Victor's North Cape May studio, where he would show her a sketch of what he had in mind — sometimes this vision involved elaborate costuming and props. Then comes a three-hour(ish)-long photo shoot directed by Victor. "Each sketch conveys an attitude," Victor said. "And from the first one, Bela got it right off the bat. Other than directing her positionally, she was able to get nearly every emotion just by looking at the sketches."

Next, Victor selected a photo — each shoot would yield approximately 100, according to Bela — to paint, at which point, he says, the canvas would take on a life of its own. "This is my first solo museum show, and I'm so proud of it," Victor said. "I have never believed in my work so much as I do now."

And neither has his muse.

We caught up with Bela to find out what it's like to be the girl on display... as a chimney sweep, and a unicorn, and Aphrodite, and a rather vicious looking beast, and... well, you really should see for yourself.

You're a high school student, right? Yes, I'm a senior at Lower Cape May Regional High.

What are your plans for after graduation? I have a pretty big list of schools I'm applying to now; I'd like to study engineering. My dream school is probably University of Washington in Washington State. We'll see what happens.

How did you and Victor connect? I didn't really know him until this project started. But I knew who he was, of course; I'd been to a few of his openings, and he and my family had connected at a few *Exit Zero* events.

Tell us what it's like to be an artist's muse? Very, very flattering.

Why did he pick you? Well, when he first painted me as Alice in Wonderland, I think I just had the look — small and blonde and young. After that, I think he wanted to continue working with me.

How does it feel that your picture will be on display in the homes of strangers? It's a little weird, but it's cool that someone would want that!

Over the last two years, how many hours have you spent modeling for Victor? I'd say... maybe 60 or 70.

He's put you in some pretty wild costumes; have there been any looks that were too out there for you? No, I usually go along with it. All of Victor's ideas, I've thought, were amazing.

What's the process like? He'll start out by showing me his sketches and talking a little while about his ideas. Then I get all dressed up in crazy things. I'll do my eye makeup but for the ones where my face is painted, he does all that. As for how long I'm posing, it depends. The shoots vary; sometimes in a half an hour we get the shot and it works out. Other times, I've been in costume for a very long time. Victor ends up with... maybe 100 photos to choose from.

Did you get to veto any, if you really didn't like it? There really



weren't any I didn't like, and if I didn't like it, he probably didn't, either. I definitely got to give my opinion, but the ultimate decision was, of course, up to Victor.

What was the most uncomfortable costume? Probably the one where I'm dripping in milk; it was getting in my eyes and all over my face. And then there was the chimney sweep, where I had to hold a lit cigarette in my mouth; having the smoke in my face was difficult.

What's it like to be at a show where a painting of you is on display? It's exciting, and also a little overwhelming. People kept coming up to me [at SOMA] saying: "You're the girl in the painting!" One lady even asked for my autograph.

Have people recognized you at school or on the street? I am a food runner and busser at the Black Duck and a customer recognized me just the other day.

What's the most extreme reaction you've received? Probably my mom's. When she first sees them, she is speechless. It's very emotional for her, and I think it's probably really cool for her to see her daughter doing something like this, and she's an artist herself [Sue Lotozo owns the Flying Fish Studio] so she really understands the art and is able to talk about it with an artist's perspective. She's really in a lot of the paintings; you just can't see her... she was there to help me with a costume or to hold some piece of it over my head.

Is modeling something you're interested in pursuing elsewhere? I definitely wasn't at first, but I've been thinking about it more. Some of my mom's friends are encouraging me to put a portfolio together.

Do you ever think about the possibility of being 'discovered' at one of Victor's shows? Not really, but I guess it could happen.

Do you have a favorite from this series? It's really hard for me to pick; it changes all the time.

Were you familiar with all the fables before you started? No, but Victor would give us the background on most. The Don Quixote one was great to do because I'd read that book for Spanish in school, so I know the entire story.

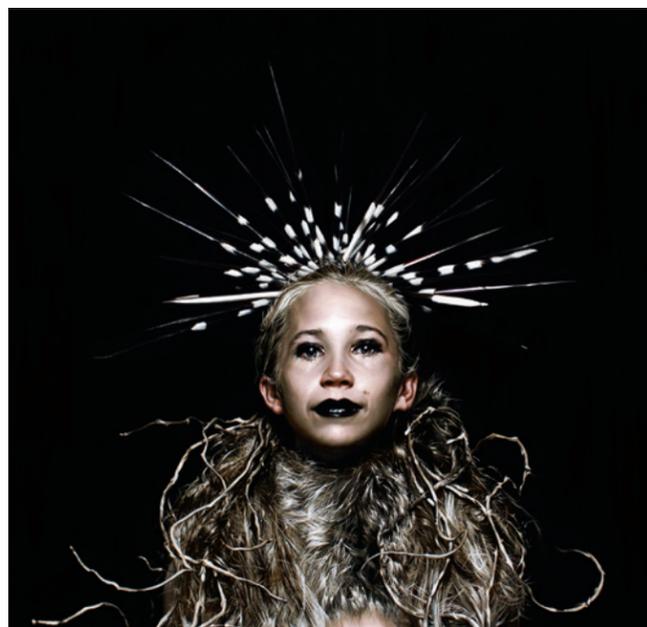
Say Victor let you design the next shoot... have you thought about how you'd really like to see yourself depicted? Not really. I guess if he gave me that opportunity it would be pretty cool to do, but he comes up with ideas that are so different and so amazing, I don't know if I could do anything like that.

What do you do when you're not posing for Victor? I play field hockey, work at the Black Duck, and go to the beach with friends.

How excited are you for the show? I feel like I've been waiting for it to arrive forever.

Is it sad to work so hard on something, and to see these beautiful paintings of yourself, and know you don't get to keep them? Maybe a little sad, but this is something I will always remember.

An opening reception is planned for October 4, from 5-8pm. For more information, visit noyesmuseum.org. The Noyes is located off mile post 41 on the Garden State Parkway.



Nebuchadnezzar "This is a really interesting biblical and historic character. He was a mofo of a king who ended up in the woods for seven years, living like an insane rabid pooch for exiling the Jews. The painter William Blake painted him in a beastly form and when I first saw it, and it resonated so much I wanted to include the character in my series. So, what came out was fur, twisty willow branches and a crown of porcupine quills. Groovy."



Icarus "I've always loved the story of Icarus defying Deadalus' warning of flying too close to the sun with his wings of feathers and wax. It's every young man's prerogative to rebel against his father. I conveyed this myth using paper airplanes instead of wax and feathers. I'm pretty sure they would do just about as well if you took them for a spin up to the burning orb that lights our days."



Don Quixote "I wanted to represent this hero of mine with what sticks most in my head when I think about DQ. Since I was a kid I have never let go of that image of fighting windmills as if they were dragons. The kid in me brought out the pinwheel and toy dragon. I'm a six-year-old in a 36-year-old body."



Siren "This bad bitch of the Baltic used her songs to smash sailors into the jagged rocks of her island — a myth from Homer's *Odyssey* that has been with me since childhood. I had to make this painting so beautiful, so pure and so big that you can't help but be guided into her."



Unicorn "Everybody loves them, but no man will admit to it. It's a universal symbol of magic. I was looking for a highly conceptual version, so it had to be beautiful but also a little off. I used a seashell as the horn, which ties it to the sea, and lots of dripping white, which made the piece unique and oddly magical."



Mr Saturday Night "I've always been intrigued by the grooviest god of the dead. If you don't bring him some tobacco and rum when you kick the bucket you ain't gettin' to the other side. I love the facial expression... it's apparently really fun being a voodoo god."



Hades "I thought, 'What would be a good job for a guy who watches over dead people all day in the fiery pits of the underworld?' Well, a chimney sweep. Apparently Americans have no idea that they even existed because the only people who recognize what this painting depicts are meat pie-eatin' Brits."



Baphomet "This pagan deity has been adopted by everybody who thinks they are evil or thinks everything that has a goat in it is evil. This creature was made up by a French king in the 12th century to accuse the knights templar of heresy. Evil stuff is just generally cooler."



4 & 20 "This great little nursery rhyme is all about cooking blackbirds in a pie, and I always thought that was cool. So with a devilish grin and a mess of cherry pie filling, I have created this cheeky portrait that at first glance could be mistaken for a well-fed vampire but which simply communicates the pleasure of pie."



Chupacabra "I really like monsters and legends and this one is relatively new to our civilization. It's like our Jersey Devil, only it lives in the south. It's interesting how people are frightened of monsters yet they pay money to see them. That's what I'm doing with this piece... it's monstrous but so intriguing you can't stop looking. She looms over you and doesn't let you go."



Magdalena "Growing up a catholic you're told all sorts of stories that stick. I am portraying my version of catholicism — how I see it, how I remember it. It's a ghostly vision with a melancholy outcome. If you look deep it can be very dark and pain-ridden but still so mysterious and intriguing."



Crazy Horse "The ultimate maverick. Leading a bunch of your people on horseback into battle against a government with guns and cannons shows huge gumption. So Crazy Horse isn't a fable but his actions are legendary and from legends we can learn. I wanted this piece to embrace a lot of different tribes of the Native Americans so it's really a tribute."



Aphrodite "The goddess of love birthed in the sea, she's the most beautiful thing ever to walk the earth. I really wanted to capture the sea in this, give a feeling of cold and damp but because she's so beautiful she grabs you and you can't stop staring."