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Why Look at Plants?

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JANAINA TSCHÄPE: BOTANICA

In a curious botanical milieu peopled with costumed creatures born from myths and folktales, Janaina Tschäpe makes extremely fascinating works of art employing diverse media such as painting, video and photography. Julien Salaud interviewed the artist for Antennae.

Questions by Julien Salaud, Translation by Joann Kim

New York based Brazilian and German artist, "Janaina Tschäpe shares her forename with a Brazilian water goddess, and, not coincidentally, her photographs and performances-to-video feature sumptuously organic, watery, distorted female figures," writes Frieze. Since 1997, the artist has employed the female body as her muse, creating universes of polymorphous landscapes, embryonic forms and ambiguous characters. Tschäpe's drawings, photographs, films and installations seek to give form to the trance of art making, portraying not a dream world, but the sensation of being in one as she deftly exploits and subverts notions of identity and reality in her work.

Her first solo exhibition in Ireland opened to the public at the Irish Museum of Modern Art on Wednesday 25 June 2008. *Janaina Tschäpe: Chimera* was structured around the genetics of the fabled beast, to create a very specific atmosphere. Comprising some 20 works, the exhibition focused mainly on Tschäpe's latest paintings that embody a sense of the extraordinary through colourful botanical notations. Displayed and intertwined amongst these paintings are her film and photographic works.

Chimera stands for a fusion of multiple

identities in a single body or creature. In her interview from the exhibition catalogue with Rachael Thomas, Head of Exhibitions at IMMA, Tschäpe describes the relationship between the *Chimera* and her work:

What makes the chimera a fearful monster isn't any of [its] traits in particular, but the fact that they are all combined in a single being. It is this notion of the chimera that applies to the way I structure the process of my work. Whether I'm making videos, photographs or paintings, the process is similarly multifaceted to the point that it departs from being a work strategy to become the reason for the work to exist. When I am immersed in this sort of media amalgamation I am allowed to lose control and be free.

In this exhibition Tschäpe created an environment of dream and fantasy, where the everyday world metamorphoses into a mythical place, populated by fabricated creatures and florescent vegetation. The four screen video installation, *Blood, Sea* (2004), is a mesmerizing example of



Janaina Tschäpe

Moon Blossom, oil on canvas, 90" x 60", 2007 © the artist, courtesy of Nichido Contemporary Art



Janaina Tschäpe

Lair, oil on canvas (triptych), 118" x 79", 2009 © the artist, courtesy of Forest Vilaca Gallery

Tschäpe's fantasy worlds. Its narrative plays with the evolutionary biology of sirens and mermaids, from fables such as the water sprites of Irish lore to the Brazilian Iemanjá - spirit of the seas, lakes and fertility - from the Candomblé religion. In this work Tschäpe plays creator to magnificent and fantastical creatures and environments.

The fertile worlds found in *Blood, Sea* and the photographic series *Botanica* (2004-05) are juxtaposed with the simplicity of an earlier series spanning over a number of years. *100 Little Deaths* (1996-2002) explores danger and the horror for an artist of a failure of ideas. This exhibition is a unique opportunity to discover Tschäpe's contemplative and melancholic, yet surreal, practice.

Images of sleeping women are recurrent in your artworks since your first exhibition (Exercises, 2002). It is noticeable that your images attempt to capture a dream-like dimension. Did your dreams influence the development of your artistic process? In what way?

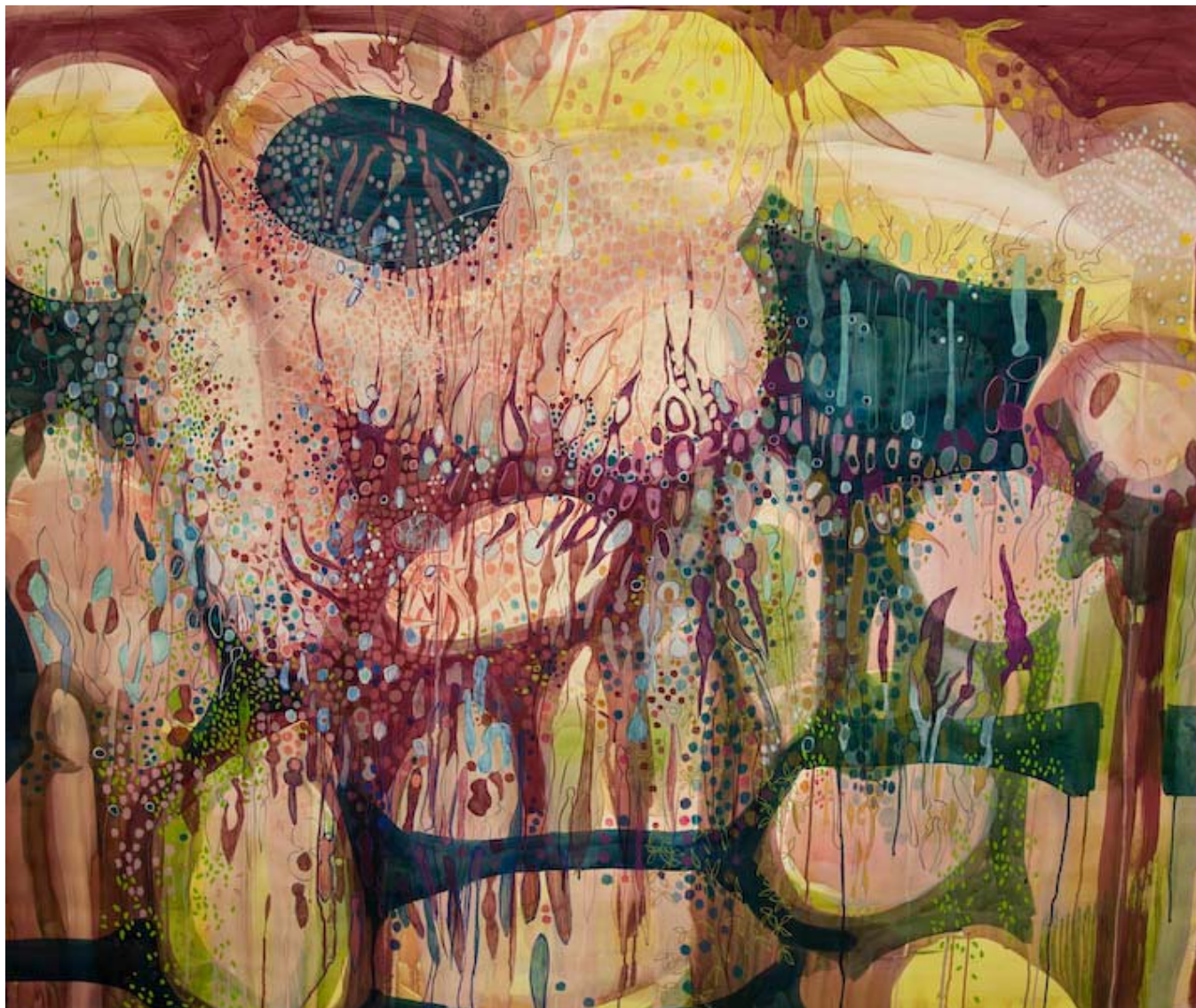
Janaina Tschäpe: Dreams are but one component of what influences my work. I draw as much inspiration from nature, fairytales, water, and the subconscious as I do from dreams. Dreams can reflect our desires, both secret and blatant, through the subconscious state of our

sleep and through this ego-less channel storytelling emerges and freely influences my work.

Fluidity is another strongly present characteristic all through your productions. In 2003, water crossed the exhibition After the rain (Albi, France): liquid, solid or gaseous captured in video sequences; the elements also took place directly in the creation of your watercolors (Interior). Why do you attempt to depict a word through the flux?

Water is a powerful force in nature, a form that plays into many mythologies and fables within various cultures alongside providing the fluidity of narrative, both abstract and representational, within a single artwork. Water is the female, water is the womb, water is the eternal formless encapsulator of mass and volume. It is the subject of fantastical figures such as Yemanhá, the 'mother of the waters' and serves both a liberating and suffocating virtue.

In this exhibition, a cycle of photos called Livia showed several self-portraits. They all offered a figure hard to delineate: a woman, an octopus, a jellyfish or maybe seaweeds at the same time. What is the meaning of these blurred bodies and



Janaina Tschäpe

Polipos, watercolour and pastel on paper, 71" x 85", 2010 © the artist, courtesy of Forest Vilaca Gallery

what do they say about animals? Are you interested in metamorphosis?

I am very interested in metamorphosis and have utilized the female body and its multiple representations within mythologies and fairy tales to re-present and provide an alternative, and more personal, reinterpretation of the physical and psychological manifestations of sex. An emphasis in the sea, and how figures find movement and breath within the medium.

From the first drawings to the last paintings, we can notice the development of the motifs we encountered in Polipos (2010): for this piece, they have been repeated through variations of scales and colors. Initially, those forms were already showed through drawings of microcosms (Interior, 2003), landscapes (I found me in a gloomy

wood, astray, 2004), or photos of unusual plants (Botanica, 2004). But it seems that they got their autonomy as motifs from Hortus period (2005). Can you give us your perspective on this evolution?

The motifs found within my work have developed throughout the years while experimenting with a more liberated process, one that didn't involve staging, posing, propping. Painting and drawing became a practice that involved more chance and spontaneity of form than precise mark making. Within this intuitive, personal and direct mode of production there was a common vocabulary built around the works, organic shapes and fluid marks, repetitive strokes and patterns of various shapes, asymmetrical and imperfect in its handmade natural state. Each work reflects the unpredictability and non-uniformity of nature, its overwhelming and eruptive tendency to visually consume, and its



Janaina Tschäpe

Wilt, oil on canvas, 110.2" x 236.2", 2009 © the artist, courtesy of Forest Vilaca Gallery

effortless tirade of beauty and harmony.

In Untitled 2 (2010), a green swarm of those motifs surrounds a sleeping human figure. Does the repetition of motifs have anything in common with the natural laws that govern the appearance of the vegetal world?

In addition to my work reflecting natural laws of repetition, pattern, and cycles, the motifs also developed out of a personal vocabulary emphasizing the spontaneous and liberated, expressive and irrational.

In some of your paintings, plants seem to be depicted through the overlapping of different points of view, different focal distances (Wilt, 2009). Is it relevant to consider Wilt as an image mixing the microscopic interiors of plants and their external appearance?

I draw my influence from both microscopic and grandiose, both internal and all encompassing perspective of nature.

What are the productivities of these overlappings of the artist, the artworks, and the audience?

Specific to my artistic practice, I'd like to think the audience viewer is entrapped in a world that is created through my paintings, photographs and

videos. Perhaps a temporary escape from everyday reality, entering a world laced in fantasy, mysticism, mythology, and inspire viewers to take the fragmented narratives to formulate their own.

Can you explain your 'plastic use of colors'?

I wouldn't say the colors have a plastic value in my work, the colors are mostly hues of a dense and opaque nature, layered and stroked in shades of deep crimson red, green, and blue. I use plastic mediums such as plasticine to experiment with shape and form in the same way I would use paint to create a painting. There is also the latex balloons and condoms, elastic that is used to morph and mutate figures within my work, to gorge and fill with water, its material providing brightness and flexibility.

From those thematic and plastic characteristics, one could conclude your artworks often have a lot in common with the paintings of an Australian native representing the Dreamtime. Is this comparison relevant to you?

Dreamtime images are of a completely different context but reflecting on my works from a purely formalist perspective, one can say that the organic shapes and motif as well as the color palette are similar.



Janaina Tschäpe

Veratrum Bulbosus, from the *Melanotropics* series, 40" x 49", C-Print, 2006 © the artist, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

The recent reorganization of Pompidou Center's permanent collections for an exhibition called Elles ("They, (women)") included some of your artwork. Can you explain us the feminine dimension of your artistic process? How does this affect you relationship with plants?

Mythological female characters, 'mother nature', the sea as the womb and source of renewal, religiosity and maternity, these are all elements that influence much of my work. But more than my work being "feminine" and not "masculine", I'm more interested in defying the notions of the permanent and rigidly defined and focus on playing with sexual and emotional anatomies of the figure and converge the internal and external facets of personage. Nature is in a constant state of change and metamorphosis, there is no certainty, no permanence, no sameness within it. I explore the same concept with the stories and figures reflected in my work.

According to you, what would be the beneficial effect if contemporary art was more "feminine" than "masculine"?

As an artist, my utmost priority in my career is that of being an artist. Within that component there is not much room or hearsay to consider if contemporary art is feminine or masculine. The art world, both in its history and in its current state, both in cultural production and commercial output, it is a white-male-centered majority. It is easy to describe a specific such as a particular artist's oeuvre as more feminine, or conjuring subjects of the maternal, sexual, natural and organic but to group an entire sector of society to a particular sexual orientation is outside of my interest.

Could men possibly "work as women"?

Men could work as women as much as women could work as men. How either case is received



Janaina Tschäpe

Cadmium Infecto, from the *Botanica* series, 9.125" x 13", Digital C-Print, 2005 © the artist, courtesy of Calier Gebauer

might differ and bend significance toward that of a "dominating" sex's change of role. My interests purely lie in producing works that are not dependent in its being received of a particular sexual orientation or culturally modified gender.

Would it be desirable?

Not any more than vice versa.

Born in Germany in 1973 to a German father and Brazilian mother, **Janaina Tschäpe** lived primarily in San Paulo, Brazil as a child. She studied at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg from 1992 to 1998 before moving to New York and completing her MFA at the School of Visual Arts in 1998. Tschäpe has exhibited her paintings, drawings, photographs and video installations throughout the world, with solo shows at the University at Buffalo Art Gallery, the Scottsdale Museum of Art, the Reina Sofia Art Center in Madrid, Artforum Berlin, and Centre d'Art a Albi, Toulouse, France, among others. Her work is included in numerous private collections and the permanent collections of museums in Europe, the United States, Brazil and Japan.