

The Rustle of the Living: The Paintings of Sasha Ferré

By Teresa Castro

Saying that a painting makes a sound, that it rustles, is unexpected. Painting is about silence – “mute poetry,” according to an old saying. Yet, looking at the paintings of Sasha Ferré, we are struck by an impression of quivering. It’s not just that the painting vibrates – for it does vibrate, it even throbs, as if the color-material of her paintings were animated by the breath of life. Under the curtains of leaves, the screens of feathers or fur, the interlacing of filaments, we hear something like a subtle murmuring. You just have to listen carefully, and you’ll hear the rustle of the living.

“Living” can be a noun, an adjective, and a present participle referring to the condition and experience or the characteristics of being alive. The living is life in action, busy with its needs; life in its multitude of transitory forms and body-as-happening; life in its proliferation of ways of being and, especially, of making connections. Being in the world is necessarily co-existing with others, but also with the other. For this reason, the living always evokes a unique composition of connections: alliances, but also alloys, in the sense of mixtures. As Emanuele Coccia writes in *Metamorphoses*, “every life has already transgressed the boundaries between kingdoms, species, and individuals, but also places and times”; “each living being is a micro-Leviathan, each one a different assembly of the most disparate and heterogeneous bodies.”¹ Mixing with the other, transforming, becoming other: that is the fate of all living things.

Sasha Ferré’s paintings seem haunted by the living, its agitation and murmurs (see her series *Murmurations*), or even, to use a biological term, its autopoiesis. Some paintings strive to map the cosmic threshold separating the living from the inert; others take on the appearance of cross-sections of organic tissue. All, without exception, bring about a vital environment, a kind of compost for life, including the life of forms. For if life “is form,” and “form is the modality of life,” as art historian Henri Focillon wrote long ago, these lines and colors also seem to be animated with a life that has no goal other than itself.² Sometimes, as in *Pink Earth*, the compost-painting truly resembles humus. In a process of transmutation that recalls composting, the waste from classical compositions is one of the sources of fermentation. The ancient dualism between form and content is part of this. In these paintings, the “content” has finally been liberated from the background, returning from the abyss into which it had been exiled. But if the artist’s paintings have the rustle of living things, this is also due to her mastery of technique. Ferré paints with oil sticks, not only employing an energetic gestuality, but displaying an almost alchemical knowledge of her material. In a beautiful text on the materials of life and the idea of creation as a process of growth, anthropologist Tim Ingold recalls that for the alchemist “the material is known not by what it *is* but by what it *does*, specifically when mixed with other materials, treated in particular ways, or placed in a particular situations.”³

But what do we see in these paintings with their variety of dimensions and color palettes? Leaves? Furs? Feathers? Connective tissue? Vascular networks? Mycorrhizae (the network of filaments connecting the mycelium of fungi to the roots of plants)? The fabric of life? Although the motif of interlacing and the biological paradigm (particularly in terms of theoretical biology, based on the study of morphogenesis and the development of organisms) are apparent to viewers, in front of these paintings, we often lose our bearings. The small and the large mix together, the near and the far collide, the vegetal and the animal merge. Some compositions evoke both the enlargement of the microscopic and the characteristic shrinking of the aerial view. This “derangement of scales” is perhaps inherent in our contemporary

¹ Emanuele Coccia, *Metamorphoses*, Cambridge / Medford, Polity Press, 2021, p. 105 and p. 128.

² Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms* [1934], New York, Zone Books, 1992, p. 33.

³ Tim Ingold, *Making. Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture*, Oxon, New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 29.

condition, which is subjected to the harsh reality of the possibility of collapse and environmental disaster.⁴ As we are constantly reminded, the climate crisis makes the ground of our former certainties slip out from under us. Human activity (at least the activity of some humans) has become a geological force and the historically constructed division between nature and culture, on which modernity is based, has become obsolete.

Yet Sasha Ferré's work is not limited to witnessing these destabilizing transformations or being merely their original and brightly colored symptom. Here are artworks that give us hints. What do you do when you lose your bearings? Exert your attention. Stop in order to see better, to discern what is not immediately visible or obvious. In this case, linger in front of a painting, even listen to it and let yourself be surprised by the faint rustle of the living. The artist's work is an invitation to practice the arts of noticing, which anthropologist Anna Tsing analyzes so accurately in her research on *matsutake* and the possibility of living on a damaged planet.⁵ Such arts of noticing place the perceptive exploration and the effort to see that are at the heart of the artist's approach under the sign of ethics – attention to what matters – and not economy – more or less attention.

This change in perspective is doubly thrilling, by its optimism and by its heuristic power – its capacity to turn a painting not only into a way of seeing the living, but also into a way of thinking about it. This in no way reduces the troubling aspect of these compositions. For these are images that cultivate trouble, and even invite us to live with it, as Donna Haraway puts it.⁶ These paintings transport us into strange worlds, made of germinations and transformations, fungic dances, flows and tangles of particles. Realms of symbiotes with multiple bodies. A world of speculative biologies, which are as much about the archeology of deep time as the exploration of future times to come, making each painting a contact zone between different temporalities. In other words, artworks worthy of the Chtulucene, of the impure and tangled narratives that it demands, capable of honoring the webs of the *Pimoid cthulhu*, a species of spider that never ceases spinning its threads, repairing its web, remaking connections, and finding attachment points.

Translation by Kate Deimling

⁴ Timothy Clark, "Scale," in Tom Cohen (ed.), *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, Ann Arbor, Open Humanities Press, 2012, pp. 148-166.

⁵ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015.

⁶ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chtulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016.