

Sybil

When the German ecologist and botanical illustrator Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) first set foot in Suriname, her senses were overwhelmed by astonishing landscapes and creatures. During her explorations, Merian detailed the process of metamorphosis and interconnection among species. The result was a compilation of sixty engravings published in 1705 as "Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium," a fascinating compendium of the New World's fauna and flora.

Her engravings represented one of Suriname's first natural histories, and many of Merian's observations were new to Western science. Unlike her contemporary naturalists, who studied and represented organisms individually through dissection, Merian pioneered drawing a diachronic album of forms to represent metamorphosis and interdependence among beings.

With a unique perspective on species interconnection in the natural world, "Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium" presented a graphic and conceptual revolution. In addition to expressive accounts collected from enslaved individuals of African and Amerindian descent, who taught about the unknown medicinal properties of various species, the book's plates represent each being by its capacity to transmit itself from one body to another, from one species to another.

Merian's ability to impart movement to species' interdependence transformed her drawings into more than just a scientific document. They became the basis for many fictions about the tropical world and the fascination of the unexplored. Her engravings, depicting transmutations between species, incorporate signs of time. The duration of metamorphoses is expressed to break the static nature of scientific drawing. As if everything mimicked by observation were on the verge of becoming something else.

This same instant seems to guide the landscapes of the Brazilian artist Fernanda Galvão. Equally attentive to the representational data of scientific manuals, the artist dissects, recombines, and metamorphoses specimens of tropical flora and images from cell biology to produce fictional realities of a distant future.

Composed of amalgamated strata, her atmospheres incorporate the notion of duration. Expressed not only by the composition, where each element seems in constant fluidity and mutation, duration is an essential pictorial element: it can be perceived in each use of her materials - oil, charcoal, oil pastel, and dry pastel - through their gesturalities and rhythms.

Her canvases overflow with fluidity, as if the very essence of painting were challenged by the prospect of becoming something else. In this aspect, they do justice to the constant presence of cinema as a means of study and investigation for the artist. Many of the paintings resemble frames from a film, capturing a moment destined for change. It is no coincidence that many of Galvão's fictional biomes depict wet and aquatic environments, evoking oceanic depths where many existences originate and end.

Immersed in deep blues and blacks, her landscapes and inanimate beings retain something of the psyche itself, which insinuates itself between the dreamlike, memory, and fabulation. Among corals, anemones, seaweeds, and scallops, new carnivorous plants emerge in these environments, heralding a new future. As in her most recent painting "Tube Feet, Spine Teeth" (2024), a large echinoderm surrounded by pedicellariae and ambulacral feet resembles a large mouth expelling and sucking up all that liquid. It is its scale and intense red that confer something animalistic and lively to the form, reinforcing the ambiguity and strangeness of its presence.

The same operation employed for this kind of submarine tongue is used by the artist to highlight and distinguish certain elements and vegetation in her compositions. The most vehement burgundies emerge in them, as well as delicate pinks and also vibrant ones. Her palette seems to carefully highlight those that, faced with the obscure and reentrant, separated from the most exquisite thread of light, survive in a resilient existence.

The sybil, in its etymology, was the name given to women and oracles with the gift of foreseeing the future. Similarly, Fernanda Galvão's landscapes delineate a hypothetical reality, devoid of humans, where what lies is a synchrony of species in constant change. From the subtlety of plants, whose trace recalls Japanese engravings, to the large tentacles, which seem ready to digest everything around them, her ambiances are the expression of a pulsating desire for existence. From her belief in the power to resist and resignify, her landscapes and beings merge. As the artist herself states: it is still possible to find life after the apocalypse.

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