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Spiritual Abstractions

Tania Candiani, Hilma's Ghost, Kati Horna, Magali Lara
France-Lise McGurn, Vibe Overgaard & Salmo Suyo

Olivier Assayas' gothic thriller *Personal Shopper* (2016) is a point of departure for an intergenerational group show that brings together paintings, drawings, photography, sculptures, and video made by women and a trans artist of different backgrounds and formations, whose practices reminds us that abstraction hasn't been only attached to rationalism, science, and progress. Abstractions, in plural, are still shaped by spiritual and spiritualist ideas and non-western mystic and esoteric traditions as in the beginning of the twentieth century. Works by Tania Candiani (Mexico, 1976), Hilma's Ghost (Brooklyn, 2020), Kati Horna (Budapest, 1912- Mexico, 2000), Magali Lara (Mexico, 1956), France Lise McGurn (Glasgow, 1983), Vibe Overgaard (Copenhagen), and Salmo Suyo (Huancayo, Peru, 1989) poetically anticipated or respond to the rapid and inscrutable process of transformation of our times regarding notions of identity, gender and the rise of non-rational thinking vis-à-vis the overpower of technology and the demise of world's natural environment.

Assayas's film projected the hegemony of magical thinking in times where personal matters and political concerns become an amalgam of abstractions convoluted behind the pale screen of the computer or the compulsive ubiquity of the smart phones. The main character of *Personal Shopper* Maureen Cartwright (Kristen Stewart) a U.S expat, embodies the grace and fatality of art and magic projected through psychic attributes assigned to women, such as clairvoyance and intuition. Cartwright, a medium, runs errands on her scooter around Paris where she works to make a meager living while obsessed with Hilma Af Klint's paintings. Assayas' *tour de force* of contemporary cinematic fiction serves as a pretext to bring together new methodologies and formal strategies deployed by women and trans artists who are, to some extent, tied to a spiritualist mode of abstractions, which is explicitly invoked by the feminist Brooklyn-based collective Hilma's Ghost. Contemporary artists Danielle Tegeder and Sharmistha Ray formed the collective Hilma's Ghost during the Covid 19 pandemic lockdown to explore different paths of abstraction and non-western esoteric thinking through a pictorial language inspired by the lineage of Swedish painter's Hilma Af Klint. The collective's use of different shapes of geometry and chromatic palettes correlate to spiritual theories linked to Theosophy as well as tantric Buddhism and magical rituals of original communities. Their research expands to collaborative practices with audiences in which they read tarot, dig into architectural stories, and heal gender troubles.

The pictorial drawings of ill or desiring flowers by Mexican artist Magali Lara, are splendid metaphors that go beyond life into the Orphic mysteries of eroticism and the psyche in their revealing force of dependence and autonomy, as well as of life and death. Lara's flowers show the liminal condition of feminine desire, equivalent to plants that, according to the words of poet Anne Carson, do not sleep, do not lie or bluff, but simply expose their genitals. In this sense, Lara has been a pioneer in exploring the B-side of abysmal paradises of feminine subjectivity and the tides of libidinal drive as liberating (and oppressive) manifestations of women in patriarchal society. Her vision of these larval and developed states of desire had been expressed through artist's books and collaborations with poets that later mutated to larger explorations expanded to canvases, paper, or animations.

It is in the pulsation between life and death where we find *Oda a la necrofilia*, an important late surrealist photographic series made in 1962 by the Mexican photographer of Hungarian origin Kati Horna for the *Fetish* section of the *S.nob* magazine. This short-lived magazine (7 issues) was edited by writers Salvador Elizondo, Juan García Ponce, and Emilio García Riera, and included the collaboration of outstanding artists, including Horna. The photographic sequence conceived by Kati Horna for *S.nob* allowed her to resume her early interest in psychoanalysis, an approach she had left behind for the sake of her anarchist militancy and photojournalism, and later due to her exile. *Oda a la necrofilia* featured the participation of her close friend, surrealist artist Leonora Carrington, with whom the photographer and her husband José Horna collaborated on other projects. Carrington appears naked as the grieving widow of her beloved, represented *in absentia* with a mask, literally as a fetish.

Tania Candiani is a Mexican artist whose work reveals the contradictions and authoritarian tendencies of global culture in the eagerness to homologate the specificity of social temporalities and the differentiated clamor of minorities. Candiani participates with the single-channel video *La Maringuilla*, a two-minute hypnotic dance from colonial times –La danza de los negritos– in which a man dances dressed in women’s clothing, covering his head with a non-wedding veil and spinning on his axis with a symbolic snake in his hand. Although the figure represents the mother of snakes and being the only female character, as in other colonial dances, it is performed by a man; which for some specialists evidences the dual symbolic guiding principle in the Totonaca cosmovision, it can also be attributed to the *machismo* of the time and region, which prohibited women from participating in the ceremonies and dances. For the artist: “In this piece, we see the image of the dancer, overlaid on his own dance, thus forming the horizontal narrative of the work, where the body itself becomes a ghost”.

Salmo Suyo, a young Peruvian artist based in Switzerland, has focused his artistic research on the mechanisms of sexual dissidence of trans masculinities. His aesthetic research addresses the radical representation of the queer body in transformation, as a kind of overflowing and corrosive lava that spills into heteronormative circuits. In his work, the biological concept of sexual difference as used by feminism in the 1970s reaches a blind spot confronting its relevance through an alternative trans discourse shaped by dysphoria, an aesthetic theoretical operation that he uses to question the medical-pharmaceutical market. Likewise, Salmo develops from the technique of object production the exploration of materials that reflect trans subjectivities and the concomitant political debates from the use of medical pigments and silicones. The artist, whose *artistic persona* blends sacred songs (psalm) with the possessive third person in singular suyo (them, theirs) also vindicates ceramics as an ancestral Andean practice that becomes more significant when it blends with the 21st-century technologies of production.

The treatment of the human figure in the paintings of Scottish artist France-Lise McGurn is associated with female archetypes. Likewise, it has been argued that female representations in her work constitute allegorical spirits or muses usually linked to gender models constructed by pop culture and contemporary fashion, both spheres portrayed in the film *Personal Shopper*. McGurn’s approach to the sexuality emanating from these flat, static figures highlights the artist’s punk attitude, enunciated in the paintings’ titles.

Vibe Overgaard, a young Danish artist, presents delicate ceramic, metal, wood, and thread sculptures conceived for her recent show at ISCP, Brooklyn. *Spindle City* –which refers to a homonymous site in Fall River, Massachusetts–embodying the ruins of the textile industry and the type of manufacturing that created a model of productivity that remains a ghost in the collective imagination. Falls River was popularly identified as Spindle City when it became the main hub of cotton production in the nineteenth century in the U.S, supplying the demand for half of the world’s manufactured material. Overgaard’s small and medium scale sculptures reflect the idea of interrupted and decaying circuits and are presented as phantasmatic vestiges of industrial capitalism. They bestow conceptually as well as in human scale and materiality a subtle critique to the corporate and masculine optimism of minimalism.