

# Tschäpe the Dragon

by Germano Celant

In 2001 Janaina Tschäpe drafted a document addressed to one Doctor Strauss, in which she described the transformation of her body: she was slowly growing wings on her back, she wrote, claiming that she was about to turn into a bird, a bat, or an angel.<sup>1</sup> It was a crucial juncture in the changes that have marked her career. After the *100 Little Deaths*, begun in 1997, Tschäpe has aimed at leaving behind images of startling portraits and dream figures which are “apparitions” summoned forth by the desire to indicate or effect a self-transfiguration, having survived the end of her first artistic experiences. The latter grew out of a context of conceptual performances realised within the milieu of the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, where the artist took her first creative steps. The wings protruding from her back stemmed from her early sculptural experiments with latex, a material that calls to mind the work of Eva Hesse, yielding a figurative result—neither minimalist nor abstract—that can be worn.<sup>2</sup> In *Terrace*, 2001, the material moulded onto her bare skin tends rather to suggest a will to cast herself into the void, into a more fanciful dimension between the primordial and the real.

The incentive is to assume the features of a devil or an angel, and in any case an active, radiant meta-body, with which she can reach—as in *Birdwoman*, 2001—an empyrean unknown to the earthlings inhabiting the planet. The wings are thus a sublimated but physical extension of her flesh. They underscore a reservoir of potentiality within her body, which had already undergone mutations in *Long Island*, 1999, and in the *Anatomy* series, 2000, in which her extremities, from her head to her feet, were subjected to transformations. This was all achieved through the use of condoms, which, functioning as highly refined containers of water, were then worn on the body, altering its outer contours. Liquid thus became the instrument feeding the transition from one state of being to another. It is the substance feeding the expansion, allowing the figure to “leave” its present condition and enter another. Indeed its transparency seems to suggest the possibility of going from an indecipherable invisibility to a visibility that is unknown. It is the amniotic fluid in which a being grows: a fleshly, bodily double that is a mirroring but also autonomous and different.

The association with water, which makes the figure fertile and transforms it even while purifying it, makes it possible to complement the suggestions of devil, bat, and angel with that of the dragon, which metaphorically concretizes another fantastical being: the chimera. Forever associated with a dark, mysterious vision, this monster (from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning “marvel”) was considered a fearless, incredibly strong being, to the point that it was often represented on the banners of Germanic armies.<sup>3</sup>



*Terrace*, 2001

Cibachrome | 45 × 60" | 114,3 × 152,4 cm

While recalling the underwater, subterranean world, the image, according to C.G. Jung,<sup>4</sup> refers psychologically to the universe of the unknown in which the self is formed. In adopting it, Tschäpe takes it upon herself to overcome her fears, to emerge from her *100 Little Deaths*. It becomes a kind of talisman against death, for surviving it, overcoming it, and rematerializing as a chimerical double. The purpose of photographing herself in her new “identity” is to seek the identification of a life-force that will make her a vehicle of imaginary powers connected to a magical, legendary universe. Such regeneration serves to appropriate a deep inner strength in which the self can be mirrored. It points to the artist’s wish to arrive at a dynamic process similar to that of the chameleon—*Camaleonas*, 2002—which allows her to give expression to an appearance through multiple ramifications, with no rigid structure: one that is created through continual metamorphoses, amplifications, and reductions. This is what happens in the 2003 work, *Agua Viva*, in the series of images of *Dani*, *Livia*, *Mana* and *Neia*, as well as in *Juju*, 2004, and *After the Rain*, 2004–2005, where, by means of protuberances, the unreal female bodies release unorthodox, marginal expressions that can be interpreted as appendices and residues of a disintegrated being, as well as articulations of a marvelous form of experience, as signs and constants of female existence.

Transmutation, however, is the leavening of revelation as well as danger. The disruptive power of femininity is a departure from the ordinary that becomes sensual and soft, as well as aggressive and dangerous. In many of Tschäpe’s works,



Aude 5, 2003

Cibachrome | 40 × 50" | 101,6 × 127 cm

the figures of women are translated into surreal creatures with unusual excrescences consisting of tubes and spheres, tulle and elastic fabrics in bright colors—pink, orange, green, blue—which float freely in rivers and waterfalls like contemporary water lilies. They are entities of unknown, surreal energy, similar to dream animals such as sirens, or deities such as nymphs: “I wanted to create a world between rainstorm, between reality and fiction, something that bursts out of you, like when you walk into the wood after rain and you see mushrooms coming out.”<sup>5</sup> The peculiarity of their existence stems from their provenance from and in water, which becomes the pre-eminent place of a new, spontaneous generation. Aside from being the medium of birth and purification, water is a symbolic entity that eludes human control. It suggests freedom and disorder, fragility and risk, and in this sense the artist’s amoebic figures call to mind the uncontrollability of witches, who dominate the unknown.

*Agua Viva*, 2003, is a liquid universe in which a sublimated, aquatic body moves covered by a second skin made up of colored fabrics and amazing extensions. These are the articulations of a desired experience that becomes concretized in a negation of one’s own objective condition as a real person

(already once subjected to a symbolic death in *100 Little Deaths*) in order to open up to a world of signs where objectivity and subjectivity are no longer antithetical and antinomial, but coexist and define another place, another stage for their own existence. Another evocation of the imaginary, after those of the devil and the dragon, involves a reminiscence of nymphs and nereids and their innocence, in works from *Naiad*, 2003, to *Nymph 1–4*, 2010. The water is “pure,” and this meaning is reinforced by the presence of the naked woman immersing herself in the sea and merging her “blood” with the liquid, in *Blood, Sea*, 2004. The female figure moving in the water suggests a further metaphor, that of the immaculate, sensual swan that in the realm of the unconscious contemplates its equivalency with the masculine. It suggests a process of evolution from the female to the male.<sup>6</sup> It is indeed a further transition away from a watery world, which in the popular imagination is always associated with misfortune and danger, and with a rebirth connected to a new world and a new body, from *Juju*, 2004, to *The Ghost in Between*, 2010.

Starting in 2005, Tschäpe begins searching for a universe halfway between physical reality and psychic reality, which takes shape as a “space in between”: a place of making art where it “loses” its corporeality and asserts the presence of a filter—drawing on paper or painting on canvas—between the world above and the world below, the conscious and the unconscious of her approach: “I started drawing again to have that personal relationship with my art making ... So I was missing art making as an intimate thing.”<sup>7</sup> She begins to multiply the occasions for contact between the language of photography and that of painting. From 2004 to 2008 she increased the possibilities of recording and evoking the wonders of nature, from the *Botânica* sequence to *Aquática*, while immersing herself in revelations of earthly and aquatic images from *Hortus* to *Undergrowth*, 2005, to the *Stars and Jelly Series*, 2007. On these surfaces the traces of colors and forms become gentle and sensual, intertwining into organic forms in an amorous play between the parts. They are the same transparencies, always changing and indefinite, that range from the fleshly details of hands and feet mediated by the latex in *He Drowned in Her Eyes as She Called Him to Follow*, 2000, to the watercolors on paper that thrive on inner reflections between the colors and slip gradually into one another, as if to evoke the immersion of art into a vanished continent.

The artist’s turn to drawing in 2004 heralded her gradual immersion in a painting practice involving a suspension of the real. This opens up an undefined universe of ghosts, often expressed in other mediums, such as photographs and the film of *The Ghost in Between*, 2013, which runs parallel to the paintings and drawings, concentrating all the wonders of an inner

journey. The effect of an initial stimulus to create a new life for herself after her metaphorical death now triggers a fantastical, imaginary defense mechanism that is the sequence of painterly “pearls” which the artist has been introducing into the artistic context from 2005 to the present. These contribute to the formation of a “possible” underwater forest that is not a duplicate of reality but—as in *Terrace*—is a new combination of figures, such as the various plants in *Possible Plants*, 2008, and a rethinking of landscape in *Landscape*, 2009. The visual impact thrives on the colors’ liquid transparency, which seems to stem from a fluid application in which the paint is imbued with light. In the images dating from 1998 to 2005, this luminosity suggests there being “something underneath” that corresponds to the desired body. What is laid onto the paper or canvas is a combination of sensations that convey an extraordinary synaesthetic virtuosity. It feeds on an osmosis between the atmospheric stratum and a sensation of chiaroscuro. All the forms are exorcised, and at the same time the whole appears to consist of a sort of fusion and transparent unity in which all the pseudo-natural “figures” are grafted onto one another.

Each work thus presents itself as a locus of intertwinings of contradictory, multiple images and tends towards a unity and harmony corresponding to the artist’s approach of not distinguishing between mediums: photography, film, drawing, performance, and painting. The color applications on canvas or paper subtend a “fusion.” They put every medium in horizontal perspective, so that each can be seen within the other—imbued from without, and marked by a strong impulse to sameness. Similarly, the way the “plants” open up in works ranging from *Floresta da Mina*, 2006, and *Wilt*, 2009, to *Passiflora*, 2010, to *The Woods*, 2014, evokes a slow-motion sketch of new species ramifying and blossoming. They are imaginary foliage and flowering that multiply ad infinitum, rising up and moving about in a continual élan. They overlap like the colors, but also vanish into one another. Compared to the figurative, reductive approach informing painting at the start of the century, Tschäpe’s approach which thrives on elaborate branching and interminglings seems to aspire to an evanescence, where what matters most is the indefinite, which feeds on vivification and not on definitions or narratives à la Christopher Wool or John Currin. Her paintings reflect a nerve network diverging in every direction, provoking constant excitement through spontaneity and emotional experiences. The exhilaration is reflected in the iconography of the foliage and the ramifications of the microscopic particles in works from *Penumbrae*, 2007 to *Dream Particles*, 2010. It gets lost in darkness in *Lady of the Night*, 2010, or scattered into the cosmos in *The Stars, the Moon, the Sea*, 2010.

The liquefaction of the particles, as in the photographs, becomes the vehicle for a new being—which before was fleshly and feminine, and now is vegetal and neuter. The woman is placed in relation to the flower through a parallel flow, in an archaic bond between the natural world and sensual sensation, which in the work of the artist assumes a wild, surreal valency, a magical, fable-like intensity. The paintings and works on paper are the place of a dissolution and loss of the performance aspect and bodily presence. They are like segments of watercourses that transform the prior experience into droplets or discrete materials. There is no point in looking for a form or stroke in this work: all mingles together in the flowing liquid matter. All has dissolved. In this way Tschäpe’s art absorbs all substances, attracts all essences, is imbued with all colors, ranging from happiness to suffering, from the luminous to the nocturnal, the joyous to the melancholy, in works from *Playing Infinite* to *Black River*, 2010. These are complex entities involving the flow of liquid but also of air—*Air*, and *Air II*, 2014—which represent a further reconnection with the cosmos. Painting thus becomes an agitator, putting the artist in touch with the oscillations of her own being, a continual search for balance—in *Self as Island*, 2014—between the flow of life and the renewal of her own existence.

- 1 J. Tschäpe, *Dear Doctor Strauss*, in: “Janaina Tschäpe”, Timezone 8 Limited, Beijing, 2006, p. 52.
- 2 “When I was in art school,” the artist said, “I did a lot of things with wax and cubes and latex. It was very Eva-Hesse-inspired. After a while they became more things to wear, things that were in my domestic environment but they were all sort of wearable too. That’s where they became more like costumes. The sculptures morphed themselves into costumes and inflatables. They became props. I never looked at them as objects,” in: Joe Fig, *Interview with Janaina Tschäpe*, Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, 24 September 2013.
- 3 Ditte & Giovanni Bandini, *Das Drachenbuch*, Munich, 2002 (Italian trans. by Anna Carbone), Armenia, Milan, 2004, p. 18.
- 4 Ditte & Giovanni Bandini, *op.cit.*, p. 16.
- 5 Quoted by Linda Yablonsky, “Putting Guts on the Outside,” in: *Artnews*, New York, September 2003.
- 6 Gaston Bachelard, *L’Eau et les Rêves. Essai sur l’imagination de la matière*, José Corti, Paris, 1942 (Italian trans., red. edizioni, Como, 1987, p. 41).
- 7 Joe Fig, *op.cit.*