

Seeking an End Without End ... by Luisa Duarte

“Maybe we feel too much the initial consequences of this event—and these consequences, for us they are not, contrary to what might be expected, at all sad and gloomy, but something hard to describe, a new kind of light, of happiness, of relief, contentment, encouragement, aurora ... Indeed, at hearing the news that ‘the old god is dead’, we philosophers and ‘free spirits’ feel illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, forebodings, expectation—finally the horizon seems clear again, even if not bright; finally our ships may set out again, set out to face any danger; every daring of the lover of knowledge is allowed again; the sea, our sea, lies open again; maybe there has never been such an ‘open sea’.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science or The Joyful Wisdom*¹

“Should the world be designated a genre, its main stylistic device would no doubt be water.”

Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark*²

At a time when art seems to follow an agenda that converges with burning issues of the contemporary world, the universal character found in the work of Janaina Tschäpe demonstrates the calm of that which is perennial in the midst of a world like ours that is changing so fast and so dramatically. Her work, from the beginning to the present day, has never been eager for modernization. Its parameters were never external, but internal. We find ourselves confronted by a poetry that has found its own time of maturation and whose vocabulary unites with that of past centuries; and if we project, it is one that seems to live peacefully somewhere in the future.

The deterritorialization intrinsic to the artist’s education can be seen as a cause and consequence of this universal character. She was born in Munich, lived for part of her childhood in São Paulo, made constant trips to the Serra da Bocaina, moved back to Germany at age nine to study at the Hamburg School of Arts, and then moved to New York at 24, where she completed her master’s degree and lives to this day, while keeping a second home in Brazil. In carrying out work that belongs everywhere and nowhere, Tschäpe has admitted numerous influences, from Joseph Beuys, Martin Kippenberger and Bas Jan Ader to Maya Deren, Lygia Clark, Emil Nolde and Soutine.

If today the core of her work is painting, her career began with sculptures that emulated an identity constructed by making use of artifices. In that half of the 1990s, the artist made models of parts of her body out of latex prostheses full of water, building a metamorphosis of herself. Following that, this process of mutation would find form in performances

whose destiny was always photography and video, as the artist was never interested in the action happening “live.” What these stages had in common was the creation of a world that escapes the watertight categories, choosing to inhabit the thin line of “The Uncanny,”³ Freud’s strange/familiar and the presence of a nature always reinvented.

In his well-known 1919 essay, Freud uses a short story by Ernst Theodor Hoffmann, “The Sandman” (1815), to demonstrate the link between the concept of the uncanny and that which refers to something known, familiar. The story is a classic of fantasy literature and presents situations typical of bourgeois life that suddenly turn out to be frightening, ghostly. The ambiguity between fiction and reality pervades the entire story, keeping the reader in a state of uncertainty about the veracity of the exposed phenomena.

Tschäpe’s painting has this ability to leave us in a zone of doubt, triggering a feeling of strangeness, and at the same time using a mnemonic repertoire with which we are familiar. This region of sharing is in the memory of interior and exterior landscapes that somehow are common to us. Present throughout the body of paintings contained in this book, the choice of ambiguous forms combining nature and science seems to be the result of the refusal to forge a possible order. It is an order incompatible with an unconscious that, like water, is fluid, admitting neither exact signals nor closed definitions. The pictorial production of the artist results from a memory born of the unconscious. These paintings are thus manifestations of an acute sense of the illusory nature of consciousness itself, which is always incomplete. Tschäpe insists on a kind of living memory that, at the very moment it occurs, refers to a past that has already been modified.

Among the earliest paintings presented in this book, *Wilt* (2009) is part of a phase in which the figurative dimension was still present in a strong way in the artist’s pictorial production. Over the past ten years we can see how this has been diluted in favor of an increasing abstraction. This work displays a clear desire to think about the morphological possibilities found in nature, drawing on a formalization that cedes a privileged space to the figure. The large rectangular canvas has a black background on which a series of greens overlap, creating a landscape. Our eye is drawn to the center of the canvas, where the representation of white foliage emerges as a clearing amid a plethora of organic forms. If we consult the dictionary for the meaning of the word plethora, we will find that, in medicine, the term refers to a superabundance of humors or blood, and in botany, it signals an excess of sap in plants. Even in *Wilt*, which means something like “shrivel” or “fade”, what appears to our eyes is the chromatic exuberance of a painting

that shows confidence in every brushstroke. If the reference to a landscape existing in the “real” world is clear, also evident is the unique creation of a landscape conceived and imagined in Tschäpe’s own way. The wealth of details in *Wilt* makes us think that we are viewing a frozen moment in which a detail of reality has been enlarged. The artist’s eyes have something of a microscope, able to see even the smallest of objects—what to the inattentive and hurried eyes of a person today goes unnoticed—as a rich universe to be explored. This view is stored and returns in a new form, not as an actual double of the real thing, but as transfiguration in the form of painting. It is a landscape that we know, but have never seen, nor ever will see. It is this ambiguous territory that refers to a repertoire of images that is familiar, but different from everything we have ever seen, and to which Tschäpe introduces us in *Wilt*.

The artist’s training can help to explain an approach to painting that is based on exuberant colors on the one hand and yet on the other demonstrates sober pictorial accents. Surely what we are witnessing here is an encounter between Brazil and Germany. Living in New York seems to have rid the artist of a superego that would, on the one hand, prevent her from delving into a solar palette for fear of falling into a tropical cliché and, on the other, free her from a hardness typical of German painting and its many primers, leaving her free to create her own accent that draws from all sources without becoming a disciple of any of them.

In *Passiflora* (2010), what we perceive exudes an exultant joy. The canvas radiates luminosity. The figuration begins to fade, giving way to a painting that is, above all, the creation of atmosphere, temperature, climate. The work’s structure is executed with long vertical strokes of a dark moss green. Around this kind of supporting point floats, like ether, a swarm of oranges, pinks, yellows, light greens. As is common in Tschäpe’s work, here there are two simultaneous landscapes—one which we perceive from a distance and which comprises an organized whole, and another made of minimal elements, details, which comes alive and can best be seen when we get close to the canvas, allowing us to glimpse a more chaotic universe. The forms perceived there form part of a kind of morphological cataloging whose signature, Janaina, is unmistakable. *Passiflora* is a painting that, were it synchronized with nature’s clock, would be like the noonday sun.

Following a path that sees in the cycles of the tides and the phases of the moon a more appropriate way to count time, *Dust Particles* (2010) would be born on a cold night. Different shades of blue receive broad horizontal brushstrokes extending over the entire surface of the canvas. Dark shapes are interspersed with other lighter ones, as if we were in different

volumes of water, now denser, now sparser. Throughout the painting, tiny particles are spread out. The elements seem to float or be submersed, living in a kind of world in which gravity acts gently, as if the organisms, the particles, were subjected to a thrust—a force from the bottom upwards acting against gravity—leaving them lighter, as happens when we are in the water.

If there is something inside this painting that suffers from the force of gravity, it is the paint. The many moments in which this flows are incorporated into the work. What happens is a clash between a world that floats and another that is flowing. This dialectic internal to Tschäpe’s work occurs in *Dust Particles*, but also in numerous other works. There are occasions where the artist uses the falling of paint to begin elaborating a new section of the painting. This gesture brings with it an unsuspected beauty. It is as if there were a choreography within each work, making two ends of the same equation dance: on the one hand that which is the artist’s intervention, and on the other, the movements of paint over which Tschäpe has no control. Thus is created a dynamic that involves at once chance and intention.

The strengthening of this dynamic finds an echo in an important technical change introduced by the artist in 2012, when she began to use casein, a water-based paint. Thus the aqueous state that she has always appreciated so greatly becomes even more present as an actual theme in her work. An example of this tendency is present in *Gush* (2014), a work that both displays Tschäpe’s ability to develop her painting off the canvas, and which also potentiates the paint’s liquid aspect in the concept of the work. On a wall of an abandoned hospital in São Paulo,⁴ intercepted by a corridor with a door at the end, the artist uses the worn state of her “support” to build a landscape composed of layers of whites and blues. The work outlines in an almost crude way a sky full of clouds that become rain, a rain that is a result, in the real world, of a thickening of the clouds and that falls with the force of gravity. Tschäpe’s work can be seen here as seeking to prolong this continuous cycle of nature’s movements. It is driven by the desire to offer the experience of light and shadow, humidity, gravity and lightness through the artifice of art. But it would be trite to say that, through painting the artist returns to us symbolically the natural landscape lost within the architectural space. Yes, what we have there is a representation of an atmospheric landscape. And the interplay of physical forces present in the represented landscape also works within the painting itself. The same force of gravity acting on the rainfall on the seas operates in the falling of the paint as it flows toward the ground. This intention of enhancing the play of forces acting both in the act of painting

and in nature finds in *Gush* a home whose beauty is pierced by melancholy.

The malleability of casein finds its greatest counterpoint on the large canvas *Flatland* (2012), whose title refers to the novel *Flatland: a Romance of Many Dimensions*, by Edwin Abbott.⁵ “Imagine a vast sheet of paper on which straight Lines, Triangles, Squares, Pentagons, Hexagons, and othe figures, instead of remaining fixed in their places, move freely about, on or in the surface [...]” The passage taken from Abbott’s work exemplifies that the artist seeks literary material as a source of inspiration for her translation of visual reality. When introducing geometry in an obvious way into work previously devoted to organic forms, the artist does it not in a rigid or solemn way, but in such a way that lines, triangles, rectangles, and squares can enjoy a lightness similar to that found in the morphology of nature. For an artist whose poetic element is closely related to the movement of water, that is, to that which flows and does not allow for defining boundaries, it is clearly an important turning point to affirm a flat land—even if the latter is only temporary.

Within the nine-meter by three-meter expanse of *Flatland*, we see at the top of the canvas a slightly lighter blue that darkens when it reaches the middle of the picture and opens again at the bottom, forming a horizon of multiple perspectives. Onto this structure the artist introduces squares, triangles, and rectangles. *Flatland* is a good example of Tschäpe’s unique ability to construct a large scene that houses multiple small scenes. Only when we look at the canvas closely do we hear the whispered conversation between the forms of nature and those of mathematics.

In *Flatland* it is the appearance of geometric elements that creates the tension between control and chance. In the artist’s most recent body of work carried out from 2013 to 2016, it is the clash between the very liquidity of casein, the safety of brushstrokes and the frenzy caused by the drawings in pencil or crayon on the painting that establishes the internal architecture of each canvas.

This most recent phase reaffirms striking features of her pictorial production, such as intense gestures and sculptural composition of forms that inhabit her photographs. An attentive eye will note the difference between the body of work from this period and that produced from 2008 to 2010. If the evocation of nature persists on the one hand, and the confabulation with ways to create a mythology of work and titles that emphasize a dreamlike character on the other, it is evident that a milder visuality, in which parts of the painting were clearly delimited, gives way here to one in which a state of turbulence prevails, as if a kind of electricity ran through each

canvas, producing a departure from the figurative aspect that emphasizes abstraction.

An attentive observation of the artist’s photographs in this book can help to understand more thoroughly the changes in Tschäpe’s painting. We note that she began to paint steadily in the early 2000s and that she makes this language the center of her poetic vision, albeit without ever abandoning the experiences of photography and video. To the contrary, they persist and are fundamental to her work when this work is back in the studio. That is, the way of perceiving learned from producing images infects the painting and this, in turn, influences the way the artist looks at external landscapes.

We take as an example the series of images *Sonne, Mond und Sterne* (2016), in which colorful balloons emerge amid oceans, rivers, and rocky landscapes. The first time these circular elements appeared in the artist’s work was in the 1990s, when they appeared during performances as prostheses attached to her body. After almost twenty years, the body, the skin, and the function practically disappeared, and abstraction, landscape and seeking to think about geometry in nature entered the scene. The balloons appear as abstract bodies without an identity. The landscapes of *Sonne, Mond und Sterne* are a scenario type which Tschäpe began to paint. As in *Flatland*, geometry infiltrates the aqueous universe; let us note that here the same procedure occurs in which the geometry infiltrates a liquid environment. In her research of paths to a *fictitious science*, the artist expands the possibilities of encounter between these two sides that normally have an aversion to each other. The balloon will never be a perfect circle when inserted amid the unpredictable ocean conditions. One of the images in the same series, which has a blue fabric *trying* to form a circle, is exemplary of this clash. But remember, it is fiction, so the commitment to total accuracy does not exist. Perhaps in reality that is precisely where one of the most important movements of Tschäpe’s work as a whole resides. It is a movement constantly seeking an impossible meeting point which is nonetheless always desired: between the mutation proper to nature and geometry’s characteristic repetition, and between the precise paths of scientific knowledge and the poetry proper to fictional narrative.

If with *Sonne, Mond und Sterne* we perceive the parallelism between the changes in Tschäpe’s photographic and pictorial production, another series of images made during itinerant exploratory fellowship program with TBA21-Academy in the seas around Fiji can help us understand the artist’s recent paintings. In *Dormant* (2015), the images show aquatic characters, analogous to the artist’s recurring practice of constituting a surreal body. Longilineal and ambiguous beings

float in a dense ocean. Tschäpe takes as reference for this work the jellyfish *Turritopsis nutricula*, a marine specimen that has the ability to rejuvenate in the face of danger. Once they reach adulthood, they can transmute their cells back to a young state, infinitely prolonging their life cycle. The *Turritopsis nutricula* alludes to the idea of regeneration and reproduction by repeating certain spiky forms and fibrous elements in the constitution of amphibian bodies. The result is images that operate between the objective and the subjective, between theatricality and nature.

In the artist's statements, we learn that Tschäpe discovered the *Turritopsis nutricula* in conversations with a marine biologist friend, David Gruber. These creatures would live on the ocean floor in a completely dark environment and only awaken from deep sleep when there was a small ray of light that could reach them, or when some creature disintegrated, becoming food for the *Turritopsis nutricula* in its deep water.

I use the imperfect tense because the work before us is never completely anchored in data about that which is real. Tschäpe's work inhabits a malleable territory between reality and fable, between the landscape seen, the landscape remembered and the landscape that becomes a painting, the result of living memory we mentioned at the beginning of the text. In this flow, the memory operates, modifies the first reference, thus producing a sort of delirious world. This is precisely one of the major powers in her work. That is, the ability to take us from a disenchanted world, without shadows, excessively real, and make us plunge into a universe traversed by enchantment.

In *Dormant* the artist has bodies in the ocean, directing the scene and thinking with photographic language. In these images, however, the meeting of planning and chance once again appears. Though Tschäpe does plan, ocean currents take charge of carrying the travestied bodies without being able to control their destiny, letting unpredictability infiltrate, making nature a kind of co-author of the work.

Chance will have an equally important role in the artist's most recent paintings. In no set of works was the use of casein as important as in the works carried out in 2015 and 2016. The extremely liquid paint assumes a major role to such an extent that it becomes the subject, and not a mere object to be manipulated. Just as ocean currents are responsible for guiding the bodies in *Dormant* and modifying their forms, the casein does its work, independent of the artist.

It has been pointed out on a number of occasions that Tschäpe's poetic drawing lies close to Romanticism. The critic Annette Bhagwati observed: "Her search has become internalized—instead of physical and external descriptive landscapes, she examines her memories, her internalized after-images

of such landscapes, using a visual approach typical of one who paints. A careful and continuous dialogue with the materiality of her media—paper, brush, canvas, oil paint, watercolor—gives rise to compositions that evoke a sense of deeply rooted memory. The expressiveness famously manifest in her works of art, however, occurs through an act of deep contemplation and inner exploration. This artistic approach is romantic, in a truly authentic sense: 'The artist should not only paint what he sees before him, but also what he sees in himself' (Caspar David Friedrich)."⁶

We may elaborate on Bhagwati's apposite words by adding another aspect seen in the artist's research that resembles the Romantic approach, more specifically that of the Jena Romantics. We learn from poets like Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, 1772–1801) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) that reality is reflexive. In the words of Novalis: "Everything is one." That is, everything is a subject. For the poets of the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, art becomes reflexive nature. In this self-awareness there is no hiatus between the thinking and the object, between subject and object. It is through this thinking that the very thinking thinks that we get to what the Romantics call "absolute." This absolute, in turn, cedes to a higher power, in referring to its own origin, which is reflection. The Romantics, in saying that everything is a subject, generalized reflection to all things. That is, the very world thinks about itself when we think about it. This idea echoes Walter Benjamin's concept of language, according to which all speaks. To everything and everyone, communication of one's spiritual content is essential. In this project of expanding the reflection concept resides the possibility of overcoming the subject-object separation.

In this sense, we can understand Tschäpe's painting as affiliated with Romanticism not only for being an expression of interior and exterior landscapes, but also for developing a nature that speaks for itself, by triggering a way of painting in which, at any moment, the artist herself cedes control of the process so that the subject can signal its course. Thus, this metamorphosed nature we witness throughout her work is a nature that speaks through the artist's voice and through its own voice, to the point where the two mix and form a new and unique voice.

Black River (from *The Ghost in Between* exhibition, 2013) is an example of the paintings which show the transition from the *Flatland* phase to that of today. The square canvas forms a mosaic of blue green, brown, red, and yellow elements. Tschäpe fills the entire canvas; there is no blank space indicating even a moment of pause. There are still traces of geometric

patterns, but these are embedded in a much more chaotic context than the one we saw in *Wilt*, for example. The pouring of paint grows exponentially and the images on the canvas are made almost frenetically.

Suggestive titles such as *Your Ghost in Me* (2016) and *Treffen Im Wald* (2016) [Meeting in the Forest] indicate that the artist's visual and emotional memory emerge as the primary force driving the composition of the paintings. In *Your Ghost in Me*, horizontal brushstrokes extend over the surface in a variety of blues, violets, and browns. On the edges of the canvas, darker shades accumulate; in the center and upper left corner are curved brushstrokes in light blue. Small gleams of yellow and green open up the canvas and capture our attention. The absence of noise on the edges of the painting contrasts with the turbulence that inhabits its center. It is as if the ghost of the title arose at the nucleus of the painting. Or we can glimpse a sense of duration, like a cloud condensation that becomes a storm after the forces that were on the margins meet at the center of the canvas.

Our attention is drawn to the coexistence of calm and serenity in the gestures marking the structure of the painting at its source: the choice of a seductive palette, and the intervention movement that interrupts this controlled visuality, give rise to a whirlwind of marks made in pencil that remind us of automatic Dadaist writing, or even of a child's aimless doodling. It is as if the artist has finally introduced into the painting what has already long existed in her sketchbooks: an errant and contagious dynamic in which the mental aspect seems to be set aside in favor of a continuous flow. It is only with the introduction of this plunge, like a gush, characteristic of her work, that these paintings gain simultaneity in divergence. The most rational process intrinsic to the pictorial creation finds an intersection with one which is more automatic and delirious, and is part of Tschäpe's work.

Until I Come (2015) glowingly exemplifies this junction between frantic scribbling and mature painting. Broad brushstrokes with different shades of pink give opacity and transparency to the canvas. Concave forms shape different sections; the paint that flows in profusion emerges amalgamated to a flurry of white lines and different shades of blue that trigger a rhythmic, high-voltage pulse on the right side of the painting. At this point the distance between this figuration in works like *Wilt* and today's abstract statement must be clear. The odd-familiar remains, but now it is about internal landscapes and not external ones.

The title *Until I Come* can have a double meaning in English—both “until I arrive” and “until I reach climax.” It does not seem to me fanciful to establish a link between Tschäpe's

recent paintings and a dynamic of desire, always moving and incomplete, characterized precisely by the impossibility of closure. There is only desire for that which does not yet exist. When desire is fulfilled, it fades away. Somehow, Tschäpe's words about her creative process evoke this phenomenon: “I never used an eraser because of believing that only in trying to resolve errors would I find other paths. Each time a painting begins to harmonize, I make a mistake. So that the conversation never ends. When I start getting very close, I run away. So that I never arrive.” This *never arriving* is precisely the maintaining of a state of desire. The completion would be the end of desire. But inhabiting this space is costly. The artist chooses to walk on slippery ground, like the act of balancing on water.

If we began the text stressing the universal character of Tschäpe's work, in the sense of an absence of subordination to an agenda of themes dear to contemporary times, this does not mean that her work does not make us think of the times we live in. “A 24/7 world is disenchanted, without shadows or alternative obscurity or temporalities. It is a world identical to itself, a world with the most superficial of pasts, and therefore without ghosts.”⁷ The 24/7 period to which the theorist Jonathan Crary refers is ours: a time that endlessly praises acceleration, vigil, clarity, and is the enemy of idleness, contemplation, sleep, dreams, imagination, and thus is disenchanted. A world without a past, and hence without memory. A world without ghosts, and so without fantasy, a world without alternative temporalities, and so slave of the productive capital order. Tschäpe's work brings precisely the signs of enchantment, of fable, of the unsuspected meeting of distant universes, and is able to dilute the world's opacity and give it a second skin, thus introducing other times. In this sense, work like hers, far from the hasty notion that could impute a place of alienation from the “real” world, ends up disseminating a transgressive character, because it is inhabited by a resistance to the hyper-illuminated face that exists today, and so is able to blind and numb us.

The artist's work shows us a *science fiction* that becomes a powerful antidote to the ills of a contemporaneity that distances itself every day still further from the poetic side of life. Even art, when it assumes an agenda overly bloated with social issues, ends up replicating this way of being current that dispenses with a creative imagination and the surprise that may come from this. Tschäpe's work, by contrast, always breathes a unique curiosity about the mysteries of nature and those that are even more complex, which inhabit the unconscious. Like her marine biologist friend, David Gruber, who travels the world diving at night to the sea floor in search of luminescent lives, Tschäpe, whether in her paintings or photos or videos, is also

searching for that which radiates some kind of light in the midst of the tedious opacity that has become a world like ours, sold to pragmatism.

As affirmed earlier, there is in this creative process a brotherhood with the well-known final work of Bas Jan Ader, *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975).⁸ On the boat trip that in the end would prove tragic, the Dutch artist presented himself to the world equipped with a deeply romantic *ethos*. Without incorporating the practical aspect of a trip at sea, which would end with no return, but completely taken with a sense of searching for that which evokes the miraculous amid the natural and existential landscape, Janaina Tschäpe creates a body of work that refers to the cycles of water and of desire, that is, to that which incessantly slips away, flows, changes, like the movement of the seas ... Seeking an end without end.

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882), published in English as *The Gay Science* or *The Joyful Wisdom* (trans. Thomas Common, 1924), available online under <https://archive.org/details/completenietasch1onietuoft> (accessed 27.01.2017).
- 2 Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark* (1992), New York, 1993.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche* (1919); published in English as *The Uncanny* (1919), available online under <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf> (accessed 27.01.2017).
- 4 The exhibition *Made by ...* with the exhibit “Feita por Brasileiros” (“Made by Brazilians”), held in 2014, brought together more than a hundred artists in an abandoned building constructed in 1904, and in which a hospital had operated until 1993.
- 5 Edwin Abbott Abbot, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, London, 1884.
- 6 Annette Bhagwati, “In Search of the Miraculous – The Work of Janaina Tschäpe”, in: exh.cat. *Contemplating Landscape*, published on the occasion of the artist’s exhibition at Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong, 2014, p.164.
- 7 Jonathan Crary, 24/7 – *Capitalismo tardio e os fins do sono*. São Paulo: Ubu Editora, 2016, p.29. Book originally edited by Cosac Naify in 2014.
- 8 Bas Jan Ader, *In Search of the Miraculous*, Cambridge, Mass., 2006.