

Eternal tourists of ourselves, there is no landscape but what we are. We possess nothing, for we don't even possess ourselves. We have nothing because we are nothing. What hand will I reach out, and to what universe? The universe isn't mine: it's me.

—Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*¹

For Janaina Tschäpe, a wondrous connection exists between the landscape and the self. The first is a terrain of mountains, caverns, waterfalls, and pools, while the second is an intangible landscape, one of memories and dreams.

Raised between the verdant forests of Germany and jungles of Brazil, Tschäpe has long found inspiration in the natural world. In her early career, performances saw Tschäpe immerse herself in the abundant landscape, floating amidst rivers and seas in an echo of Ana Mendieta's earth sculptures of the 1970s and a primal need to forge a connection between the body and nature. Through her paintings, which she began consistently in the 2000s, Tschäpe continues to test this porous divide between the figure and landscape, and the personal and universal experience of nature.

At Galleri Bo Bjerggaard, Tschäpe's works inhabit both visible and hidden realms, brought to life by the sweeping strokes of oil and watercolour. Her soaring oil paintings speak to the residue of the natural world, like the impressions of sunlight on our eyes. Even at their most defiantly abstract, plumes of colour and organic shapes evoke pastoral scenes. And though Tschäpe might endeavour to tiptoe away from the horizon line, a single mark might send mountains, forests, and oceans rushing back into the canvas. As Tschäpe notes, the eye cannot help but search for the anchors of sky, earth, and water.

Tschäpe made these paintings from her studio in a converted warehouse in Brooklyn. With no windows to the outside world, Tschäpe could work without distraction and linger in a landscape of her own imagination. As Luisa Duarte writes, “[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.”² Stepping out into the world, Tschäpe would return to the studio to paint intuitively from memory. She mused, “how do you paint that movement or that atmosphere at the end of an afternoon in the summer and the feeling of that?”³ As COVID-19 ebbed from the city, Tschäpe savoured the elongated sense of time the pandemic had left behind, not only permitting greater periods with the works in the studio but prolonging the experience of nature each canvas could convey.

¹ Bernardo Soares, 'A Factless Autobiography' in Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 112.

² Luisa Duarte, 'Seeking an End Without End,' *Janaina Tschäpe* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2017), 11.

³ Conversation between the author and Janaina Tschäpe, June 21, 2022

Profusions of paint bring these encounters to life. In Tschäpe's sumptuous *Madrugada* (2022), the heady indigo of night gives way to touches of ochre and rose at dawn. We imagine how it might feel to have the first light of day tickle our skin. Dark shapes press upon one another to form an ancient stratum in *Perspire Fábulas* (2022); the spaces in between are like snatches of breath. In *Weeping Willows* (2022), cascades of paint evoke the drooping tendrils of branches, while in *Clouds Rolling on the Hill* we are confronted by a mountainous vista; layers of colour convey the fabric of rock and vegetation. There is something of Arshile Gorky's poetic landscapes here, inspired by the bucolic surroundings of milkweed, haystacks, and rivers in Connecticut and Virginia. Tschäpe conjures her own imaginings of nature—dancing in the dark, morning dew, and gathering storms—without needing to define these sensations in literal terms. The experience of nature is close to the surface. There is a sense of magical thinking, as if Tschäpe herself brought these events to pass.

Tschäpe's response to the landscape is closely entwined with the German Romantics, who lauded the individual's experience of nature and its revelation to others by means of words and paint. The titular work of Tschäpe's exhibition at Galleri Bo Bjerggaard, *Wandelstern* (2022), meaning "Wandering star," speaks to the particular influence of Caspar David Friedrich and his romantic vistas of snow laden trees and crumbling megaliths. Through the deep blue of *Wandelstern*, areas of shimmering white recall the moon, floating in the cosmos. This ghostly moon echoes the solitary figure of Friedrich's landscape. And though the heroic wanderer is not explicit, the grandeur of nature is present for Tschäpe at every turn. *Purzelbäume im Schnee* (2022) also resonates with the wintry scenes of Friedrich's oeuvre. Flurries of white and scrawls of grey and blue suggest what it must feel like to be engulfed in a snowstorm.

Friedrich reproduced the inward sensations of nature on canvas, taking an extract from the outside world before returning to the studio to paint from memory. He once wrote, "Close your physical eyes, so that you see your picture first with the spiritual eye. Then bring what you saw in the dark into the light, so that it may have an effect on others, shining inwards from outside."⁴ By contrast, Tschäpe begins with the self. Her experience dictates the shadows of caverns, as her senses instruct the forms of rolling hills. Inspired by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Romantic notion that human beings do not exist above or outside of nature, Tschäpe places the viewer at the heart of these landscapes. We are blanketed by the painterly lines of earth, ground, and sky, and left to feel the sensations of nature in our own way.

While Tschäpe's oil paintings speak to the vistas of willow trees, clouds, and snow, a series of works on paper provide an insight into the secret landscape of the self. These pictures form part of a wider group of self-portraits that Tschäpe embarked upon several years ago and has continued to make ritualistically each day, forming a diary of sorts that she describes as a map of the soul. This self-reflective tendency suggests Tschäpe's essential Romantic impulse and recalls the early series, *100 Little Deaths* (1997–2002), which she also, initially, referred to as maps. These photographs captured a particular moment and a particular version of the self, as Tschäpe succumbed to death in different locations. Her self-portraits act as a similar record. And like *100 Little Deaths*, in which Tschäpe's body is pressed to the ground, the self-portraits are not a record of the face, but of the spirit. These maps of the soul resonate

⁴ Vaughan William, *Friedrich* (New York; London: Phaidon, 2004), 237.

with the revolutionary maps of German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, who explored the interconnectivity of nature and revealed the ties between different climates, geographies, and ecosystems.

At times, eyes, noses, and mouths manifest in Tschäpe's self-portraits, while at others there is only the hint of a figure—the ventricles of a heart, the rounded shape of an ovum. "It's almost like a combination of the rain outside and how it makes me feel," Tschäpe explains. "Then I make a portrait of that, of a grey day or a sunny day, of a happy day or a sad day."⁵ These images capture how a person is defined by their environment, transforming the way they look and feel. There is a kinship between these self-portraits and the profound honesty of Edvard Munch's watercolours of inner turmoil. Tschäpe compares her self-portraits with the abundant selfies found on social media, which have constructed a homogenous ideal of beauty. Their external distortion aligns with Tschäpe's early performances in which jelly, condoms, latex wings, and masks transformed the body. The painted self-portraits by contrast are not nearly so concerned with the superficial self we present to the world; they tackle an inner landscape of perceptions and emotions.

The self-portraits drift from recognizable bodies to enigmatic abstract forms, as watercolour literally dissolves into the fabric of paper. This aqueous quality highlights the fluid nature of the self—where does the body end and nature begin? Tschäpe's images are like the flickering silhouettes of bodies beneath water, seen through the turbulent surface of waves. This liquidity echoes the definition of Romantic German poetry by Friedrich Schlegel as, "in a state of becoming,"⁶ as well as the philosophical notion of "being" and "becoming" in our understanding of the world. As Doris van Drathen writes: "[Tschäpe's] is a pictorial world of suggestion, of imitation. Nothing is decided, there is no final statement; everything is tossed, sketched, in the process of becoming."⁷

Tschäpe has toyed with the state of wetness and the uncertainty that it provokes throughout her career, questioning the containment and demonisation of fluid borders. Tschäpe's own namesake is the Afro-Brazilian goddess of water, and her work has often plunged us into the subterranean worlds of sirens and mermaids. Here, there is no night and no day, no life and death, no beginning and end. It is a space of endless possibility. "A woman who lives under the water doesn't necessarily have pretty features," Tschäpe notes. "Maybe she's dissolving, eroding away in the water?"⁸

Tschäpe's sense of the fluctuating self, reveals the formative influence of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. Writing under the guise of some seventy-two monikers, Pessoa gave voice to his thoughts and feelings with disarming honesty and reimagined the boundary between the observer and observed. Pessoa's posthumous masterpiece, *The Book of Disquiet*, is a transference of the self to the page, just as Tschäpe's paintings are an outpouring of the body and soul. The frustrated clerk Bernardo Soares, whom

⁵ Conversation between the author and Janaina Tschäpe, June 21, 2022

⁶ Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 30.

⁷ Doris van Drathen, 'Janaina Tschäpe: Vocabulary of the Possible,' *Künstler: Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst*, Edition 123, Issue 19/3, Quarter 2018, 2.

⁸ Conversation between the author and Janaina Tschäpe, June 21, 2022

Pessoa describes as meeting in a Lisbon restaurant one evening, is the character closest to the author. Through Soares's "confessions," he brings to life his inner landscape. Recounting feelings of estrangement and emptiness, Soares reflects: "All these half-tones of the soul's consciousness create in us a painful landscape, an eternal sunset of what we are."⁹ Tschäpe's works are imbued with such "half-tones" that conjure the waterways and stony paths of a metaphysical world.

The shift between languages in the titles of Tschäpe's paintings at Galleri Bo Bjerggaard is another hint towards the multifaceted self. Tschäpe was born in Munich and spent her childhood in São Paulo before returning to Germany and studying at the Hamburg School of Arts. In 1997, Tschäpe moved to New York and now divides her time between America and Brazil. For Tschäpe, the boundaries of cultural and national affiliation are blurred, just as the vernaculars of Portuguese, German, and English are interchangeable. She reflects on the resonance of a word as one might the qualities of a paint stroke. To choose a title, Tschäpe scrawls a handful of words, before adding more, erasing others, and translating those left behind. She slips effortlessly between languages to convey a sentiment that might be beautifully expressed in one but lost in another.

At Galleri Bo Bjerggaard, Tschäpe reimagines the traditional genres of landscape painting and portraiture. And yet, Tschäpe does not dictate the relationship between the visible and hidden realms of our experience. She does not provide a horizon line by which to find our balance. Tschäpe plunges the viewer into a landscape of her own making that is at once otherworldly and real, personal and universal. She carves out a space in which the experiences of nature can resurface and be shared. In contrast to Caspar David Friedrich's bold conquistador, surveying the landscape, Tschäpe invites us to become part of this natural world, in body and soul.

⁹ Bernardo Soares, 'A Factless Autobiography,' 171.