

29. 6. — 22. 8. 2021 (MeetFactory Gallery)

EN



# Planted in the Body

The group show *Planted in the Body* looks at soil, plants and their products – such as oils and pigments – as sources and carriers of knowledge, and explores how their unique heritage has been transmitted through the centuries.

The works in the show recognise the agency of vegetation for its own sake, in its proper universe, away from human intervention and domination. Plants came before us and will probably survive us too. We have embedded ourselves in nature, more than the reverse. Yet, in this embedding, plants have also become crucial witnesses to human history, reflecting local, regional and global power games, and political and social divides, both in natural environments and manmade landscapes. Exploring plants and transmission places us in a liminal space where different forms of existence and knowledge interpenetrate.

The show highlights the role of matrilineal and ancestral chains in preserving and passing down to younger generations teachings from nature that touch on the realms of remedies, spirituality, ecological care, survival skills, food practices, gardening, coping mechanisms after trauma, political memories and conflicts. There are multiple dissemination processes, from verbal and nonverbal communication to tales, songs, orality, embodied practices, cooperative forms of actions, hands-on approaches and sensing the environment. Whether living in forests, plains or deserts as nomads, or being in touch with vegetation in orchards, gardens and parks, we all experience a certain link to plants. They are part of us, but their knowledge is not always considered in proportion to their value, and fluctuates with time, culture and geography. Heritage chains are vulnerable and often at risk, including the threat of disappearance and censorship. History provides many examples of the interruption of transmission chains, from rulers who regard the knowledge of healers and herbalists as sorcery, and ecosystems being threatened by anthropogenic destruction, to younger generations losing their connection to the land, its nonhuman inhabitants and their ancestors. We need to care for such links, for it is along these paths that plants certainly teach us about themselves, but mostly about ourselves.

At its core, the show endorses the notion of 'plantcestors', considering that the non-linear knowledge channelled through vegetation can also be internally accessed, without intermediaries, through the intimate bonds that we, as living entities, have established with the natural world, from seeds to leaves, bark, flowers and fruits. In a way, the know-how bestowed by flora is *planted in our bodies*, as a gift that our intuition allows us to reach. Common resources are our best teachers, and our strongest allies, in ensuring ecological balance. This explains the importance of indigenous knowledge and cosmogonies in learning how to receive messages from the vegetal, animal, mineral, spiritual and ancestral worlds, and to live in harmony with them, even if these voices have been lost, discriminated against or otherwise silenced through imperial, colonial and capitalist domination. In this respect, many of the works featured in the show adopt ethnobotanical ethics and envision regenerative practices for landscapes, soils and bodies, thereby reconnecting us to our common inheritance.

Permeating the works are notions of fertility and seasonal cycles that connect us to abundance and decay – present in all of us – and lead us to question our own relationship to transmission patterns. If plants are vessels, then we should act as recipients of their heritage and learn how to integrate and embody it. Plants enable us to decolonise our ways of learning, preserving and passing down. The works included in *Planted in the Body* address all these issues, looking both into our common kinship and into the future. Listening to botanical knowledge invites us to embrace responsible ways of acting, being and resisting that are relevant to our contaminated and deregulated times.

Upon entering the exhibition space, the viewer can see from afar a painting by Aboriginal artist **Emily Kame Kngwarreye** (c. 1910–1996), before observing it in a more intimate manner. Her artworks tackle the power borne by plants, and depict how women use atnwelarr (pencil yam) and native seeds, which miraculously survive in the desert, and their relation to the ancestral landscape and cosmogony. Born in Alhalkere, Utopia, in Australia's Northern Territory, Kngwarreye was part of the Anmatyerre community, and a custodian of it. She came to painting at an advanced age, focusing mainly on Dreaming sites associated with the yam and women's ceremonies. Her *Untitled (Alhalkere)* and *o.T.* paintings (both from 1993) are emblematic of the artist's vibrant depictions of the plants and flowers used as food sources by the Anmatyerre community. Her colour abstraction, filled with dots and lines, captures arlatyeye (pencil yam), ntange (grass seed), intekwe (a small plant), atnwerle (green bean) and kame (yam seed).

In a similar fashion, *Untitled* (2018), two genipapo on canvas, and *Untitled* (2020), seven oils on canvas, by **Solange Pessoa** evoke an ancestral heritage and a vibrant link to nature. Her compositions often recall historical cave parietal art and are also redolent of Modernist aesthetics. In the show, her pieces featuring vegetal motifs, foliage and flowers are made out of genipapo and lineaca – native oils and dyes used by indigenous Mineiro tribes for medicinal purposes and for body painting. Based in Minas Gerais, Pessoa has been working with these pigments for a long time, learning from an indigenous woman living nearby. The artist uses mostly organic materials in her practice – soil, moss, feathers, soapstone, wax, seeds, etc. – and transforms these earthly components into spiritual and metaphysical works that highlight our common kinship with the environment. Exhibiting her paintings together with those of Emily Kame Kngwarreye fosters a dialogue between works that share the same approach and sensitivity, despite coming from distinct geographies, cultural contexts and time spans.

In Central Asia, too, this deep connection to natural elements as sources of energy is significant, as evidenced in **Soadat Ismailova's** exploration of dendrolatry (tree worship) in the video *Celestial Circles* (2014), which is screened in the exhibition. It features women marching and chanting around a 300-year-old plane tree in Handoni Eshoni Chanor, Tajikistan. Tree worship – mainly of plane, elm and walnut – is widespread throughout Central Asia. Usually performed by women, it involves rituals, sacrifices, prayers and pilgrimages. In *Celestial Circles*, the camera spins hypnotically around the canopy, a motion that reveals a vegetal motif redolent of Uzbek traditional embroidery. In the exhibition, the video is projected onto the ceiling to invite the viewer to experience bodily the women worshippers' pace of walking and singing, immersing the audience in a sacred sonic atmosphere. Another video by Ismailova, *Chillpiq* (2017), not exhibited in this show, reflects again on dendrolatry, but this time women turn around a tree-like metallic pole on top of Chillpiq mud tower, Uzbekistan, interestingly merging artificial components into a natural ritual.

**Laura Huertas Millán** considers the place of the coca plant, which in the Muiná-Muruí community of Colombia is traditionally a sacred interlocutor for families and not merely a product. In her recent film *JÍBIE* (2019), the artist depicts the fabrication ritual of green coca powder (called mambe or Jiibie) and unveils an ancestral myth of kinship in which women and plants have a special role. Coca is considered here not only as a source of knowledge but also as a guide for recognising good and evil. Huertas Millán has been working on the notion of pharmakon (a substance that is both a poison and a remedy) since 2018, and explores the non-human subjectivity of the coca plant, its uses in non-Western cosmogony and its role in the so-called war on drugs and the prohibition of psychotropics. *JÍBIE* allows the viewer to observe the

traditional processing of the coca leaves by indigenous people (in contrast to the Western relation to cocaine, in the form of white powder). At the same time, it exposes the colonial and postcolonial violence of conquest, exploitation and destruction of indigenous traditions and knowledge.

Likewise, **Suzanne Husky** is interested in natural remedies that can teach as well as heal. In her multimedia practice, Husky combines handmade objects and crafts with research in botany, agriculture and history, with a strong component of ecological awareness. Her large series of ceramic objects *Apothecary Pots. Plancestors* (2019) – from which we present a jug and a (wash)bowl – is inspired by the traditional blue-and-white design of the albarello (medicinal jar) produced in 15th-century Italy, based on examples brought by Hispano-Moresque traders. The drawings on these pots depict humans (mostly women) and plants or fungi hybrids and proclaim the interconnectedness of life, as well as our responsibility as ancestors to our descendants. Talking about this series of pots, Husky contextualises her intentions and interests: 'I'm taking a "Herbal Allies" class at Oakland's Ancestral Apothecary School where plants are our allies, ancestors and teachers if we listen to them. Each week begins with a meditation where we become plants. Then, with our eyes closed, we lick a few drops of tincture from the back of our hand and observe their movements in our bodies, their effects on our thoughts. We share our intuitions and our visions, and we are here but also with our ancestors who knew these plants and recognised them.' In addition to the show, we are also presenting online a Czech translation of a podcast in which Husky interviews the Franciscan friar and agricultural engineer Hervé Coves and discusses the meaning of various plants in Czech (Central European) tales and myths.

The notion of human and non-human ancestorship is also present in the current body of works on textile by **Adéla Součková**, who gains her inspiration from extensive research in history, mythology and cosmogony. In the Kostka Gallery, we are showing her new painting *Connected* (from a larger series), which depicts an androgynous human body rooted in the ground and at the same time interwoven with the sky. Like the figures of Suzanne Husky, Součková's painting connectedness and dependency (material as well as spiritual) of a human being on its environment. Součková uses various natural pigments to dye her canvases, such as onion, wine/grapes or ash from various sources. For the background of this painting, she used madder root, which she discovered during a residency in Georgia, where it relates to religious and sacral uses. Madder root (*Rubia tinctoria*) has been utilised for thousands of years as a textile dye, imparting orange and red tones to fibres, the oldest examples of which were discovered in archaeological sites in India and Egypt.

In the main gallery space, we are exhibiting *Návratypředků I., II.* (Pregnant with Ancestors I. & II., 2019) and *Pixeled*, Součková's lightboxes, showing another traditional way of dyeing textile – the Moravian blueprint. Originally, a natural indigo (plant-based) pigment was used for the blueprint, but it was replaced by synthetic indigo in the local context. Součková works a lot with archetypal symbols or their updated versions; here, the motif of pregnant women with heads/masks inside their body can be seen as a mother-goddess figure, a celebration of fertility (which, in general terms, connects the female body with the Earth and its cycles) or an expression of the ancestor–descendant relationship.

**Luiza Prado de O. Martins** delves further into the feminine body by unravelling the links between plant knowledge, fertility and abortion, sometimes touching upon the complex and traumatic colonial experience. She has created two new works for the show, both following her previous projects and research. In *Notes to the Seers* (2021), the artist tells us about two plants found all over the world, wormwood (or artemisia) and rue, both of which have a long tradition of use as remedies (especially for 'women's illnesses', to stimulate the menses or relieve the pain of menstruation), but also as a religious protection from harm. The story of artemisia is framed by Greek mythology, whereas the story of rue is told from a very personal

point of view, connecting the artist with her Brazilian traditions, origin and lineage. Visitors can take envelopes of the herbs, feel their smell and taste, ideally infused, and therefore experience them physically through their own bodies and senses. The stories can be also downloaded from our website in the form of the original audio or as a text. **(Attention: these herbs should not be consumed by pregnant women.)**

The second work by Prado in the show proceeds from her former project *Between The Beginning of Sense and The Chaos of Feeling: A Multispecies Banquet*, which also used plants as ingredients – specifically, those that are known as food sources or used in herbal preparations meant to induce fertility and lust. These ingredients were used for dinners served on bioplastic plates that afterwards encapsulated the traces of both human and non-human meal companions. The exhibited resin panels, titled *Fleeting Commensalities* (2021), preserve these leftovers, expressing once again the idea that humans, plants and all other creatures are part of a complex, entangled chain of life.

**Nikola Brabcová** and **Alexandra Cihanská Machová** have created a new multimedia installation that combines Nikola's objects and video with a soundscape made by Alexandra. Nikola Brabcová departs from her long-term interest in soil and environmentally friendly ways of producing artworks. In her installation *Jara*, she uses biomaterials (including bioplastic) that are biodegradable and have minimal impact on the environment. Her artistic work manifests in her everyday life, simultaneously with her housework, cooking and parenting. Therefore, she recycles and uses ordinary materials, even leftovers. She seeks a result that is ephemeral and not definitive, a sculpture that shows its own processes. Alexandra, whose work connects both the video and the objects, perceives sound as a vibration that goes through our bodies/matter and changes us. At the same time, the deliberately intrusive presence of cables and other technical devices reminds us that technology (and media such as sound or video) is not immaterial but has a strong impact on our environment. In her video, Nikola shows an ordinary walk through the garden of her mother-in-law. The grandmother explains to her grandson where food comes from, the different roles played by insects and weeds, how compost works and also how crucial the legacy of previous generations is – here in the form of trees planted by the grandfather. The aim of this video is to think about an agriculture and farming that is driven by love of nature, not exploitation, in which personal experience and sensitive knowledge foster a respectful relation to plants.

In the video *Flames Among Stones* (2019), **Corinne Silva** looks at gardening as a resistance strategy, opening the doors of a women's walled garden in Central Turkey and contrasting it with an authoritarian and patriarchal exterior. Set up by two sisters, Güler and Türkan, this plot of land is a haven, a fertile ground for entering into resonance with the Earth and its knowledge. Responding to the dictates of climate, and gently letting nature indicate the path to take, the gardeners follow seasonal rhythms and return to a circadian time. Through organic gestures, they work with the soil, not against it. By weaving the folktale of Şahmaran, a deity with the head of a woman and the body of a snake, who holds knowledge of all realms, Silva also investigates matrilinearity and how earthly know-how can be cultivated and valued. Gardening becomes the passageway to another wisdom to help us regroup ourselves and respond to exclusive politics and ecological degradation. Her imposing, nine-metre-wide textile work *All Our Mothers' Gardens* (2021), occupying a prominent place in the gallery's main room, integrates fabrics dyed with earth and plants from a number of community, memorial, allotment and guerrilla gardens, including the community-led Parko Navarinou (Exarcheia, Athens), Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust (Liverpool) and Extinction Rebellion's community garden (London). Pushing through the hanging veil of the textile to enter the video installation space is

to cross a threshold into a world of non-patriarchal knowledge transmission, one that privileges female, non-Western and more-than-human wisdom.

Political turmoil is never far, as botany is so much entrenched into power relations. Yet, in the show, it keeps at a quiet distance even if we can still hear its rumours.

Throughout the exhibition, **Uriel Orlow** presents trees as witnesses to important historical events, respectively as contributors to healing processes in a Mafia-entrenched Sicily and as bearers of memories linked to the colonial imprint in South Africa. In the Kostka Gallery, Orlow presents *Wishing Trees* (2018), an immersive multimedia installation that is part of his larger body of work *Theatrum Botanicum*, a thorough exploration of botanical politics. Here, he emphasises the role of plants as carriers of political memories, especially those linked to power distribution and conflicts. The multiple layers of *Wishing Trees* connect to three Sicilian trees embedded in a history of activism and migration. The first is a 440-year-old cypress outside Palermo linked to San Benedetto; the second is a *Ficus macrophylla* in the centre of Palermo, overlooking the residence of the murdered investigating judge Giovanni Falcone; and the third is an olive tree under which the armistice ending Italy's participation in World War II was signed. These respectively gather stories around slavery, religion, cooking and migration, as well as the fight against the Mafia and the first resistance against it, which was led by women activists, and memories of war. Through this piece, Orlow stresses how interlaced the destinies of nature and humans are.

Back in the main gallery, the artist is also presenting a photograph from his series *The Memory of Trees* (2016), which tackles the importance of plants as pawns in geopolitics and as holders of memories and traces of history. The series consists of five pieces focusing on South Africa and trees linked to the Dutch colonial past and to apartheid, as well as on the complex history of the plant trade and the plundering of plants.

The show is marked by the strong architectural motif of a circle connecting all parts of the space and symbolically representing a tree trunk, which the visitor can enter. All the artworks, in their diversity of media, techniques and styles, resonate together on many, sometimes unexpected, levels, which were revealed during the installation process. The predominant use of raw, non-polluting vegetal matter runs through several pieces, and in others a link emerges between the figure of the grandmother, or female ancestor, and her (great) grandchildren. The evidence of the power infused by plants in our daily lives jumps out at us – curators, artists and viewers. We found that in their materiality and form, and in their content, the new commissions – subconsciously, through our curatorial frame – became symbiotic fellows of the existing works. The different generations of artists enter into dialogue, and, despite coming from varied cultural contexts, manifest how the knowledge of plants transits through our bodies and our senses, without intermediaries, and stress how interconnected our human existence is with that of natural entities. Absorbing such knowledge, in the form of embodied practice, opens us up to grasping the cyclical, perishable and regenerative aspect of all things. Again, we are within nature and nature is within us.

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Galerie MeetFactory

Artists: Nikola Brabcová (CZ)  
& Alexandra Cihanská Machová (SK),  
Laura Huertas Millán (CO), Suzanne Husky (FR/USA),  
Saodat Ismailova (UZ), Emily Kame Kngwarreye (AU),  
Uriel Orlow (CH/UK), Solange Pessoa (BR),  
Luiza Prado de O. Martins (BR), Corinne Silva (UK),  
Adéla Součková (CZ)

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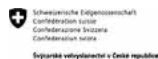
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