

Título	In Search of the Miraculous: The work of Janaina Tschäpe	Autor	Annette Bhagwati
Data	2014	Artista	Janaina Tschäpe
Publicação	SARDENBERG, Ricardo; POCOCK, Melanie; GRUBER, David; BHAGWATI, Annette (textos / texts). <i>Janaina Tschäpe: Contemplating Landscape</i> . Hong Kong: Edouard Malingue Gallery, 2014.		

164 IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS- THE WORK OF JANAINA TSCHÄPE By Annette Bhagwati

In early 1975 the Dutch concept and performance artist Bas Jan Ader set out to traverse the Atlantic alone in a small boat. This was to be the second part of his project *In Search of the Miraculous* – a voyage into the endless expanse of the sea, an unconditional surrender to nature in a quest for self-knowledge and self-understanding. It was the most uncompromising project in Ader's ongoing inquiry into the driving forces of romanticism, which was as analytic and conceptual, as it was poetic and existential¹.

It comes as no surprise that painter and performance artist Janaina Tschäpe often refers to this particular work as a source of inspiration that has deeply influenced her own practice: a practice that can best be described as surrendering herself to unknown landscapes, an exploration driven by a desire for enlightenment, for answers in a world that is virtually inexhaustible - and for this very reason affords limitless possibilities. Yet, while Bas Jan Ader confronted landscapes in an existential and – in its radicality - ultimately tragic quest, Janaina Tschäpe's work is rather driven by a deep sense of wonder, astonishment and curiosity. She is interested in the miraculous that landscapes can offer, their rich potential for new perspectives, for the unknown. She gives herself to landscapes, but she does not lose herself in them. Rather, she seeks for answers by engaging with the landscape: she challenges it, probes it with a variety of methods – sometimes carefully, sometimes mischievously and boldly, and often quite directly and unconditionally. The romantics, in their search for knowledge and self-realisation, desired to succumb to landscape's uncontrollable and sublime presence: for Tschäpe, this same landscape rather holds answers and becomes a source of inspiration. She continually engages with it in a sustained process, by letting her interaction with the landscape gradually unfold over time - and on equal terms.

Tschäpe's landscapes, therefore, are not assessed in units of space, but of time. "*Landscape is almost like measuring time: you look at something and try to find out where it ends. So the contemplation of a landscape is always a search, the search for something new, the search of time.*"² Landscape, for her, is the equivalent of time - time to encounter the unknown, time to contemplate it: in a very real sense, landscape itself is already a quest. For Tschäpe, a landscape cannot be something that stretches out in front of you, something objective. Experiencing landscape as such a quest also always requires the Other - the questioner, the seeker, the artist: it cannot be envisaged without her awareness of it, her reaction.

As Tschäpe's artistic intentions, personal conditions and conceptual interests evolve, her work with and through landscapes takes on different guises, media and approaches.

Ballgame (2012, video) [p.76-77] employs an interventionist approach – one that had also characterised her earlier work: performances and interventions in lush, tropical landscapes. In *Ballgame*, the screen shows a beach. Waves gently lap onto the sand. A blue, endless sky stretches across the horizon. It could be just another quiet afternoon on a deserted beach, save for this giant white circular thing, a radiant ball dancing on the waves, flawless, flamboyant. Wind and currents keep it in balance. We do not know how it got there, why it is there at all. The presence of this ball makes us stop and ask: what kind of landscape is this where white balls seem to naturally float in the sea? Is it subject to the same laws as other landscapes we know? Which beings inhabit it? The perfect symmetry of the ball's body, the radiant non-colour white directs our gaze to the abstract properties of the surrounding landscape, its colours and shapes: the blue of the sky, the pale fawn of the sand, the horizon line – in the carefully chosen frame of *Ballgame* all coalesce into a composed image.

Through her interventions, Tschäpe engages with the landscape, even challenges it. She reacts to its materiality and to its underlying forces – its textures, shapes, colours. Her dialogical process intertwines image-making and conceptual strategy and thus subverts our perception of landscapes, re-assembling them anew - and differently. Yet, other than in her earlier works, the artist here does not directly, physically engage with her subject: instead, she lets an object interact with this landscape - and then observes this interaction, and employs a range of strategies to accentuate or probe resulting features.

This disengagement from total immersion, this turn towards reflexivity and processuality as an integral part of her practice is a prominent feature of Janaina Tschäpe's most recent works. Her quest has turned inwards – instead of chronicling outer, physical landscapes she examines her memories, her inner after-images of such landscapes by way of a painterly, visual approach: a careful, sustained dialogue with the materiality of her media – paper, brush, canvas, oil, watercolour – gives rise to compositions that evoke a sense of deeply-layered memory. The artworks' overt expressivity notwithstanding, they come about through an act of profound contemplation and inner exploration. This artistic approach is romantic in a truly authentic sense: "*The painter should paint not only what he has in front of him, but also what he sees inside himself.*" (Caspar David Friedrich)

Dark Sea (2014) [p.146-147] affords us the experience of a landscape that unfolds towards infinity – perhaps a memory of a seascape. On the canvas, broad, horizontal brush strokes extend over the entire surface in a variety of blue, black and violet tones. Dark forms congest near the upper left edge and are mirrored, in lighter shades of blue and violet,

¹ Verwoert, Jan. 2006. Bas Jan Ader. *In Search of the Miraculous*. AfterAll Books

² Conversation with the artist, February 2014

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in a water-like reflection near the lower edge. A translucent light blue area in the upper right corner serves to indicate depth, an impression reinforced, in the lower half, by yellow fields, which increase in intensity as they approach the edge. The transparency of these interior forms allows us to see some underlying layers and contours of earlier painting – and stands in stark contrast to the bold and decisive gestures that Tschäpe uses to demarcate and structure surfaces. This transparency in which previous layers can emerge does not only heighten the illusion of seeing a three-dimensional space – it also accents the temporal, accumulative structure of the artist's process. Step-by-step the painter reacts to the texture of the surrounding landscape, by circling, layering, highlighting, and painting over patterns, contours and surfaces – a process that is at once contemplative and interventionist.

These interventions, however, are in no way dominant or assertive. Rather, they are marked by a deep curiosity towards the landscape emerging on the canvas. Tschäpe invites colour drips to run down – and then integrates them into her construction of a visual space. Shapes are defined by their boundaries, but are not fully fleshed out; a tapering brush stroke evokes a contemplative moment, of hesitation, of standing back to let other layers re-appear.

This observant interaction with the emerging landscape becomes most evident in the way Tschäpe works on the upper half of the canvas at the conclusion of her dialogue with the canvas: with transparent white brush strokes, she traces the forms and contours that have emerged from previous layers, circling them, accentuating three-dimensional effects, reacting with gestural counter-designs and enhancements. This is a final meditation on the landscape that emerged from her painterly actions, one during which she does not add new propositions and shapes but simply observes, reflects and comments. Even though she inscribes herself into the landscape in a most direct manner, she at the same time almost disappears into it: with tender gestures in white, a non-colour that neither challenges nor competes with any of the other colours.

Two other works, *Hydromedusa* (2014) [p.130-131] and *Cerianmone* (2014) [p.90-91] are characterised by the same engagement with texture and materiality: again, it serves as inspiration and point of departure for the contemplation and lyric abstraction of landscape memories. Unlike in *Dark Sea*, however, the process here is more decisive and spontaneous, the two sides of the dialogue are more "balanced". Instead of choosing the "solid", "considered" and controllable acrylic as a foundation, Tschäpe goes for watercolour. This is a medium that like no other has an inherent tendency to "invent" unforeseen shapes and forms - it therefore is well suited for the role as a counterpart in an equitable painterly engagement. Instead of an expansive all-over

composition we encounter spontaneous dialogic exercises, proposals and counterproposals, which emanate from the centre of the canvas. They are not so much landscapes as a swarm of traces, ephemeral reminiscences of contours, mirrorings, vestiges of colours and shapes – the dark blue silhouette of a hill-like form, sky blue specks on earthen dabs.

Tschäpe usually sets out a first gestural proposition with broad strokes. Lines and dabs proliferate, colours thicken, leaks at the edges following their own laws. Colour fields are superimposed into luminous organic forms that calmly and confidently float in space. Tschäpe reacts to this emerging rhythm of forms by opening a second image plane and by an abrupt shift in painterly flow: she surrounds these fields with nervous strokes, she enhances central points of repose and centrifugal forces (e.g. *Cerianmone*) or reacts to geometric propositions with idiosyncratic formal inventions (e.g. *Dark Sea*). The lines remain delicate; the independence of the first image plane is never called into question. The dialogue remains open.

With their abstract elements and their emphasis on gesture and texture in the absence of classical principles of form and composition, these works evoke the visual language of the *art informel*, of lyric abstraction. Yet, conceptually, they fundamentally dissent from the ideas of the *informel*: where *informel* elevates "the formless" to its loftiest principle, always aiming at a delicate and tense balance between dissolving and emerging forms³, Tschäpe's work is firmly rooted in the figurative. Her point of departure is concrete, real landscapes, and not inner states of mind: she recalls landscapes, examines and contemplates them – and then re-creates or re-understands them in the process of a painterly engagement. Formlessness is not a principle, only a method. It is the trace left by working through this method. Gestures or textures are not so much an end in themselves – they are a necessary condition for embarking on this exploration.

This guidance becomes much clearer in the two other watercolours *Ancula Stichopus* [p.54-55] and *Spiny Muricea* [p.26-27] (both 2014). Whereas Tschäpe, in the other works, reacts to abstract propositions with equally abstract gestures, accepting the medium's autonomy, in these two works she goes a step further. She matches forms and colours to her visual memory and then intervenes by nudging these abstract forms towards the figural. She structures surfaces, defines inner and outer spaces. By decisive interventions she transforms shadows, rhythmic pulsations, formal propositions into clearly delineated, controlled forms and defined bodies: the artist appears to inscribe her memory into the imagescape. She defines how to read the abstract plane, determines what may be perceived as the theme - and what remains mere accompaniment. Meditative contemplation has become active, inventive image making. Fare di mondo.

³ Rolf Wedewer, (2007), *Die Malerei des Informel. Weltverlust und Ich-Behauptung*. München/Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, p. 10

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Spiny Muricea focuses on a structure of light brown watercolour dabs, blurry around the edges, that runs vertically through the image plane. It is embellished, traversed by a whirl of rapid gestures and fine strokes. Tschäpe takes this new surface structure and fills it with vivid colours – pink, blue, turquoise: thereby generating many tiny sharp-angled inner forms that accentuate the centre's spatiality and dynamism. These vivid colours and the whirling sharp angles remain in stark contrast to the quiet earth tones and the spiny symmetry of the background. They conjure up the interplay and clash of elemental forces – air, light, energy.

Where her technique in *Spiny Muricea* appears almost as a game that deftly makes serendipitous use of given fields and abstractions, in *Ancula Stichopus* Tschäpe chooses a much more concrete and figurative approach. The forms that she marks out in red over the green background evoke botanical shapes: they resemble heart-shaped leaves, distinctly in focus in front of a blurry vegetative background structure. The spatial illusion is heightened by clever texturing effects: light enclosures in the green watercolour lend extra luminosity to the background, colour is thickened to suggest shadows, enhancing the illusion that we see symmetrical leaves. In spite of Tschäpe's decision to use a medium that tends to coalesce into unforeseeable forms, her determination to compose, to resolutely set out her artistic ideas is palpable on every square inch of these two works.

Amorphous (2014) [p.36-37] is another impressive example. It is grounded with broad strokes that create calm vertical orange fields, creating a luminous, high and deep colour space. Tschäpe reacts to this proposition with a varied mesh of tender, rapid gestures that impatiently move up across the image plane. She then, using pink, light blue, light green, dark blue and red, delineates what resembles leaf-like forms within this dynamic weave. They are orientated along the drawn lines, strengthen and complete them, follow their movements and merge with them, enhanced by white hatchings that afford these 'leaves' even more depth and perspective. Yet, they are not really integrated into the colour space: they appear to be aliens, transient visitors that soon will leave this space again.

Some of the aspects mentioned above are present also in the series of large drawings from her recent sketchbook: the curiosity for other worlds, the penchant for recognisable *gestalts*, the markings that make us see figurative shapes in abstract layers. Yet, in these works, painterly dialogue or an engagement with the medium have ceased to be a primary concern. The artist's research is focused exclusively on an inquiry into inner worlds. These works, almost sketch-like in their allure, might seem like studies for the larger works discussed above. And yet they stand alone, are moments of intense concentration, inner

contemplation, when the artist withdraws into herself - to explore her inner visual archive, examine her memory of the landscapes she saw. She finds this kind of concentration late at night, when the day's bustle has subsided into stillness. Tschäpe calls them her "night time drawings". This intimacy of the work process is reflected in the very gesturality of the paper drawings: "In the studio I am working in much larger physical gestures. Those drawings that I do at home, have a much more intimate universe. My mind sets. The drawings help me to think, like a diary. They live by themselves."⁴

This process is all about (re)searching, and less about creating. Comparable to the principle of automatic painting she inscribes the paper with sketches and traces of inner images, with fugitive spectres and memory fragments. Resistant and autonomous materials would be an obstacle to this outpouring. Tschäpe thus chooses to draw with colour pencils, pastels, and watercolour crayons, mediums that, other than brushes, colour or ink, afford her maximal control and precision – an unmediated correspondence between her inner images and their outward manifestations. The errant drawing gesture, now free from all constraints, is a memory thread that the artist can follow and shape into landscape memories of shape, form and movement. No simple image plane should limit this impulse. Indeed, in some of them [figures 1, 2, 3 & 4] the drawings extend beyond the edge of the paper: the sheet is no frame for her composition – it is just a surface onto which the drawing happens to inscribe itself. Abrupt shifts between light and forceful pressure, rapid changes in direction, short-lived gestures followed by free-flowing lines – all these point to a moment of deep contemplation that frees up the deepest layers of memory. These drawings unleash free forms [figure 5], but also geometric shapes [figure 6], articulate rhythmical movement [figure 1] or develop hatchings and contours into figurative biomorphic forms – plants, rocks, organic bodies. In figure 1, the tightly packed vertical movements recall grass and twigs. Tschäpe uses brown-green hatchings over violet gestures to delineate the surfaces and edges of a thick shrubbery; in figure 2, the contours of a large tropical leaf emerge from a tightly aligned ellipsoid arrangement of short turquoise, light brown and light green strokes; in figure 5, the nervous base rhythm of short brown and light blue strokes is overlaid with geometric lines that seem to conjure up the large finery leaves and the dense thickets of a tropical jungle.

The concern with organic forms and geometric shapes reflects her deep interest in the work of German zoologist and graphic artist Erich Haeckel whose prints in his book *Kunstformen der Natur* [Art Forms in Nature] (1899-1904) have had a profound and sustained influence on early 20th century visual arts.⁵ Like Haeckel, Tschäpe is fascinated by the seductive beauty of natural organisms, their geometric forms and symmetries.

⁴ Conversation with the artist, February 2014

⁵ Ernst Heinrich Philipp August Haeckel. 1998. *Art forms in nature: the prints of Ernst Haeckel*. New York: Prestel-Verlag

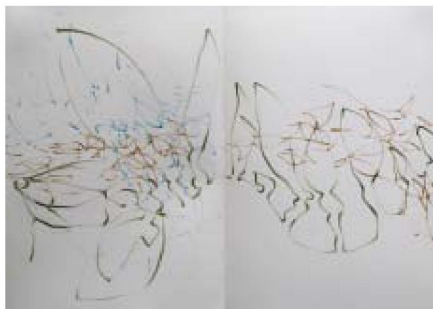
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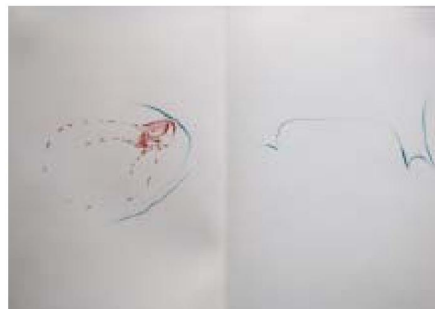
[Figure 1]
[圖一]



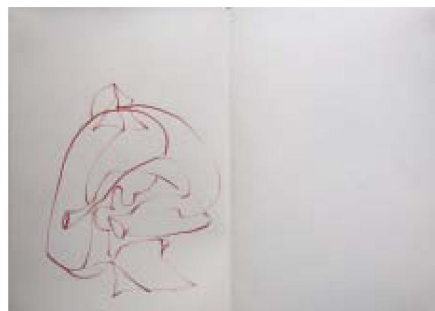
[Figure 2]
[圖二]



[Figure 3]
[圖三]



[Figure 4]
[圖四]



[Figure 5]
[圖五]

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As a source of wonderment, such forms can be found in the transparent red body embedded into a protective outer sheath [figures 4 & 7], the grand, elegantly swerving flower petals in figure 9, or the curious shape resembling a bud of the Brazilian vrisea-flower that vertically rises up from the horizontal plane – but also in non-vegetative shapes, three-dimensional objects reminiscent of stones and rocks [figures 7 & 9].

Throughout all of Tschäpe's work one can sense her fascination for nature's patterns, rhythms, sequences, shapes: from the white ball in *Ballgame* and the drippings and horizon lines in *Dark Sea* to organic leaf rhythms and solid rocks.

In her most recent work cycles, the cutouts, Tschäpe explores the creative potential of abstract properties in landscapes even further. Inspired by the set-conflict in the film "Flatland" where two-dimensional inhabitants of a plane world suddenly confronted with the evidence of a third dimension – she here focuses on the opposition, but also the creative potential between geometric order and biomorphic flow: "I love the idea of having the rigid pattern which, through unfolding, falls apart and becomes an organic landscape."⁶ In *Ocean Study II* (2014) [p. 48-49] Tschäpe leaves the painted surface and explores the resultant tensions between surface and space, geometry and landscape, artistic intention and the materiality of the medium. The strict geometric lines she cuts into the paper seem to unfurl almost autonomously when they are folded up. Tschäpe controls this autonomy by using their emergent shapes as the point of departure for her own landscaping explorations: she fixes them on a rectangle, creating sculptural, overlapping, organic forms, soft, bending waveling in various directions. These works are graphic sculptures and spatial drawings at the same time.

Contemplating Landscape (2014) [p. 6-7] too, explores the relationship between two and three-dimensionality. Here, Tschäpe confronts painterly landscapes with the sculptural objects, *Geometric Shapes* (2014), she developed from her engagement with these visual propositions. As in her intervention in *Ballgame*, she here is the initiator, the machinator, the alchemist who lets colours, materials, elements react with each other and observes their interplay: horizontal orange, red, yellow, blue and pink patterns evoke a luminous seascape, the afterglow of a setting sun. Instead of intervening into this image as a painter, she situates her reflection and contemplation outside of the image plane: she places it onto the surfaces of polyhedral, which appear stacked in a complex arrangement: drippings and drawn gestures contrast, reflect, comment on and complete elements of the painting. Whereas orange and pink cubes extend the hues of the painting into the surrounding space, the blue, turquoise and green cube surfaces enhance spatial depth by their complementary colour contrasts.

The geometric arrangement of the polyhedra echoes and varies the painting's symmetries and horizontal lines. All of this results in a vibrant and dynamic interaction between the sculptural space and image plane, between the painting and its three-dimensional deconstruction. Not for nothing does she qualify this work as a "large drawing".

The open sea, the wide horizon – the visual clues of *Contemplating Landscape* lead us back to the beginning of our inquiry into the work of Janaina Tschäpe. The line of the horizon is a recurrent trope and cohesive element in Janaina Tschäpe's oeuvre. In its unattainability, the horizon forces us to confront ourselves as humans. But to Tschäpe, this should not be seen so much as a discouragement than, rather, as a promise: the promise of endless potential that unites all those who give themselves to a world that lies before them. Like no other motive, the horizon embodies what fuels the artist's explorations: a desire for the unknown and a search for the miraculous that the world has in store.

Annette Bhagwati studied art history, social anthropology and geography in Freiburg, Berlin, and London. After receiving her PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, she joined the exhibition department of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) as in-house curator and program coordinator (1999-2006). In 2009, she became Affiliate Professor of art history at Concordia University, Montreal. Since 2012 Annette Bhagwati is project director of FORMER WEST and 'The Anthropocene Project' at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. She is research fellow at CEREvand founding member of the research group Curatorial Theory and Practice at CISSC, Montreal. Her research interests include artistic and curatorial research, contemporary arts from Asia and Africa, and exhibition studies.

⁶ Conversation with the artist, February 2014.