

A place for songs

There is a sensibility in how Gokula Stoffel conducts her creative process, starting with her contact with what we conventionally call nature. "Nature" is perhaps a multi-scale word, designed by and for humans. However, when used here, it helps us organize specific terms. After all, this creation—the notion of nature—has been mobilized in the fixed construction of a universal world in which plants, humans, and animals belong to distinct, isolated realms. Unless elected by humans to participate in their lives, other beings are kept in a category that diminishes them until they are integrated into the world of bipedal mammals.

The very Latin root of the word "forest" derives from *foris*—"outdoors"—suggesting a kind of wilderness, something that exists beyond the supposedly proper, practical and civilized world. I choose these words, however harsh, to start this conversation about Stoffel's work, as they seem important for situating it. In her journeys—whether mental or on walks—the artist outlines a conducive practice prior to classifications, where the rigid distinctions of what constitutes the 'world' begin to blur. They mix with breathing, concentration, and dispersion.

I propose an exercise: close your eyes and try to feel a breath that begins to form inside your chest but soon expands and comes out through your mouth. Look—it's as if this breath existed before you could control it. It may reveal a unique song in the world. It is not about your ability to project but about the perception of something that is already there, that pre-exists, and that crosses the vastness of the whole. You could say that it is a metaphysical, spiritual experience, shrouded in mystery—but also something that, when felt, is capable of taking shape and modifying whatever it touches.

This kind of sublime song, which permeates Stoffel's work, is not symbolically articulated with a vision of the sublime shaped by modern ideas, based on transcendence and the separation between subject and nature. From the hegemonic perspective, although nature can occupy a central position, it is not understood as a space integrated with all beings. It is like a territory that maintains a reverent distance from the human—evoking the grandeur and mystery characteristic of the traditional sublime, in which the subject contemplates and recognizes the vastness of nature without diluting herself in it. Thus, the tension between finitude and transcendence is maintained, an essential axis of prominent modern philosophical formulations of the 18th century.

In Stoffel's case, this displacement of the human from the center of the arena suggests a landscape that, far from being a mere backdrop, is an active agent in the construction of meanings—a force field in perpetual transformation.

Her relationship with "nature" is not just optical, nor is it built on a scale that privileges vision as the supreme sense. On the contrary, what is seen begins to be modulated by touch, the weight of pigment, which becomes matter in Stoffel's experiments, mainly on

different fabrics and cold clay. These supports seem to allow the artist to play with the paint: because they are malleable, they can be kneaded, expanded, and twisted.

Painting, as a main preoccupation, is her pictorial exercise—manifested almost as the house of the masters of the invisible. Stoffel establishes connections with beings that she does not necessarily name, but that appear as constant presences, characters that blend into the landscapes. Even though they keep their silhouettes and contours, these elements are not enough to delimit what is inside and what is outside—between the space that is the body and all that surrounds it, until, porously, everything becomes one.

The painting's surface, although visual in this case, is not limited to a search for what is seen. Her landscapes are not realistic: her practice turns inward, in a study of landscapes that overflow from the body and the mind and that connect her to a certain type of unknowing. As a manipulator of scales and sizes, the artist positions heads, legs, hands, and noses in seemingly inappropriate places—but which perhaps give us clues to feelings, sensations, and emotions that arise in everyday life. This investigation, which does not follow precision nor order but rather a listening between the manipulated elements, makes Stoffel's practice almost a mantra for herself—a song that guides her gestures.

Engulfed by her landscapes, she becomes the animal of her own thoughts. Her movements leave traces on the canvases; several heads take shape, but we do not know for sure to which body they belong—they could be giant mountains, small dewdrops, or even something that is not seen by everyone but felt, like a continuous breath.

Finally, I end this piece by listening to the album *World Galaxy* (1971) by the fantastic Alice Coltrane—a profound researcher of the connection between meditation and song and of the impossible separation between one practice and the other. I present her presence more as a fabulatory exercise: I imagine Coltrane walking through the exhibition room and chatting with Stoffel about meditation and mantras. This encounter confirms the emergence of subtle presences and expands the fertile fields opened up by artistic practices—in this case, Hinduism, a religion both experience, each in their own immersion, manifests in distinct ways, in similarities and differences, in their creations themselves.

Ariana Nuala

São Paulo, March 20th, 2025