

I. Explosions in the Sky

As I write this essay, the shuffle mode on my music app plays *Snow and Lights*, by the Texan quintet Explosions in the Sky. I doubt Sophia Loeb (São Paulo, 1997) paints while listening to this track, but its presence in my headphones offers a lens through which to consider her work. The song, despite the suggestion of scenery in its title, shuns literal interpretation. Instead, it unfolds in textured timbres and silences that ebb and flow like deep breaths: chords burst forth like sparks in the dark, while silences allow for suspension. There are no lyrics, no storyline—only a succession of delicate climaxes and gradual fades, as though something were perpetually on the verge of emerging but never fully coalesces. This ebb and flow of impulse and restraint, between brilliance and fading, echoes the subtle logic underpinning Sophia Loeb's practice.

On my first visit to the artist's studio in São Paulo, I was greeted by a large-scale canvas—approximately 10 feet wide by six and a half feet high—bathed in a spectrum of blues. Its surface was anything but uniform: it featured areas of rich opacity and layered thickness, contrasting with sections where the paint thinned and dripped as though slowly dissipating. Deep navy, vivid turquoise, and translucent blues intertwined, inviting the eye to explore each undulation and nuanced gesture. The large blue canvas, *O véu sobre a terra se reveste de fogo* (The Veil Over the Earth Clad in Fire, 2025), revealed itself little by little. What initially appeared as a fluid, dense, and hushed sky began to take on ambiguity. The composition offered no discernible beginning, end, or horizon: only a seamless continuity where background and surface could no longer be distinguished. Between dense zones of blue and areas of diluted green, flecks of red punctuate the field—discreet pulses that unsettle the visual field. Over time, the painting unraveled less as an image than an immersive experience: looking at it was akin to peering into the water, sensing its tremors, its fleeting reflections, the way light penetrates and dissolves into the medium.

This kind of experience, where vision does not dominate but accompanies, and where meaning resonates and does not settle, opens avenues for conceiving artistic creation as a relational practice. I invoke the thought of British philosopher Christine Battersby, whose perspective proves particularly compelling in this context. In *Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (1998) ¹ Battersby offers a radical reconceptualization of subjectivity: against the

¹ BATTERSBY, Christine. *Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity*. London; New York: Routledge, 1998.

solitary, static, self-contained “I” of the Western tradition, she proposes a subjectivity both embodied and relational—one that is continuously in the making.² Within this framework, identity emerges not as essence but as a process: something formed through engagement with the world, with matter, and with the Other.

This shift has direct implications for art. Creation no longer remains a mere projection of form onto reality and becomes instead a practice arising from listening, friction, and negotiation. Battersby writes, “The body is not just something we possess, but something we are — a source of agency, knowledge, and creativity.” To recognize artistic making as a form of thought is to admit that it does not organize itself around fixed concepts but emanates from the moving body, along with gesture’s tempo, the resistance of matter, and the attunement to time. In this context, the body transcends its role as a mere expressive vessel; it is an active agent of thought, feeling, and sense-making. To create, in this sense, is to forge relations with the world, with the medium, and with what is yet to come.

I approach Sophia Loeb's poetics within this horizon. Her canvases do not confine an image; instead, they sustain what shifts, vibrates, and remains formless. The surface turns into a dynamic field linking color, body, and time; it is an arena where form remains provisional and the visible ever mutable. By insisting on processuality, her work articulates an ethics of engagement: rather than imposing, it listens; rather than fixing form, it sustains its permeability and impermanence. Her works seem to go hand in hand with what is in motion—creating openings for unnamed presences.

II. Another Ocean in the Making

This is one of the phenomena that marks the recent history of our planet. In the heart of the Ethiopian desert—one of the driest regions in the world—the earth

² Feminist art history criticism, with authors such as Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock, has revealed how power structures shaped the exclusion of women from the official art narrative. Nochlin, in *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971), questions the notion of artistic genius; Pollock, in *Vision and Difference* (1988), proposes a rereading of art history centered on gender and the differentiation of the gaze. Building on this lineage, Christine Battersby, in *The Phenomenal Woman* (1998), advances a feminist metaphysics that conceives thought as embodied and processual. Within this framework, abstraction ceases to be understood as a pure, universal field and becomes instead a sensitive, situated, and relational practice.

cracked open.³This occurred in 2005, after more than four hundred earthquakes, when a 37-mile fissure tore through the Earth's surface, exposing its innards in profound stillness. At the convergence of the Arabian, African, and Somali tectonic plates, scientists are witnessing what may be the emergence of a new ocean—a geological transformation that, until now, seemed confined to the planet's primordial timescale. What was once imagined to take ten million years may now occur in under a million. Slowly, basaltic layers form, and the saline waters of the Red Sea start to flood what was once solid land. The seemingly still continent starts to shift. The earth moves, reshaping the map.

The image of a planet transforming from within—in apparent silence and slowness—also offers a key to thinking about time and matter in Loeb's work. In her paintings, there is something of that same underlying, persistent, subterranean logic: a temporality marked not by clocks but by layers. A time that does not tell stories but pulses. That does not represent but gradually reorders the world, beginning at the surface.

Having begun her practice in sculpture, Sophia brings a distinctly physical approach to painting. Her canvases are rotated, tilted, and viewed from multiple perspectives; liquid pigments, oil sticks, and colored powders are applied, scraped, and layered. The material sets the pace: each hue summons a specific gesture—digging, rubbing, scrubbing, dissolving. The result is richly textured, porous surfaces where transparency and opacity alternate. In many works, the chromatic palette intensifies this vitality: vivid hues and stark contrasts evoke Fauvist intensity, not as citation but as a sensory impulse. Here, color transcends description—it activates, strains, and transforms the perceptual field.

Although she does not name direct influences, the artist's work seems imbued with a visual lexicon shared with digital territories, simulation environments, fictional realms, and references spanning Western Impressionism and Expressionism to Japanese painting traditions. These references function as syntax rather than direct quotations. She describes her works as visions of "primordial scenarios beyond human knowledge." The expression, far from pretentious, signals a simple gesture: to bridge the divide between humanity and the environment. By choosing abstraction, Loeb reconfigures matter, time, gesture, and form on a surface where nothing lies "beyond": layers of paint absorb, evaporate, and retain traces—not to represent nature, but to operate within it.

³ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/global-trends/earths-sixth-ocean-is-forming-but-will-split-the-african-continent-in-two/articleshow/118295296.cms?from=mdr>

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After years spent living abroad, the artist has returned to São Paulo to develop her new works, which are now brought together in this exhibition. Upon reconnecting with her studio in São Paulo, she began to evoke more concrete references from her surroundings—horizon lines, waterfalls, rocky ridges—without abandoning the surface's radical abstraction. Mountains and rivers emerge not as figures but as chromatic shifts that trigger the viewer's memory. There is no fixed point nor single perspective; only flow, density, and accretion.

These works are permeated by watery states —vapor, rain, moisture, and rapids. These elements do not appear as themes; they are rhythms, ways of feeling and moving. The painting does not seek to fix an image but to sustain the moment when something begins to take shape—like a sound reverberating before being recognized or a fissure that opens without warning. Loeb paints with her body: each gesture inscribes a living presence into matter. It is in this in-between that abstraction becomes a deep listening to materiality, not as an escape, but as participation in the world's pulse. Under the influence of these layers and expansions, the painting is embodied thought, where body, color, and time intertwine.

I finish this essay to the sound of *Sæglópur*, by the Icelandic band Sigur Rós—a piece marked by rarefied atmospheres and suspended intensities, unfolding like an aurora across a dark sky. Like Loeb's layers of paint, the music does not resolve but lingers. Both invite the gaze and the ear to dwell in the in-between.

— Ana Roman

Sophia Loeb

Panta Rei sobre a Estrata

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