Thapiri
The flower-images of Yanomami dreams

In the Western Yanomami language, spoken by the community of Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe (Mahekototheri, Platanal, Upper Orinoco, Venezuela), the verb *thapimou* means "to dream." To dream "far/beyond" (*thapi ha*), within the space-time of the forest (*urihi a*), is to dream of other places, of absent people, or of other beings—nonhuman, distant. Thus, *thapi*—the dream—characterizes oneiric activity above all as a vehicle for mental exploration beyond the limits of visible, daytime experience. For the title of this exhibition, the suffix *-ri* was added, which carries a superlative and/or supernatural (mythological or shamanic) connotation. In this sense, we may understand this new body of work by the Yanomami artist Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe—*Thapiri*—as a compilation and visual account of a journey through extraordinary dreams, of metaphysical dreams across the forest.

In order to understand the meaning of Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe's work and truly appreciate the dreamlike images and the forest world it explores, it is necessary, first and foremost, to free ourselves from certain blind spots in our own way of seeing, and especially from the vocabulary that underpins it. Let us recall, then, that the forest inhabited by the Yanomami is not, for them (as it so often is for us), a mere cluster of trees, nor an unsettling still life subject to our unrestrained exploitation or nostalgic contemplation. The "forest-earth-world," *urihi a*, is, in Yanomami shamanic knowledge, a complex multiverse in which a multiplicity of living peoples—visible or invisible, human or nonhuman—coexist on equal footing, sustained by mutual commitments.

Moreover, we must also begin from the understanding that the dreams of Yanomami shamans cannot be reduced to the exercise of mystical and exotic fantasies or to the divination of cryptic desires. For the Yanomami, on the contrary, they constitute true forms of knowledge and metaphysical inquiry. This is what Davi Kopenawa, a major Yanomami intellectual and political leader in Brazil, seeks to make us understand when

he says: "We, the Yanomami, when we truly want to know things, strive to see them by dreaming. That is our way of studying."[1]

In dreaming, the inner "image" of each person—that immaterial component of the human being that Western Yanomami call *no uhutipɨ*—detaches from the body and travels far away. In the course of its out-of-body journeys, this "image" is able to undergo experiences of interaction and perception that recall the dreamer's everyday life, but from a distant geography: hunts, journeys, and feasts; visits from absent people; loves and misfortunes; threatening or unsettling encounters with animals, malevolent beings, or specters, among others. These are, according to the Yanomami, the dream forms of "ordinary people" (*kuapora thë pë*). The dreams of shamans (*shapori thë pë*), by contrast, are considered more intrepid and, at the same time, truly "distant." During the night, the shamanic spirits, *hekura pë*, can seize their "image," the *no uhutipɨ*, and carry it along their "paths of light" through all the dimensions of cosmological space-time: to the superimposed layers of the universe, to the time of origins, or even to the far-off hiding places of invisible malevolent beings. Thus, during the "time of the dream" (*mari tëhë*), the out-of-body journey of the "image" of shamans, transformed into *hekura* spirits, becomes a metaphysical odyssey toward remote universes unknown to "ordinary people." As Davi Kopenawa explains with precision, "We, shamans, carry within us the 'dream value' of the spirits. It is they who allow us to dream far away. That is why their images never cease to dance with us while we sleep."

This extraordinary capacity to "dream far," whether grounded in everyday experience or in accompaniment to the journeys of spirits, is attributed by the Yanomami to *Omawë*, the demiurge of the present world. As the "primordial dreamer" (*maritima a*), he endowed humans with the ability, during sleep, to release their "images" from their bodies. Beyond this, *Omawë* created and placed, at the far reaches of the forest, the "tree of dreams" (*mari hi*), whose blossoms, as they open, stimulate human dreaming like an imagetic particle accelerator.

[1] The references to Davi Kopenawa and the Yanomami notions of dreaming evoked here are drawn from the book we wrote together, *The Falling Sky*, chapter 22, "The Flowers of Dream."

The Yanomami distinguish immaterial images (*uhutipɨ*), such as those of shamanism, from graphic elements such as drawings, paintings, or bodily markings (*õni / nouku / -no*)[2]. As in the case of Joseca Yanomami in Brazil, who was influenced by the school-based iconography that was present during his childhood, most contemporary Yanomami artists have chosen to follow the inspiration of shamanic images. That is, through the pictorial transposition of shamanic chants and narratives onto paper, which then becomes a "skin of images" (*utupa siki*). In this way, they "bring down" (as shamans do with their *hekura pë*) representations of Yanomami cosmology and mythology onto "skins of paper" (*papeo siki*). In doing so, they appropriate the Western "realist" representational device and transform it into a new pictorial style that we might call "shamanic realism" (in allusion to the well-known literary magical realism).

Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe's inspiration, in turn, followed a different and highly original path: that of the drawings, paintings, and markings that traditionally adorn Yanomami bodies and objects, both quotidian and ritual. As the artist often recounts, this graphic inspiration came to him in childhood through a patient initiation guided by his mother, a remarkable ornamentist and basket weaver. The patterns of these figures, which cover both the surface of baskets and human skin, are composed of a variety of simple geometric graphic elements—perhaps around twenty—that can be combined with one another. These elements often refer to animal characteristics, especially to the traces of the bodies of the "human-animal" ancestors of Yanomami mythology (the *Yarori pë*). It was therefore through a personal reappropriation of this ancient graphic tradition—combined with the influence of calligraphy and the schooling to which he was also exposed—that Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe gradually defined his singular aesthetic style. Thus, throughout the 2000s, at the beginning of his artistic trajectory, the artist assembled a vast compendium of traditional patterns transmitted by his mother. These patterns occupied a central place in his first solo exhibition, entitled *õni thë pë komi* ("All the drawings are finished"), organized by Luis Romero in 2010 at Oficina #1 in Caracas.

[2] For an analysis of the work of two Yanomami artists from Brazil, see Joseca Mokahesi and André Taniki, chapters 6 and 7 of Bruce Albert & Davi Kopenawa, 2023, *El espíritu de la floresta*. Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia.

Drawing on this auto-ethnographic aesthetic research, Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe gradually developed a kind of iconic stenography, initially in red and black and later in an increasingly expanded palette. This pictorial technique isolates, stylizes, and transposes the traces, markings, and animal and vegetal forms resulting from his meticulous observation of the forest world in which he lives—observations he records in pencil in notebooks he always carries with him: "When I go out to fish or hunt in the forest, I always take a sheet of paper with me to describe or sketch what I observe; that is my work today—my drawings come from this..."[3].

The figures and stylized traces produced through this acute observation of the graphic elements of the forest's living worlds are ultimately transposed by Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe's fertile artistic imagination. They thus become abstract figures and signs (in black and white, black and red, or other colors), isolated and enlarged or, more often, repeated in orthogonal grids and meticulously arranged across a surface of paper or fabric: animal markings, details of plumage or fur, leaves, vines, fruits, branches, palms, reptiles, insects, mushrooms, butterfly wings, among others.

In this new body of work, however, the originality of his usual graphic perspective is intensified in a distinctly singular way. This amplification does not concern his sources of inspiration, nor the foundations of his graphic style. It arises, rather, from a shift in his gaze that seems to produce an effect of aesthetic parallax. The title *Thapiri* thus indicates that, in this exhibition, Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe moves beyond his classic geometric abstraction of the forest's graphic traces to reconsider them from the perspective of dreaming. In doing so, the artist explores, by new means, a non-Euclidean recomposition of the pictorial space that ordinarily gathers and contains them. In this way, the minimalist patterns of Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe's notebooks seem to come alive and to dance, imbued with a radiant luminosity and an increasingly vivid palette. They proliferate across the surface of the paper as enigmatic rhizomatic multiplicities, tracing cartograms of oneiric journeys.

[3] Excerpt from the video *Les Vivants: The exhibition as seen by Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe – Yanomami artist* (curated by Bruce Albert and Hervé Chandès, Lille, France, 2022).

Transformed into constellations of signs dispersed beyond their usual orthogonality, the artist's graphic language seems, as Davi Kopenawa would say, to have been carried away by the "dream value" of the shamanic *hekura pë* spirits. Here, Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe contemplates the universe of the forest not only through his own observations, but also by way of the cosmological vision he borrows from the *hekura pë*, who travel with his "image" during the "dream time" (*mari tëhë*). Thus, in looking at these new works, we have the feeling of entering a floating universe in which mysterious iconic choreographies circulate like scattered sketches from a shamanic travel diary: paths cascading from the sky; undulating dispersals of ornaments and palm leaves; calligraphies of aquatic and terrestrial worlds; lianas of lightning and signs of stone; mist-laden trees and bands of cloud; luminous adornments of feathers and showers of fruit; entanglements of multicolored serpents; interwoven branches and pointillist whirlpools of water…

Through their chants and choreographies, Yanomami shamans strive to convey to the "ordinary people" of their communities their spirits' "dream value," sharing the visions of distant worlds and unknown entities encountered during their ceaseless cosmological odysseys. In a similar gesture, through the works in this exhibition, Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe brings forth before us the images of the "dream flowers" from the multiplicity of beings from the forest where he lives, day after day, as a Yanomami hunter and artist. Thus, with restless generosity, the artist invites us to open our sensibility and our minds to the aesthetics and knowledges of the inhabitants of another universe—that of the Yanomami "forest-earth-world"—whose richness, diversity, and beauty our industrial world, out of ignorance and greed, continues to destroy without mercy.

Bruce Albert