

## PAULA FLORES: PARTY OF A LIFETIME

Marcello Farabegoli

Paula Flores was born in 1988 in Tijuana / Mexico. She studied from 2010 to 2015 at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California in Tijuana, where she received a bachelor's degree in Plastic Arts. In 2018 she came to Vienna / Austria, where in 2021 she obtained a master's degree in Art & Science at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. It is remarkable that, contrary to the mainstream in Mexico, Flores dedicated herself to abstract-gestural art at a very young age and thus faced strong headwinds at the Mexican university, which offered a classical-figurative education. Stylistically she was also influenced by the "Exvotos Mexicanos" (Mexican votive offerings are representations of popular art), the "Rótulos Mexicanos" (hand-painted commercial posters full of color and ingenuity in which images coexist with varied typographies), and both traditional indigenous and mestizo woven and embroidered textiles. She gradually began to explore the roots of her family – her grandparents, who had a close relationship with nature, play an essential role – her culture in general (festivities, rituals, etc.),<sup>1</sup> especially the precolonial ones, and her own relationship with nature. Along the way, she also encountered the world of shamanism, especially Maria Sabina (1894-1985), who revealed the miraculous power of entheogenic mushrooms (psilocybin) to the western world. So Flores began to study the mysterious world of mushrooms and other living beings like bacteria and some plants, topics that she then deepened at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. Thus she developed her own painterly style, a mix of abstract-gestural painting with figurative elements. These mostly have a symbolic intention and are deliberately naïve in character. Due to the joyful colorfulness the works in general appear Mexican or South American to Western eyes. At the same time, when you see for example her sculptures made of mycelia, some of her actions/performances, and videos, you also recognize another enigmatic side of the artist, which cannot be pigeonholed into a particular subject, ethnic group, nation etc., one that is about deep questions about our existence, our relationship to nature and the universe.

In general, Paula Flores is concerned with the complexity of nature, with our knowledge or ignorance of it and our relationship to it. How is it possible, the artist wonders, that Western capitalist-imperialist thought, conceived predominantly by men, has enabled a part of humanity to legitimize the exploitation of enslaved and oppressed populations and groups of people, and nature no less?

Thus Flores seeks ways to change, dismantle, and overcome these hierarchical conceptual constructs that can limit us in the understanding that we may have of the natural interconnectedness of the world. To do so, she is studying "extraordinary ways of communication" between humans and other species, such as fungi, bacteria, and plants. In this context Flores is very interested in symbiogenesis:<sup>2</sup> in the biological world the endosymbiotic theory is when

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<sup>1</sup> In many conversations with Paula Flores, she told me that Mexican culture is famous for celebrating big and celebrating almost everything from births to deaths, and everything that is a big or small accomplishment. Further that Mexicans celebrate birthdays in a huge way, weddings are all about having a great time and making an unforgettable party. Everything is with great amounts of food, and gifts and everyone especially presents themselves with suitable clothes, makeup, and hair to celebrate these life accomplishments. For the cultural celebrations, festivities are even bigger, because the whole community comes together to make them happen. Many of these festivities and rituals are dedicated to different religious deities (not only Christian). This makes them even more special because people celebrate, dance and sing for days, and also do not sleep to thank and keep the deities happy.

<sup>2</sup> In her investigations, Paula Flores likes to refer to the article "Psychological Correlates of Communication, Gravitation and Unity" by Jacobo Grinberg-Zylberbaum, a controversial Mexican neurophysiologist and psychologist, focusing on the field of consciousness. According to the homepage of the CIA – the Central Intelligence Agency of the federal government of the United States – this article was published in "Psychoenergetics" Vol. 5, p. 235-243 by Gordon and Breach Science Publisher, Inc. in 1983 in the United Kingdom and approved for release by the CIA on 7 March 2001: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP96-00792R000700130001-6.pdf>. Here a short quote from this article: "The Syntergic theory postulates that the brain creates an energy field (the neuronal field) that expands into space, interacts with the space-matter continuum, is able to change the informational content of the latter and thus affect other neu-

two or more different organisms live in close physical contact – it brings together unlike individuals to make larger, more complex entities i.e. lichen. The artist hopes that symbiogenesis may lead to a shift in the balance of power and possibly pave the way for a more balanced relationship between humans and nature that would benefit the entire planet.

On the other hand, Flores is interested in the duality between life and death and questions where the sharp boundary between these states or concepts might be found. Regarding this fundamental contrast, it should be mentioned that the famous Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger, with his legendary essay “What is life?”<sup>3</sup> published about eighty years ago, had pointed out the great riddles of the phenomenon of life as well as the associated principal explanatory hurdles, and at the same time had given an essential impulse to genetics. Remarkably, the current state of knowledge is still not sufficient to understand how life arose. Likewise, it is still technically impossible at present to create artificial life. Last but not least, a virus, i.e. a being which exists as such by definition between life and death, played a generally known frightening role in the Covid 19 pandemic.

On what seems another side of the spectrum, in so-called animistic religions, for example, a kind of soul is attributed to any natural object. Perhaps children today may still have the ability to feel this all-soul; some artists in particular often cultivate this ability throughout their lives. In her childhood, Flores herself was able to cherish a “magical feeling” concerning nature and recognized this particular effect even more intensely in the stories of her grandparents, who grew up in the countryside, whereas she grew up in Tijuana – one of the most active borders in the world. Flores’ will to find a way of transformation by means of explorative-artistic work, which is to break through the dual concept of life and death, to explore what is in between might seem particularly radical. Last but not least, she believes that through this she can attain a connection to beings that animate the universe.

The exhibition at Kunstraum Feller from 5 November 2022 to 6 January 2023 that I curated in Vienna is divided into two rooms: one on the right with the installation “PARTY OF A LIFETIME” (2022) and one on the left with works mainly from 2022 that are closely related to this installation, as well as a few works from 2019 and 2020.

All the works in the left-hand room deal with very different themes, but are connected by a red thread. One for example is an homage to the native people of Baja California, a state in Mexico and suggestive peninsula bordering the US states of California – Tijuana, where Flores grew up, is the biggest city in this state. Near to this work, you can find another that has to do with the feeling of space in the desert, a landscape closely associated with the artist.<sup>4</sup> Mushrooms appear again and again in the works of Flores, who connects them to the moon and

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ronal fields and physical forces.” According to Paula Flores, research shows that on a level of consciousness human beings can interact and exchange with diverse beings with the aim of somehow overcoming the physical. With this being said Flores thinks it is possible to come to a different understanding of the balance of the world – an understanding that other groups and individuals have had, but many aspects of contemporary times don’t allow for this to happen anymore. As the renowned American biologist Lynn Margulis stated: “As a species, we still fear the eccentric in our views of ourselves [...] Yes, humans have indeed evolved, but not just from the apes or even from other mammals. We evolved from a long line of progenitors, ultimately from the first bacteria.” (MARGULIS, Lynn, 2008. *Symbiotic Planet / A New Look At Evolution*. Basic Books, p. 4).

<sup>3</sup>SCHRÖDINGER, Erwin, 1946. *Was ist Leben? Die lebende Zelle mit den Augen des Physikers betrachtet*. [Originally titled: *What is life?* Aus d. Engl. übers.] Bern : Francke Verlag.

<sup>4</sup>That type of landscape is where Flores interacted with nature. It is where her family has a ranch, in Tecate, and she went hiking with her grandfather, cousins, aunts and uncles. Among many other activities that her parents could not teach her.

healing. In the works, elements can be found that have to do with ephemeral festivities, dances, rituals, *velada*<sup>5</sup> and all kinds of celebrations. It is also about *copal* and *salvia blanca*, which in Mexico are used to cleanse “bad energies” or any other energies and have a similar status to incense in Europe, about healers and spiritual guides, and in general the search for one’s own paths or aberrations. In a larger landscape format, Flores shows how her grandfather taught people to remove *ahuates* (cactus thorns) from their hands and in a small portrait format Flores asks herself about the possibility of feelings of isolation of potted plants...

For curatorial reasons, three photographs from the performance “QUELITES” (2019) have been included in this more “classical” part of the exhibition. In this performance, Flores slept for several nights in a self-made wool blanket in which she had planted lettuce seeds and made them germinate thanks to her body heat and exhalations. At the same time, her skin also gradually came into direct contact with the fine roots of these plants. Especially in sleep, when our waking consciousness gives way to our subconscious and we confront our deepest fears and desires, Flores, as a life-giving being, tried to establish an intimate connection with the plants. It is about *energía dadora de vida*, she says, as it is called in the *Temazcal*<sup>6</sup> ritual. The artist wonders what the energy of a newborn plant, growing skin to skin with us, can teach us: What can we give to this new being and what can we get from it? Can we get in touch with the plant emotionally and feel the energy of life itself?

Last but not least, the video “IN A LANGUAGE WE DON'T UNDERSTAND” (2020) could also be seen in the room, in which according to the artist a “concoction of her existence that trespasses the understanding of aliveness, gathering of knowledge that doesn’t have a beginning or an end, learning by mirroring through and with others”.

The installation “PARTY OF A LIFETIME”, which consists of several paintings and sculptural components, is a tribute to the aspects of nature that Paula Flores grew up in, the stories that her grand-parents talked about, and the festivities from her home country that celebrate nature on its own and humans' relationship with nature. The idea was born from the thoughts of Flores’ grandfather, who grew up in the rural area of Los Altos de Jalisco / Mexico. When he was only six years old due to family circumstances sometimes he wandered off alone into the mountains near his town. He took a kilo of tortillas with him and an *escopeta* (small rifle) which he hunted with. But he loved also to grab the fallen fruit from the ground that generous nature gave. He slept on the ground accompanied by the stars, which gave him plenty to think about, and enjoyed the freedom. On the other hand, it was Flores’s grandmother who talked about the magical aspects that were hidden within nature and the powerful connections to their ancestors, which must be kept alive by paying tribute, speaking to them, and having them always present in their lives and never stop being amazed by their wonders... the grandmother also taught her the festivities, from catholic/indigenous celebrations, rights of passage and tributes to secret playful spirits that lived in nature.

After several years of living in Vienna, the Mexican artist started to feel painfully distant from all of this, not just because of the physical distance, but because she had started to change. Even if, for example, nature in

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<sup>5</sup>“Night vigils (veladas) and ‘sacred mushrooms’ form a fundamental aspect of Mazatec culture and identity, and they are considered to effective in treating serious diseases that have not been cured with allopathic medicine; to trace missing persons or objects; to inquire into people’s future with the aim of changing their destiny, or as the Mazatecs say, ‘to straighten the fate’; and learning how to solve difficult problems” (ORTEGA, Fabiola Minero, 2012. *Las Mujeres Sabias Y las Veledas Con “Hongos Sagrados”: El Chamanismo Mazateco*. Tesis que para optar el titulo de licenciada en etnología. Directora de tesis Dra. Antonella Fagetti Spedicato. Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia. México D.F. p.8). Translation by Paula Flores.

<sup>6</sup>“In Mesoamerica, since ancient times, the temazcal, ‘steam bath’, has played an important role in social and religious life. The temazcalli (from Nahuatl: theme, ‘steam’, and calli, ‘house’) can be defined as ‘steam bath house’”. (BUTRÓN, Tomado de Agustín Ortiz, 2005. *El temazcal arqueológico*, In: Arqueología Mexicana n. 74, pp. 52-53). Translation by Paula Flores.

Austria is also beautiful, she cannot create this inner connection as in Mexico. And she also misses home because of the lack of festivities that are meaningful to her. According to the artist herself: "If we are not here to appreciate the beauty of life (birth), growing up, changing, energies we can't see but can be interacted with and death then what are we here for? In these very diverse festivities from mestizo to indigenous practices, I find a mirror. A mirror that reflects how we relate to nature, how it is represented and intertwined in our daily life, scheduled festivities, spontaneous and sporadic rituals, parties, gatherings, *veladas*, etc... This is how we bring nature into our mind and into our soul. This is how we keep it alive."

But now back to the installation itself: in Mexico, it is customary to stage parties, especially for children, on the basis of a particular theme, and this is what Flores has also done by sticking to the above-mentioned themes. In general, the theme of imitation plays an important role in Mexico. At first glance, one notices several larger and colorful canvases attached to wooden poles and hanging airily and playfulness in the room. In between, various objects lie on the floor and the room itself is adorned with more or less glittering party decorations. A mysterious wallpaper door is slightly open and party paper scraps invite you to open it...

The rigid geometric structure of the room is organically broken, so that the artist manages to achieve the illusion of a cheerful, even childlike gaiety. One can perhaps even get the impression of having arrived at an Indio tent camp in the middle of nature and still feeling the dances of the inhabitants.

On the canvases, which are mostly made with acrylic paint, one can recognize elements that can also be seen in the paintings in the other room, such as mushrooms and plants. One also distinguishes stones, rivers, but also urban landscapes, and even a highway – where people dash back and forth in their cars, the artist says, and no longer even notice the surrounding nature. And at the same time, more elements from her grandfather's stories appear, such as fig cacti, dragon fruit, and pomegranates one which he fed. Somewhere you also recognize his above-mentioned *escopeta*. There are also figures that appear to be somewhere between human and animal – these are the powerful shamans *Nahuales*,<sup>7</sup> who according to tradition can actually transform themselves into animals. In one image, one shaman whispers secret knowledge to the other, while in the other they drink tea together as cow- or dog-like creatures. There are many symbols and references, such as to the *Mayan codices*,<sup>8</sup> which were initially perceived as primitive by the Western world because of their otherness. But nevertheless, not everything can be explained and there is a lot of mystery. The artist no longer knows why she painted a menacing centipede, for example, and that is a good thing, because the works were created intuitively and as if in a dream. This is also one reason why Flores did not take the path of strictly figurative painting, in order to preserve this special freedom. She believes that this also allows her to access the emotional world, both her own and that of the viewer. One of her works, for example, is completely abstract and, with violet-greenish colors, merely alludes to the water and moisture that is so essential for growing mushrooms.

The natural objects and others on the floor also oscillate between clear meanings and enigma: dried corn kernels

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<sup>7</sup>"Well seen, the examples of modern ethnography show how the Indians themselves often end up closely intertwining the two beliefs, to the point of almost confusing them. Among the Nahuas of the highlands of Puebla, for example, everyone possesses an alter ego (tonal), while some individuals (called *nahualme*), precisely by virtue of coexistence with 'doubles' of a particular nature (such as jaguars, snakes, owls, etc.), believe they are capable of transforming themselves and acting by causing harm to others in the form of an animal." (LUPO, Alessandro, 1999. *Nahualismo y tonalismo*, In: *Arqueología Mexicana*, n. 35, pp. 18-23). Translation by Paula Flores.

<sup>8</sup>"Codices, from the Latin codex: handwritten book, refer to pictorial or image documents made as cultural products of the great Mayan, Aztec, Mixtec, Zapotec, Otomi, Purépecha, etc. civilizations, which emerged and developed in Mesoamerica." (GALARZA, Tomado de Joaquín, 2003. *Los códices mexicanos*, In: *Arqueología Mexicana*, Special edition n. 31, *Códices prehispánicos y coloniales tempranos*. Catalogue, pp. 6-9). Translation by Paula Flores.

symbolize the important plant that originated in Mexico; small mountains of woolen cord lie around; dried mushrooms; strips of Curcuma powder have to do with the Mexican tradition of healing and spiritual purification; copal resin used to purify bad energies; white sage for purifying any energies; volcanic pumice means ancestors in Mexico and is used for rituals; bamboo similar *carizo*<sup>9</sup> sticks with synthetic fur symbolize power objects of the shamans, etc. The objects on the floor are usually laid on glittering papers in the colors of gold, silver, and copper to emphasize the meaning of the objects lying on them. Some gold papers have the shapes of leaves, which in Mexico were traditionally used as plates. Mirror effects that reflect light onto the walls are equally important to the artist alluding to the playfulness of natural light in landscapes like one that is reflected off of water and in this specific case to give the feeling of a dream or magic state. And on some sculptures, there are small cards with little drawings on them, like a mirror iteratively repeating elements of the canvases... This “magical dimension” is reinforced by the installations on the floor, which are more or less reminiscent of altars. Indeed as you enter Flores’ installation, the sense of cyclical time gradually prevails over linear time and you gently step from mundane everyday life into a sacred ceremonial world.<sup>10</sup>

On a purple synthetic felt carpet that seems to float, there is a sculpture made of a filigree metal net and wood that rests on a sensitive balance: the artist thus interprets the harmony of nature, but also of mind and body, which can more or less easily be shaken. Somewhere you can find a fine fabric similar to that used in Mexico to collect the sea dew in order to capture its healing powers, trusting in nature. A small transparent Plexiglas cube out of which a mass of plaster is forced, hinting at the destruction of nature in an urban context. Thus, according to the artist, people in Mexican cities prefer the artificial and have largely forgotten the traditional knowledge of plants and nature.

Also the video “PARA SACARTE LOS AHUATES” (2023, To take out the Ahuetes) is embedded in this room, in which is the story of when Flores learned to clear pain with nature through the teachings of her grandfather. At the same time, it is the understanding and realization of what it means to be born and grow up in a place that is divided by socio-political circumstances, the border. That this division does not stop as a geopolitical division that only keeps people in check.

The relationship between natural and synthetic materials is remarkable. Paula Flores loves to mix natural materials with synthetic ones for her installations, such as glittering papers, skins, and felts. Some of them look very natural and thus imitate nature. And this is perhaps one of the essential features that makes her work so appealing: the harmonic mixture of naturalness and artificiality, of clean, aseptic, almost digital elements of our contemporary world and natural, even archaic elements. And, on the level of form and content, this reflects scientific achievements and magical references, meaning and enigma, the willed and the arbitrary, waking consciousness and dream, which floods the entire installation.

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<sup>9</sup>The artist is also fascinated by the fact that *carizo* is supposed to be harvested at a very specific time in the lunar calendar so that it does not contain moth eggs.

<sup>10</sup>ELIADE, Mircea, 1998. *Das Heilige und das Profane – Vom Wesen des Religiösen*. (The Sacred and the Profane - On the Essence of the Religious). 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Frankfurt am Main; Leipzig : Insel Verlag.

In this context, a small but important element of the installation is to be deepened: the sculptures “MEDIATION” (2021) made from the mycelia of mushrooms.

Flores has been experimenting with mycelia for a long time to specifically grow them into compact shapes and then let them dry out, although in most cases this process also means the death of these living beings. The sculptures seem somehow like prehistoric eggs, which may have come from dinosaurs or are even of extraterrestrial origin. When you hold them, you notice how light and fragile these filaments that have grown together are. It is common knowledge that only the visible fruiting bodies are referred to as fungi or mushrooms. However, the actual fungus is primarily the thin, thread-like structure (hyphae) of the mycelium in the soil or wood, which is usually not recognized due to its presence in these opaque substrates. Fungal mycelia can cover more than a square kilometer, have an enormous biological mass and reach a great age. Mycelia are crucial in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems due to their role in the decomposition of plant material and are the main factor in the health, nutrient uptake, growth and fitness of a plant.

By bringing or forcing a hidden, essential living being so radically to light, so to speak, through her artwork, the artist intends to investigate and possibly rediscover and present what a fine, immense network of hidden correlations may exist. To achieve this goal duality must be overcome in favor of diversity. Without wanting to mystify physics, one can learn from general relativity that matter and energy, and space and time are densely intertwined and especially in quantum physics, phenomena occur that are (still) considered mysteries or even spooky.<sup>11</sup> Anyway, the paradigm shift that has occurred from classical to quantum physics is finally beginning to take place in other natural sciences like biology and medicine. On the other hand there are also increasingly strong points of contact between the natural sciences and ancient indigenous knowledge such as in ethnobotany and ethnopharmacology – which Paula Flores also emphasizes in her research – as well as certain “scientific laws” that are reminiscent of “truths” that originate from meditative, mystical or even magical practices. It seems to me that the boundaries between the tangible and intangible are no longer so clearly defined.

Marcello Farabegoli, 2023<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> ZEILINGER, Anton, 2005. *Einsteins Spuk / Teleportation und weitere Mysterien der Quantenphysik*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. Munich: C. Bertelsmann Verlag.

<sup>12</sup>The text was written by Marcello Farabegoli during the course of the exhibition, later amended several times and finally edited by David Westacott.