

## SILENCE AND METAMORPHOSIS

IN "EL HERBARIO IMPERFECTO" (THE IMPERFECT HERBARIUM)

BY MARTA SÁNCHEZ MARCO

"All living beings are, in a way, one body, one life and one self that continues to pass from form to form, from subject to subject, from existence to existence. This same life is that which animates the planet, also born, escaped from a pre-existing body - the Sun - and generated by metamorphosis of its matter 4.5 billion years ago."<sup>1</sup>

Emanuele Coccia, *Metamorphoses* (2021)

I immediately noticed the delicate movement of Marta Sánchez Marco's fingers when holding small objects in the palm of her hand.

As the years go by, this skill, which I noticed when we first met, continues to fascinate me.

Her hands are hands that think, draw and photograph. They are hands that write too, for in her projects there is always an intense previous reading and research work.

The photographer shoots with both the oracular hand and the tactile eye.

It is the hand as eye, in line with the visionary spirit attributed to that organ by the surrealists.

Marta begins to portray the leaves from the very moment she picks them up from the ground and caresses them; long before the camera's shot is taken. The project is a years-long, carefully thought-out commitment that unfolds in different approaches and techniques: photography, drawing, jewellery... different possibilities that I would read as the stages of a therapeutic and alchemical process of resurrection of "dead leaves".

The journey begins when she chooses the pieces during her walks, continues when, rocking them in her warm hands, she measures and accepts them, and ends in her studio-laboratory, subjecting these plant bodies to a singular embalming that evokes a metaphorical resurrection.

In this ritual, gold adds an aesthetic and symbolic charge, for when the metal fuses with the natural substance of the leaf, they undertake a chemical and spiritual transformation, united as one.

I recommend that you carefully read the text that the artist has produced, which forms part of the project. It sets out in detail some of the references she uses in relation to gold, among which I would highlight two: the application to plants of the Japanese technique of *Kintsugi* (ceramic repair), which dignifies the wound; and the application of gold plating to specimens of laurel, elm and olive, which then become imperishable jewels.

Furthermore, I think it is worth emphasising that Marta does not choose perfect natural elements, or elements that stand out from the rest because of their

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<sup>1</sup> Emanuele Coccia, *Metamorphoses*.

originality, to make them eternal, but quite the opposite: specimens of common leaves that often present imperfections and signs of deterioration or diseases.

In his inspiring essay, *Metamorphoses* (2021), the Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia presents the difference between the concepts of conversion, revolution and metamorphosis. In all of them, there seems to be a change of identity, but while in conversion (individual) and revolution (social) a decision is made by the living beings, in metamorphosis there is a power that passes through us without the conscious intervention of the will.

"On the contrary, a metamorphic being is a being that has renounced all ambition to recognize themselves in one face alone"<sup>2</sup>.

Marta Sánchez Marco chooses simple leaves... even cloned ones, which seem to exemplify the secret laws of this vital metamorphosis.

### **An emotional ecosystem**

"'Sometimes we walked in silence', says René, in Chateaubriand's novel of that name, describing his country walks with his sister Amélie, 'giving ear to the dull sighing of autumn, or the sound of the dead leaves.'"

Alain Corbin, *A History of Silence: From the Renaissance to the Present Day* (2019)<sup>3</sup>

The careful installation allows the visitor to inhabit a landscape constructed with drawings, photographs, intervened herbarium specimens, jewellery and sound, which subtly evokes old natural science museums, where the construction of the story combined poetic charge and the transmission of knowledge.

The arrangement possesses this double quality: introspective (meditative) and critical (of environmental deterioration). It is an open route that invites visitors to take a silent, non-hierarchical stroll among the elements on display, like a horizontal score. Visitors can let themselves be carried away by their own motivations and intuitions, just as they would do when visiting a historical museum or on a country walk.

The combination of a certain scientific and distanced tone (the species collected are accurately dated) and artistic and technical talent (especially in those executed with the gold-plated electroforming technique), sparks an intense emotional response on me, only comparable to those I felt when I discovered the projects of the plant photographer and sculptor Karl Blossfeldt (1865 - 1932), who also built bridges between botany, art and photography.

However, the exhibition is not only made of leaves, but also butterflies, birds, chrysanthemums, branches and buds that complete the imagery of this calm landscape.

In contrast to the cautious universe of plants, in nature, birds are usually in action. In the exhibition, however, the birds, drawn in graphite, remain static.

As opposed to the sparrows' still life, the "dead leaves" come back to life, covered in gold.

And, filling the atmosphere of the room, the song of a blackbird, messenger of eternity, which was recorded by the artist during her mourning process after the loss of her mother.

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<sup>2</sup> Emanuele Coccia, *Metamorphoses*.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Corbin, *A History of Silence: From the Renaissance to the Present Day*.

## Aroma of haiku

In tune with the verses of Japanese haikus, I would say that all the works Marta Sánchez has produced over the years form a kind of inventory of fragments, capable of illuminating the beauty of the subtle.

Like Zen verses, her pieces place in the foreground that which disappears from our walk if we are not "awake": the minimal, the transitory, the incomplete, the fleeting... Hence, in Francisco Loscos y Bernal's treatise: *Serie imperfecta de las plantas aragonesas espontáneas (Imperfect series of spontaneous Aragonese plants [1867])*, Marta finds a reflection of her feelings towards nature, because she too renounces to encompass the infinite mosaic of parts that constitutes life.

At home, I have a small and very beautiful piece by Marta, placed next to a book of verses by the poet, painter and Buddhist nun Kikusha, who in 1780 travelled through the north of Japan, following the mythical itinerary of the poet Bashō in reverse. I suggest you read these verses<sup>4</sup> while you contemplate the pieces.

*Lost in the forest*

*Just the sound of a dead leaf*

*falling on my hat*

*Between deep mountains*

*In my hat*

*The sound of the dead leaf*

Metamorphosis, in line with the concept with which we began this text, can be understood as that slight change in the identical. Marta Sánchez's works underline the capacity of art to reveal the beauty hidden in the fragile matter of the everyday.

"The recycling that metamorphosis imposes upon the slightest part of this world's matter is what prevents any kind of cycle, any form of return of the identical".<sup>5</sup>

This slight singularity in what remains is, perhaps, the manifestation of (eternal) life in continuous reincarnation.

Susana Blas Brunel, in Madrid, on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of May, 2022

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<sup>4</sup> Translation of a version extracted from "Haiku clásico escrito por mujeres" (Classic Haiku written by women [2008]) <https://paseos.net/phpbb3/viewtopic.php?t=1886>

<sup>5</sup> Emanuele Coccia, *Metamorphoses*.