

Press Release

Katie Van Scherpenberg : Overlooking the Amazon  
1 October – 30 November 2021



*Vista sobre o Amazonas [Overlooking the Amazon]*, 2010 - 2017, Katie Van Scherpenberg, Tempera, oil and collage on marine plywood, 112×162cm

Cecilia Brunson Projects is pleased to present *Overlooking the Amazon*, the first exhibition of Katie Van Scherpenberg in the UK. With a career spanning more than five decades, Van Scherpenberg is one of the most remarkable painters to have emerged in Brazil during the second half of the 20th century. An important figure in the Rio de Janeiro art circuit in the 1970s and 1980s, the artist was never affiliated to any groups or movements. Instead, she pursued an extremely original and coherent trajectory which remains largely unknown to international audiences.

Born in São Paulo in 1940 to a diplomat father, Katie Van Scherpenberg spent her childhood and youth between Brazil and Europe, initially returning to Rio de Janeiro in 1964 after having spent two years (1961-63) studying in Munich with Georg Brenninger (1909-1988) and in Salzburg with Oskar Kokoschka (1816-1986). By the late 1960s, however, the artist decided to move to the remote Ilha de Santana, an island located in the delta of the Amazon river where she spent great part of the next two decades. Without access to artist materials in this environment, the artist was prompted to research the use of natural pigments in painting, sparking a continued interest in ideas around materiality, natural processes, and entropy.

*Overlooking the Amazon* brings together works from different periods of Van Scherpenberg's lengthy career, including examples of some of her



*The Executives*, 1976, Katie van Scherpenberg, Tempera and oil on canvas, 98×143.5cm

most renowned series. Among the earliest works on view are paintings from the series *The Executives* (1976) - produced during the hardline years of the military dictatorship in Brazil -, which comprises individual and group portraits of suited white men rendered in a grotesque manner in which the artist manages to brilliantly encapsulate the harsh political climate of that time.

In the 1980s, Van Scherpenberg started to develop her 'landscape paintings', a series of groundbreaking outdoor works in which she applied mineral pigments onto the landscape to create ephemeral drawings that were gradually dispersed and absorbed back into nature. The exhibition features photographic documentation of the work *Furo* (2001) which involved the application of iron oxide in a circular pit on Boa Viagem beach, Niteroi. As time passes, the iron oxide slowly washes out to sea, creating a living painting that incorporated processes of entropy and the passage of time that would become a key feature in later series.

At the beginning of the 1990s, when the Brazilian economy underwent one of its most severe financial crises, Van Scherpenberg found herself once more without access to proper art materials. This was the beginning of one of her most significant series, *Mummy, I promise to be Happy* (1990s), in which she used pieces from her own trousseau as canvasses. What started from economic need soon acquired a subversive meaning, as the delicately embroidered collection of linen symbolising the domestic role assigned to women in patriarchal society is transformed into a work tool for the painter. The exhibition includes one of the most outstanding works in this series: *Portal* (1999), a large-scale diptych formed of two vertical panels of embroidered bedsheets onto which the artist applied bronze and copper pigments that oxidise over time.

In the 1990s, Katie Van Scherpenberg initiated another key series of works which was also prompted by a personal object: a small painting by Romantic German artist Anselm Feuerbach which had been carried across continents by her family in their many moves from country to country. By the time the painting was bequeathed to the artist, it already

showed signs of visible disintegration, its condition somehow reflecting Van Scherpenberg's awareness of the relationship between landscape and passage of time. In some earlier works in the Feuerbach series, sheets of metal (copper or silver) are applied to the surface of the canvas and the artist uses a variety of reagent solutions (salt, vinegar, or urine) to create different chemical reactions.

Katie Van Scherpenberg continued to develop the Feuerbach series in the next decade, this time exploring the composition of the original work to create Amazonian landscapes that seem to bring together her profound knowledge of Western tradition in painting and her comprehensive understanding of natural materials and processes that are the product of a lifetime spent between two antagonistic worlds. The exhibition at Cecilia Brunson Projects takes its title from a work from this recent series, providing an overview of the extraordinary trajectory of an artist that has fearlessly and rigorously pursued the meaning of painting like few.

Kiki Mazzucchelli

*About Katie Van Scherpenberg:*

Katie van Scherpenberg won the Jury Exemption at the Modern Art National Salon in 1976. During this time her works were purchased by several major art collections in Brazil such as the Gilberto Chateaubriand at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro. The artist's work is held in a number of significant collection in Brazil such as the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Brasília and National Museum of Fine arts, Rio de Janeiro, as well as in collections internationally such as Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas and Royal collection of Sweden, Stockholm. Scherpenberg's has been shown in group exhibitions such as "Contemporary Art in the Collections of Rio", Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro (2005), and Sin Título at the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas 2006. She has also exhibited her work in solo shows, including "Feuerbach and I in a Landscape"- Museum of Contemporary Art of Niterói in 2000 and "Waiting for Daddy"- Mercedes Viegas Arte Contemporânea, Rio de Janeiro in 2005.

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