

Press Release

Katie van Scherpenberg

Traces: 1968 - 2007

22 June - 28 July 2023



Detail: Katie van Scherpenberg, *Furo [Hole]*, 2001

Cecilia Brunson Projects is delighted to present the second UK exhibition by Katie van Scherpenberg. Drawing together works produced in Brazil between 1960s-2000s, *Traces* gives unique focus to the depth of van Scherpenberg's environmental investigations. Her gestural, transmutational work offers a tender and thoughtful approach that counters the monumental land art practices unfolding concurrently in North America and Europe. The tenets of both painting and environmental thought are dismantled to a point of pure simplicity in works such as *Jardim Vermelho [Red Garden]* (1986), a landmark event in the history of Brazilian painting.

Born in São Paulo in 1940, van Scherpenberg spent her youth between Brazil and Europe and studied art in Munich and Salzburg, before returning to Rio de Janeiro in 1964 and then settling on Ilha de Santana, a remote island in the Amazon delta. Working under the Brazilian dictatorship, when artists' supplies were scarce, drove her to look to the environment of the Amazon and research ways to make natural pigments, a pioneering project that drew upon a relationship to nature based on convivialism rather than extractivism, a major principle of ecofeminism. Her work varied from figurative, political painting, to abstraction, to landscape interventions, and through this approach, she experimented with the fundamentals of painting while also commenting on the issues of social distribution and a need for self-sufficiency in the face of Brazil's economic and political turbulence.

The result of this research is van Scherpenberg's seminal series of 'landscape paintings,' a body of photographic works documenting her environmental interventions, in which she applies her paint directly to the land. *Jardim Vermelho* records van Scherpenberg's actions at Rio de Janeiro's Parque Lage, where she was teaching at the Escola de Artes Visuais, a leading centre for experimental artists. The formal garden's fountain and lawn are painted with iron oxide pigment, the grass brushed blade by blade, until the site is wholly, momentarily, recoloured, echoing the way the reddish tides of the Amazon stain its muddy banks. Her actions draw our focus to a small part of the world and the movements of nature within it, as the grass grows and the pigment is absorbed back into the ground. Sourcing her paint from the iron-rich waters of the Amazon and applying it directly to nature, van Scherpenberg creates landscape paintings that are ephemeral, alive, and inevitably consumed by the earth. The protagonist here is not the artist leaving a permanent mark on the landscape as did so many (primarily male) practitioners of early land art, but nature itself.

The exhibition also includes the 1980 work *A queda de Ícaro* [*The fall of Icarus*], a turning point in the painter's trajectory which finds cohesion between the national artistic language of geometric abstraction and van Scherpenberg's meditations on landscape. Five canvases convey a temporal sequence; as Icarus falls, our focus is on the moving horizon, which swallows his body and stretches on. A moment of human drama is dwarfed by the overwhelming expanse of nature, that must continue on its course, regardless.

A series of figurative drawings gain new meaning amongst these landscape works, as a dialogue emerges about the connections between life and relationships and the environments in which they unfold. The 2004 photographic series *Esperando Papai* [*Waiting for Daddy*] shows the artist in a moment of meditation on the life she had shared with her father in the Amazon Delta. The evening landscape and its changing light provides a space and prolonged moment for thought. Amongst van Scherpenberg's sensitive drawings of human figures, including depictions of parental relationships, the photographs are imbued with an emotional weight unexpected in landscape photography.

A central figure in Brazilian art, van Scherpenberg reintroduced the question of painting and of the viewer's position in her experimental works of the 1980s. Her work is immeasurably influenced by her time spent in the Amazon, her observations of its landscape and her particular notion of it as a living painting, carrying colour and a sense of continual evolution. In her gentle and fleeting actions in the landscape, she offers a point of reference for one of the most pressing themes challenging artists today. These works are testaments to the role of the Amazon as the source that feeds and sustains her practice.

Event:

Private view
21 June, 2023, 6-8pm

Press:

Alexia Menikou
am@alexiamenikou.com

Enquiries:

Dom Christie
dom@ceciliabrunsonprojects.com