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Written for the exhibition

*Katie van Scherpenberg | Traces: 1968 - 2007*

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Over the last half a century, Katie van Scherpenberg has pursued the practice of making art as an organic extension of her nomadic biography, her natural surroundings, and her everyday life. Although the development of her work—from figuration addressing overtly political themes to geometric abstraction to landscape interventions documented in film and video—mirrors many of the trajectories of postwar art both in her native Brazil and abroad, her primary interest has always been the medium of painting and its intrinsically meditative quality: “Painting is my field, the record of passing thoughts, brushstroke by brushstroke.”

Born to German/Dutch-Norwegian parents, van Scherpenberg spent much of her childhood and early adulthood going back and forth between Europe and Brazil before settling with her father and young daughter on the remote island of Santana in the Amazon Delta in 1967. Paradoxically, as the critic Kiki Mazzucchelli has suggested, it was precisely her perpetual rootlessness—of not feeling she belonged anywhere—that ultimately anchored her to this exuberant and at times inhospitable landscape. Among her most seminal works is *A queda de Ícaro (The Fall of Icarus)*, 1980, comprised of five three-dimensional white panels hung on a black wall, which abstractly portrays the descending movement of the mythic figure who fell victim to his own hubris—his doomed fate a mere blip on the horizon of the maritime scene in Brueghel’s iconic painting that van Scherpenberg clearly references as she reflects upon nature’s indifference to the drama of human experience.

Indeed, the period of Brazilian history that coincides with the artist’s formative years was tumultuous, marked by a repressive and violent military dictatorship. The regime’s unraveling, during the so-called lost decade of the 1980s, was coupled with economic stagnation and hyperinflation that resulted in a scarcity of consumer products, among them art materials. Given her previous experience experimenting with natural pigments she created from the soil of the Amazon, van Scherpenberg was commissioned by the National Foundation for the Arts (FUNARTE) to help develop local, sustainable artist paint—a pioneering project that implied a relationship to nature based on convivialism rather than extractivism, a major tenet of ecofeminism, whose inception also dates back to this time. Living so close to one of the world’s most significant, and most threatened, waterways, the artist developed a profound respect for its aesthetic qualities and transitory nature—like a painting, like life itself, she would later say. With her 1986 work *Jardim Vermelho (Red Garden)*, she replaced the canvas as a medium with the landscape itself, initiating a series of ephemeral interventions comprised of painterly gestures that ultimately vanish—the natural pigments she employs reabsorbed by the very organic processes that conceived them.

In the first of these “landscape paintings,” as she called them, van Scherpenberg painted over the garden of the Parque Lage School of Visual Arts in Rio de Janeiro with red iron-oxide pigment, photographically registering the slow disappearance of her intervention with the growth of new grass and the gradual transformation of this living tableau from deep red to bright green. There is a performative element at play here; however, the protagonist is not the artist leaving a permanent mark on the landscape as did so many (primarily male) practitioners of land art in the 1960s and ’70s, but nature itself, which sometimes successfully evades human attempts to fundamentally alter or master it. In 2000, she was invited by the curator Paulo Herkenhoff to enact a similar intervention at Boa Viagem Beach, next to the Niterói Museum of Contemporary Art. The video *Menarca (Menarche)*, 2007, its title referring to a woman’s first menstruation, shows the artist submerged in the ocean, where she releases red pigment that quickly stains the water and envelops her body, eventually washing onto the shore in a direct allusion to how the banks of the Amazon River are painted red by the high iron-oxide content of the water. Similarly, the photographic series *Furo (Hole)*, 2001/2023, documents the temporal effects of the incoming and receding tide on a hole filled with the same red pigment, which comes to resemble either a bleeding orifice (nature as the source of life) or an open wound (the violence we commit against nature), depending on one’s interpretation. Filtered through the lens of ecofeminism, these alternate readings illustrate the movement’s two major, often opposing, tendencies: cultural feminism, which celebrates women’s cultural and biological ties to nature and thus their propensity to act as its protector, and radical feminism, which resists the patriarchal exploitation of nature and women while opposing their conflation. In 2002, the artist enacted a similar action at Ipanema Beach with *Passante (Passerby)*: this time an impromptu collective performance began when beachgoers walked through the blocks of red painted onto the sand, the movement of their feet producing anonymous quasi-sculptural configurations that would inevitably be erased by the wind or tide (or both).

Some three decades after the death of her father, van Scherpenberg returned to the now dilapidated house they’d once shared and created several works that manifest her intimate relationship with this particular landscape, that of the Amazon Delta—perhaps most notably, the photographic series *Esperando Papai (Waiting for Daddy)*, 2004/2023. Taken at dusk, the images show the artist seated in a chair next to a table upon which a lantern has been placed; however, the setting is not a domestic interior but the river itself. Submerged in water, this solitary figure faces the horizon as the sky grows darker with the onset of nightfall, while the light from her lantern glows ever brighter in contrast. The artist’s quiet contemplation of nature seems to draw upon the Romantic tradition—indeed, she has also created an extensive series of works in different media based on a small painting she inherited from her family by the nineteenth-century German artist Anselm Feuerbach. Here, however, these fluvial photographs recall numerous landscapes by Caspar David Friedrich of lone figures or couples lost in reverie before majestic natural scenes that inspire wonder, awe, and sometimes fear. A contemporary meditation on the experience of the sublime that confronts the human subject with the limitations of their own significance, van Scherpenberg suggests that it is ultimately death itself that incarnates the ultimate communion with nature. But it is painting that has taught her how to live: in the final image, she has emerged from the water and walks determinedly toward the spectator, meeting our gaze.