



In the quiet suburb of Humaitá, you look up at Mount Corcovado, at the feet of Christ the Redeemer. Walk west, and concrete highways fall away to the forest. Trees shade the pavement while you find an unassuming house on Rua Aiuru. Climb four flights of stairs, and you enter the home and atelier of Katie van Scherpenberg.

At this height, the house has lost the protection of the streets; windows open to the forest canopy and monkeys hang from the iron grilles.

This simple space has been the home and studio of van Scherpenberg for almost 50 years. Against whitewashed walls, carefully placed objects hold moments and memories of her extraordinary personal history. Quietly, you travel the room through time and place. Four Delft tiles are inlaid above a ceramic sink; a German edition of Rembrandt's catalogue raisonné, its leather cover scuffed and faded, sits on top of a 16<sup>th</sup> century linden chest. A painting by Anselm Feuerbach leans against a wall.

These objects tell the course of van Scherpenberg's life, tracking her movements across the world and through the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her own works, hung and placed throughout the atelier, hold a dialogue with these found objects. Spanning a course of 50 years, both objects and artworks narrate van Scherpenberg's story.

Born in São Paulo in 1940, daughter to a Dutch diplomat, van Scherpenberg's childhood was split between Brazil and Europe. In the 1960s, after studying in Munich and in Salzburg under Oskar Kokoschka, she returned to Rio de Janeiro. Married, a mother, and then divorced, van Scherpenberg left Rio de Janeiro in the late 1960s, joining her father on

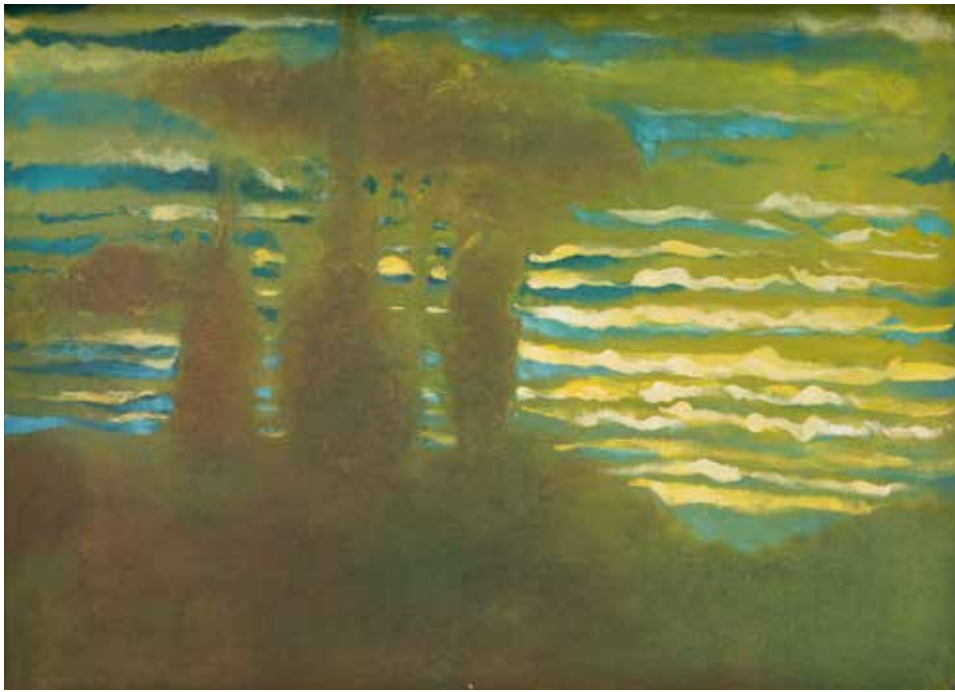
the remote Ilha de Santana in the Amazon delta. She spent the majority of the next two decades living in this extreme location, and it was here that van Scherpenberg began to experiment with local pigments found in the Amazon River, beginning her deep fascination with the materials of painting that persists in her work to this day.

*Overlooking the Amazon* brings together works from different periods of van Scherpenberg's five-decade career, including examples from some of her most renowned series. The earliest of these, from *The Executives* (1976) series, are her only figurative works, grotesque and humorous responses to the hard-line years of military dictatorship in Brazil. Later landscape works from the 1980s mark van Scherpenberg's move towards abstraction, a form she explores using mineral pigments, oxides, wood textures and metal. Changing over time, these living paintings incorporate processes of entropy and oxidation. Most recently, van Scherpenberg reflects on her time spent on the Amazon, collapsing Anselm Feuerbach's landscape painting with her deep knowledge of materials and pigments.

This important exhibition was put together with the help of Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro and Kiki Mazzucchelli. We are indebted to Kiki's new scholarship on van Scherpenberg, and her thoughtful and piercing intellect on Brazilian art. Without Gabriel, we would not have met van Scherpenberg, and are deeply grateful for his support on this journey.



*Vista sobre o amazonas* [Overlooking the amazon], 2010-17  
Tempera, oil and collage on marine plywood  
112×162 cm



*Landscape I*, 2003  
Tempera and oil on canvas  
51.5 × 72 cm



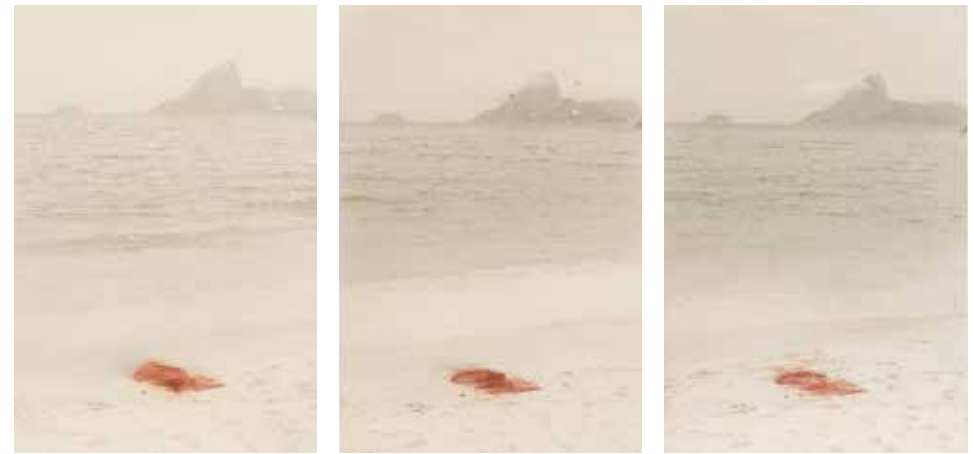
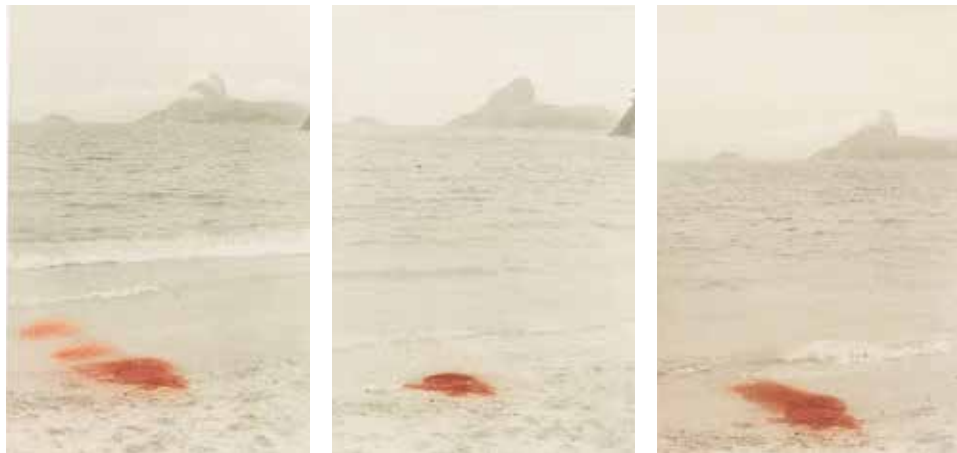
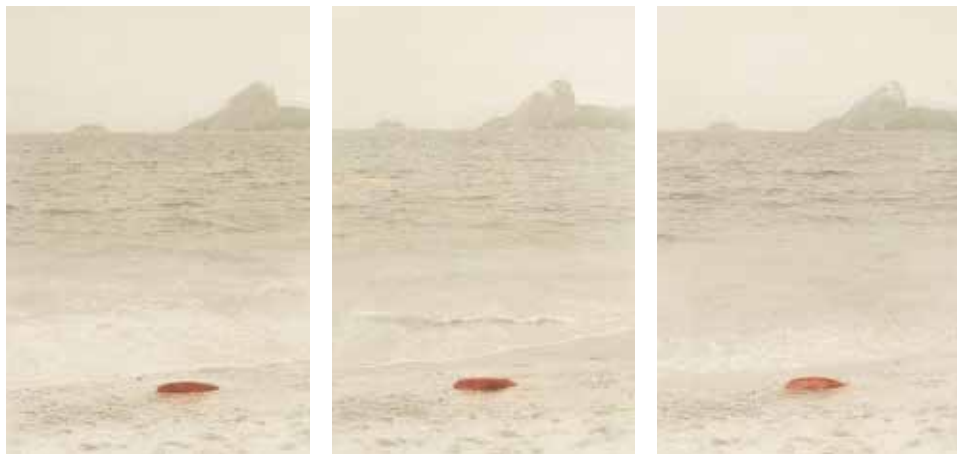
*Igarapé*, 1968  
Oil on wood  
23.5 × 16.5 cm



*Portal*, 1999  
Bronze and copper oxidation,  
embroidered bed sheets on canvas  
109.5 x 192 cm (x2)



*Esperando Papai [Waiting for daddy], 2004*  
Colour digital print on canson paper  
28×88 cm (×2)  
Edition of 10, 1/10



*Furo*, 2004  
Chine collé à la poupee polymer  
gravure on rives BFK 280gsm paper  
55×226 cm  
Edition of 10, 1/10



*Untitled*, 1983  
Stones, glue, sawdust and soot on marine plywood  
19×19 cm



*Estudo [Study]*, 2005  
Mixed media on marine plywood  
19×19 cm





*Matérico [Material]*, 1986  
Pigment, sawdust, gesso and woodpicks on marine plywood  
50×50 cm



*Untitled*, 1986  
Gesso, tempera and wax on marine plywood  
50×50 cm



*Manchado [Stained], 2006*  
Embroidered bed sheets and pigment on marine plywood  
42×62 cm



*Pai morto [Dead Father], 1972*  
Tempera and oil on wood  
22.5×28 cm



*Untitled (from The Executives series), 1976*  
Tempera and oil on canvas  
47.5 × 47.5 cm



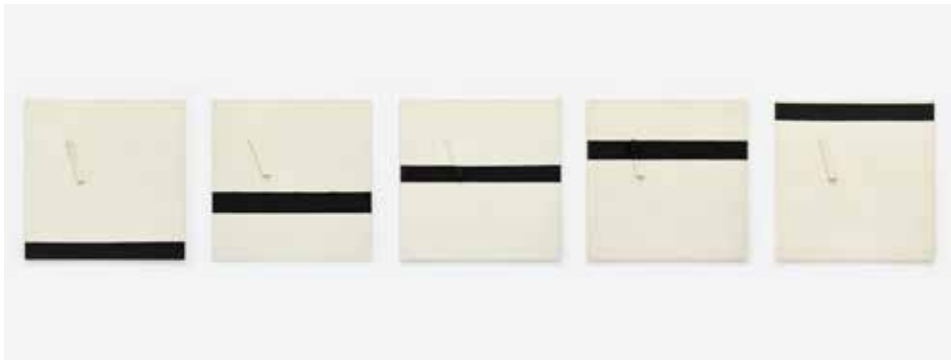
*Untitled (from The Executives series), 1976*  
Tempera and oil on canvas  
98 × 143.5 cm



Painting as Knowledge  
Kiki Mazzucchelli

The impulse to bring art and life together took over artists' imaginations in several parts of the world in the postwar period, when the modernist principle of autonomy of the artwork gradually started giving way to neo-avant garde practices that sought to engage more directly with the realities of everyday life. In Brazil, this period coincides with the emergence of the neo-concrete movement that produced such notable artworks as Hélio Oiticica's wearable capes/sculptures (*Parangolés*) and Lygia Clark's hinged metal objects meant to be manipulated by the viewer (*Bichos*). These iconic works, which today seem fully incorporated into the global historiography of art, explicitly collapsed the autonomy of the art object through the participation of the public. While it seems fair to say that neo-concretism is now recognised as one of the key movements in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several other equally groundbreaking practices still remain under the radar.

With a career spanning more than 50 years, Katie van Scherpenberg has developed a very singular, original and consistent body of work in which art and life are inextricably intertwined. This entanglement, however, is not the product of predetermined artistic intentions or strategies, but rather the expression of a life's work that is characterised by great coherence and determination as well as of a very singular biography. Born in São Paulo to European parents (her father Pieter was a naturalised Dutch citizen from Germany and her mother Mildred was Norwegian) in 1940, she soon moved to the US, then Canada, finally settling in London, where she lived until 1945. The following year, the family returned to Brazil, where her father was sent on a diplomatic mission to support the arrival of Dutch immigrants into the country. As van Scherpenberg continued her primary school education in Rio de Janeiro, in 1950 Pieter acquired an island on the delta of the Amazon River,



in the remote state of Amapá, where he lived to the end of his days. This was a pivotal event that played a significant part in her work.

Her formative years were spent between Brazil and Europe, including frequent visits to her father in the Island of Santana, completing her studies in England, and a two-year scholarship granted by the German government in 1962–64 that allowed her to study sculpture in Munich with Georg Brenninger (1909–1988) and in Salzburg with Oskar Kokoshcka (1816–1986). Van Scherpenberg returned to Rio de Janeiro in 1964 – one week after the military coup that installed a dictatorial regime that would remain in power for the next two decades – and got married a few months later; her only daughter was born the following year.

At this point, van Scherpenberg seemed to be settling into a more conventional career path: she started to show her work in national salons, continued to pursue her art studies, and set up her own studio. But the marriage didn't last long, and in 1968 she took the radical decision to pack up her bags and move to her father's place in Amapá with her young child in tow. It is hard to imagine a more sweeping change of circumstances for an artist who had previously experienced a highly cosmopolitan life in Brazil and Europe. Van Scherpenberg's choice to relocate to a remote Amazonian island shows how the artist inherited her father's 'adventurous spirit', which she claims 'allowed (her) to become an artist, to live in different countries, withstand affective and financial difficulties, overcome injustices, and keep working'.<sup>1</sup>

*A queda de Ícaro [The Fall of Icarus], 1980*  
Tempera and soot on canvas  
100×100cm (x5)

Pieter was not only an extremely influential figure for the artist but her only immediate relative left in Brazil when he passed away in 1971. One of the earliest paintings included in this exhibition, made the following year, is a small-scale work depicting her deceased father lying on a bed, his spectral body bathed by the light of a bedside table lamp in the dark room. Although van Scherpenberg's work would change markedly in terms of style over the next decades, this candid and deeply personal painting encapsulates some ideas around erosion, time, and – of course – death that persist throughout her entire artistic trajectory.

The majority of the next 17 years were spent on Santana Island by one of the world's most magnificent rivers, where the absolute lack of professional art materials drove her to research ways to make natural pigments from soil. Speaking about this period in her life, the artist recounts:

You could say that the river was, among other things, so much paint, for it contained a large quantity of pigments (ferrous oxides) from faraway places, and together with this paint it brought me a whole lot of information. In this sense, the river is somewhat like a painting. The Amazon was red, but it could take on any colour at all, depending on the angle in which the light hit its surface, sometimes smooth, other times choppy. But the colour that stayed on was a clayey red. A river is like life, it is never stable by its very nature – particularly the Amazon.<sup>2</sup>

In one of our conversations, van Scherpenberg mentioned that, looking in retrospect, working with earth pigments was also a means to connect symbolically with the land. Having grown up in between places, she always felt she did not belong anywhere. With her father gone, and both mother and sister having moved permanently to Europe, the incorporation of the 'land' into pictorial plane played an almost ritualistic role in processing her feelings of rootlessness. The matter of painting is central to Katie van Scherpenberg's work; the centrality of materials becoming gradually more prominent as her practice matured.

By the mid-1970s, when her paintings still focused primarily on the human figure and Brazil was undergoing the so-called 'Years of Lead' of the military regime, the artist produced her only openly political series. Titled *The Executives* (1976), these paintings comprise individual and group portraits of

suited white men rendered in a grotesque manner, their distorted faces bearing disdainful smirks and diabolical stares. In these equally satirical and monstrous portraits, van Scherpenberg manages to brilliantly encapsulate the political climate of that time. Unfortunately, in the past couple of years, the series has achieved renewed resonance – a timelessness – in light of the recent political scenario in Brazil as well as in other parts of the world. Although her later work would move away from any direct allusions to social or political themes, this series gave rise to an interest in exploring geometry and space that developed from studies on perspective for paintings showing groups of politicians standing on podiums.

A turning point in van Scherpenberg's trajectory was the work *The Fall of Icarus* (1980), which marked her first incursion into three-dimensional space and the exploration of movement and time. The work comprises five MDF square panels painted in white tempera installed horizontally on a wall covered in black velvet. Each module features a small white plaster object placed on the left-hand side of the surface. These panels are identical, except for a black strip that traverses each piece horizontally, placed at the bottom of the first panel and shifting slightly upwards on each iteration. Here the Greek myth is translated into strictly abstract forms, with the tragic fall only tangentially suggested through the visual effect of the horizontal stripes that cut across each square, like a sequence of snapshots of a film strip in motion. According to curator Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, in *The Fall of Icarus* the artist articulates for the first time 'the relationship between the human body, nature, paint, and indifference'. As he points out, the work is devoid of any individual drama; what it shows is a body falling in space or, in Pérez-Barreiro's words, 'the drama of nature and time itself'.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1980s, van Scherpenberg worked on a project commissioned by National Foundation for the Arts (FUNARTE) with the aim of developing good quality art materials for the Brazilian market which involved the analysis of mineral pigments from Brazilian soil that could be used to produce paints. At the time, artists could not access high quality paints due to extortionate tax import duties and lack of interest from Brazilian industries to develop products for this niche market. This not only provided the artist with the opportunity to expand her research on local materials initiated in the Amazon territory, but also opened



up new possibilities to explore materiality in her own work. Moreover, from today's perspective, this was an extremely pioneering project in terms of promoting sustainability and local economic development.

Importantly, the 1980s marked the expansion of van Scherpenberg's paintings into outdoor spaces. These ephemeral interventions on the landscape – or 'landscape paintings', as the artist calls them – consisted of the use of different types of pigments on beaches, gardens, and rivers. Following the introduction of concepts of time and space in *The Fall of Icarus* – where these ideas still operated

*Jardim Vermelho [Red Garden], 1986*  
Series of photographs taken at Escola de Arte Visuais,  
Parque Lage, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil



on a representational register – in the new series of outdoor works painting *is an actual* process which unfolds in time and space. In the first work in the series, made in 1983, the artist placed a frame on the white sand at a beach in the state of Rio de Janeiro, filling its interior with dark pigment to create a window-like grid formed by two rows and two columns of black rectangles; as the pigments were dispersed and absorbed into the ground the image gradually vanished.

One of the most remarkable works in the series is *Red Garden* (1986), where iron oxide pigment covered the open field facing the historical building at Parque Lage School of Visual Arts, in Rio de Janeiro. As the days went by, the grass started to germinate and the green spikes slowly pierced through the red surface, creating a living painting that incorporated the movement of nature and the dissipation of organic pigments. Considered in relation to Western pictorial tradition, van Scherpenberg's 'landscape paintings' collapse the hierarchical split between human and nature implied in art historical works devoted to this subject. In these works, nature is neither invested with Christian symbolism nor is it represented as something to

Anselm Feuerbach (1829–1880)  
*Untitled*, c. 19<sup>th</sup> century  
 Oil on canvas  
 51.5 × 72 cm

be tamed and conquered by 'civilisation' or as the expression of human subjectivity. Like the Amazon River, which the artist sees as a kind of painting in flux, they undergo natural processes of transformation and entropy that are not subjected to human will; the same processes that are at play in our bodies in spite of our humanity, and which will, at some point, inevitably lead to death. Perhaps this is what Perez-Barreiro means when he speaks of the 'drama of indifference' as a central idea in van Scherpenberg's work.

At about the same time, the artist started experimenting with different pigments and a wide variety of materials on a series of wall works that often incorporated found objects onto the pictorial surface. Exploring the dynamics of the relationship between support and material, she prepared mixtures made with gesso, tempera, sawdust, wax, and other materials onto plywood boards, adding pigments onto the surface to create abstract works in which form and materiality are highlighted. Speaking about this period, van Scherpenberg stated that these works gave rise to 'the idea of a succession of forms leading to the unknown, the fundamental, the sacred thing, and finally painting as a road to knowledge.' Over the years, the artist managed to keep expanding her practice into different directions even at times of great adversity.

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. Soon, other women started to offer her pieces of their own linen, so she amassed a considerable amount of bedsheets and pillow cases to work with. 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. While the very materiality of these works certainly conveys this subversive (or political) meaning, the artist's own intentions in this series are even more ambitious. According to van Scherpenberg, 'the themes that arise in my work have always emerged from painting. I've never set out to discuss the topic of women, for instance, but rather was moved by the need to discuss the basis of embroidery on linen, a question that brought me quite close to the origins of painting as we know it'.<sup>4</sup>

Among some of the most remarkable works in the series is *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. The bright greenish copper stains on the top end of each canvas drip down over the bronze-coloured background, creating organic lines that vertically cross the painting. Through the chemical reactions at play, time and metamorphosis become the matter of painting, in a similar manner to van Scherpenberg's outdoor interventions in the landscape. Here, the supposedly feminine object charged with emotional connotations – objects which are meant to be cared for and cherished by women – is treated pragmatically, and without mercy, as the support used by an artist fully devoted to a rigorous and intellectual pursuit of painting.

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 the passage of time as a result of her need to constantly adapt to new realities due to the family's constant relocations. The painting itself, which depicts the dark silhouettes of a group of trees on a hill against a dramatic sunset or sunrise was of no particular interest to her. In an interview with curator Luis Camillo Osorio, van Scherpenberg mentions: 'What I really find interesting is the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, his great-uncle, to whom thought is divested of the importance issuing from the presence of God', later adding that 'the feeling for nature in Feuerbach is such that he even admits that the ultimate communion with nature would take place through death'.<sup>5</sup>

In some 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. It would be reductive, however, to interpret these paintings simply as allegories of death, or of the death of painting for that matter. Van Scherpenberg expresses this point very clearly when she says that 'death is a material thing, and

painting, because it is thought and made visible, generates memories, debate, history, culture, roots'.<sup>6</sup> While it is true that deterioration – even when premeditated as in this case – in her work speaks of the 'drama of indifference', the impulse underpinning her indefatigable quest for knowledge seems at times almost Romantic. In the passage below, the artist brilliantly articulates some of the ideas at play in the Feuerbach series:

Painting material is impressed by its own passage in time. The artist-spectator would decipher this erosion, a necessary element, and by discovering the link between art and nature, violate the very structure of that which is sacred. In some of the works the changing of matter as it occurs and the cadences of time substitute the manipulation of colours and forms. Colour appears as the material changes into pigment while forms are made as a measurement of time. The paintings try to be a reflection on these passages. Matter, in a final analysis, should no longer be an important part of the work; just the idea and the clarity of the visual symbolism in its insistent demand for communion with the exterior to itself.<sup>7</sup>

In the 2000s, van Scherpenberg continued to develop works in the Feuerbach series, this time reproducing the compositional structure of the original painting, which is stencilled onto the canvas to create Amazonian landscapes using tempera and oil paint. These paintings may seem deceptively conventional when we consider the experimentalism that characterises many of her earlier series, but to me they appear as a kind of moment of communion between the highly disparate worlds of Western pictorial tradition and the natural world of the Amazon that have shaped her experience. Few artists in Brazil have engaged so profoundly with the pursuit of knowledge through painting as Katie van Scherpenberg. In her work, art and life are inseparable, or to put it more precisely by quoting her words during our recent interview: 'Painting has taught me how to live'.

1 <http://arteseanp.blogspot.com/2010/06/conversando-sobre-arte-katie-van.html>. Last accessed on 20/08/2021.

2 Artist's quote taken from Herkenoff, Paulo. 'Katie van Scherpenberg em Boa Viagem' in *Feuerbach e eu na paisagem* (exhibition catalogue). Rio de Janeiro: MAC Niteroi, 2000.

3 Pérez-Barreiro, Gabriel. in *Katie van Scherpenberg* (exhibition catalogue). Rio de Janeiro: Oi Futuro, 2020.

4 'A Conversation About Painting: Katie van Scherpenberg and Luis Camillo Osorio', in *Op. cit.* Rio de Janeiro: MAC Niteroi, 2000.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*



First edition published in 2021 by Cecilia Brunson Projects, London  
© 2021 by Cecilia Brunson Projects

This publication was organized by Cecilia Brunson Projects for  
the exhibition *Katie van Scherpenberg: Overlooking the Amazon*  
1 October – 30 November 2021

Publisher: Cecilia Brunson Projects  
Editor: Cecilia Brunson  
Text: Kiki Mazzucchelli  
Gallery Director: Fred Henderson  
Photographer: Eva Herzog  
Design: A Practice for Everyday Life  
Printing: Pureprint  
Photo credits: courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Brunson Projects

Special thanks:  
Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, Antonia Cundy, and Jessica Raja-Brown

Cecilia Brunson Projects  
Royal Oak Yard  
London SE1 3GD  
[ceciliabrunsonprojects.com](http://ceciliabrunsonprojects.com)

#### Gallery Mission:

Cecilia Brunson Projects (CBP) was founded in 2013 to increase the visibility and understanding of Latin American artists and their role in global art movements. The gallery uncovers overlooked Latin American artists' estates; supports contemporary Latin American artists; and introduces historical and contemporary Latin American art, not shown before in Europe, to a global audience. This mission is centred around an exhibition programme at CBP's gallery space in Bermondsey, London.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission from Cecilia Brunson Projects, except in the context of reviews. The publication has made every effort to contact all copyright holders. If proper acknowledgement has not been made, we ask copyright holders to contact us. All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission from the publishers.