

## **What else is a tree but freedom?**

**By Ana Castella**

The first time I encountered Alejandra Venegas' work, I remember feeling elated. It was a drawing from her Mountain-Water series: simple, curved brushstrokes of Indian ink on a long sheet of rice paper, delicate yet powerful. It was evidently influenced by traditional Eastern art and since Chinese calligraphy and the I Ching have all been interests of mine since I was a teenager, I felt very drawn to her work.

Similarly, my first approach to Paul Beumer's work was through the dye works he developed in Nigeria. I was fascinated by the directness of the patterns and the oversized weave, as well as by their deep indigo colour, which was at once familiar and otherworldly. A colour so deep and absolute it was like a portal: able to transport us to outer space or the depths of the sea.

This is not the first time both artists' works enter into dialogue, and indeed they share a few similarities. The most obvious one being how both employ natural materials, mainly those sourced from different trees and plants such as wood, bark, or fruits. They also share a timeless and universal language that is able to transport us to faraway places. Both artists are attentive observers, looking to uncover the essence in things. And while their pieces are humble in their materiality and composition, they manage to condense a lot of energy and soul into them. The works sway easily between abstraction and figuration, flat and voluminous, contemporary and ancient, local and global.

Both artist's practices go beyond fixed formats and techniques. With Alejandra Venegas, it is a mix of drawing, painting, and sculpture occurring simultaneously. And with Paul Beumer, assemblage, sewing and weaving are all entwined. Their art is the place where these disciplines meet and their limits are erased, together with the gender-normative roles each one of them defies with their craft.

I also see in their works something necessary and urgent. While the world is at once burning fiercely and being swept away by torrential rains, and in a time when we are becoming painfully aware of the importance of being able to breathe, Venegas' and Beumer's works draw our attention to nature as it brings not only solace and respite but also awe and respect, as the creative force within nature is also a destructive one.

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Paul Beumer moves around, he is a traveler. His studio is everywhere, anywhere. While studying at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, and finding himself under pressure to create in the confines of his studio and using the traditional artist's toolkit of oil paints and stretched canvas, he felt the urge to go out into nature and wander. Out in nature is where he found release, freedom, and inspiration.

His work stems from a restless curiosity that leads him to faraway places such as Sarawak, Nigeria, Taiwan, Madeira; learning old traditions, crafts and techniques in collaboration with the local craftspeople or experts he meets.

Paul is particularly interested in researching fabrics and fibers, with the attribute that these materials are lightweight and are very easy to travel with. In Kano, in Nigeria, Paul visited the Indigo dye pits that have been in use for around 700 years. He was intrigued by the chemistry between the plants, the minerals, the heat, and the air that when brought into balance create this deep, dark, magical color, reminiscent of both the night sky and the ocean. In Sarawak, on the island of Borneo, he worked with barkcloth, the most ancient form of textile which predates weaving. It is made by harvesting the inner bark from mulberry trees in the wet season when they are flexible and supple. The bark is then pounded with a wooden mallet to flatten the fibers. Barkcloth is an important ceremonial cloth in different cultures and is listed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

The titles of this body of work come from the expressions used to describe the pattern of barkcloth in Iban, the local language in Sarawak. These are, to name a few, A phosphorescent centipede, The tongue, A ripple on the water, A spear with a narrow blade, titles Paul revisits in the works developed in Madeira with the Kapok fruits. Titles are very important components to his works offering fresh perspectives.

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Alejandra Venegas has lived in her family house and studio since she was born, in the rural outskirts of Mexico City in Xochimilco, a name which in Náhuatl means 'Field of Flowers'. It is civilization itself that is approaching and growing towards her, the urban sprawl slowly enveloping her home. For more than 30 years she has been taking long walks around where she lives, noticing the vegetation, the animals, the weather, the seasons, and how her childhood landscape is changing.

Apart from her immediate natural surroundings, Alejandra also finds inspiration in the vast art library she shares with her father, a prolific and established artist himself. Books on antique and Eastern art are numerous, along with theory, novels, and poetry which all nourish her ideas. There is an anecdote that resonates with Alejandra, one which Jorge Luis Borges, an avid traveler himself, tells in one of his stories. It is also told in Buddhist and Sufi traditions. It is about a person who dreams of a buried treasure and embarks on a long expedition, leaving his life behind to go looking for it. After traveling for many years one day he dreams of the treasure again and realizes that the place where it was buried was in his own garden, the one he had left behind. For Alejandra, there is a widespread addiction to novelty, trends, and the exotic in today's society. Conversely, there is little appreciation for the traditional, the domestic, and the everyday. 'I think the problem is that we are not attentive to the manifestations of life and in the best of cases we are only seeing the surface of things'.

Alejandra is currently reading *That Mighty Sculptor, Time* by Marguerite Yourcenar who writes about classical Greek sculpture and the influence of time on materials. 'Stone sculptures, under the effects of natural elements, will return to their primordial forms' Venegas notes while she contemplates the

life of trees, their slow growth, their cycles, the fact that they have witnessed many events and are archeological beings. One can learn by observing the growth rings in their trunk when there was drought, or when there was a forest fire, and when it was unusually wet. Venegas in a way helps the wood retell these stories like a medium. She says that what excites her about working with wood is that it is similar to having a conversation with the material.

Have you noticed the grain of wood? Sometimes it looks like mountains enveloped by mist. Other times like water ripples on the surface of a pond. At other times it looks like topographical mapping. The knots look like eyes, or caves, or stones. This myriad of possibilities is embedded in Alejandra's field of vision. She sees these details and honours them.

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From October of last year until early this year, Paul visited Madeira, a small archipelago of Portuguese islands off the northwest coast of Africa. The name Madeira translates to wood and madera in Spanish. Here he encountered the Kapok tree, which is native also to Central and South America and southeast Asia. It is a large tree, rising up to 70 meters in height, with buttress roots and very straight, towering trunks. The Kapok fruit, which is roughly the size and shape of a teary cucumber, releases a soft cotton-like fiber, which has been used for flotation and as stuffing for pillows and mattresses.

Paul noticed the fallen Kapok fruits on the ground, some of these were run over by cars, becoming flat and similar to barkcloth. After collecting and drying the peels he bleached sections and sewed them together into a composition which is part latticework, part loose weaving, arranging them freely as if they had just fallen to the ground. With some stripes placed horizontally, others vertical, and others diagonally he creates a pattern, similar to the fiber's own but augmented, like a meta-image.

In a manner reminiscent of jewelry boxes, these compositions are displayed in artist's frames that have been painted in different colors, all alluding to the chromatic possibilities of the sky at different times of the day or night or under different weather conditions, highlighting the hidden colors of the fibers, but also allowing us to imagine seeing the fruits still hanging from the tree branches against the colorful Madeira skies.

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In Mexico, there are really only two seasons: the dry one and the wet one. Alejandra's wood carvings seem to exist when one season ends and the other begins. Earlier this year in the dry season, on one of her usual walks to the hills around her home, Alejandra was confronted by a violent encounter: the land had burnt and it was charred and all black. What was likely intended as a controlled burn prior to sowing a patch of agricultural land must have gotten out of hand. Yet slowly and throughout the following months, the land and vegetation started to recover and heal with the help of a very abundant rainy season. Duality is present in Alejandra's work, Yin and Yang energy chasing after each other. We see torrential rains (or are they gusts of wind?) in Aguacero (2021),

rhythmic, unyielding, coming down, and in Luna (2021), the reflection of a crescent moon in the surface of a rippling pond, dark and cool. Or is it a herd of cows at night, their horns illuminated? While other panels render glowing fires and flames, in various shapes and sizes, all luminescent and hot, but they can also be blades of grass, or feathers, or waves, or all at once. It is also satisfying to notice that they are carved in the same material fires feed from as if entering a truce with their destructive potential.

While the landscape is a central theme in her practice, most of her works are in portrait format as opposed to landscape format. When I ask her about this she says: 'I am portraying something that breathes, that has a life of its own. More than seeing the landscape as a distant entity - the old colonial gaze - the landscape is not separated from me.'

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In Central America, the Kapok tree is known as Ceiba, and is regarded as sacred by the native cultures, as it represents the universe: the roots being the underworld, the trunk the world, and the canopy the heavens. While visiting the Mayan ruins of Palenque a few years ago, our guide told us that another element of confusion that led the Mayans to believe that the Spanish conquistadors were sent by the gods were the Catholic crosses on their shields which, for the Mayan, seemed to represent the cruciform figure of the holy Ceiba tree. Paul told me another tale: according to the folklore of Trinidad and Tobago, the castle of the devil is a huge Kapok tree growing deep in the forest in which the demon was imprisoned by a carpenter. The carpenter tricked the devil into entering the tree in which he carved seven rooms, one above the other, into the trunk.

Legend has it that the Huanacaxtle tree, meaning 'ear tree' in Nahuatl, got its name when the gods gave it the ability to listen. The tree has ears instead of fruits or, to be precise, the seed pods look like ears. This, together with the generous span of its canopy, is excellent at sheltering people against the sun or the rain, make them eavesdroppers, listeners, and confidants to people's secrets which they keep safe in their trunk.

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Consider the air you are breathing, think about its source. Which tree might have exhaled this air? I read about a technique on how to meditate: the author suggests appreciating the air you inhale in a similar way a sommelier tastes wine: savoring it, noticing the notes, the temperature, the smells. Imagine if we could develop such a sense that we would be able to tell which trees exhaled the air we are inhaling. And if we could develop a sense to learn from breathing this air, all the stories that trees could tell us.

Ana Castilla is an independent curator and cultural promoter living in Mexico City. She is currently curating an exhibition with artist Jessica Briseño Cisneros at Proyecto NASAL) and Salon ACME's Guest Projects, both due soon in Mexico City. In recent years, she worked at Museo Tamayo as Head of Development and was a member of the selection committee at ArteBA, Buenos Aires. Previously she worked in commercial galleries including kurimanzutto and Sprüth Magers. She studied Art, Design, and Environment at Central Saint Martins, London.