

Disegno: Drafting on a Figure of Thought

Ana Maria MICU: I came to pay attention to observational drawing and painting after a detour into other expressions, only to end up in a place similar to that from which I started, in my formative years, when I was drawing from life in school. Nevertheless, the way I work now follows different rules. I reference photographs, although they are not the best choice for me. I would rather just sit in front of my scenes for as long as it takes. Certain practical aspects make that impossible, and I very much need to bring up, through memory, the way I felt when I was looking at something real. The analytical gaze is the same as it ever was, but maybe it has become more trained and aware over time.

Vlad IONESCU: Every tour is a detour, Derrida would say. What's the original *dérive* that you took?

AMM: In my twenties, I felt that I failed on several occasions when I was purposefully trying to create, with all the knowledge and strength I had, impressive works. After recovering from this I settled into a stage that continues to this day, a stage in which my practice is completely enmeshed with my personal life. I have in a corner, on a wall, a hand-written, older thought: *The minor artwork. The outcome does not cover the debilitating struggle that led to it.* It gives me comfort to have set it as a guide. I see it as an accessible aim, in the pursuit of which greater things are possible, things that I could not achieve should my target be focused on them specifically.

VI: Maybe we never stop debating this “debilitating struggle” with which we begin and maybe that is typical not just of art but of life. Maybe life itself is a debilitating struggle and maybe this struggle does not come later in life, together with an apprenticeship, but from the very beginning. However, the difference lies in the framing of the outcome. The artist interprets the debilitating struggle through the exercise of an acute attention, a representational memory, a powerful image and – hopefully – an intelligent question. What you call the “minor artwork” appears usually as a symptom that is reworked as a series of reoccurring yet shifting figures. After all, what becomes a major artwork is both a reworking of emerging figures and of an artwork's life, its history, the setting in which it is welcomed. Major and minor are also predicates on which the artist herself has a partial but not an

absolute authority. Art history, criticism and curatorship shift these values depending on larger passing interests, questions, intrigues that frame the oeuvre of an artist. In this sense, an artwork is a process of working through a question, a struggle whose debilitating nature can be – in some cases – a motivation. Hence, the meanings that an artwork can bring about depend on the broader art historical, institutional, philosophical, anthropological context where it is placed. Fortunately, neither the artist nor the curator, can control that context. It all depends on the broader cultural condition where it will live on.

AMM: After a series of accomplished tasks, when you give yourself a comprehensive look to internalize the satisfaction of things brought to a successful conclusion, a moment comes up which is interrupted by the thought that there is something left to do, and that something missing is an artistic act.

VI: Probably that's the paradox. That something is missing appears to be essential in artistic creation. There is no search without something missing. There is also no artistic research in modernity without the knowledge of history and the acceptance that – from a certain perspective – everything has already been done. But the real question is whether what's *felt* as missing has ever been there completely. An intuition, a sentiment is a driving force for an artist, not a clinical or historical fact, a given to be filed and done with. Furthermore, the “artistic act” never completely depends on you. This does not just mean that the artist cannot control the viewer's attention, art history, art criticism and the entire “life” of an artwork. It also means that the artistic act is never completely a question of artistry, of craftsmanship but also of the emergence of aesthetic ideas, associations, other artworks, an impact on the changing interiors where the work hangs, etc. In other words, an artwork lives on as long as it generates aesthetic ideas in the sense of Kant, reflections without a definite rule or definite conclusion. The struggle seems to be how to manipulate this missing artistic act since it is hypothetically always missing, it is never completely present. It's a modern problem: looking at the Flemish masters of the 15th and early 16th century, one might wonder whether their artistic act was of a different nature. Making a convincing image was the goal, the “debilitating struggle” was the combination of the visual with the theological. However, there is something sublime in the way these images passed through history, have shifted through different contexts, have been “rediscovered”, that is, how they drew the viewer's attention, how they changed her sensibility once more. The cult of the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages that inspired many an icon has both a theological and a cultural outcome, like the tenderness

and sensibility in the relationship between a mother and child. In the Western culture, images have no control over their agency: what starts as a religious story can also affect the emotional and affective relationships between the people who carefully look at images and worship them. The modern artist has, of course, different challenges. The canonical tendency here is to think that the modern artwork concerns the “depth” of the artist herself and that the canvas is originally a blank page. This subjectivity of the modern position has been endlessly discussed, from Hegel to Deleuze. Regardless, the point is that there is always something missing in a living, creating subject. This should be seen as a constitutive lack, as a human condition more than as a loss at a given moment in time. It is important, however, that this condition turns into a productive process. It ends only with the end of an *oeuvre*, the indifference of the public or – more recently – the shifting attention of the curator.

AMM: I love the way you acknowledge and describe this constitutive lack, as belonging to our human nature. In my case, this is not something that I once had and lost, but I never had to begin with. I associate it with a longing or curiosity that, although almost indecipherable, can never be satisfied once and for all. When I draw, in all the early stages, I feel like I am solving and discovering something. What use could such knowledge be? Is it a genuine act of knowledge? Can it be analysed in comparison with other forms? Can it be improved? Observational drawing produces evidence of observation, which ends up being different from the observed object. This degree of difference fascinates me. Ideally, my work would be an overlay of the reference image with the drawn image, as I suggested in *Left Hand* (2022) and *Distant View* (2022), where the photograph is a printed ceramic plate that can be positioned subjectively on its drawing. The *Grid Method* that I use to reproduce images, in painting and drawing, is in a significant way similar to the method of archaeological excavation, where a site is first divided into quadrants.

VI: Or the perspective machine published in Albrecht Dürer’s manual from 1525, or the modernist grid and its striated space, all devices that give us the “right” form. However, there is no reproduction that does not also produce and shape knowledge. This might seem a common place, but art history teaches that the creation and the understanding of images – what you call making and knowledge – have gone hand in hand, certainly since the Renaissance. We could refer to the role that the drawing (*disegno*) played in the *Vite* of Vasari: it justified both the knowledge *and* the practice of art, activities that were integrated in the emerging academies and were supported by the royal authorities. Already here, a certain

conceptualism enters the picture, as Georges Didi-Huberman showed when he returned in his book *Devant l'image* (1990) to the writings of the Renaissance painter Federico Zuccari. The latter absolutized drawing as the realization of the idea.¹ Drawing emulates the divine creative act and so puts the artist on a creational level. Simultaneously, drawing is referred to natural objects but also to the past painters whose *Vite* Vasari generously described. This is a unique moment because – as said – it explains the making of art as inherently bound to the understanding of the past, first to the knowledge of the past, the entire understanding of past artists, and then to aesthetic experience. So, the questions that you raise are as old as the notion of art as we have known it for a long time, namely as a practice that is more than craftsmanship, that is self-aware of the archaeology of the painted, sculptured, built artefact. Furthermore, today, the practice and knowledge that it brings about has a *performative* side to it: it is precisely the automatic making of images, their mechanical reproducibility, that demands an intense and critical study of how images are made and how they are perceived. Precisely because figurative representation has become a technical automatism, drawing is fundamental – it is the ideal tool to understand the production of knowledge that image-making is capable of. If we drew more, then maybe we would peruse images on screens more slowly, less ferociously and distractingly. In your case, at least to some extent, drawing seems to 'perform' and 're-stage', a foundational act of looking and understanding, arranging, and creating the perceived object. It's similar to the reason why a child memorizes and recites a poem or a song. The child's performance is not just an act of memory but a way to dramatize language, its intensity, the figures it creates, and their emergence at a given moment, a moment that demands the attention of the listener. Your work provides – at this level, but there is more – an archaeology of perception that echoes classical phenomenological issues: the relation of the eye and the hand, the emerges of vision as contrasted to mere visibility (or capacity to see), the surplus of visual sensations, etc.

For Zuccari, the act of *disegno* had divine powers because drawing meant literally producing the imagined or represented object. There is no *Annunciation* without the drawn setting of a Fra Angelico or Fra Bartolomeo: drawing meant also inventing a scene, an interior and two bodily gestures, one of Gabriel and one of Mary. Maybe today, when the production of images is automatic and mediated by other mechanically reproduced images, drawing condenses the act of looking and what I would like to call the 'arrangement' of objects,

¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image. Question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art*, Paris, Éditions du Minuit, 1990, pp. 89-90.

thinking of them in a certain setting, interior or order. Their drawn representation captures a specific type of *attention*, a notion that is central to contemporary life: it combines recognition or reading what is seen with an understanding of the way in which objects appear as a specific *place*. That is the vocation of your work: beyond a strong craftsmanship and a figurative iconography, between the making and the reading of images, they should demand something of the viewer and your work – if I understand it well – demands an attention for a philosophy of the interior. We shall return to this point. Your drawings and their modulations in other media are quite bound to this emergence of a sense of place. Not just space in the geometrical sense of the word, but space understood as a meaningful arrangement of an interior – what I'd like to call a 'place' where plants grow along with drawn lines and drawn lines refer to the growing plants.

AMM: We are not in the *ars gratia artis* period anymore, aren't we? It's an expression whose correct meaning I don't think I understand well, and I only assume it's appropriate here. I am speaking about a way of making art that enables the artist to draw a rejuvenation or energization, at the end of the process, from simply contemplating what it was made.

VI: We can debate this for long. Needless to say, in the middle of the 19th century "contemplation" had something transgressive beyond its apparent bohemianism. It proposed a contemplative look and an aestheticism at the moment when Europe plunged full throttle into the industrial revolution, when some people saw an old world disappear under train tracks and steam ships.

AMM: I constantly find myself within a set of physical and conceptual circumstances in which nothing is possible without beating the odds. As a result, I have come to love the convoluted routes I've taken to accomplish certain things. The visual documentation I keep of these biographical instances is indicative of a particular kind of lived experience. For instance, the work *an existing configuration, ... You then continue creating* (2023) is based on a photograph I took while I was trying to verify if my bed would fit in my kitchen. I was in great need to extend my studio area and the image is a testimony of a ridiculous attempt, which I could not accept. I found a better way in the end, after decluttering this arrangement of objects and furniture.

VI: That is why your work is relevant for the philosophy of interiority and even to a certain take on interior design. Interiority consists in a set of tactics that expand the possibilities of a given, found, limited and concrete interior design, the studio, the living room, the gallery space, etc. Shifting objects is an opportunity to shift visual perspectives, perspectives on life, movements and affects. The interior designer in any of us knows that we can fit a few objects in an interior, but the challenge is the kind of movement and rest that they can mediate for us, the stories that they make possible and the imprint that they leave within us, in that interiority that we carry along everywhere we are. The great exterior, the world outside is always to some extent a confrontation with this interiority that we live with.

AMM: Most events I use in my works are recorded as they happened, though in some cases, I was inspired by a situation and elaborated on the spot. In *engaging activities, ... Back to All NightCrawler* (2023) it was necessary to introduce the imagery of my body into the existing scene. The idea behind this work came to me when I suddenly noticed that, should I slightly constrain and control my movements, I could fit in this space where I usually keep a cardboard box. The image thus obtained implies that within the room, there is a smaller enclosure, like a miniature home, an improvised shelter, or the entrance to some underground place. This is a narrative that comforts me, and it makes me question myself about the things I need protection from, considering that the apartment is as safe a place as it can be, and I live alone.

VI: The exterior world will always dispute interiority. And interiority will always fashion a temporary, mobile, flexible shield.

AMM: Through conceptual processes like this, I've learned that my decisions are not only a product of inspiration and creativity, but also of vast sets of external circumstances that are both in and out of my control and awareness. A key aspect of my practice is trying to understand these mechanics. Art today is a consumption of non-renewable energy. And I would like to think about where this energy comes from, how is consumed in me, and what I do afterwards, when I wake up empty. It seems that it has nothing to do with the way things used to be or how they should be. The degree of aggressiveness or indifference with which the artistic act is met in public today is unprecedented, except maybe for the post-World War II period.

VI: Art has always been a field of conflicting forces with comprehensible regrets about certain sudden, incongruous changes mixed with a consistent nostalgia for other periods. We cannot exit (art) history any longer, we can't do as if humans can change because some philosophers unravelled how they think. Artistic practices and their history have always needed that mixture between change and nostalgia, between indifference and interest. After all, in the Western part of Europe, on Sunday, the churches are empty, and the museums are full. Which art captures the distracted or interested attention of the viewer it's a different question. However, the dawn of art is described as a crisis: in his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder (1st century AD) addressed painting as an art that in previous times has been memorable because it was needed to transfer to posterity the image of glorious kings and countries. And at the time he writes, this moment that he evokes is long gone. Vasari too, introduces the model of thinking art in terms of subsequent ages that grow and age after they have reached their momentum. It's a fundamentally biological model of thinking that has always motivated art's understanding and its making. Even more, in the 19th century, with the dissolution of the Parisian salons, the artworld admits and accepts that the art of the future will not have a predestined public, it will no longer be the subject of a shared common sense. As Thierry de Duve convincingly showed, Duchamp's submission to the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in 1917 is a telegram that breaks with a culture of consensus. Interesting in Duchamp's gesture is the indirect question: can we even live with the idea that everything can be art? And, even if everything can be art, does that mean that all art is interesting, good, worth seeing? So, the logic of a state of crisis and unrest has always been there. It's no coincidence that art in modernity always refers to moments of crisis and nowadays is completely obsessed with ecological, gender, colonial or other crises. It's art's vocation (restless, at times even hysterical) because one of art's goals is to turn these moments of crisis in aesthetic ideas, to make an emerging public – not just a sociological group – think and feel differently. And representation is obviously fundamental to the understanding of a crisis, regardless of its content. That's why the more autonomous art becomes, the more it takes itself so seriously and nowadays it really believes it can intervene into the broader social and political structure. The avantgardes have shown that art has a certain limitation to its impact. One can accept this inherent finitude or struggle against it, do as if it's not there and shout louder, perform what I'd like to call an act of "magic thinking": if we artists explicitly pinpoint these crises, then it will surely have an impact. This thinking is – to use your words – a consumption of non-renewable energy because good art addresses *exceptions* and not the *rules* of how the world works, of how humanity behaves.

When it comes to art and its history, it is more important to point out – even if it is a common place – that the evolutionary model of thinking about art is completely unreliable. Identifying with a certain Stoic position, one might even daresay the same thing about history as such: each period contains both the worst and the best of mankind. Artistic practices that were deemed “dead” have never disappeared and are practiced and reinvented along new media. Pieter Fischli played on this theme that quite seductively in his *Stop Painting* exhibition at Ca’ Corner in 2021. Already in the ’30s Henri Focillon proposed a different metaphor against an evolutionary model: art develops in geological layers, not unlike Freud’s description of the unconscious as a psychological Rome, a layering of past ruins from different ages that prepares the path for new constructions.² Furthermore, bad art is needed – people’s attention is in a constant metamorphosis, their emotional constitution tends to perpetually “transpire”, get saturated, become sensible to something else. It’s arguably helpful to think that when it comes to humanity and its endeavours, the crisis is not a moment that comes *after* a glorious period but that it is constitutional, structural, a perennial mess that we get with our birth certificate.

AMM: I am a method artist because I don’t know how else to make art. And I need an overly complicated method to allay my fears that what I do is not enough. As a self-taught animator, I am compelled and empowered to follow this medium because it is such a direct expression of what an image can become, what its future could be. My true centre is always painting, as perhaps the most complex way to produce an image, yet not as difficult as I would prefer. I plan to start my work long before the photograph, that is its source, appears. As a result of my lifestyle and resources, I can pursue this development just within the small perimeter where I already reside, and I found a possibility for expansion by considering the process of growing plants as a sketching stage for painting. *the demolition ... daylight figure prominently* (2023) and *find a way to honor ... to help meet their goal* (2023) take the role of generic still lives, with me knowing that they depict diverse plant specimens and complicated shapes that took an entire season to manifest themselves. I captured the photographs moments away from yet another transformation, preceding the action of dismantling the containers, composting the vegetal remains and preparing the soil for a resting period. In a similar manner, *endless growth. ... believing that hope can be dredged from ruin* (2023) was an intentional visual

² Henri Focillon, *Vie des formes, suivi de Éloge de la main* (1934), Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2013.

experiment with a container that I filled only with compost from the bin I keep on the balcony. I wanted to facilitate, in parallel with my main gardening activities where I focus on edible plants, the spontaneous emergence and unrestricted growth of volunteer plants resulting from seeds preserved in the soil or coming from my kitchen's scraps.

With the help of these vegetal sprawling contortions, imposed by the specifics of indoor gardening, by the reduced amount of light, which only penetrates from one direction, and forces the plants to develop more in that part, I see how an aesthetic accumulates that I would not have the character to impose on my own.

VI: And here is the figure of thought that returns in your recent production, namely the interior as a *place* and drawing as unconsciously intertwined with the organic life of plants, their infinite threads, intertwining ribs, and involuted veins. Your plants constitute a tessellated and lush extension of your own graphed outlines on paper, with their balanced shades and gradual light formations. There is little we can say about the exquisite technique that you master completely because there is nothing essentially new there except the fact that you are an atypical artist today where craftsmanship is often subordinated to technical reproducibility. At this level we would have to invoke another period when figurative painting and drawing returned, namely the hyperrealism of people like Chuck Close and many others. We could also point to your colleagues from Cluj, especially Ciprian Mureşan, who takes the making of images seriously. But these comparisons end quickly because your artistic research concerns this specific biotope, the plants, and even more, the apartment as studio. Your images protrude from an architectural interior that is carefully curated.

Maybe we should test this hypothesis, namely the symbiosis between image making and "interior design", in this case, arranging an interior so that it fits with a sense of interiority, an inner world that you inhabit, a place where you seem to draw back and draw. In this context, drawing is in a symbiotic relationship with other agencies of traces, if we are to use Tim Ingold's differentiation between threads and traces. In his *Lines. A Brief History* (2007), he argues that there are many organisms that produce threads, from the silkworm to the spider and the human fishing nets or suspension bridges.³ Threads are extending into space and an architect like Gottfried Semper famously argued in the 19th century that threading and

³ Tim Ingold, *Lines. A Brief History*, New York, Routledge, 2007, p. 41-42.

weaving constituted man's original creative act and the birth of architecture. The Austrian art historian Alois Riegl countered this position in the legendary *Problems of Styles* (1893). For Riegl, the *drawing* of traces was the constitutive act of image making because prior to weaving, mankind has always been a drawing species. And the reinvention of forms was for Riegl intimately related to the transformation of organic motives. In his view, the acanthus motif did not originate in a copy of the plant but in a transformation of the Corinthian capital, independently of the observation of the plant *acanthus spinosa* because the outlines do not resemble the plant itself. He argued that the acanthus as an artistic motif emerged from the transformation in a sculpture of the semi-palmette. Even later, the explanation of the mobility of the drawn line and the life of plants inspired Paul Klee's philosophy of art. In his *Notebooks*, Klee drew a parallel between nature's growing forms and artistic creation. The point has the potential of a seed: it is an "infinitely tiny elemental plane" from which a line emerges.⁴ It moves in different directions like plants growing in partial cross sections or longitudinally. Drawing for Klee is a way of emulating nature's engendering vitalism. In his Bauhaus lecture from 1921, he comes close to Riegl's philosophy of art: writing and drawing were originally identical, and they were the constitutive acts of culture.

Looking at your recent work from a broader perspective, namely by integrating the artworks in the studio from which they emerge, motivated this long intermezzo. It's all meant to point out that drawn lines have often been thought in relation to plants and organic motives. The significant artistic shift that is traceable in your work on canvas, animation and on paper is this emulation of organic life to the interior. Your studio is a peculiar interior that contains a cornucopia of plants that stimulate your production of images. The interior is thus not just a 'place of work' but a place for interiority, maybe even a *locus amoenus*, an idealised garden, protective and productive, invigorating even though small. Promethean in its regeneration, fertile even though tightly quartered, fecund even though in small portions. Nevertheless, it is a prolific interior that speaks volumes about what motivates all these images. Even more, this love for plants that Robert Harrison called "chlorophilia" is essential to mankind – a modern city without gardens is detrimental to its citizens.⁵ But when it comes to the interior, plants are even more interesting for us. The Belgian artist Wesley Meuris researched in his

⁴ Paul Klee, *Notebooks. Volume 1: The Thinking Eye*, edited by Jürg Spiller, translated by Ralph Manheim, London, Lund Humphries, 1961, p. 19.

⁵ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens. An Essay on the Human Condition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 61-62.

“Verticality” series from 2021 what I called the “cosmic caravan”, namely interiors of spaceships where the cosmonauts integrated flower arrangements and tiny plants, even a miniature Christmas tree.⁶ Technology and science are here too, bound to the cosiness of the interior.

AMM: I started a few years ago, and I try to practice more noticeably, the introduction of ethical, existential factors – and here I would like maybe you to help me with a better term – in the aesthetic decisions I opt for. Contemporary art no longer reserves a place for any classical manifestation, especially in the case of painting.

VI: But is it so? Painting was central during the last Biennale and there are many galleries that are specialised in painting. Even children that start an artistic education experiment a lot with painting. Drawing is the most direct, confrontational, and convincing way of making images and of understanding how images, spaces, interiors, or volumes work. Drawing – even though it is executed with different care and attention – is still what unites art and architecture. There is surely an “ethics” of drawing if and only if we understand by this statement that drawing is a regulative principle that indisputably motivates the creation of images. Drawing is an obligation that all artists should follow even though they do not develop or specialise in drawing, even if they make films or photography. And your work seems to turn drawing in an artistic mission because you transform it in a tactic of appropriating images, reading, and understanding them, representing their tensions and remembering them. That’s the categorial imperative of your work: *thou shall use your hands to see*.

However, don’t you think that the older a medium is the fewer artistic mistakes that it allows? The first man, the primitive man or woman, in the Lascaux caves, was a painter and despite all the hypotheses concerning the meaning of what those animals are, he or she must have been a successful painter, even in the modern sense of the word. I am aware of the anachronism but think about it: few people could execute these paintings; the interior and the light were cumbersome challenges and everybody who sought shelter could see it. Fast-forward to centuries further to our times when the possibilities of paint on wood or canvas, drawing and lithography have been thoroughly exploited, the situation is radically different. An image has a different status, it’s neither icon nor just pure ornament, the time to reflect on

⁶ Vlad Ionescu, *On the Cosmic Caravan, Verticality and Other Human Pursuits*, in *Verticality*, Duffel, Stockman Artbooks, 2021

it has changed, it has become often quite short, and there are fewer possibilities to come up with something new from these media. The situation is comprehensibly challenging. What you do in your interior is fundamental research on the possibilities of drawing in relation to these changing conditions of image-making and the perception of art. History weighs on the eyes of those who know it. They are no longer moved by the Romantic myth of “originality” but by delicate, intelligent, sporadic, local acts of making and viewing that are exceptions from what we see all the time in the world, the artworld included. Intelligent curators and collectors know that painting is a delicate domain. Painting today forces us to take a different stance towards “the new”, that holy grail of the Moderns. Painting in the age of the fast technical reproducibility and circulation of images has an ethical vocation: it expects that the viewers – with all their differences – look slowly, peruse, and read the image. Painting is highly relevant because it’s critical of what looking and reading have become nowadays. It demands more attention than the other media that are also simultaneously used in the production and consumption of digital images. After Velásquez and Newmann, painting combines the intelligence involved in image-making with a look on the world that the digital media cannot yet have. And it’s all in the materiality of painting and in the way that the created paintings can alter our perception of life and world. Yours is a laboratory of these organic possibilities that painting, and interiority can generate.

Still, due to its often-confusing eclecticism, contemporary art cannot afford to exclude any specific medium. However, it does seem to be passionate about “grand intrigues”; art has always had social and ecological ambitions, but their recent manifestation is sometimes anecdotic, quite unequivocal, all driven by this desperate yet naïve idea that art can change people or, even more ambitious, that art can make people think. What kind of thinking does it propose and who are these people recent art talks to? What role does imagination and sensibility play there? Like with all avantgardes, its enthusiasm is disproportionate to its actual ability – often the rhetoric of political engagement surpasses the care for cultivating a sensibility for representation. This explicit and clear political engagement comes to the detriment of the entire craftsmanship, intelligence and erudition that is associated with image-making. The restlessness of recent art is a symptom of an inevitable vulnerability that it comprehensively refuses to accept. It will pass even though the result could be a lot of bad art. But let’s return to the gardening of the interior.

AMM: Never mind how painting is considered today, I have always worked from a defensive position. I don't know why. There is my instinct that I must protect my work and there is the intuition that I set it against this inability, or illegitimacy, to paint. I am adept at addressing this technically. I am often partial to images that I don't know how to approach in order to allow myself the experience of discovering the solution. I push through the panic, and I manage. But when it's about concepts, it gets trickier. To escape, I rely on depicting scenes from endeavours of such characteristics that there is only one debate: whether or not you should execute them. If you go ahead with them, which is the only possible decision for me in their case, the visuality and rationale no longer matter. All activities related to home gardening, the way I perform them, and because they are for me an absolute primary necessity, fall into this category. All the instances in which I capture myself and my plants are images that qualify as painting sources. I document them randomly, choose them according to preferences, and paint as many as I can, but they are all good. I don't question whether what I'm doing is contemporary art, because it's a necessary act for me. Very often I find evidence that it isn't, but this does not convince me to abandon my preoccupations. *Personified. Katie ... rest* (2023) was not a staged composition. The image appeared at the point when my cactus grew so tall, he became unstable and almost fell over. It was urgent to implement a temporary fix and I put him in a basket where I keep blankets and pillows, to lay him on a cushioned surface, for a gentle rest. It is all too easy for me to personify my plants and I can imbue them with emotions.

VI: The sensitive tension between the cactus that grew too much on the one hand, and the protective pillows, on the other hand, is suggestive. Or, if I am allowed to presuppose, there are also the emotions that the plants generate when they are integrated in these settings that you make. The great reference that we have not mentioned but that is relevant even as a contrast, is the Dutch still life and the entire tradition of painting flowers. Some of your work would fit in an interior along those great Dutch lovers of flowers and plants in interiors. The organic, the flower, the plant belongs to the great exterior and still, one of the most fundamental gestures in interior design is the integration of samples from this great exterior within the limited interior, the house, the living room, etc. As we have seen, the organic life has inspired drawing quite often in modernity. The life of forms – to use the traditional expression of Henri Focillon – is viewed as a growing organism with different historical layers. It is also intimately bound to Focillon's "praise of hands". But Riegl, Klee and Focillon prepare us for a rather anthropological and philosophical explanation of your work.

Significant for works like *The Apprentice with No Sorcerer* (2017-) or *indoor and outdoor environment. ... Images, music, narration, light, and sound effects* (2021) is that your images testify to an interior. The life of plants is here reduced to Candide's words *Il faut cultiver son jardin* but then away from the rest of the world. These images evince a preoccupation with the scenography of an interior even though nature is overwhelming somewhere *outside*. Yours is an interior that modulates the standard architecture of these old communist apartment buildings. Their rigid concrete enclosure is quite clearly confronted with a plethora of plants, an organic process that unfolds daily, following the change of light. That is why this architectural interior appears often in artistic practices as a strategy of partially avoiding the rest of the world. Already in the '70s, Gianfranco Baruchello started an entire artistic project by moving outside Rome where he started farming and gardening while visually representing, extensively writing, and exhibiting his *Agricola Cornelia*. The project was partially motivated by the loss of enthusiasm in the events of 1968 but the amount of work that Baruchello generated from this farm is impressive and intelligent.⁷ However, in your case, we deal with a domestic interior that echoes visually the solipsistic memories of Xavier de Maistre and his *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1795): the superposition of a modest interior (filled with plants in your case) with someone's interiority, the *daimons*, those guiding inner voices, yields a visual archive that is a life on its own.

AMM: My practice does not stop at the physical limits of drawings or paintings but has some ramifications in the rules and routines that I follow. I have a theory about creating art, and growing plants. I believe they can just happen. The only thing you have to do is to allow it, to facilitate it. The life-sustaining source does not come from you, but from them. Art should appear spontaneously in any given environment, and it should unfold rather independently. Both artistic occurrences and seedlings can benefit from the attention of an observer, and my role next to them is only of a guardian. In many of my images, I am detailing proofs of acts of care, while symmetrically erasing any leftovers of an authoring ego that might try to take centre stage. Symbols to which I return are knots, threads, sticks, wires, trellis, improvised supports of any kind, all humble in their aspect and dutifully useful.

VI: Some form of sensibility will surely outlive art and mankind. Whether someone or something will call that "art" is an open question. Whether art can suddenly appear in any

⁷ See Gianfranco Baruchello, Henry Martin, *How to Imagine? A Narrative on Art, Agriculture and Creativity*, New York, Bantam Books, 1985.

given environment is also an open question. What we call “art” has been a phenomenon that is framed in time and history. It has had its own institutions, places, schools, discourses, etc. What surely appears “spontaneously” – even though we should be careful with this word – is an aesthetic sense of beauty. And beauty is the sentiment that corresponds to an affirmation of life, its movement and adaptability. That is what all the post-human talk should clarify before ending into obscure homologations. We think of art beyond the human, but what we meet is a feeling of life that maybe surpasses the human. However, all discourse about it is human, all too human. Plants have become the *basso continuo* of today’s artworld but in different senses. Nona Inescu’s gardens and emulation of organic and geological processes is not completely unrelated to the animal and vegetal metamorphoses that René Magritte developed in the ’50s, for instance in *Les graces naturelles*. Of course, the medium, the modulation of forms and the context differ. But these variations on the life of organic forms have their own history. For some contemporary philosophers and anthropologists, like Emanuele Coccia or Anna Tsing, plants, fungi, and nature at large have become the avuncular core of today’s intellectual preoccupations. One of the reasons is the indisputable ecological catastrophe that we experience.

However, in your images we deal with a specific implementation of plants and that is the systematic co-habitation with them and their pleasurable arrangement in the interior. There is something fundamentally domestic and architectural in the way you treat them as a motif that *already* generate forms and change the interior by being there, in that godforsaken communist apartment. Observing your work, one sees how plants are already at work with lines and colours within the interior, prior to your representations. To use the conceptual language developed by the Belgian dramaturgist Jeroen Peeters, even before producing paintings and drawings, you design an ecosystem of “attentional practices”, an interior where you as an artist seem to ‘ferment’.⁸ Attention and fermentation go here hand in hand as they constitute an interior where forms, spaces, gestures, gazes, corners, organic growth, lighting will become images. So hopefully you agree that your images are an opportunity to think about interior design in a broad, existential sense, by which I mean, a sense of interiority. Plants are a privileged motif when it comes to the interior because of the old tendency to bring nature into the house. Emanuele Coccia famously proposed a cosmological model starting from the

⁸ See Jeroen Peeters, *Mattering Attention. Notes on Material Literacy in the Theatre*, in *The Corps-Objet-Image Journal*, no. 4, 2020. See also Jeroen Peeters’ collaboration with the performance artist Sara Manente materialized as ROT Garden, Kunstencentrum BUDA, Kortrijk, 10-13.06.2021.

life of plants as the organisms that are the “most direct and elementary connection that life can establish with the world”⁹ or as a laboratory for the regeneration of forms. His model is convincing to a certain extent, but it should be taken with a grain of salt precisely because of the directedness that he ascribes to plants. He represents a typical contemporary attempt to bracket the fundamental role that human understanding plays in the transformation and destruction of the otherwise spontaneous process of constant change and growth that plants do maintain. The very concept of nature is completely cultured in modernity and no cosmology – that is really, a comprehensible fascination with the adaptability of plants – can change that. In that sense, the fleeting observation about plants from Kate Briggs’ *The Long Form* (2023) is simple and poignant: the main character of the novel enters her house, sees that a houseplant is dead and asks herself whether houseplants die of old age when they are “mugged of their verticality”.¹⁰ A plant might die but water and light might also regenerate its growing process. Everything that is ‘inside’, within the public or private interior becomes the object of care, attention, culture. That is quite essential for your art and for humanity as such.

Therefore, this organic process of constant growth is important for two things that are identifiable in your work: first, there is the artist’s studio. This studio is a scenography that interiorizes these lines and colours that plants already produce every single day. There is a double image-making process in your case: the plants are themselves capable of bringing about images in the way they alter your interior. The latter becomes a process of continuous regeneration, perpetual genesis – plants ‘draw’ in the sense that they grow on certain walls, thus altering the studio space. Their intellectual and artistic activity is analogical to their vital activity. They are capable of image making and drafting them is a strategy to modulate their outlines, their volumes.

Second, yours is a creative – theirs is a generative power. ‘Creative’ means that what you do depends on human imperfection and its cultivation: training, looking, exercising, childhood, midlife crises, happiness, and sadness, nostalgia, and an imperfect memory. The ‘generative’ power of plants is sublimely described by Kate Briggs: you give them water and they regain their verticality. Your artworks emerge at this intersection. Here is a hypothesis: the preference for plants is a sign of an interest in the regenerative life of forms, this perpetual

⁹ Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants. A Metaphysics of Mixture*, translated by Dylan J. Montanari, Cambridge, Polity, 2017, p. 5

¹⁰ Kate Briggs, *The Long Form*, London, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2023, pp. 71-72.

self-transformation. Plants have no *logos* but they embody the most powerful affirmation of life, more than animals. Anna Tsing described the intriguing and fascinating route of these matsutake mushrooms in the places affected by ecological disasters.¹¹ The resilient regenerative power of nature surpasses the infinitely more difficult conditions required for the existence of mankind. But again, what we have called “fine arts” is a human endeavour, a historically dated practice. We can make art *about* a post- or non-human situation but the result itself makes sense only within a well-defined institution that presupposes both a certain *gaze* and a cultural memory: aesthetic, reflective, inquiring, educated, imperfect, etc. (Coccia rather rapidly identifies a cosmology in the regenerative ‘intensity’ of plants. In this enthusiasm he also instantly overlooks the fact that plants do not *need* a cosmology, that a cosmology is only relevant to an interpreting culture. It’s worth asking whether a cosmology is interesting in itself, regardless of the kind of anthropology to which it can be connected. Plants do determine life more than any other organism, but gardens, parks, landscapes are all a product of culture.)

Hence, your artistic practice redefines image-making starting from an inquiry on the studio, this well-known creative environment that has been systematically challenged since the ’60s: the studio is not just a *space* – an enclosed extension where one works – but a *place* – a space that occasions meanings, transformations, variations.¹² This means that the reinvention of the studio in contemporary art makes is also a scenographic and dramaturgical challenge: spatial perspectives and creative procedures, places and images intertwine. The produced work is intimately bound to the place where it is created, not unlike how Bruce Nauman treated his studio – it was not just a space but also an archive and a material for his films and installations. From an architectural perspective, we could also evoke the *Atelier Constantin Brancusi*: Renzo Piano carefully reconstructed it near the Centre Pompidou in 1977, relating the sculptures to an intimate sense of place. This was already the second reconstruction after the 1962 partial reconstruction at the Palais de Tokyo. That means that the sense of a *place* that meaningfully reinforced Brancusi’s artworks had been already perceived. The need to cherish it was always there.

¹¹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at The End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruin*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015.

¹² See Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice (eds.), *The Fall of the Studio. Artists at Work*, Antennae 1, Amsterdam, Valiz, 2009.

The studio as a regenerative ecosystem of worldmaking through the consistent drafting of the regenerative life of forms – this might be a hypothetical way of looking at your work. Plants are the organisms that seduce the artist, the resident and maybe the viewer with one simple and powerful illusion: given a bit of water and light, life is endless. And fine arts have always seduced us all in a similar way: art is what survives the death of individuals and artistic forms have their own *Nachleben* or Afterlife in the sense of Aby Warburg, the historical regeneration and transformation of motives and forms throughout history. What a powerful illusion that we need in order to move on! Of course, the artworks themselves can travel outside the studio, they should live their own life outside the studio, but their genesis is inherently woven into the fabric of the walls, the plants that colour them, their perennial metamorphosis.

Disegno: Drafting on a Figure of Thought is a dialogue essay between the artist Ana Maria Micu and the art theoretician Vlad Ionescu (PXL MAD / UHasselt, Belgium) that accompanies *Woman, Scaffolding*, a solo show by Ana Maria Micu, presented by Mind Set Art Center, Taipei from 16 March to 27 April, 2024.

Ana Maria Micu is a visual artist based in Botoşani exclusively represented globally since 2018 by Mind Set Art Center, Taipei. She works primarily with painting, connecting two or more images with reference to personal experience and her close environment, in non-linear presentations of scenarios she identifies as *minor acts of living*. Micu graduated from the MFA of the University of Art and Design of Cluj-Napoca in Romania in 2004. In 2011, Micu's works were at the Fourth Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. Her 2020 painting *workers, will still be ... to stay* has been collected by the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC) in Bucharest, Romania. In 2022, Micu held her solo exhibition *Left Hand to Distant View* at MNAC and in 2021 was included in the group exhibition *The Poetic Realm* at Yu-Hsiu Museum of Art.

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Originally specialised in formalist aesthetics and art history (Riegl, Wölfflin, Worringer, etc.), he is currently working on the relationship between art and architecture. Besides co-editing and co-translating Jean-François Lyotard's *Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists* (Leuven University Press, 7 volumes published between 2009-2013), he is the author of *Applied Arts, Implied Art. Craftsmanship and Technology in the Age of Art Industry* (A&S Books, 2016), *Pneumatology. An Inquiry into the Representation of Wind, Air, Breath* (ASP, 2017), *Waiting Rooms of Architecture*, with Malgorzata Maria Olchowaka (VAi, 2023), *Felix Aestheticus. Pour Herman Parret*, edited volume with Sémir Badir et Nathalie Kremers (Peeters, 2023), and many other essays on the aforementioned topics. In 2017 Vlad Ionescu was Laureate of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Sciences and the Arts, Class of Arts/ Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten/ Klasse Kunsten.

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Mind Set Art Center (MSAC) is a contemporary art platform founded in Taipei in 2010 that exhibits and promotes artworks by Taiwanese, Asian and international artists. It is dedicated to creative programs and collaborative projects with curators from different regions for the aim of cultural exchange. Since 2017, the gallery has successfully launched large-scale exhibits at Art Basel in Hong Kong that have garnered global acclaim. These include *A 100km Walk* by Shi Jin-Hua, *The Play of a Taiwan Ranger* by Lee Ming-tse, and *Liminal Air Space-Time* by Shinji Ohmaki. MSAC has also been working with the Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts since 2019 to widen representation of its artists in the academia. The collaboration has led to milestone exhibitions, including *Infinitrace* by Rao Fu, *Rustle of Existence* by Shinji Ohmaki and *Tide Table* by Marina Cruz. MSAC currently works with more than 30 artists around the world. In 2023 the gallery exhibited Romanian artists Dragoș Bădiță, Ioan De Moisa, Dan Măciucă, and this year Oana Fărcaș, Andreea Medar and Ana Maria Micu. It is preparing to participate in Art Brussels 2024 with Dani Ghercă and to mark the debut in Taiwan of Bogdan Vlăduță with an extensive solo show. Since the gallery was built, it has been active in publishing literature and completed nearly 40 publications, including exhibition catalogues and the artist albums of Shi Jin-Hua, Juin Shieh, Tang Jo-Hung, Shinji Ohmaki, Marina Cruz, and Ana Maria Micu.

www.art-msac.com