

Silvia Stocchetto: Forms in Nature

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Dr. Stocchetto, before you started painting on a professional level in 2004, you pursued a successful career as a scientist at the Faculty of Biology at the University of Padova. You completed a Diploma in Biology and a PhD in Biochemistry/Biophysics and you worked as a research scientist. Could you briefly outline the research topics of your projects?

I worked in the field of molecular biology. Initially I did research on the single cell organism *Dictyostelium discoideum* at the Institute of General Pathology in Padova. The project for my PhD thesis was related to the decoding of the genome of the yeast *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. Our lab had a leading international position in the field of sequencing this genome and the subsequent functional analysis of the new genes. After completing my PhD I also started teaching science.

A focus of our journal is people who cross borders between science and art and we are interested in your motives for giving up a successful career at a renowned university to study art.

Drawing and painting have been a great passion of mine since childhood and during my school years. My choice of study was motivated by the conviction that a degree in science would secure my living in the future. But after completing my PhD I just had to resume my old passion. It is difficult to explain, I just could not do otherwise. In addition, it was very difficult to find long-term employment at an Italian university at that time.

After leaving the University of Padova, you studied Free Art in Venice and you were awarded the Diploma in Painting at the Accademia di Belle Arti in 2013. You have worked as a freelance artist ever since. Your early work was based on still lifes in shades of grey. Could you describe them in more detail and were they related to your research in Padova?

I started working with different shades of grey during my study years at the Academy. Initially I focused on portraits, but then I started to work on a modern interpretation of traditional still lifes, arranging everyday objects such as kitchen tools into novel objects, presenting unusual views. I analysed the visual form of everyday objects in a scientific way and implemented the results of my analysis onto canvas by means of a very detailed precise painting style. I have always been drawn to the colour grey which is a neutral colour full of possibilities. I started a painting with one particular shade of grey and I gradually added other pigments as my work progressed. The background always remained grey. Similar to research work in the laboratory, the process of painting was sequential and analytical, with constant review of the interim result. My grey still lifes reflect a particular form of realism with a metaphysical touch, a transformation of reality based on real objects.



Silvia Stocchetto: *Still life* (2014). Photo: Filippo Giacometti.

You later turned to a subject on which you have been working until today - nature. Your work combines images from botany and the animal world and it also combines realistic depiction and fantasy elements. Did your former work as a biologist affect the choice of the motifs and their artistic elaboration?

After concentrating on the grey pictures, I gradually added more and more colours to my still lifes, including the background. I started to add elements of vegetation, leaves, fruit etc. Botany was one of my favorite subjects when I studied drawing at the Academy. When I am outside in the garden or the forest and I see something which I really like, this experience leaves a trace or an imprint. A new image starts to develop in my mind, different images merge into a new scene, individual impressions are condensed to form a new overall picture. As in scientific work, I analyse meticulously what I see. In a way I copy the forms provided by nature but I transform them through my emotions and my passion for nature. I chose to study Biology because I love nature. Precise scientific observation is an important

issue, but it is also important to note that both the scientist and the painter have conflicting emotions with respect to nature. Nature fills us with awe and admiration, but there are also uncertainties and doubts whether our work will and should unveil something which is unknown and in a way mysterious.

Your work deals with the tension between our perception at a certain time and a world beyond which is not easy to grasp. Is this a psychological question or do you refer to topics of evolutionary biology?

The impenetrable or inaccessible is a subject which is rarely considered in science. I try to address the issue as an artist. Art raises questions about the meaning of existence. The theory of evolution addresses this issue from a scientific point of view. Evolution stands for an unending process of transformation. The visible world is the result of continuous change and growth, the struggle for survival and ongoing further development. This is an extraordinary issue of reflection for an artist.

Evolution is a current focus of artistic engagement in various fields. The exhibition *Design after Darwin* which forms part of the Architecture Biennale in Venice is an example. Your paintings entitled *Evolution* and *Metamorfosis* also deal with the subject of transformation as related to evolution.

Origin, growth, struggle – these are important issues which I addressed in my research work at the university. How do the forms and colours which I perceive in nature evolve, this is what I am interested in. The forms which I paint intertwine, undergo transformation and merge into a fluid continuum which unites them in a single life cycle. My paintings show hybrid creatures made up by organic and anorganic elements, part animal and part plant, part realistic and part imaginary.



Silvia Stocchetto: *Evolution* (2017). Photo: Filippo Giacometti.

In contrast to your earlier *Grey Pictures* – some years ago you had a very successful exhibition in Trieste entitled *GRIGIO* (grey) – your recent paintings are very colourful. The focus is on shades of green and brown. How did this change come about?

I am very attracted to the colours of nature such as shades of green and earthy colours. In my earlier paintings, the colour grey created a kind of undefined space which formed a background for objects with strong contours. In my new paintings, the colours serve to create a kind of primary space which forms a

single entity with the figurative elements. The earthy colours and the shades of green are anchors of reality. These colours represent our origins and at the same time they serve as a kind of allusion to the unknown and the impenetrable in nature.



Silvia Stocchetto: *La gru coronata* (2016). Photo: Filippo Giacometti.

Your painting *Giungla* (Jungle) presents an interpretation of the forest as a place of continuous change.

The forest symbolises a lot more. It is a kind of laboratory for an artist`s creativity. In a forest, the contours change continuously, depending on light and shadow, boundaries dissolve. Animals, plants, minerals merge into a single entity. Whether a distinct element belongs to one or another object is up to the viewer`s imagination.



Silvia Stocchetto: *Giungla* (2016). Photo: Filippo Giacometti.

As a biologist and as a painter, you are interested in the secrets of growth and decay in nature. You frequently paint birds which do not only stand for the animate world. As hybrids they are also meant to represent more abstract ideas. Why do you choose birds?

I have always been fascinated by the expressive qualities of birds, their eyes, their beaks, the large variability of form. For me, birds have a lot of human-like features. I sense a strong presence of an anthropomorphic quality. My painting *Totem* shows a hybrid creature which is made up of animal and plant elements. This metamorphic form is an image of universal life, a bestiarius of enormous vitality. The individual parts merge into a hybrid which is set in a space without connotations, with no relation to the real world. When the focus is on detail, however, the figure appears real, as part of nature as we

know it.



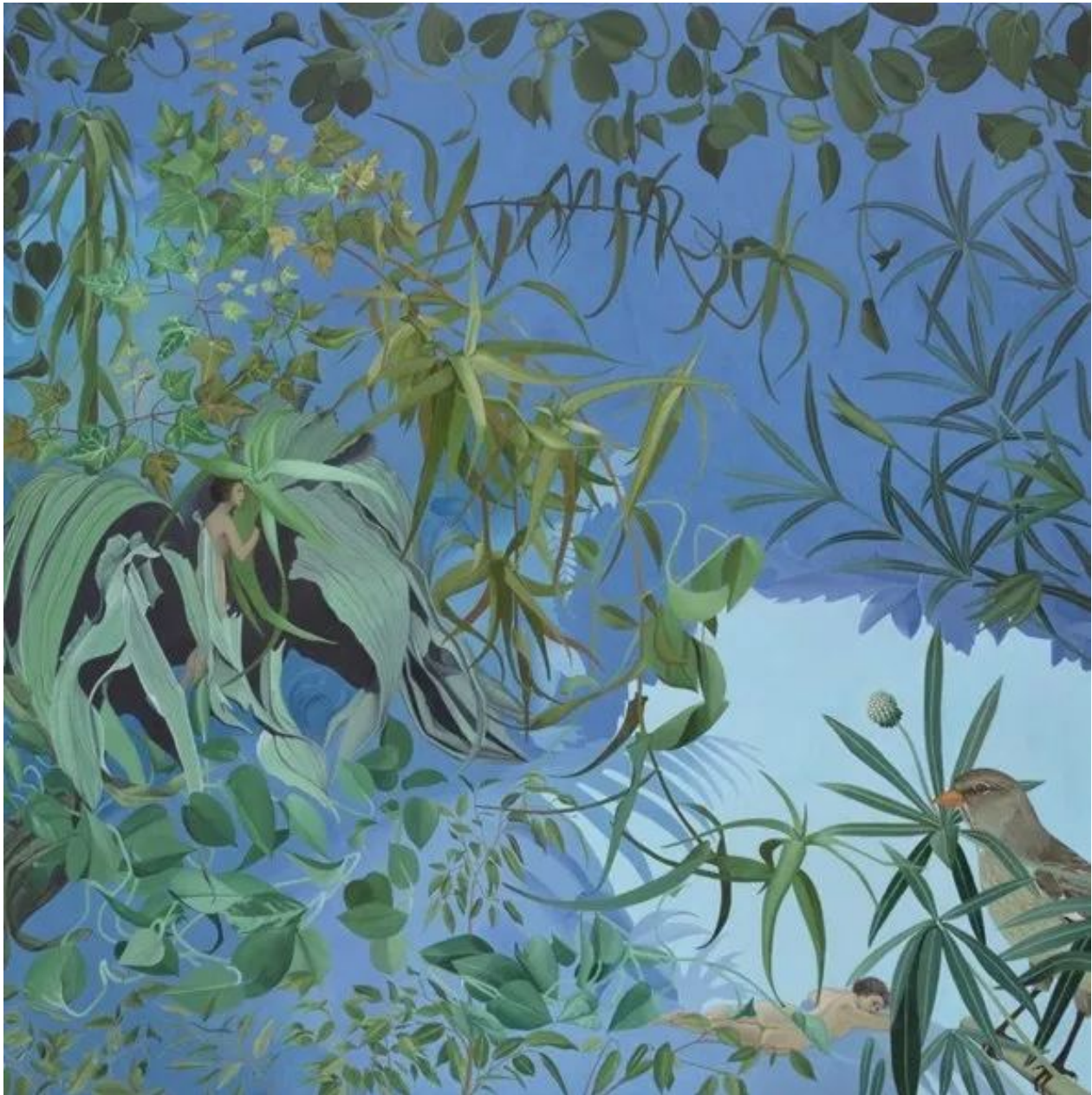
Silvia Stocchetto: *Totem* (2016). Photo: Filippo Giacometti.

An important objective of your art is to promote deeper thinking about the role of the viewer as part of nature, being subject to its laws. How do you try to achieve this aim?

Humans belong to nature, we are part of a whole. I refer to the spiritual act of reflection about entity, about belonging. The realistic life-like elements in my work might stimulate such reflection. The viewer sees something he is familiar with, something which triggers his pictorial memory. Linking the picture to the fantasy elements, on the other hand, might stimulate the less conscious, emotions, the inner world of an individual.

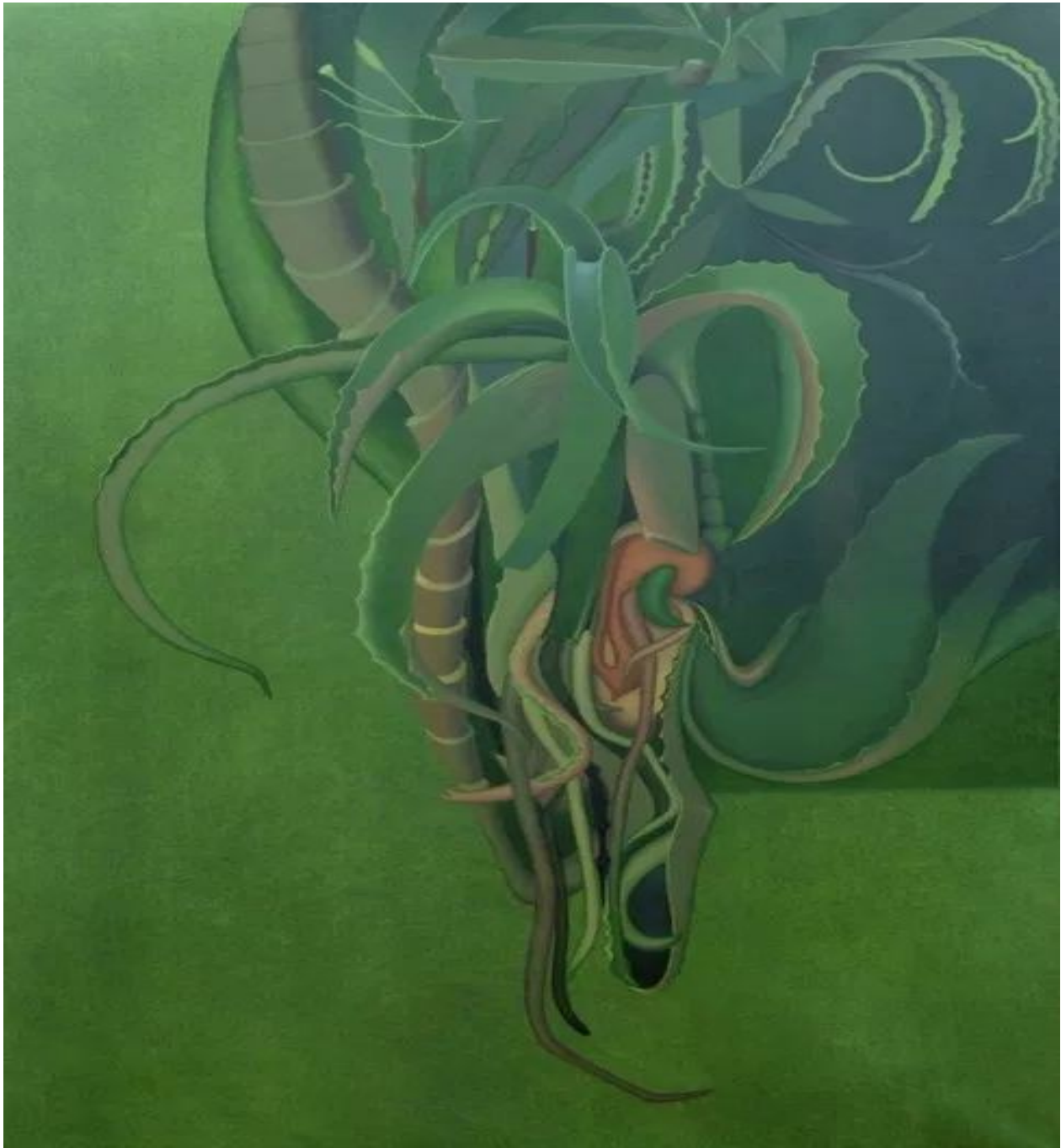
In 2018 you were named winner of the Cultural Association 42 Art Award for your painting *Rêverie*. It shows a nature scene and the title is psychology-related. This is also true for your work *Il Giardino di Psiche* (The Garden of Psyche). How do such links evolve?

When I am travelling, I am often deeply impressed by the richness of wild life, the vast variety of forms, the beauty of landscapes. The painting *Rêverie* reflects my ideas of how an image evolves, how I create a garden of imagination. Plants which I see during a trip to the countryside lose their distinctive features and change in the garden of my fantasy which is a further step in a transformation process.



Silvia Stocchetto: *Rêverie* (2017). Photo: Filippo Giacometti.

For me, this reflects an inner experience of beauty which can also be found in *Il Giardino di Psiche*. The painting shows serpentine leaves which are superficially motionless but still appear to be animate and full of strength. They reveal unusual and hidden forms. For me, they evoke inner images and ancestral memories of organic life before birth when forms are sensed and not seen. Through reflection upon nature an imaginary garden emerges in which emotions transform and change forms. The garden symbolised ancient memories of life in nature before our time.



Silvia Stocchetto: *Il Giardino di Psiche* (2016). Photo: Filippo Giacometti.

You mentioned that art and science have a lot in common and that both draw inspiration from the search of the unknown. Could you please elaborate on this idea.

Both the natural sciences and art strive to make something visible which is as yet unknown, invisible. These efforts involve a high degree of uncertainty and doubt, fear of failure, fear of emptiness. This is true for the empty canvas as well as laboratory work. Experience with observational skills is an important prerequisite of the type of analytical painting style which I pursue. Scientific insights are limited. As an artist I address fundamental questions related to the meaning of human existence. The unrest, the quest is compensated to some degree by the power of imagination which offers some comfort – this is another example of what science and painting have in common.

Are there features of your former scientific work which have a negative impact on your work as an artist?

Initially my approach was too analytical, blocking access to my imagination and my inner visual world. My pictorial language developed gradually as my imagination became increasingly more liberal and richer. The early period characterised by observation and reproduction bore fruit, however, since I was able to continue to improve my very precise and detailed style of painting. I developed a novel view of nature which in turn had a strong effect on my inner images and their artistic implementation. I think that because of the many years of exposure to forms in nature it has been virtually impossible for me to dedicate myself to abstract painting – and now I do not want to.

Silvia Stocchetto, thank you very much for this interview.

Picture above article: Silvia Stocchetto next to her painting *L'idolo* (2018), oil on canvas, 105 x 80 cm, oil on canvas. Photo: Irene Daum

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