

## Becoming Nature: On Michele Fletcher's Painting

Michele Fletcher is a Canadian-born artist who lives and works in London. Her work emerges from close-up encounters with vegetal life. Until recently it also emerged from her garden in Leyton, where she built a "beautiful, light-filled studio" in 2017, before outgrowing the space last year. In our Latest Reads, we reflect on the series 'Garden', Patricia Fleming Gallery at NADA Miami 2023. Fletcher talks of the sequence, which began when she was "immersed" in her allotment during the first Covid lockdown, as "abstracted botanical ruminations on a year in the garden... they kind of cycle through the seasons in terms of colour."

This series conjure lithe, sinuous forms with wide, fluted and calligraphic brushstrokes, in tones ranging from the verdant to the down-right psychedelic: from deep green to startling violet. Colour spectrums can be traced both between and within brushstrokes, attuning the eye to different scales and rhythms of movement, suggesting the possibility of infinite extension or regression. The shapes allude, by turns, to great density – a lush undergrowth – and to massive spaciousness or depth, as if they were emerging from a hidden core of brightness. Names like *Water the Soul That Plants the Seed*, *In between Two Worlds*, and *To Be Green* hint at the human-vegetal tryst to which Fletcher invites us.

Sometimes a particular approach to abstract art suddenly seems ripe with topicality, with connections to new developments in how human beings think and feel about themselves in relation to the world. But, by the very nature of the medium, the work won't offer up its wisdom in language. It's obvious to point out but it seems relevant here because Fletcher is not an artist who will write the label for you. "Basically, I'm a painter. I push pigments around on a surface... Spirituality, plant thinking, non-human agency, the way plants recreate themselves and how that can influence human creativity. All this can be layered on top of what I do, but ultimately it's process-led abstraction." Best to start with the material facts, then: the painting process. Such are the otherworldly effects and forms Fletcher creates, it's tempting to assume some secret, sacred method is involved. "It's not a secret," Fletcher says. "I paint on primed linen using oils, thinning them to make them transparent. I use soft brushes called mottlers. I may mix some of the colours on my palette but mostly I mix during the painting process, working wet on wet. That's how I achieve that quality of depth. Because the colours are translucent, the ground will often show through and that's how I get the sense of light." Often, the primed linen is covered with a base layer of terre verte, a browny green that softens and tempers the colours applied subsequently and creates a binding, earthy undertone. "At the end of the day if I have paint left on my pallet, I use it to sketch *Night Studies* on paper."

What about those curved shapes, suggestive of some endlessly self-reproductive system, bearing fractal depths? "Those emerge from my imagination," she offers. "I don't use source material, like a photograph. But I've been working with the natural world for so long that I have a vocabulary that I draw on subconsciously, if that makes sense." A bit of biography might be useful here, then. "I was born in a small agricultural town in Ontario and did a series of farm jobs, including planting and harvesting fruit and vegetables, from the time I was about 12 until I was 20, so I was immersed in plant culture from an early age." In recent years, the artist has tended to an allotment near her home in east London, "which has also had an influence on my making."

These experiences of plant-life as something to be held, smelt, and nurtured, offer some clues as to why the landscape tradition in painting seems a buried rather than eye-level influence in Fletcher's images. She refers to Japanese landscape painting of the Kan and Edo period as an influence filtered through artists such as Whistler, whose liquidity of facture is an obvious reference-point. "That in turn feeds into Monet for example, but if I was going to single out a landscape painter who has influenced me the most it would be Corot".

The idea of tracing the qualities of light on foliage at different times of day might well be admired in a large landscape painting by Corot or indeed from Monet. But, unlike these artists, Fletcher gives us nature close-up, from a gardener's perspective.

Put another way, Fletcher's paintings of (or with) nature suggest a bodily rather than exclusively visual encounter, led by something like muscle memory, a set of manoeuvres established over years of working with plants that somehow enact plant-like motions, assume plant-like dimensions. The Garden series emerges from the endlessly various expression of a set of basic formal possibilities, yielding an impression of organic propagation or fecundity, unconscious in the post-Enlightenment sense. Here and there we find the visual hint of a stalk or stem, an unfurling leaf or hooded stamen. But the underpinning compositional logic is more crucially plant-like than is its visible surface.

Of course, if we take away the botanical references, there are art-historical precedents for the kind of 'all-over' effect described here. Fletcher talks in particular about her interest in 1950s painterly abstraction: Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, et al. Some of these artists painted flowers, of course. Still, once we have reintroduced the vegetal as a dimension of Fletcher's aesthetic, a philosophical rubric somehow seems more pertinent to a full appreciation of her art than a medium-specific one.

The art historian Barry Phipps has referred to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as a way of framing the encounter between human and plant-life in Fletcher's paintings, "[t]he reciprocal process of 'seeing and being seen', or 'touching and being touched'... 'one of the essential ingredients of perception'." Jumping forwards in time, the contemporary, object-oriented ecology of Timothy Morton seems relevant too, in particular their call to imagine human life as a facet and expression of nature, to work against the "traumatic severing of human-nonhuman relations" in the western scientific tradition (see Morton's *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People*). Perhaps above all, the philosophy of Michael Marder, who writes of opening up western metaphysics to the influence of ego-less "plant intelligence," is a key to unlock some hidden sancta within Fletcher's painted spaces.

In *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetable Life*, Marder talks of how "human thinking is, to some extent, de-humanized and rendered plant-like, altered by its encounter with the vegetal world." It is perhaps partly in this context that we can consider the qualities of spiritual encounter or insight that seem to accrue to the artist's surfaces—though there is also, undeniably, an element of romantic phantasmagoria to this. If titles like *Under the Acid Sky* and *Opiate* nudge us in the latter direction, others, like *Verdant Myth* and *Viriditas* – meaning "greenness," a reference to the writing of Hildegard von Bingen – suggest a kind of post-human mysticism (though Fletcher is sceptical of that word), an openness to what Marder calls the "vegetal soul."

We might think of algorithms, too, as we trace the trills and twists of Fletcher's process-led abstraction, and thus of the current explosion in AI art, in which the compositional process is given over literally and explicitly to non-human intelligence. Fletcher's work serves as both analogy and antidote to the fatigue-inducing spectacle of much of this new genre. If it involves a similar collaborative encounter, it implies a quite antithetical emphasis on organic intelligence and thus, perhaps, a step back from the ceaseless flow of information and stimulation that populates the digital realm in which our own animal intelligences now seem semi-permanently embedded. "There's a real need to think about our connections to nature at the moment," Fletcher offers, "because we're at a breaking point." These paintings offer us the chance to sit with the intelligence of nature, and perhaps to become something new.

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