

Botanicas/os: Plants and Personal Metaphors

by

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Flowers are odd creatures that look like body parts emerging from the ground. I am interested in their forms and I anthropomorphize my plants that I draw and paint. My work consists of images of voluptuous botanicals and their bodily fluids. In my paintings, I create metaphors that connect to the female body, beauty and disgust, maternal relationships, ovarian cancer, and sexual desires. My forms are dewy, round, organic, and plushy.

My interest in botanicals started out with my attraction to flowers. My father, who works in landscaping, has worked with plants for many years and introduced me to various flowers. He sends me pictures of flowers he doesn't know, so I can help identify them. I use my garden as a reference to create my botanical artwork. My work is informed by familial relationships and stories, and scientific research.

When a flower in a vase is drooping and becomes discolored, it can start to release a brown liquid. I listen to crime podcasts while I paint and I realized that a similar thing happens to a decomposing body. It releases gases and fluids that then attract bugs to come and devour the flesh. Tree sap is another example of plant discharge. In Mexico, my father with his father foraged for food while hunting for hares in mountain's forests to sell. They would chew tree bark and eat wild cactus, either raw or cooked to burn off their thorns. Foraging was and still is a way of survival. Burning moist wood also releases a white bubbly foam. My father told us that if a child still wets the bed, putting some of this foam on their belly button will make them stop. This is a common belief in Mexico. The fluid from the wood helps control the bodily fluid of a child. This is an odd form of care. These examples of plant fluids sparked my interest and allowed me to compare them to the human body. We bleed. We drool. We cry. We

discharge. I think about the tension between beauty and disgust while creating my paintings. My work isn't explicitly bloody and grotesque, but includes disturbing combinations.

Most of my plants are leaking. I use bodily fluids to add a realistic human quality that is also uncomfortable to bring up such as bleeding, crying, and cumming. The bleeding tooth fungus is a fungi that releases red sap from its spores that is forced out from the inside.¹ Cacti store their water supply inside of its body. I compare these biological functions to how I deal with my emotions. I keep my emotions inside and protect myself, until "prick" something triggers me and tears pour out. *Nopal* was my first drawing of a crying cactus. The cactus flower is posed in a waving position, while a tear comes out.

Plants do not sexually climax, but a flower's sexual reproduction is communicated and carried by bees, wind, insects, and animals to reproduce more of their kind. I explore ways to expose their mating system while expressing sexual desires. I also try to include my body insecurities. *Blush* is an intimate image where each plant below is sharing the mayo colored discharge from the hairy round poppy plant, similar to pubic hair. The pink, puckering lips are trying to consume the discharge, while other flowers wait for their turn or die of thirst. In an opium poppy, the sap is

¹ Fearnley, Kirstin. "Weird & Wonderful Creatures: Bleeding Tooth Fungus." *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, 4 July 2016, www.aaas.org/news/weird-wonderful-creatures-bleeding-tooth-fungus.

classified as a narcotic and is very addictive². In response to this, sexual pleasure can become very addicting. In a study done by the University of Lincoln, “plants can be separated as male and female or have a female and hermaphroditic plants coexist within a population.”³ Plants can change sex depending on the level of light they get. Prior to discovering this in my research, I did not think flowers had genders. I explore the themes of gender and sexuality in my paintings.

In *Puff*, cacti flowers are suckling on yellow and puffy breast-like clouds. Teal liquid leaks out between the cloud and flowers. The liquid drips onto the fallen petals on the bottom of the painting. Cacti are drinking directly from their water source. This painting was the third version of suckling plants that I made. Instead of breasts, they also look like thighs. Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* comes to mind when looking at *Puff*⁴. Courbet's painting shows that the origin of the world, to a human, is the vagina. Humans “pop” out of there and become a part of the human race. In contrast with *Puff*, I create the act of breastfeeding. This action isn't seen in plants, but the clouds are part of their energy source and symbolize a maternal figure. Courbet's painting shocked the viewers for being too explicit, but the image is part of the female

² Armstrong. “The Opium Poppy (Papaver Somniferum).” *Opium Poppy*, Wayne's Word, 4 Apr. 2021, www2.palomar.edu/users/warmstrong/opium.htm.

³ University of Lincoln. “New Research Sheds Light on Why Plants Change Sex.” *ScienceDaily*, ScienceDaily, 10 Jan. 2017, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/01/170110094606.htm.

⁴ Courbet, Gustave. *The Origin of the World*. 1866. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire_id/the-origin-of-the-world-3122

anatomy. Breastfeeding is taboo and considered inappropriate to do in public, but this action is natural and necessary. People are offended to see what they came out of and what they suckled on for months to get their milk. It is a shame that the female body and how we feed our young is still considered taboo.

After *Puff*, I made *Plush Sky*. I used polyfill and a blue tie-dyed cotton shirt. This soft sculpture is formed from my attraction to plushy and cloud-like shapes. It is small, portable and lightweight. The body consists of a head and two puffy legs. A formal similarity to *Plush Sky* is the mandrake root as seen in *Pan's Labyrinth*⁵. The root is shaped as a human body. Its shape is also similar to the Venus figurines found dating back to the Late Stone Age⁶. Thought to symbolize fertility and sex, these figurines can also be a symbol of survival in response to the cold climate at the time⁷. In colder conditions, the figurines looked much more swollen and voluptuous than figurines from warmer climates⁸. For *Plush Sky*, my goal was to make the sky physical to touch and be a cute little discovery for the viewers. In response to the ever changing sky, this sculpture shows the ideal sky I would like to see every day. *Plush Sky* is like carrying a soft sky baby around.

⁵ Toro, Guillermo del, director. *Pan's Labyrinth*. Telecinco Cinema, 2006.

⁶ Unknown. *Venus of Willendorf*. 24,000- 22,000 BCE. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna, www.nhm-wien.ac.at/presse/top10/venus_of_willendorf

⁷ Dockrill, Peter. "Stone Age 'Venus Figurines' Have a New Explanation, And It's Surprisingly Touching." *ScienceAlert*, 2 Dec. 2020, www.sciencealert.com/the-mystery-of-the-enigmatic-venus-figurines-has-a-surprising-new-solution.

⁸ Dockrill, Peter. "Stone Age 'Venus Figurines' Have a New Explanation, And It's Surprisingly Touching." *ScienceAlert*, 2 Dec. 2020, www.sciencealert.com/the-mystery-of-the-enigmatic-venus-figurines-has-a-surprising-new-solution.

Specific plants are used to make drugs and medicine. Inspired by the ideas of the ethnobotanist Terence McKenna, psychedelic research became a new interest of mine. He talks of his experience of consuming psychedelics and why they are consumed in indigenous cultures. “The psychedelic experience is as central to understanding your humanness.”⁹ This quote compares something very human, like giving birth, to that psychedelic experience. In my paintings, I am combining a human experience, like breastfeeding, within plants. In *Untitled*, the teal liquid dripping from the red hermaphroditic flower morphs into multiple teal phallic-like flowers. Drips become plant forms. I made my interpretation of what a psychedelic episode can look like, not for the viewers, but for my plants’ experience.

Cara Chan is an artist that makes bodily sculptures of busts. She scavengers for rocks that look like breasts, nipples, vaginas, penises, sphincters, or faces¹⁰. She also created fruit that were made to look like sexual forms based on “Chinese symbology wherein peaches, pomegranates, finger-citron, and fungi represent fertility, effluvia, genitalia.”¹¹ Like Chan, I combine body parts found in nature and on humans to create my plants. Cacti, orchids and clouds can represent protection, unconditional love, fertility, and sexuality. My plants are very bodily and become butts, phallus, vaginas, breasts, eyes, and mouths. If her fruits and my plants were real, I don’t think anyone would want to go near them.

⁹ TheOmegaPointProject, director. *Psychedelics: An Illegal Experience [Terence McKenna]*, YouTube, 21 Oct. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dr8Y9EMQVRQ.

¹⁰ “CARA CHAN.” *Ochi Gallery*, www.ochigallery.com/exhibition/cara-chan/.

¹¹ “CARA CHAN FRESH FRUITS.” OCHI SHOP, 5 Dec. 2020, www.ochishop.com/product/cara-chan-fresh-fruits/.

Most of my work lacks background and is floating in space. Subconsciously, I set them up as if they were religious icons. I come from a Catholic background and have many pictures of saints around the house. Multiple versions of the Virgin Mary, Jesus figurines, guardian angels, and saints. During Sunday mass, I ignored sermons and only looked at the dramatic statues, reliefs, and priest robes. Personally, I like images of saints for their elegance, softness and their "perfect" look. In images of the Virgin Mary, she floats alone surrounded by clouds and beams of light. In *Untitled: Orchid*, the white orchid flower leaks a bright green slimy discharge. There is a dark bruising in the bottom center of the flower. These cut-outs are placed upon the wall and stand on their own. This is similar to how pictures of saints are hung in my home. It's like the object is more precious than the actual saint. Flowers are handled carefully to avoid bruising and damaging the flower, but precious flowers are only temporary. In a way, I'm making the flowers permanent and making them the ideal religious icon.

In *Putto*, I arranged three flowers in a triangle composition. "Symbolically, the triangle can represent a spiritual hierarchy, particularly in Christianity where the trinity is depicted in three points of significance.¹²" The holy trinity being the father, son, and the holy ghost. Instead, in *Putto*, it's the vulva, phallus and anus. There is a blue phallic flower bud, a puffy pink vulva orchid, and pink hairy butt shaped petals in a soft blue sky. These forms are similar to winged infant children that symbolize love and fertility and hold the highest angelic order. This drawing started out as a sketch for *Untitled*, but I became interested in their angelic appearance and the composition they formed.

¹² twfineart. "The Triangle in Visual Art." Twfineart, 8 July 2014, twfineart.myshopify.com/blogs/tw-fineart/18267385-the-triangle-in-visual-art.

I tend to mix a lot of white in my paintings and maintain a light color temperature that hardly contains any contrast. I believe these colors attract and seduce the viewer to trap them. Like a form of sexual deception to trap bees. Orchids change their appearance and smell to lure in insects.¹³ Kinke Kooi is an artist that does this to her viewers. She makes pastel colored drawings of fleshy organ shapes mixed with vegetation. Her images are light and beautiful, but unsettling. Some of her forms look like caterpillars, tentacles, intestines or peapods. As Scheper explains it, her forms are “whirling upward like opulent draperies and forming sensitive rises and declivities.”¹⁴ My paintings are light in color, but combine plants with lips and genitalia.

Abrir is my latest cacti drawing. In other cacti paintings, the cacti are flowering and dripping, but these cacti are exposing their interior form. The openings suggest mouths, eyes, and vaginal openings with thorns surrounding the glowy pink voids. This drawing started out as a sketch, but after making one cactus, I drew two more. The composition became similar to a family portrait. I compare cacti to my family because they have a hard and protective exterior, but filled with a sensitive and slimy core. *Abrir* also represents the opening of the womb and incisions made on the body. I used my family history of ovarian cancer, oophorectomy, hysterectomy, and midwifery. This involves my maternal and paternal grandmothers, and my maternal great grandmother who was a midwife and delivered many babies in Guatemala.

¹³ “The Sexual Deception of Orchids - Anne Gaskett.” *YouTube*, 14 Feb. 2019, youtu.be/hml-rJuYAjw.

¹⁴ Scheper, Moritz. “Kinke Kooi at Lucas Hirsch.” *Kinke Kooi at Lucas Hirsch - Artforum International*, 15 Oct. 2019, www.artforum.com/picks/kinke-kooi-81020.

A story that was repeatedly told to my siblings and I was our birth story. My mother gave birth to four children all through c-section. Her abdomen was cut open, us taken out and then she was stapled back together. In *Cicatrices*, the ripples and folds are her deep scars and the whole forms are representations of her ovarian cysts. Her ovarian cysts would grow larger with every birth. Each yellow cushion looks as if they are wrapped around a baby being cradled. Like in Raphael's *Madonna in the Meadow*, the composition is in the shape of a triangle¹⁵. His triangle is positioned pointing up to represent ascension. *Cicatrices* composition is pointing down, to represent a descent to the physical world. *Cicatrices* was based off of a soft sculpture I made. It is yellow and tumorous. I exaggerated the folds, lumps, color, their glow, and added a hairy red dot in the center of each yellow form.

From this soft sculpture, I made a series of plant plushies, *Tiny Peluches*. They are the physical versions of my botanicals and can easily fit in the hand. I construct them as small plant altars, similar to religious altars I have around my home, placing flowers with religious figures and a candle. I like making my soft sculptures hand held because I used to really like small plush toys and collect a bunch. I also repeat the voluptuous bodies from *Plush Sky*. Plants need a piece of the sky.

Ver Mis Trenzas combines both braids and botanicals. I used to work with braids in my past work and wanted to combine it with my botanical paintings. Braids are a form of protection in my family. In this painting, braids are coming out of a pale green vulva shaped cactus. Cacti and braids are both prickly and biomorphic. In the blue

¹⁵ Sanzio, Raffaello. *Madonna in the Meadow*. 1506. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Vienna. Kha.at, www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/1502

background, there are three openings resembling the yellow forms from *Abrir*. Two of them are gazing at the cacti in front of them while one is consuming a bigger braid.

Family became symbolized in some of my plants. But before that, the botanicals were based on the shapes that attracted me to plants. It started out with “how strange can I make flowers look?” I represent female anatomy, I anthropomorphize them, I make them leak and drink from each other. Some of my artwork became sexual and abject, but then started to become caring and familial. The suckling plants can look like a strange fetish, but when compared to breastfeeding, they became metaphors for maternal relationships. When I use orifices and leaking plants, I think of the vaginas. But when I think of vaginas, I can’t help but think of my family history and of how it affects me now and in the future. It is a part of my body that I feel uncomfortable with, but also want to explore more about. My botanicals do look “hot”, “steamy” and voluptuous, but also alien like. I am usually thinking about attraction and repulsion. What will attract me and what will disturb me.

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Unknown. *Venus of Willendorf*. 24,000- 22,000 BCE. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna, www.nhm-wien.ac.at/presse/top10/venus_of_willendorf



Nopal, 2020, chalk pastel on paper, 22in x 20in



Blush, 2020, chalk pastel, acrylic, ink on paper, 44in x 30 in



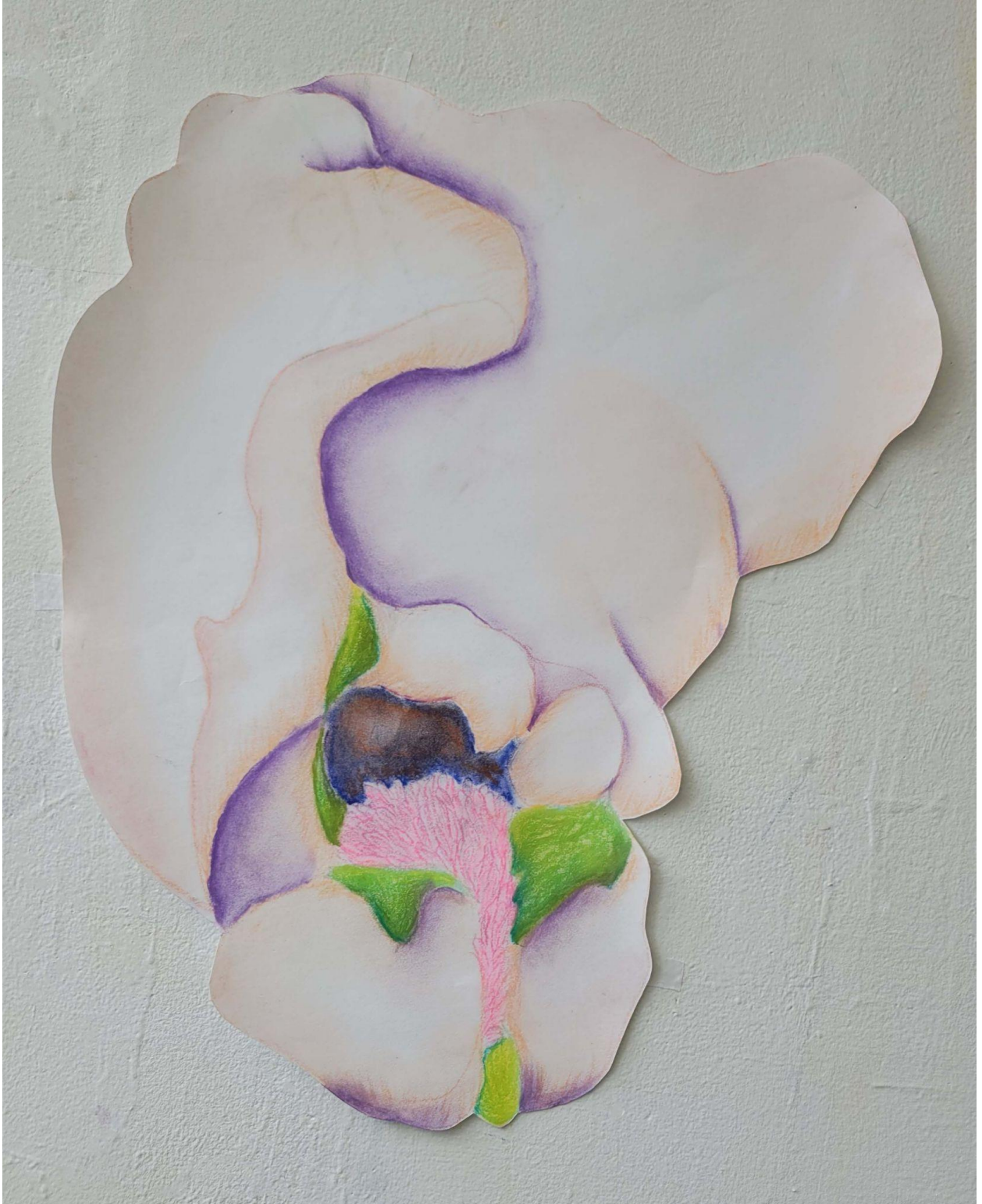
Puff, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 6ft x 4ft



Plush Sky, 2020, poly-fil and cotton fabric, 5½ in



Untitled, 2021, oil on canvas, 55in x 40in



Untitled: Orchid, 2021, chalk pastel on paper, 22in



Putto, 2021, chalk pastel on paper, 22.5in x 30in



Abrir, 2021, chalk pastel and pencil on paper, 32in x 35in



Cicatrices, 2021, oil and acrylic in canvas, 44in x 60in



Tiny Peluches, 2021, mixed media



Ver Mis Trenzas, 2021, oil on canvas, 24in x 30in