

# ***Paroxysm of Sublime: from a vision of Los Angeles to a vision of the world***

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Dorothee Saillard

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Paroxysm of Sublime, Installation view. (Left to right) Etienne de France, Eddie Aparicio, SMITH x DIPLOMATES, Daniel Otero Torres, iris yirei hu, Eva Nielsen. France Los Angeles Exchange (FLAX) at LACE. Photo credits Christopher Wormald

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**Presented by FLAX in partnership with LACE, *Paroxysm of Sublime* is curated by Flax Program Director Anna Milone and Associate Curator Ana Iwataki. Exploring ideas such as “imparadise Los Angeles” and “solastalgia”, the 16 French and international artists open the conversation in time and space to our own connection to an ever-changing environment. Anna Milone, together with French artists Sara Favriau, Eva Nielsen and Daniel Otero Torres who created their works when in residency with FLAX, and Beatriz Cortez, the Los Angeles artist and scholar born in San Salvador, extend the discussion here below.**

## **Anna, how did your approach to California and Los Angeles cityscape influence the curating of *Paroxysm of Sublime*?**

Anna Milone: *Paroxysm of Sublime*, whose title comes from a poem by French artist Sara Favriau written after her residency with FLAX in 2018, is the result of two years of research that started with Los Angeles and its unique relationship to nature. Once you live here, you realize that trees and flowers are very much part of the cityscape and the visual identity of the city.

The book *Trees in Paradise* by Jared Farmer, subtitled « The Botanical conquest of California » taught me that there were never as many trees in California as today whereas we regularly read articles about trees dying in Los Angeles, whether from insects or as a result of drought echoing the fantasized dystopia associated with the city.

The book tells the story of the Los Angeles ecosystem which was completely transformed by man for several reasons including the affective. Settlers started to bring plants from their home land to recreate a familiar environment. New introductions occurred with a marketing movement called « imparadise Los Angeles » in the early 20th Century, bringing « exotic » plants and green trees with the aim of transforming the city into an idyllic Garden of Eden according to its Western conception. Lush greens lawns and big trees providing a lot of shade in the desert climate of Southern California.

### **That's when « solastalgia » comes in?**

A. M.: According to Jared Farmer, natural colonization is the most insidious one as it looks natural! Thinking about these ideas of a constructed nature to represent an ideal place but also bringing plants to recreate a familiar environment, I discovered the concept of « solastalgia » developed by an Australian philosopher, Glenn Albrecht: an illness at once psycho and somatic—affecting humanity at large, caused by a changing, once-familiar environment, whose fate seems beyond our control.

Home becomes first uncanny, then hostile, until we feel estranged in a place we never left. This concept took us on a philosophical journey, analyzing and deconstructing concepts such as *nature*, *culture*, *home*, *environment* mostly inherited from the 18th Century Enlightenment theorists. A humanist vision also means a Human centric approach that needs to be challenged today to adapt to the current social, economical and ecological state of our homes.

The artists we brought together tell the story of this exchange between the Old and the New Worlds through the travels of plants, the creation of exotism, the coining of this humanistic and romantic vision of nature, other relations between man and the natural world but also of speculative philosophies trying to shift our current paradigm, taking inspiration from the subterranean, parasitism, the cosmos or by fictional situations like one in which the Sun devours the Moon.



Paroxysm of Sublime. France Los Angeles Exchange (FLAX) at LACE. Sara Favriau, Miel, 2019. Mixed medias. Dimensions variable. Photo credits Christopher Wormald.

**Sara, *Miel* poetically navigates between Paris and Los Angeles. Tell us its story.**

Sara Favriau: When I came to Los Angeles, I chose tree species available both in Europe and in Los Angeles and thought about the idea of produce locally. I decided to track the whole production line from wood to plywood. The main specie is birch and the transportation boxes are made of the same wood as each piece.

Then, I wanted to send the pieces that were created in France to Los Angeles without coming back there for two reasons. We talk more about nature than about humans nowadays, though both are connected. Also, I wanted to refer to Joseph Beuys' performance and to his decision not to step foot in America and to lock himself in a room with a coyote, notably exploring themes such as wildness and domestication.

As a result, the boxes are upholstered in felt and the pieces are slit, which reflects on the idea of bandages and scars. *Colonies*, an olive branch with pieces of birch bark, evokes a form of colonization of two species based on the notion of cutting, on the intrusion of felt, and on the intervention of a human being when inserting something into a branch after piercing it.

Animism, transhumance and otherness were the ideas that guided me, together with ritualizing the works transportation as I wanted to question these notions of otherness,

travel, disappearance and cult of personality, since I was away from the installation and the opening, even though I had worked on the spatial installation.



Paroxysm of Sublime. France Los Angeles Exchange (FLAX) at LACE. Sara Favriau, Une voix béante, un genre tandem. C'était la paix (A gaping voice, a tandem genre. It was peace), 2019. Birch, birch plywood, linen felt, olive. Dimensions variable. Photo credits Christopher Wormald.

### **How does your thinking about nature and human aspects run through your practice?**

S. F.: I realize that my whole life has been turned to a form of ambiguity and of sensitivity, that may in a way refer to animism, somehow.

My work is eclectic and includes numerous references to art history, navigating between a wild side and sculpture which, along with the conceptual aspect, take root in time. I also write poetry. I feel double at various levels and today, I think that I have my rightful place to keep relying on intuition and explore ideas as analogies as well as our sensitive aspects.

Referring to the works of Baptiste Morizot and Nastassja Martin on *the time of myth*, that time devoted to hybrid, therefore uncontrollable creatures, I joke about being one of those, as per my eclecticism. Staying tuned to our sensitive side is also a way to figure out our multifaceted aspect. Actually, *Miel* is hybrid, multiple and poetic. As such, it aims to develop an ethic language rather than moral. Then, it brings the idea of crossing, but not only the ocean. It is also about being moved by my work myself, as well as the visitors, hopefully.

**Eva, you work with that kind of collision between old masterpieces landscapes and those modern textured architectural shapes. What struck you about Los Angeles?**

Eva Nielsen: I came twice to Los Angeles for residencies. My first cinematic feeling and fascination echoed with many people first impression of the city I guess. The second time, I could better concentrate on the failures of the city, its history, structure, and the connections between the neighborhoods, since nothing is hidden. As you go through the city, you find different strong sequences with massive and varied constructions. I was particularly fascinated by the L.A. River where I spent a lot of time.

Wherever I go, I love going to the suburbs to observe evolutions, constructions, destructions. Witnessing these layers of the city which are linked to the history of each place fascinates me. I went to Detroit, Chicago, Toronto, Pittsburg... In fact, architecture and housing are always connected to something deeper.



Paroxysm of Sublime. France Los Angeles Exchange (FLAX) at LACE. Eva Nielsen (left to right) Polhodie III, 2019 (78.75 x 71 in), Hard Sun, 2017 (35.4 x 27.5 in) Collection of Danny First Los Angeles, Aphakie, 2019 (75 x 55 in). Oil and silkscreening on canvas. Photo credits Christopher Wormald.

## **The exhibition is a conversation among time and places and your work stands near a painting by Hubert Robert...**

E. N.: As a joke, I once told Anna Milone that having my work next to this piece by Hubert Robert was like playing the opening act of my favorite band! He was very original for his time and was fascinated by things people usually don't notice, which I relate to since cities are made of numerous and insignificant poor materials and details that outlast us and tell our stories, then disappear too. Architecture is both about what is left and about vanity. We build cities knowing that they will survive us.

I use fragments from the city, resize and reproduce them with silkscreen. Under Los Angeles' light which underlines its contrasts, material details are perfectly revealed. You can even clearly see the dust during the golden hour.

## **Daniel, *El Borrachero* dates back to your recent residency with FLAX 2019 in Los Angeles, you were born in Colombia and live in France. What does this crossover vision bring to your practice?**

Daniel Otero Torres: I moved to France when I was 19. I experienced a dual and continuous understanding by living overseas. Perception about difference changes as you realize what you have and had simultaneously. The fact of missing while being in a constant state of learning is a big motor with a persistent flow of research and creation to overcome that special kind of emptiness which is then rewritten with the new things you encounter.

Being a foreigner through the gaze of others occurs in your two worlds and also in your own self. I consider myself as a cultural blend. In my work, although the eye doesn't forget the original sun of birth, the question about the subject has become more global, as our problematics nowadays, and more centralized on Latin America itself.

The idea behind my work is that we are able to project ourselves somewhere else, depending on the subjectivity of each individual. For me, displacement is directly linked with learning. Being born in Colombia and living in France is definitely linked to my practice.

One of the first steps of my working process is photography. My subjects are constantly merging and existing within a space where there is no place for cultural hierarchies. I perceived Los Angeles as a complex of multiples enclaves and its cultural diversity as a powerful melting point where relationship to otherness is constantly taking place...



Paroxysm of Sublime. France Los Angeles Exchange (FLAX) at LACE. Daniel Otero Torres, *El Borrachero*, 2019. Aluminum, stainless steel. Dimensions variable. Photo credits Daniel Otero Torres.

### **This mobile, *El Borrachero*, refers to the Bogotazo...**

D. O. T.: *El Borrachero* is a series of hand drawings on aluminum, in constant movement, a comeback to the roots of a significant moment in the history of Colombia. It connects past, present, and what is happening globally, in Latin America nowadays, with that growing flow of demonstrations trying to wake up governments.

The flowers in the piece are called « Angel's Trumpets » in Los Angeles. These floating brugmansias are called Borrachero in Colombia. When referred to flowers, there is often a contradiction between their beauty and their true use. Traditionally used for rituals by the Muisca (ancient community from Colombia), they have multiple medical characteristics and a derived substance, scopolamine, which can block a person's ability to form memories, and temporarily inhibit his ability to make free will choices.

The hands were extracted from a historical photograph of Sady Gonzales taken in 1948 during the riots of El Bogotazo that started because of the assassination of the leader of the liberal party, Jorge Elieser Gaitan. These hands are waving machetes, canes and other objects. I erased them. Likewise, any other object can mentally replace the emptiness in these hands. For me, this mobile expresses both constant movement and inertia that can be felt within a manifestation.

**Beatriz, can you speak about your installation, *Our Roots*?**

Beatriz Cortez: *Our Roots* was first created in 2014 and re-created for this exhibition, *Paroxysm of Sublime*. The work engages with the concept of « our roots » that is often used in reference to Indigenous Peoples of the Americas by Latin American peoples who are not of Indigenous background. This contributes to push Indigenous peoples to the past, as the discourse of our nations does, as the discourse of colonialism has done for centuries, and to imagine Indigenous peoples as a fixed component of our past, as backward, as uncivilized.

My work is about the opposite, I collaborate with Indigenous communities, I have a lot of friends, mentors, collaborators who are Indigenous. I want to imagine their knowledge, their technologies, their cultures surviving in the future. This installation engages with these ideas as it also explores issues of diversity (all the root balls are different), rhizomatic growth (the root balls grow in many different directions), and life under the ground, the subterranean world. Lately, my work has been engaging with the subterranean world, which is not meant for humans but is full of life, negotiations, interactions...



Paroxysm of Sublime. France Los Angeles Exchange (FLAX) at LACE. Beatriz Cortez, *Our Roots / Nuestras raíces*, 2014-2019. Plants and trees. Dimensions variable. Photo credits Christopher Wormald.



**As part of *Paroxysm of Sublime, A Rush of Stories* was the occasion to deepen the conversation. On October 22nd, you gave a talk, *A Dialogue of Nomads: Brown Border Crossers in Conversation with Dead French Philosophers...***

B. C.: I was interested in showing the ways in which philosophers such as Pierre Clastres, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari had engaged with the ideas of Indigenous communities in the Americas, particularly through the work of Clastres, who produced an important work: *Society Against the State*, exploring ideas about life and law outside modernity.

Deleuze and Guattari expanded on these ideas, particularly as they worked on their conceptualizations of the nomad, the war machine, or imagined time outside chronologies. I wanted to illustrate how brown border crossers such as myself, the scholars and artists who engage with their work here in Los Angeles, and who have inspired my work, are continuing a conversation that is engaged with both, these philosophies of movement and nomadism, and Indigenous philosophies about how to be in the world.

More than anything, I wanted to question that these philosophers' works are French or Latin American. As a thinker of nomadism I cannot imagine ideas belonging to a nation, they come from elsewhere. So I spoke also about Spinoza's condition of exile from his family's land and community, as he was working on ideas about life outside modernity. I think these ideas are connected across time and space. They are about nomadism, they don't respect borders or diagrams.

**By Dorothee Saillard**

**Currently on view or upcoming shows (selection):**

Sara Favriau, « An Instant Before the World », Rabat Biennial  
*September 24 – December 18, 2019*

Eva Nielsen, « Persona Grata? » at MAC VAL, Vitry-sur-Seine, France  
*March 30, 2019 – January 5, 2020*

Daniel Otero Torres, « Así fue », at The Pill, Istanbul, Turkey  
*November 20, 2019 – January 20, 2020*

Beatriz Cortez, « Memory Insertion Capsule », « In Plain Sight » at Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA  
*November 23, 2019 - April 26, 2020*

**Paroxysm of Sublime FLAX (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions)**

**in partnership with LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions)**

**curated by Flax Program Director Anna Milone and Associate Curator Ana Iwataki**

18 septembre – 3 novembre 2019

With : [Eddie Aparicio](#), [Carmen Argote](#), [Beatriz Cortez](#), [Sara Favriau](#), [Etienne de France](#), [David Horvitz](#), [iris yirei hu](#), [Candice Lin](#), [Laura Huertas Millán](#), [Eva Nielsen](#), [Nine Herbs Charm \(Eric Kim, Hannah Mjølunes, Saewon Oh\)](#), [Hubert Robert](#), [SMITH x DIPLOMATES](#) and [Daniel Otero Torres](#)

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