

# Nerve Bushes Like Coral Forests

Regina de Miguel

The mission of the right eye is to peer through the telescope  
while the left one peeps through the microscope  
— Leonora Carrington

This group of paintings is the result of the imaginary evoked in a science fiction story I wrote in April of the strange year 2020.

The story places us in a future in which the colonisation of space has been taking place for several centuries, to such an extent that there are already ruins throughout the galaxy, old-fashioned tourist complexes and even a museum with the most important art collection known: replicas and copies of all the art produced by humanity throughout its history.

The protagonist, a biologist in the middle of an exploration route, is forced to interrupt her journey because a virus, a pandemic that requires confinement, is holding her hostage in a hotel on a planet halfway between Earth (already almost abandoned) and the planet Exile, on which she is completing her thesis. In the solitary building, she wanders around and observes a garden with strange mutations:



Regina de Miguel *Arbustos de nervios como bosques de coral*, 2020.  
Watercolour gouache and pencil on paper, each 48 × 36 cm.

368

*I did not come here for reasons of chimerical and twilight tourism or to contemplate the catastrophe, something that became fashionable centuries ago. No, I was just passing through on a research mission on alien archaeology on the planet Exile.*

*I have been working on it since the distant days of the red rain in Kerala and I was on Deception Island before that. I am especially interested in bacteria.*

*The hotel is very understaffed. Nothing goes up to the rooms and the people here sit individually at tables covered by screens to avoid contagion. Something like this happened in the twenty-first century on Earth before the colonies.*

*At that time, it was not known that there are reciprocal links between terrestrial epidemics and cosmic chemistry, but there are. The galactic centre, with its black hole, functions like a dandelion that spreads all kinds of objects outwards like the asteroids that carry life from world to world.*

*I can't walk the streets but, for a few days now, we are allowed to wander around the hotel, look out of the windows, go out to the enormous terraces and contemplate the vegetable species in the garden that are so strange that they seem to respond to a continuous mutation, finding orchids, hydrangeas, cherry blossoms on the same branch...*

*or combinations between birds and insects.*

*When the Earth collapsed, they brought specimens of everything that could still be saved. Here, however, despite coming through, lives took on their particular forms by hybridising into multi-species organisms. In front of me, I see several nerve bushes that look more like coral forests.*

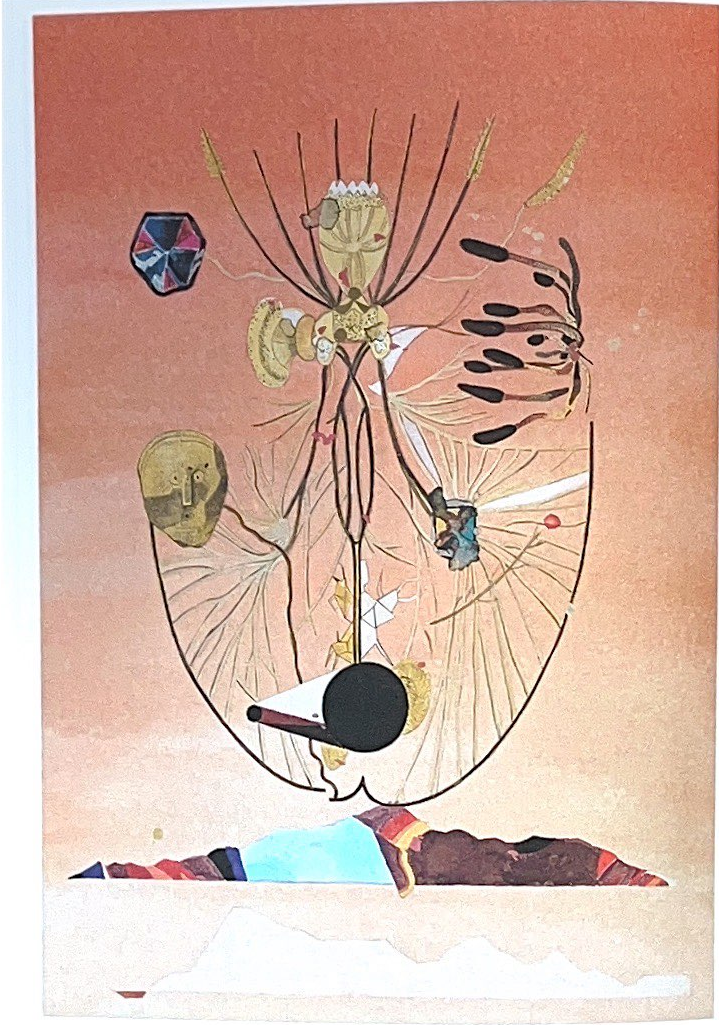
This speculative self-fiction culminates in a dialogue between my scientific alter ego and my former self, just beginning to be an artist, in a reflection on the multiplicity of edges and nuances that curiosity and human consciousness encompass in a life. I contain multitudes.

The mutant and hybridised forms of life found in the hotel gardens also reflect this condition. The one that tells us that no one can live alone. That we must generate community by taking the example of biology.

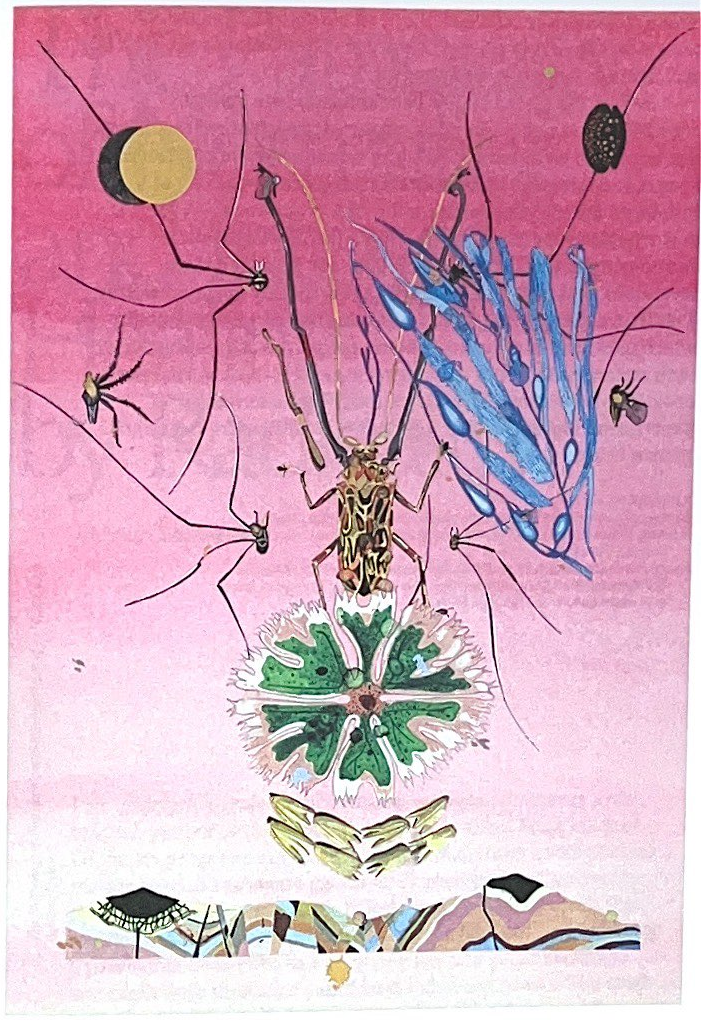
The paintings portray multifaceted species of holobionts, with the nervous systems of a cuttlefish, corals, parts of mushrooms, flowers, insects, fragments of vessels,

Nerve Bushes Like Coral Forests  
Regina de Miguel

369



370



371

masks, necklaces or representations of the cosmos; like animist totems that appeal to co-dependence. As Donna Haraway (2016: 68) says, species cannot be disentangled.

Rather, the orchid and its bee-pollinators are mutually constituted through a reciprocal capture from which neither plant nor insect can be disentangled... It is in encounters among orchids, insects and scientists that we find openings for an ecology of intimacies among interspecies and subtle propositions. What is at stake in this evolutionary approach is a theory of ecological relationality that takes seriously organisms' practices, their inventions, and experiments crafting interspecies' lives and worlds. This is an ecology inspired by a feminist ethic of 'response-ability', in which questions of difference among species are always conjugated with attentions to affect, entanglement and rupture; an affective ecology in which creativity and curiosity characterise the experimental forms of life of all kinds of practitioners, not only human beings.

#### REFERENCES

- Carrington, Leonora [1937] (2017). *Down Below*. New York: NYRB Classics.
- Haraway, Donna J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hustak, Carla and Natasha Myers (2012). 'Involutionary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters'. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23/3: 74–118.