

Chaos reigns in Cecilia Fiona's paradoxical and unworldly painted universe

The richly woven narratives which imbue Cecilia Fiona's paintings provide a glimpse into a world behind the veil of reality, inhabited by ambivalent creatures partway between monster, human and celestial being, and governed by laws of transformation, paradox and cosmic chaos.

With two writers for parents, the narrative complexity and interwoven philosophies of thought which characterise Cecilia's work come as no surprise. "I'm fascinated by the meeting between physical reality and the fictive", she tells us. The stories and fictions we encounter continually shape our experience of the world around us, and Cecilia's paintings seek to do exactly this—to immerse the viewer in a fiction which is at once atavistic and wholly defamiliarising, so that in returning to a more immediate reality, a shift will have occurred, a metamorphosis of perception.

This meeting and commingling of two diametrically opposite elements is a driving force throughout Cecilia's work. Chaos represents the beginning and end of the universe, the void between creation and destruction, between heaven and hell. It is into this void that Cecilia paints. On her canvas, animal and human merge; the demonic and the divine become inseparable; different realities unfold simultaneously. It is above all the material quality of the works which distills these concepts. The use of rabbit-skin glue results in semi-translucent, ethereal shades, from which Cecilia's figures and landscapes emerge as a series of minutely painted brushstrokes, almost Fauvist in their undulations of unblended colour. Cecilia's palette, which moves between rich, warm earth tones and pale, icy hues, reveals itself as she paints, according to instinct and the chromatic relationships which arise during the painting process.

Recently, Cecilia's paintings have evolved in their scale and proportions. The use of folding screens has allowed her to extend the physical dimensions of her works, engulfing the field of vision and involving the viewer's whole body in the experience of the artwork. From her creative space in Copenhagen, Cecilia is currently exploring ways of translating her painted mythologies into different mediums, such as film, sound and performance.

interview by Rebecca Irvin

Featured image:

Cecilia Fiona
Blindly reaching out
harelum and pigment on canvas
100 x 120 cm



AMM: *Hi Cecilia, we understand that you did drawing and illustration before you came to painting; is this something which is still present in your approach to making?*

CF: My approach to making is still very much to tell a story and to create a universe which you, as a viewer, can step into. At one point I got tired of the illustration work, there was too little freedom to create, too many rules to follow, and too many people with an opinion on how your drawing related to the text. You had to create from an already existing narrative and were not allowed to invent the narrative yourself. That's why I stopped. I wanted to be completely free to create my own universe with my own rules and my own stories. I was also not that good at illustrating (haha) because I had a hard time sticking strictly to the text. Now, I can completely decide the narrative on my own—it's more in my spirit.

AMM: *Looking back at your past work, there is a discernible shift or evolution in the painterly style, texture and composition—from a more segmented and block-colour opacity towards an ethereal translucency. Can you tell us about this development in your work?*

CF: I think that development is partly due to my change of medium from acrylic to rabbit-skin glue and pigments. The rabbit-skin glue has more liquid, transparent qualities than acrylic. On the other hand, it is also a lot more difficult to paint with, as you can't really paint layers over one another.

But I also think the development in style stems from a personal journey towards a more fluid, transformative, ambivalent view of the world. This is something that started to grow in me after a trip out into the jungles of Peru, where I lived with some shamans. They taught me a lot about the life of plants, about dreams, and about how all living organisms are connected. Thoughts that have always been a part of my upbringing, but which I, when I was younger, distanced myself from. Perhaps because none of my peers looked at the world that way.

AMM: *Tell us about the imagined world in which your images exist. Where are these places? What are its rules, the elemental laws that shape it?*

CF: It is a mythical world filled with paradoxes and ambivalence. A world in constant motion and transformation, and therefore a world that breaks with the dualistic 'laws'—and thereby instead of seeking a definitive ordering principle, continues to transform itself forever. Instead, my world is a space before cosmos and order, a space where chaos still reigns and the boundaries between nature, humans and animals are therefore unfixed.

In one sense, it is an ancient, mythical world, a world before the world is shaped, before body and soul, earth and sky, darkness and light, dream and reality and life and death become opposite elements. In another sense, it could also be a dream of a world in the future, where mysteries and imagination once again have an

important place among us, and where chaos, transformation and ambivalence are no longer considered to be negative states.

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In the motifs, the mountains are growing, the sun is rising, the earth is giving birth. In other words, the world in which the figures find themselves is being created, but is not yet shaped. So, the very process of creation is in focus, to create a new world—another world under a new sun. But I don't think it is about creating a new physical planet. Being under a new sun is more about seeing the world in a new light. Dreaming about another more relational, fluid world and letting that dream, that fiction, escape into the physical world.

AMM: *And the inhabitants of this space—how do you understand these creatures? Are they human, pre-/post-human, or something between human, animal and imaginary being?*

CF: To me, the inhabitants of the world in my paintings are neither good nor evil. They are just part of the world, like natural forces that both destroy and build the world at the same time by creating movement and transformation.

They are both human-like and very caring creatures—some are almost heavenly and winged, others have horns or ears and are animal-like, or maybe even devilish and monstrous depending on the viewer's interpretation.

The monstrous is an interesting category, I think, because it is created by letting conflicting elements merge (for example, man and animal) and in this way new categories are created, new visions, leading to new worlds and new relationships between man and nature.

I think the inhabitants are also mythical, old, irrational creatures from a forgotten time. A time of mysteries and dreams which are now trying to be part of this world again. When I paint them, I let them into this world.

AMM: *We'd love to know more about the ways in which your work engages with myth and allegory—are you inspired by mythic narratives and stories?*

CF: I have a bachelor's degree in art history, and I am very interested in how narratives, myths and images move through time and re-emerge in new forms. For example, how in ancient Egypt people often worshipped figures of gods who were half human, half animal—the sphinx, for example. Meanwhile the sphinx in Greek mythology is often only portrayed as a monster, a negative figure. Why and how do these images change their meaning?

Recently, I have been very preoccupied with the myth of Ishtar from ancient Mesopotamia, who was both Goddess of war and fertility—in other words life and death at the same time. To me she is the incarnation of the paradox



photo by Kasper Witte Larsen



and connects the demonic with the cosmic. I'm fascinated by the meeting between physical reality and the fictive; the two spheres are often presented as separate elements, but in our understanding and experience of the world, they cross each other again and again—they are inseparable. We must relate to the imagination and fiction because it plays a huge part in the shaping of the world. I continue to dive into the sensuality of fiction in my works, trying to understand the physical reality that surrounds me.

AMM: *It's interesting to us that your parents are writers; what effect has this had on your approach to painting?*

CF: I have always read a lot of books. To tell a story, to create a universe that you as a viewer can step into and continue to compose in your own imagination—I find very fascinating. I think my interest in creating very complex stories in the same painting, stories that cross each other, is perhaps also a consequence of my parents being writers. I want the single painting to be a complete novel, full of different layers and stories.

AMM: *In terms of the aesthetic of your paintings, are there any artists or movements which have had an influence on your work? There is, for example a certain primitivist or outsider-art quality to your images.*

CF: I am very inspired by the painters Ovariaci and Odilon Redon because they seem to have access to a dream-dimension with rules only they know of. Their images become a mystery in this world, as if they were not painted here. I can look at their works over and over without getting any closer to their secret. That's exciting. To be able to tell a story full of secrets.

Recently, I have dived into 16th century grotesques—large, ornamental murals in the early 16th century in Italy. The word grotesque means cave, which can represent both a uterus and a burial site, thus uniting life and death. The grotesques are a visual phenomenon that have been overlooked in art history—among other reasons, because they were full of imagined creatures and tangled, fantastic worlds. Through their use of ornament and transformation, the motifs in the grotesques unite conflicting elements and create a space for the paradoxical and ambivalent.

I am also very inspired by Donna Haraway, especially her concept of tentacular thinking. It implies that the world should be perceived as a spider senses the world—its eight legs hitting different surfaces simultaneously. In other words, we must understand that the world never becomes whole, but that the whole is precisely in acknowledging the world's ambivalence and pluralism—that is, having our 'spider' legs in several worlds at once. Therefore it is only by creating new tentacular narratives which open more coexisting narratives in the same worldview, that we can solve the challenges man faces today in relation to nature.

AMM: *What else inspires your work? Are you influenced by other art forms such as music, or film?*

CF: I'm a huge fan of David Lynch's visual universe. I feel a great resonance every time I watch his movies. His visual language speaks to something deep in me and his exploration of the forces of the universe, his way of making them visual, is truly fascinating. I just watched the third season of *Twin Peaks* and was completely engrossed.

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– Cecilia Fiona

When I paint, I always listen to music that is soft and fluid, to get into that feeling of blending with the canvas and the materials. At the same time, it is a way of letting thoughts and feelings disappear to achieve a clear mind. I make the best paintings when I'm not dealing with any emotions, but instead find myself in a more objective and neutral state of mind. To get there, I often listen to music by Hildegard von Bingen, a psychic nun from the Middle Ages—it works every time. Recently, I have also read a lot of Inger Christensen, a Danish poet. Her ability to connect elements and weave times, places, nature, and people together, as

well as the way she lets death and life exist in the same sentence, is absolutely great. You can really sense how everything is always changing and never reaching a final position in her world. That worldview appeals to me a lot. Seeing everything in a constant mode of transformation and movement.

AMM: *Can you talk a bit about your practical approach to making a painting, from idea to finished artwork?*

CF: I always have a sketch before I start painting, but it's very incomplete, often just made quickly with a pen. The picture always ends up being something different. I often start over several times—and I really mean all over again. You can't paint over anything when you use rabbit-skin glue and pigments, because you can always see the previous layers and colours. So if you paint incorrectly or are not satisfied, you must rinse the picture down with warm water to dissolve the glue. However, there are always traces of pigment left on the canvas, no matter how long you rinse. These clues or hints are always included in my new image, like forgotten tales which emerge as ghosts from the past. The good thing about these shadows is that there is a layer in the narrative that I do not have control over myself but must work together with. Starting over again and again can also be useful for the narrative. The more times you try to tell a story, the closer you get to its core.

I think I see the very process of painting as non-verbal communication, perhaps an emotional communication between me and the canvas. Sometimes the communication ends in a quarrel, other times we understand each other and merge. A bit like an unstable relationship, with ups and downs, and lots of love and hate.

AMM: *What role does colour play in this process? Are you particularly drawn to certain colour interactions and combinations?*

CF: The colours are not chosen in advance, but arise in the process. For me, all colours can work together, it's just about the shade and the combination. It took me a while to understand the nature of the pigments when mixing them with rabbit-skin glue, but I have gradually gotten to grips with who they are. Because I have had a studio in my bedroom for some time, I have chosen to use natural pigments to paint with—they are often less toxic. Incidentally, they are also often less powerful in colour than artificial pigments. And I like how the natural pigments make reference to frescoes, to old painting traditions and a long-forgotten time. At the same time they give a touch of something organic.

AMM: *How does scale come into your work? Is it important for viewers to experience the paintings in person?*

CF: The latest works I have made have been very large—210 x 210 cm. Something happens in the meeting between the viewer and the work when the size of the work goes up. The body becomes activated in a different way, it becomes small, and the experience becomes

more physical.

Because there are so many details in my works as they are painted with a tiny thin brush—even the very large ones—there are a lot of small brushstrokes that are difficult to reproduce (on Instagram, for example). In the physical meeting, you can more easily zoom out completely by moving your body to see the image in its entirety, or zoom in completely by standing with your face close to the work.

It is also interesting to me how large works often create a focus on the narrative in the work itself, the image itself, while smaller works create a space where the materiality and surface automatically come more into focus, because you have come very close to the canvas.

Working with paintings of 210 x 210 cm has been exciting. I like to cram as much into a work as possible, because I have a hard time finishing a story. My stories always end up being complicated and tangled. And the more surface you have to work on, the bigger the canvas, the more space to tell, resulting in a bigger narrative. There is also a limit to how big a story can be made before it crumbles. It has been exciting to explore that boundary. When do you, as a spectator, shut down your imagination, because it all becomes too chaotic, tangled and flickering?

AMM: How do you go about naming your paintings? And do you ever feel that something is lost in the translation of the titles from Danish to English?

CF: That's the hard part. I spend a long time on the titles. I really think a bad or boring title can ruin the whole work for me. At the same time, a good title can make a bad work great. My works always get titles only long after they are made. If I start by having a title to paint from, the work often doesn't work because its narrative is, in a way, determined in advance rather than taking shape during the process. Finding out the title afterwards is like figuring out the work's hidden narrative. The narrative which is already present in the work but which may not be the most obvious. For me, the title should point to something hidden and draw it out without taking precedence or removing focus from the visible in the image.

I find it difficult to translate the titles from Danish to English, as the meanings are flimsy and fleeting—a slight twist can change the title's atmosphere and point it in a completely different direction.

AMM: How do you find working in the creative scene in Copenhagen? Is there a strong artistic community?

CF: I feel like I have just entered the scene, so I still don't feel like I know that much about it, but my impression is that a lot of exciting things are happening, including a growth in artist-run exhibition spaces.

AMM: What do you do when you're not making art?

CF: I have just come out of a very intense period over the summer leading up to a big show. A period where I literally did nothing but paint all day long without seeing a single other human being. The only thing I did, besides painting, was sleep, eat and go shopping in the supermarket.

But usually when I am not working, I read a lot of books, run, go on long walks, see exhibitions and hang out with my friends and family.

AMM: In what ways do you see your work developing further? Would you branch into different mediums, for example?

CF: This summer I made folding screens with paintings on both sides. In these works, the painting takes on a spacious and more sculptural dimension. It enables the viewer's body to move around the work and get a different physical, bodily experience. Folding screens were initially used for dressing up, or changing your clothes. When the body moves around behind the screen, it is hidden and can undergo a transformation—change its costume and become a new character.

I have also started working on costumes, which I sew out of jute canvas and paint on. The costumes are, at the moment, inspired by the myth of Ishtar, a Goddess of war and fertility from Mesopotamia. I have already used the costumes in a performance which takes place between the painted folding screens.

I find it exciting to expand the space of painting and the universe I have created in it, making it vibrant and three-dimensional through other mediums. Right now, I am going to work on a video project where the elements from my paintings merge with video and sound. Expanding the paintings into other mediums becomes a way of exploring that encounter between worlds, between dream and reality. What happens when the physical body dresses itself in the myth?

Featured image (p.18):

Cecilia Fiona
From the core of the earth they grow
harelim and pigment on canvas
70 x 100 cm

Featured image (p.21):

Cecilia Fiona
The struggle for light
rabbit-skin glue and pigments on canvas
100 x 120 cm

Featured image (p.22-23):

Cecilia Fiona
In the light of the mountain
rabbit-skin glue and pigments on canvas
100 x 150 cm







Cecilia Fiona
She gave her seeds to the wind
harelim and pigment on canvas
70 x 70 cm



Cecilia Fiona
Digging for sun
rabbit-skin glue and pigments on canvas
70 x 70 cm



Cecilia Fiona
Red morning, before you are leaving
 rabbit skin glue and pigments on canvas
 180 x 60 x 3 sections (complete screen : 180 x 180 cm)



Cecilia Fiona
Chain dance
 rabbit skin glue and pigments on canvas
 180 x 60 x 3 sections (complete screen : 180 x 180 cm)