

ELISA BRAEM

WE MEET IN THE NIGHT

19.09.25-01.02.26

Curatorial text. Aina Pomar Cloquell

It is nighttime. She beholds the starry sky over the calm surface of the seawater. Like fireflies absorbed in a hypnotic dance, the stars shift to the softly rippling waves. Today the sea is still as oil, unmoving, but not entirely. One star shines brighter than all the rest. Walking tentatively, trying not to stir the water with her feet below its surface, she draws nearer to observe it up close. She lowers her hands into the water, cupped beneath, a vessel below the star. Then raises them, but the star slips away. However much the action is repeated, it keeps flickering on the surface, until the rotation of the Earth carries it to water's edge, and it disappears. A star is not a star, but its own image, a version of reality itself.

Minute stories like this, brief actions and evocative imagery, feed into the imaginary realm of Elisa Braem. They appear in conversations and sketches on paper, and are often the preliminary shapes of ideas which then become artworks. In other cases, they illustrate the artist's recurring interests, such as reflections, movement, the human gaze, night, darkness, the universe. In this text I bring together some of the ideas that have accompanied the artist in her studio, ideas that have accompanied us during our times together thinking about "We Meet in the Night".

For Braem, human fascination for the sky is translated into curiosity for those elements that have the power to unite us beneath a single cloak. Celestial references in her work are subtle. They are codified into features that resemble stars, ribbons imitating the infinity symbol and figures that bring the earthly world closer to the universal.

Night sky plays a key role. It points towards an eternal entity that envelopes all of us equally, and whose darkness incites us to alter our awareness and perception of reality. It carries us to a state of nature that is paradoxically more human and transformative, with a wild and open spirit.

Roland Barthes, in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, relates the night to "any state which provokes in the subject the metaphor of the darkness, whether affective, intellectual, or existential, in which he struggles or subsides".¹ In relation to the feeling of love, the author speaks of being in obscurity, unable to see much further, as if in a state of calm, even though things are not seen clearly. Barthes added a detail from the Chinese philosophical text *Tao Te Ching*, "To darken this darkness, this is the gate of all wonder",² which calls us to understand darkness as origin and mystery, and the night as a place of return.

In relation to this meditative, unifying state, Braem is interested in places where the individual is dissolved, giving way to all that humanity shares. She reflects upon the impact universal entities like the sky, nature and light have on these places: night in the forest, half-light in spaces for meditation, the sheen that a certain chromatic range is able to reflect.

1. Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978, p. 171.

2. Barthes. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, p. 172.

The use of light and shadow in artistic and architectural works influences the ability of the context in altering feelings. The colours inside a temple, for example, are carefully chosen for their capacity to absorb just the right amount of light, bringing individuals closer to their meditation, and thus nearing us to the divine.

In the essay *In Praise of Shadows*, the author draws from luminous considerations to define the beauty and peace of leisure spaces or domestic environments: “The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty’s ends. And so it has come to be that the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows—it has nothing else.”³

Throughout the pages of the book, writer Junichirō Tanizaki describes materials found in objects of daily use, such as minerals, lacquer or ceramics, in terms of light and shadow. Our appreciation of them is grounded, he argues, in the capacity of their surfaces to absorb shadow and reflect light.

Places of worship and nature are recurring subjects in the artist’s imagination, as they give rise to a unifying experience of calm and seclusion. Braem often refers to the night forest as a metaphor of transformative space, where consciousness is melded with nature and perception changes in harmony with the surroundings.

References to the sky and to shade, as well as the presence of flora and fauna, are combined with human features in the artist’s sculptures. Animal, botanical and human shapes coincide with features from the environment or architecture. This symbiosis draws from human approximation to our surroundings, from the dissolution of what is human—gaze, body, thought, language—and landscape, with all the traits, living or inert, that comprise it.

In the context of “We Meet in the Night”, this fusion is understood as bidirectional and non-hierarchical. Or to put it another way: all the components that go into the works, human or more-than-human, have the same agency and are on the same level. Historically, however, in art as with other disciplines, the human gaze over the environment it inhabits has imposed itself over other considerations.

Looking upwards, towards the sky, has often been linked with curiosity for the universe, the place where we encounter myths and deities, where we seek out guidance or look for omens. Quite beyond any sort of religious inclination, the will to understand astronomical phenomena (to explain the passing of time, the seasons, the existence of day and night) has been a constant feature of all cultures. Looking at the sky and showing interest in astronomy are an intrinsic part of humanity, and have been seen in artistic expressions in all epochs and places.⁴

In preparing this exhibition, we have frequently reviewed the pictorial tradition of landscape. We have wondered about the reasons bringing individuals to depict features as vast as the sky. Whatever they may be, we have concluded that the human gaze over its surroundings is always transformative and reciprocal.

With modernity, and the growing importance of science, the pictorial representation of astronomical phenomena will take on another meaning. Rather than being bound to religious entities, it becomes a testimony to discoveries and observation, and is integrated into the aesthetic process of landscape’s abstraction.

The historical trajectory of this abstraction, from Petrarch and Leonardo da Vinci to the impressionists, passing along the way through J. M. W. Turner and Caspar David Friedrich, insists on the idea of the double gaze. This way of seeing on the part of the artist shifts between the exterior and the interior, between subjectivity and the visible world; it understands nature as a bifocal phenomenon that oscillates between an empirical territory and a landscape of the soul. The canvas of the painting compresses what is observed with the observing subject, fusing nature and the gaze. In this way, the painting of landscape becomes a metaphor of a window

3. Tanizaki, Junichirō. *In Praise of Shadows*. Stony Creek, CT: Leete’s Island Books, 2018 [1977], p. 18.

4. Villar-Martín, Montserrat. “Arte y Astronomía”. In: *Pasaje a la Ciencia*. Alcalá la Real: No. 13, 2010, p. 17–25.

open to the world, fragmenting nature and reordering it in function of the painter's dominant perspective, able to capture and condense the aesthetic experience of nature.⁵

The narrative is altered with impressionist painting, when this spatial and temporal perception is decomposed into fragments of light and colour. The chromatic dimension becomes autonomous and takes on its own formal capacity, altering the way of studying and observing what surrounds us.

In a similar manner, Elisa Braem's production process sets out from this abstraction of light, colour and nature phenomena. It transforms the pictorial window of landscape into volume, without forgetting that the human—the observer—is part of the same world that we isolate and convert into landscape.

In this regard, the choice of the chromatic palette (brought about, it must be said, through intense exploration based on trial and error with the kiln) is based on its capacity to express volume and light. The two sculptures entitled *Azul zul línea I* and *II* (2025)⁶ are developed from floral shapes, but not from a wild flower: from one that has been domesticated and transformed into a concentration of stems and pestles pointing to the sky, creating a rough surface that conjures a relief of hills, as if seen from an airplane window. Formalised almost like a block, the two sculptures trace out a sombre silhouette, with their calm, earthen tones responding to the intention of bestowing them a relative volume. Of the entire body of works here, these are perhaps the ones that reference most clearly the gaze at night, the sensation of finding oneself at nighttime trying to separate figures on the basis of a pure contrast of shadows, but then—returning to Barthes—with the serenity the half-light provides.

In contrast, in works like *Intermitente luz* and *Reflejo solar*, the play of light gives way to blinding clarity; it is so white it almost burns, it is strong enough to dissect. In the first of these, it is close in terms of volume and colour to the sculptures mentioned previously, but formally they have grid motifs, like a latticework projected on a body by intense light. In *Reflejo solar*, Braem embraces this pattern by opting for an even more vivid tone, clearly manifesting her intention to let the light through so as to see within these shapes. Even though the volume once again recalls floral figures, they shift towards a more organic morphology, although not as a block but as interlaced bulbs.

Leaving aside the context of paint and colour, we explore the realm of ideas, where might understand Braem's work from a post-humanist point of view—in line with the theories of Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Sarah Whatmore or Rosi Braidotti—that does not see human beings as isolated or symbolically above nature. This relationship with the surroundings is crafted by hand, by means of the gaze.

Manual work with clay makes her aware that the main component she works with—ceramics, as well as wood and metal—is the material of landscape, and as a consequence the material of landscape's representation. Clay comes from specific sites in the territory, and to a certain degree returns to them: for millions of years, wind, water and temperature changes have decomposed mountain rocks and their minerals, depositing them in geological environments conducive to clay sedimentation. Firing this clay, with the evaporation that goes with it, as well as clay's transformation into ceramic material as found in roof tiles, bricks and other decorative and architectural elements, are all part of a territorial return. This cyclical process ties in with the environment's ability to send the gaze back.

The idea of return, of continuous, cyclical movement, is present in this project in various ways, one of them being reflection. Various sculptures are composed of a clay figure with its wooden counterpart below, being essentially the mirror of the part above. It is as if the figures were to be found on a horizon line divided by water, and the wood were the reflection of the landscape above. In the case of *Lazo ondulado I, II* and *III*, the three sculptures emerge from

5. Hofmann, Werner. "Las partes y el todo". In: *La abstracción del paisaje del romanticismo nórdico al expresionismo abstracto; in memoriam Robert Rosenblum (1927-2006)*. Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2007, p. 17–19.

6. All the works are from 2025.

preliminary ideas and sketches of birds, gradually abstracted until a round base is made to grow, allowing them to exist in sustained balance. The soft tones—if I may return briefly to chromatic concerns—pertaining to their bodies and to the pinkish base they rest upon, have the subtlety of colours seen through or upon water; they have a liquid quality, and a tonality corresponding to reflections.

From a philosophical point of view, the idea of a returned gaze, binding human perception to its surroundings, was explored by sociologist Georg Simmel in his 1913 essay “The Philosophy of Landscape”, where he delved into aesthetic and cultural theories on the construction of landscape. Using the term *Stimmung*, roughly translatable as landscape’s spiritual tonality, he explains the total union between the human eye, the position of the body and the surroundings. In his definition of landscape, the fact of being compressed within a visual horizon is essential. Nature has no parts, it is the unity of a whole, and it provides the material of landscape, which in itself is delimited. Elisa Braem’s project is positioned within this impossible disassociation between humans and their environment, in the collective human soul and the spaces we inhabit.

From Simmel up to contemporary cultural theories of landscape, transformation and fragmentation are processes that are present in genesis of landscape as such. As a coherent, autonomous entity, it is the product of the mind’s activity, making it possible to unite the perception of a country, territory or nature with the action of setting it apart. Yet the fact of observing the world and delimiting it peripherally is not enough. There is an internal process filtering certain aesthetic features of a territory that enables us to unify it, getting around having to understand it as a whole. There is something of a debate on whether landscape begins with the appearance of the term that designates it, with the development of certain artistic practices of the 16th century, or with the emergence of the figure of the walker or traveller. All these theories, however, do coincide in conceiving it as a process of construction; they all state that, to define it, both its human and aesthetic dimension must be taken into account.⁷

Braem’s works *Mujer montaña*, *Hoja rizo* and *Azul zul línea I* and *II* position us before a way of conceiving landscape and the components comprising it, where it is neither a stage nor representation, but rather process. In *Hoja rizo*, three swan heads come together to emulate the soft and rippling movement of a leaf falling from a tree. *Mujer montaña* starts with a female face, looking relaxedly upwards, letting her long hair bond and turn into a mountain.

Making use of materials derived from nature, the artist invites us to think of landscape as an entity in constant transformation: fragmented, re-signified and tied to the human presence inhabiting and observing it.

This approach resonates with a philosophical and critical perspective on landscape, which we understand as a dynamic construction rather than a fixed unity, where the surroundings and the subject run through each other. Within this framework, the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari have provided us with ways of understanding the common identity of landscape and the individual as becoming. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*,⁸ the authors introduce the concept of the rhizome, the subterranean stalk that grows horizontally in creating interconnected multiplicities. This biological system, present for example in the lily or ginger, serves as a figure of thought to define a structure without a sole centre, able to grow and connect in any direction, and with a multiple, open and non-linear organisation. One of the philosophical implications of the rhizome is that it highlights the process, in the flux of ongoing transformation, free of static definitions, that we understand as becoming.

In the work of Elisa Braem, this becoming is made manifest as a methodology, rather than a concept: a way of doing that sidesteps closed structures, opting instead for opening, indeterminacy and the coexistence of forces. Bodies of clay or wooden matter, as well as aesthetic and

7. López Silvestre, Federico. “El paisaje, ¿nace o se hace? Teorías culturales del paisaje”. In: *Revista Mètode. Paisatge/s*. València: Universitat de València, No. 58, 2008, p. 97–103.

8. Deleuze, Gilles; Guattari, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

theoretical considerations, create forces that push in multitudinous directions. The artist's works do not represent the landscape; they *are* landscape in continuous flux. They do not describe the subject, whether plant or animal, but rather sketch it out as the result of relationships, gestures and materials in dialogue with their surroundings.

Within this way of doing, Braem's creative process is very much aware of the geological sedimentation that makes it possible for clay to be formed, layer by layer. Actions and ideas pile up and combine until the point they are fired, glazed and finally assembled. The production of a body of work begins with a personal reflection that often draws from the reading of poetry and philosophical texts, or from observing her surroundings. Over this incitation to thought, she writes a few lines here and there on sketching paper, drawing preliminary shapes conjured by these words once made manifest in writing. Afterwards, she steps into the phase of creating models and tests, in her earliest interaction with clay. At this point the main idea has been transformed and multiplied into ramifications, possible artworks, fragmentations of the same bulb.

Then, more cerebral decisions are necessary (quantity of clay, size, inclusion of other materials) to enable craft work. In the studio, the handling of clay to formalise the pieces means a new series of mutations. The inclusion of wood in some pieces also leaves certain formal factors open to chance, since in function of the tree and the crosscut, the trunk will reveal one set of veins or another. Dialogue between the idea, matter and its manipulation becomes intertwined, making it onerous to discern the agency of the artist from the agency of her work.

The inclusion of colour involves glazing and firing tests that often come back with unexpected results, opening the way for new possibilities of theoretical and formal transformation. The chromatic result is, once again, a combination of decisions taken by the artist, the heat and the material.

Ultimately, colour brings us back to concerns about light and shadow, in harmony with the gaze and with human consciousness. Some pieces will reflect a luminous quality that is able to absorb and calm the viewer, while others will make the gaze vibrate or, due to their tonality, will make the perception of their volume mutate. Finally, the capricious nature of colour will not only change the pieces, but also the meaning of the entire exhibition space and everything enveloping them.

Deleuze and Guattari recur to colour references and popular culture to explain how it is possible to "make rhizome" with elements drawn from one's surroundings: "The crocodile does not reproduce a tree trunk, any more than the chameleon reproduces the colors of its surroundings. The Pink Panther imitates nothing, it reproduces nothing, it paints the world its color, pink on pink; this is its becoming-world, carried out in such a way that it becomes imperceptible itself, asignifying, makes its rupture, its own line of flight, follows its 'a-parallel evolution' through to the end. The wisdom of the plants: even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else—with the wind, an animal, human beings (and there is also an aspect under which animals themselves form rhizomes, as do people, etc.)."⁹

Pink tones accompany us in this night in which we meet. It is done subtly, through hues that resemble the sky when night is ending. Yet the sky is not placed above our heads, but below. This is patent in the irregular shapes of the base of glazed tiles, upon which the three birds in the process of becoming abstraction dance, in the works *Lazo ondulado I, II* and *III*. In an even clearer manner, it is spread out across the exhibition floor, beneath the works and below our feet. As we move forward between the sculptures, we situate the sky on earth. The exhibition heralds the day.

WWW.ESBALUARD.ORG
#ELISABRAEMESBALUARD

9. Deleuze, Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 11.