

POPEA. UNIVERSITAT HERBAL: PAINTRESS GOSSIP

31.01-06.07.25

Curatorial text. Raquel Victoria

In the beginning was the Word.

No.

*This is about the moment before the word, when
everything inside you is broken open.*

*Words, together; multiple and multivalent, coming in a
rush, Sounding in a chorus, a force like a waterfall. A dam
breaking. A difficult birth.*

So Mayer. «The Broken Open».

Spells, Ignota Books

The broken open. This is the title So Mayer gave the introduction of *Spells: 21st-Century Occult Poetry*, one of the first publications by the now-defunct publishing house Ignota Books. In that text, what is broken does not close, but rather allows for an opening; what is violated contains a healing potential; stories emerge like water flowing through a crack. Words operate like spells, capable of re-enchanting the world.

It could be said that the story we are about to tell began with a major fracture: the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing lockdown. This sudden halt of productive time opened up a wound-crack through which, for a moment, we could imagine other ways of existing. This abrupt and temporary interruption of life as we knew it revealed the urgency, necessity and relevance of care; the interdependence of relationships—not so evident before; the burden of forced social isolation; the radical need to be together. We also witnessed nature breathing and regenerating itself as soon as we gave it space, and how the rhythms of production and consumption—both suffocating and absurd—could be suspended, albeit briefly, to make way for other cadences and uses.

It was during this unusual hiatus that Catalina Obrador and I began a *dérive* without knowing where it would lead us, but which she had been developing in different episodes and locations on the island of Mallorca, generating a kind of serialised saga. From then on, the artist began to use the name popea, giving her space to imagine, while also distancing herself from the notion of name-territory. popea, with its pompous sound reminiscent of Florentine marble folds, refers not only to Nero's wife, but above all to a fictional character who rides on a dolphin through the seas around an island, with a ring in her mouth.

Ever since I met Catalina, all I remember her doing is drawing, focused and present. In *The Pleasure in Drawing*, Jean-Luc Nancy approaches drawing as an act of choice and discernment, an exercise in openness that reveals a power to exist. The act of drawing becomes a form of caress between pencil and paper, revealing the emotional and reactive participation of the body. You can draw almost anywhere and at any time, even when you are with others. I find it difficult to separate Catalina's personal life from her creative work as an artist—a trait that I love to recognise in many other artists we admire. Her painting studio is also her bedroom. It is interesting to observe how the furniture and objects have been arranged, to notice there is a stickiness in her way of doing, to see which objects are closer and which are further away (Sara Ahmed). A stove, several tables with books and notebooks, fabrics, cushions, a bed, shelves, sofas, painted walls. Her creative process is far removed from the idea of the focused and inspired artist, isolated in their studio and distanced from other activities. How does one create, what elements matter most, when one paints and mothers alone?

When we read *The Fisherwoman's Daughter*, the tale written by Ursula K. Le Guin in 1998, we realised that the supposed dilemma of choosing between books or babies, art or children, was nothing but a trap: a misogynistic construct. Drawing on the experiences of other female writers and the circumstances in which they wrote, Le Guin argued that work, writing and artistic creation became even more vital thanks to motherhood, not less. The power of the experience—of a person coming into immediate and inescapable contact with the sources of life, death, beauty, growth and decay—elevates and enriches the work.

During those months, conversations about motherhood became urgent (I was pregnant with my daughter Marcela). We began to think of motherhood not just as a topic, but as a form of knowledge and a political issue. Motherhood was no longer viewed as a destiny or a sacrifice, but as an ambivalent, contradictory and deeply political experience. Le Guin's text was included in Moyra Davey's 2001 anthology, *Mother Reader*, in which the photographer brought together thirty-two texts—essays, memoirs and stories—that condense several decades of feminist thought from very diverse perspectives, especially between 1970 and 2000: from Sylvia Plath to Lydia Davis, from Margaret Mead to Toni Morrison, as well as Adrienne Rich, Margaret Atwood, Jane Lazarre and Ursula K. Le Guin herself, among many others.

The idea is to think of motherhood as an ongoing practice (mothering) rather than a fixed identity or regime of belonging (motherhood). This shifts motherhood towards a form of expanded relationality, oriented towards generating bonds and constructing community. Over the past ten years, popea has been moving towards more hybrid ways of working, rooted in social and local aspects, in her hometown of Santanyí, while continuing to create drawings and installations in spaces such as butchers', mechanics' workshops, artists' studios and clandestine churches. Through collaborating with other groups, she has been mixing materials and formats: reading essays out loud, the collective embroidery *Calça Subversiva* in squares and on the streets, making posters and fanzines, activating devices such as La Radio Social and sound performances in the countryside. For a time, popea abandoned painting. She continued with drawing and actions, such as public storytelling—as she did in that exhibition in Madrid, where she covered people with sheets and read excerpts from diaries and stories—which reappears here as an activation: an unrepeatable, performative moment where bodies synchronise and the work takes place in shared time. It is not about representing, but about summoning; not about closing off meaning, but about opening up a space where something can happen.

In addition, for seven years—until 2020—she was an active and founding member of a cultural, association-based space that functioned as a living organism: people who would come and go would sit, talk and do things together for a while. Throughout its history, the space hosted workshops, meetings, artistic experiments and screenings, as well as the play *Lysistrata* with Comando Cotorra. But, above all, it facilitated self-organisation processes linked to the material conditions of everyday life. In this context, care took centre stage: groups of cleaners, care workers and neighbours who got together to self-reflect and share information. Here community is not presented as an abstract ideal, but as a sustained, fragile and necessary practice. This

place thus embodied an approach that runs through all of popea's work: the belief that creation is, above all, about generating the conditions for something shared to take place, even if temporarily and subject to transformation or displacement over time.

Following Silvia Federici's work, this project sets up small-scale experiments centred around the commons that test ways of re-enchanting the world. Along similar lines we find *Ses Milanes. Créixer a la natura*, the pedagogical, nature-based project Catalina herself pointed out to us on the map when we were looking to move to the island with the intention of offering our son Agustín a kinder place to live. However, *Ses Milanes* turned out to be much more than a school in the forest: it is a political project conceived by its founders—Palestinian artist yasmine eid-sabbagh and Catalan epidemiologist Adrià Ramírez—along with others they managed to convince along the way. For over twelve years, they have practised a radical pedagogy focused on spontaneous play and the careful accompaniment of a single group of children aged two to six, organised by the families through sustainable self-management, collective deliberation in assemblies and conflict resolution.

During the months of lockdown—when the association Catalina devoted so much time to also closed—we delved deep into reading, into having long telephone conversations, recording ourselves reading out loud, exchanging letters and exploring new routines that felt elastic. Other readings brought us closer to Donna Haraway, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Virginie Despentes, Adrienne Rich, Angela Carter, Octavia Butler, Mónica Ojeda, Mariana Enríquez, Marina Warner and Carmen Martín Gaité. Feminism, speculative science fiction and Latin American gothic literature: worlds that destabilise the normality learnt since childhood—that ideology that gently takes root and seeps into spaces of free time, socialisation and acceptance.

The Wave in the Mind by Ursula K. Le Guin marked a turning point in the process. It is a collection of essays permeated by themes of listening, radical attentiveness and the celebration of imagination. Le Guin proposes a narrative approach that is not based on conquest or domination, but rather on care—literature understood as an open, permeable and communal conversation. Storytelling is not about imposing a voice, but about opening a space that, like any shared activity, requires time, silence and hospitality. Telling stories well requires listening well, and paying attention to others. Authentic communication is not just transmission of information, but a living exchange between minds.

Similarly, in *El cuento de nunca acabar*, Carmen Martín Gaité understands a story not as a structure that moves towards a conclusion, but as a thread that remains alive as long as someone is paying attention to it. Storytelling does not stem from a desire to conclude, but rather to break open and see what comes out; to engage in conversation; to inhabit a shared space where stories can deviate, be interrupted or remain in suspense. For Martín Gaité, storytelling is a relational gesture, a way of accompanying each other: the story exists in the “in-between”, in the trust that allows us to continue the conversation.

In turn, Le Guin refers to Walter Ong's reflections on *Orality and Literacy*, reminding us that communication has its roots in orality: in the direct relationship between speaker and listener that is capable of creating community. This ethic of listening also resonated with popea's reflections on Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing*. Here, attention is presented as a political practice, akin to Hannah Arendt's notion of the “space of appearance”: a fragile yet fundamental space where people talk and act together, where community becomes visible. It is not about grand gestures, but about proximity, scale and context. From this perspective, creation was no longer thought of as an isolated act, but rather as what occurs within a network sustained by bonds, mutual care and small yet persistent communities.

During the summer of 2021, while Marcela was still in the womb, we organised a series of gatherings thought out as tours around the village of Bunyola. She titled them *Sensacional recopilació d'històries mai abans contades per l'autora* [A Sensational Compilation of Stories Never Before Told by the Author]. At each stop, popea would read a story and take an object out of a bag. These walks served as an initial affective cartography of the project. The map was

not only a means of orientation, but also a way of narrating the relationships between places, bodies, texts and times.

Then came more activations, each one different, but all connected through reading, listening and storytelling: *Taula d'arrelament* (second activation of *Sensacional recopilació d'històries mai abans contades*, Teleclub de Sineu, 2022); *Per davall la nou sobre les espatlles una bossa foradada* (third activation, Taca, Palma, 2023); *La boca diu. Un manual per a llegir a viva veu. Antigones contra els monstres* (fourth activation, Jaume Canet's workshop, Felanitx, 2024). Each one expanded the project as if adding layers to a multivoiced story, without ending it.

“Universitat Herbal: Paintress Gossip” is the title of the fifth instalment of the project, presented at Es Baluard Museu in 2026. Following the museum's invitation, we started thinking about all the above in terms of a saga: not as a culmination, but as another chapter in an ongoing story. The catalyst of this shift came from *El río*, Canadian author Julie Doucet's latest comic published by Fulgencio Pimentel. In it, Doucet continues her radical experimentation with comic book language: the strips disappear and the main story is narrated by the author herself in the present tense. Intimacy is constructed through a disorganized flow, where her figure repeatedly appears in the foreground, surrounded by a multitude of faces, creating a continuous, mural-like collage effect. The book's title (The river) functions as a metaphor for a current that carries fragments, images and voices with no fixed origin or clear destination. For popea, this book acted as a new springboard. The intimate diaries of her youth, the intertwined flow of voices and moments, and drawing as a form of narration opened up the possibility of a return to painting. Not as the rediscovery of an abandoned language, but rather a profound rewriting of her connection to it.

In the correspondence exchanged throughout this process, one question kept coming up: To carry on painting from where? Which narrative should be dismantled first? It was impossible to resume painting without questioning the way it had been learnt. Returning to painting therefore meant deciphering the past and telling it for the first time, not as a way of settling scores, but as an act of clarity. Painting began to appear as a dialogue that needed to be expressed. The gesture is slow, physical and ordinary. The time it takes the oil paint to dry, the small brushes and the easel, once transcendental, but now off-centre. The rhythm of painting resembles that of other learned practices: embroidery, sewing, insisting with one's hands. The studio becomes a porous place surrounded by books by female authors and catalogues of painters—accompanying voices. Circles form around the painting, emotional walls in each of them. Painting happens between chores: feeding the fire, looking after your child, cooking, putting on a wash, going back upstairs, reading, contemplating escape, adding more wood to the fire. Painting becomes embedded in life, and life becomes part of painting.

In Es Baluard Museu's Exhibition Hall D, popea builds a porous labyrinth sensitive to the passage of air and the resonance of voices. The space is broken-open, filled with entrances, exits, folds, nooks and crannies, inviting you to wander. Fabrics, dyed with organic pigments and rusted by time and hands, hang like membranes. Paintings created on large reused surfaces like newspapers and old paintings populate this labyrinth, sustaining stories and time. Images appear and fade away, intertwining with words; the sounds never quite match what we see. A text being read interferes with the image; memories interrupt the scene. The exhibition thus becomes a space for listening. It is a letter, a confidence, a kitchen table.

And at the same time, it is a collectively constructed story. During the summer of 2025, popea run the Jeleton Camp in collaboration with the group of the same name and Rafael Martínez del Pozo (audiovisual recording), at her little house at Es Pinaret. Other voices participated, among them Blu, with whom popea run screen printing workshops, and Jaume Canet, who is responsible for the iron pieces found in the gallery. popea made the fanzine that accompanies the exhibition, which functions as a natural extension of this logic: portable containers where stories circulate, get deformed and continue. Rather than documenting the exhibition,

they act as devices of secondary orality and prolong it, keeping the conversation going beyond the exhibition space.

Their intense coexistence during that summer shifted individual practice—painting, diaries—towards collective work, driven by conversations, debates, card readings, sound experiments and reading aloud. Snippets and evocations concerning the archaeology of the desire to be an artist and their shared formative years budded forth. The river of memory carried fragments away and returned them to the murky sea, transformed into a portal. A Nan Goldin catalogue, without any knowledge of the context or her story. The romanticising of sex and drugs. The harm in student-teacher relationships. Bathing in the sea on muggy days suspended self-absorption and transformed the water into a passageway to other worlds. Memories arose like an inevitable landslide, and when verbalised, they became something shared, belonging to many. What is remembered becomes real; what is recounted transforms us. Gossip is inscribed in this genealogy. This minor, despised, historically feminine genre, becomes a political gesture, a tool for dismantling authority and revealing what was concealed.

Water—so integral to island life—appears here as both a current and an archive: an ocean of memories and ghosts. Not only the gentle, picture-postcard sea, but also the Mediterranean as a border, a tomb and a threshold. In this exhibition, water serves as a narrative portal. For Virginia Woolf, style is like a wave that travels from the high seas to break on the shore in the form of words, while for Le Guin, literature is a living current. This relationship between water and writing is also reflected in books such as *The Chronology of Water* and *Illuminated*, by Lidia Yuknavitch, in which the body is presented as a liquid archive affected by trauma, desire and memory.

The story then went back to the 1990s, to a Faculty of Fine Arts in Spain. Today, its half-empty buildings, overgrown with vegetation, offer an unintended allegory: a forest growing within the architecture that once held space for an old narrative. This is not a silent ruin, but rather a landscape that asserts itself and overflows, reminiscent of the spaces María Zambrano describes in *Claros del bosque*: places that are not conquered or forced, but accessed through attention and patience, when something opens up without warning; places where something emerges outside the realm of time, allowing us to recover a past feeling, a primal unity that does not erase the wound, but renders it thinkable.

In that same landscape, she engages in conversation with Ursula K. Le Guin's interpretation of *Sleeping Beauty* in *The Wave in the Mind*, titled "The Wilderness Within". Rather than speaking of the arrival of the prince, she speaks of the acknowledgement of the brambles that have grown around the dream. These brambles do not appear out of nowhere; they grow when a false narrative has gone unquestioned for too long. A story made up of fascination, silence, hierarchies and structural violence. In *Complaint!*, Sara Ahmed describes this institutional violence that becomes the landscape, forcing us to adapt in order to survive and punishing those who call it out. Crossing those brambles is not an act of heroism, but of lucidity: the possibility of opening up a clearing where before there was only continuity, confusion and fear.

For centuries, folk tales—especially those featuring women—have been one of the main devices of transmission of norms, fears and hierarchies. Marina Warner has shown how these tales operate as cultural technologies, shaping bodies and desires. Angela Carter took up this legacy and dismantled it from within: rewriting the story not to abandon it, but to restore consciousness, risk and pleasure to its protagonists. Where there was obedience, now there is choice; where there was silence, now there is a voice.

In 2020, popea signed up to a workshop in La Casa Encendida titled *Black Mirrors: Political Imagination and New Latin American Gothic*. Through her reading and analysis, she articulated how her fascination with gothic fiction and fantasy offered a means of reconnecting with dark, dormant or postponed emotions. She said that reading horror could also be a way of learning: a way of facing fear head-on, dissecting it and understanding the unnameable forces at play. To look at what is broken. Reading is a way of traversing other worlds and becoming other

bodies and times, if only momentarily. If science fiction helps to imagine possible futures, why not consider whether gothic fiction can teach us something about the present?

We later came across *Always Coming Home*, also by Le Guin, as though, after understanding the brightness of a single star, we had discovered an entire constellation. Its blend of imaginary archaeology, stories, poems, maps, drawings, containers and invented genealogies gave us the language to express what was happening. Our project was not linear or heroic, but rather a living territory: a space-bag where personal stories, minimal gestures, kitchen conversations, feminist genealogies and fragments of memory could coexist without hierarchy. Rather than a mere reference book, *Always Coming Home* served as a model of the world, offering a new way of thinking about artistic practice as a sensitive archaeology made up of remains, journeys and stories in motion.

The notion of the bag, formulated by Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, forms a crucial part of this project. Rather than the epic of the hero and conquest, Le Guin proposes a narrative made up of minimal gestures: a container with room for the beginnings and losses, fragmented stories and actions that make up life. This is the space poeas works in. Her practice moves between memory, fiction and conversation, constructing a territory where intimacy becomes political and the political becomes intimate. The exhibition is presented as an open bag: a place to listen, share fragments and reweave bonds. At a time when the hero narrative is making a comeback, this exhibition puts forward an alternative form of storytelling: one that does not conquer, but sustains.

Perhaps, as Le Guin says, there is still room in the bag of stars. There are still seeds to be gathered. There are still stories that can save us. And it is there—in the humble, radical gesture of narrating together—that poeas work reveals its most profound power: reminding us that life, like fiction, is based on community.

WWW.ESBALUARD.ORG

#POPEAESBALUARD