

The landscape as a living body: art, ecology and artistic practice

Abstract

This article investigates artistic practice as a means of reconnecting the human body and the natural landscape, based on the conception of nature as a living, sensitive body endowed with memory. The study is part of the field of contemporary art and ecological thought, articulating contributions from phenomenology, anthropology of nature, ecosophy and non-Western cosmologies, which problematize the modern separation between humanity and the environment.

The research adopts a qualitative and ethnographic approach, combining interdisciplinary literature review with research based on artistic practice. The empirical excerpt refers to the experience lived by the author during the “Artistic Residency Essence and flow”, held between January 8 and 25, 2026, at the Terra UNA ecovillage, located in the Serra da Mantiqueira Environmental Protection Area, in Minas Gerais. The residency, inspired by the concept of Good Living (2016), under the coordination of the magician artist Nadam Guerra, proposed a sensory and community immersion aimed at the integration between art, nature, spirituality and alternative ways of life.

Keywords: art, body, ecology, landscape, territory

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Introduction

Throughout history, art has portrayed the human condition, social organization, beliefs, values, conflicts, and forms of beauty specific to each era. In its trajectory, it evolves in the representations of nature and divinities, functioning as a mirror of cultural, social and technological transformations. In this sense, art constitutes a fundamental field for the construction of identity, contestation of paradigms and critical reflection on human experience.

This study is inserted in this context by proposing a reflection on the notion of body as nature and nature as body. It is based on the assumption that the elements of nature can be understood as living, sensitive and complex organisms endowed with flows and memory. In the same way, the living beings that make up the planet can be understood as parts of a larger body, planet Earth itself, formed by interdependent bodies, often fragmented by modern ways of understanding and exploring life. When this relational structure is not recognized, bonds become fragile and susceptible to rupture.

In this scenario, artistic practice can act as a means of reconnection between the human body and the body of the earth. In painting, for example, this conception shifts the artistic gesture from mere representation to sensible experience: painting becomes a form of communication with the whole. Representing elements or landscapes is configured as an exercise of attentive observation, presence and connection.

David Abram¹ expands this reflection by stating that perception is always an exchange between living bodies. For the author, nature manifests itself continuously through sounds, textures, movements and atmospheres. From this perspective, the landscape can be understood as a body that feels and responds. The notion of active nature also finds support in contemporary anthropology. Tim Ingold² proposes to think of the world as a tangle of life lines, in which plants, rivers, and mountains participate in the same relational field. In this approach, there are no isolated objects, but processes in continuous becoming.

This view is close to indigenous cosmologies, in which planet earth is conceived as a living and ancestral entity. In Krenak's³ view, the separation between humanity and nature constitutes a modern fiction that sustains practices of exploitation and destruction. Recognizing the earth as a body also implies recognizing its vulnerability and dignity.

By understanding the landscape as a living being, with roots that resemble veins, trunks that evoke columns and crowns that function as lungs, the artist who assumes nature as a living organism does not resort to metaphor in an illustrative way, but expresses the singularity of its existence. The landscape ceases to be scenery and becomes presence.

Contemporary art has shown itself to be contrary to hegemonic models of development, contributing to the construction of new ecological sensibilities. The philosopher Guattari⁴ proposes the concept of ecosophy, understood as an ethical-political articulation between three registers: environment, social relations and human subjectivity. This perspective seeks to address the crisis of civilization through the reinvention of ways of life and resistance to capitalist standardization. In this context, art acts as a device for perceptive and ethical transformation.

Under the lens of Donna Haraway,⁵ who proposes the notion of making kin, new forms of coexistence between species depend on imaginative and narrative practices capable of generating bonds. Painting that conceives of nature as a body contributes to this exercise by producing images that evoke interdependence, care and co-responsibility.

Drawing and pictorial practice, in this sense, take on a ritualistic character: it is not only a matter of producing images, but of establishing a space for listening, attention and deceleration, mobilizing the imaginary as a way of approaching the landscape. The artistic gesture thus becomes a form of symbolic resistance in the face of the extractivist logic that reduces land to a resource.

TERRA UNA: União Natureza e Arte (UNA)

The headquarters of the NGO Terra UNA¹ is located in an ecovillage (Figure 1), inserted in an area of 48 hectares, located in the Environmental Protection Area (APA) of Serra da Mantiqueira, in the municipality of Liberdade, Minas Gerais, Brazil. The space integrates housing, work, education and leisure, constituting itself as a center of experiences that seeks to involve the human being with proposals that articulate art, nature and spirituality.



Figure 1 Terra UNA Ecovillage – February/2026. Serra da Mantiqueira, Liberdade, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

Source: Personal collection.

The project presents alternatives based on the concept of “Good Living”, formulated by Alberto Acosta,⁶ understood as a philosophy oriented to life in communion, reciprocity and balance between human beings and the environment.

This article presents an excerpt of the author’s experience in the Artistic Residency “Essência e Fluxo”, held between January 8th and 25th, 2026, under the coordination of the artist-magician Nadam Guerra, the production was carried out by Danilo Nóbrega.

With the participation of twenty residents, the process involved collective displacement, community experience and intense sensory immersion in the territory. The author joined the group through a scholarship offered by the program and stayed at the Beija-flor chalet with three other artists: Lola Sol with whom she shared the room, Eliane Fraulob and Maria de Los Vientos. This space also began to function as a studio (Figure 2) and the coexistence between the four participants favored creative and inspiring exchange, fundamental for the development of artistic processes.



Figure 2 Casa Beija-flor Atelier – February/2026 (Eliane, Kalli, Evânia and Maria de Los Vientos).

Source: Personal collection

¹Available at: <https://www.terrauna.com.br/arte>

During the residency period, the participants were involved in conversation circles about behavior, spirituality and art, in addition to activities such as hiking, bathing in waterfalls (Figure 3), dance workshops, drawing, collage and singing around a campfire. The tasks of caring for space were shared among the residents, favoring an environment of cooperation and listening. This context evoked creativity marked by freedom, playfulness and symbolic exchange.



Figure 3 Poço do meio-dia waterfall – February/2026 (Mariana, Lola Sol, Gabriela and Maria Sanches).

Source: Personal collection

In the second week, the process of artistic production began aimed at holding a group exhibition scheduled for March, at the Solar Grandjean de Montigny University Museum², from PUC-Rio, in Rio de Janeiro. Curated by Nadam Guerra, Mateus Morani and Bruna Costa. As part of this training path, the concept of psychomagic, developed by Alejandro Jodorowsky, was introduced through the documentary “The Art that Heals”.⁷

The author produced two paintings on canvas (60 x 40 cm), using the pasted painting technique. The first presents a daytime landscape, in which a female figure crosses the forest, being enveloped by it. The figure establishes a visual dialogue with a hummingbird (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Pasted oil painting - landscape Hummingbird - 0.60X0.40.

Source: Personal collection

The second (Figure 5) depicts a nocturnal landscape, with the Beija-Flor chalet in the background and, in the foreground, an owl on a termite mound in the foreground.

²Available at: <https://www.puc-rio.br/sobrepuc/depto/solar/>



Figure 5 Pasted oil painting - landscape Owl - 0.60X0.40.

Source: Personal collection

The works express a state of unity with nature, translating the enchantment and flourishing resulting from the sensitive surrender to the territory, an understanding that the author associates with the notion of magic. The use of dense layers of paint, internal flows of light and organic shapes in movement seeks to materialize the invisible vitality of the place. Light is not treated as an external or atmospheric element, but as energy that emerges from within the landscape, suggesting pulsation and breathing.

This approach is close to the notion of material imagination proposed by Bachelard,⁸ according to which the elements, earth, water, fire and air, do not operate as abstract symbols, but as living forces that shape the sensible experience. Painting is thus configured as a space of intertwining between matter and imagination.

Methodology

This study adopts an ethnographic approach, centered on conceptual analysis, seeking to understand art as a contribution to the connection with the whole. The research uses qualitative methodology, based on an interdisciplinary bibliographic review, understanding art, especially drawing, painting and sculpture, as practices of sensitive and relational knowledge. It brings the voices of authors such as Acosta,⁶; Fisher,⁹; Ingold,²; Abram,¹; Haraway,⁵; Guattari,⁴; Descola¹⁰; Jodorowsky⁷ and Krenak³ whose contributions made it possible to construction of a conceptual basis for reflection on behavior, artistic practice and the analyzed context. In addition to the theoretical review, the study presents the production of two landscape paintings, in the 60 × 40 cm format, relating the creative process to the experience lived in the Residency “Essence and Flow”, an artistic activation project developed in the context of Terra UNA.¹¹

Results and discussion

The results of this research are not expressed in measurable or statistical terms, but as conceptual understandings elaborated by the author from her residency and her artistic production, carried out in the vicinity of the Beija Flor Chalet, in the Terra Una ecovillage, in search of a sensitive dialogue with the place. The work presented on

canvas expresses the relationship with the lived space, articulating bibliographic analysis, artistic practice and critical reflection, which shed light on processes that transcend previously experienced techniques, configuring a sensitive dialogue with the territory.

As a reference, the author includes landscapes of the place of Terra Una that are intertwined with aspects of her own subjectivity, inspired, among other elements, by the documentary: “The art that heals”,⁷ by Alejandro Jodorowsky. A film and theater director, Jodorowsky, understands psychomagic as a form of therapy through symbolic acts, mediated through touch, in contrast to psychoanalysis, understood as therapy mediated by words. According to the author, psychomagic acts by encouraging the mind to cross the border between reality and dream, allowing subjects to metaphorically experience their traumas (generators of unhappiness) and introduce something new into their lives, something they have never done, in order to complete the symbolic liberation and reach an immediate stage of positivity, whose effects are prolonged in time. This approach was presented by Nadam Guerra in one of the meetings that made up the context of the research.

Thus, one enters a speculative and sensitive territory, sometimes described as magical, in which art, imagination and subjective transformation are intertwined. In the specific case of painting, understood here as the act of painting, one of the main results of the study is the consolidation of the notion of landscape as a living and sensitive organism, as opposed to the modern conception of nature as an inert object or exploitable resource.

The dialogue established between Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology¹² and Ingold’s² relational anthropology shows that the perception of the landscape occurs through a shared corporeality, in which human and environment mutually constitute each other. In the pictorial practice carried out, this understanding is manifested in the replacement of static forms by organic structures, of essence in flux, in which leaves, trees and mountains merge into a body. This result was designed by the author, with the intention of expressing her connection with the place.

The hummingbird and the owl emerge as central symbols. The hummingbird, associated with the diurnal period, represents pollination and vital flow; the owl, linked to the night, refers to introspection, spiritual focus and the expansion of consciousness. Both are understood as powerful animals, evoking an understanding of unity with the whole.

In this way, the hypothesis that painting can operate as a means of expression capable of dialoguing with non-Western cosmologies is confirmed, as previously brought by Krenak.³ The choice of the artistic process, marked by the use of dense layers of paint and curved gestures, favors a slowed down temporal relationship with the work, demanding from the artist and the observer a posture of presence and serenity. This characteristic reinforces the idea that painting can function as a ritualistic act, approaching both psychomagic, proposed by Jodorowsky⁷ and the ecosophical propositions of Guattari,⁴ by integrating environmental, mental, and subjective dimensions.

The analysis of the work reveals that light, a central element of the composition, is not treated as an external source or mere atmospheric effect, but as an internal energy of the landscape, suggesting pulsation, respiration and vitality. Such an approach dialogues with the notion of material imagination proposed by Bachelard,⁸ according to which natural elements are understood as active and poetic forces.

This aesthetic perspective contributes to breaking with the visual regime that privileges distance and objectification, favoring an immersive and sensorial perception.

The results thus reinforce the understanding of art as a legitimate form of overflow, reflection and knowledge, especially with regard to the relationships between body, territory and ecology. Painting, by operating through matter, gesture and sensibility, produces a type of knowledge that is not reduced to discursive language, but complements it.

In this sense, the research confirms the relevance of the qualitative methodology that included artistic practice, as proposed by Borges; Irwin, (2018). The notion of nature as body and body as nature thus emerges not only as a theoretical concept, but as an embodied and shareable experience.

Elements of nature understood as the body find resonance in the reflections of artists and thinkers who conceive art as an expanded form of perception and access to symbolic dimensions of experience.

In this context, the contribution of Alan Moore,¹³ when he states that art is like magic, the science of manipulating symbols, words or images to make changes in consciousness, allows us to deepen the discussion about the role of art in various approaches.

For the author, symbols, narratives and images act directly on the structure of perception, promoting transformations in the ethical and political fields. This conception dialogues with the painting analyzed in this study, to the extent that the organic symbols, the internal light of the landscape and the fluidity of the forms do not intend to represent the world, but to activate states of sensible consciousness, in which the landscape is perceived as a living presence.

Ernst Fischer,⁹ in turn, understands art as a fundamental anthropological need. According to the author, art arises from the human desire to overcome the fragmentation of everyday experience, reestablishing a sense of totality between subject and world. In this context, art not only reflects social reality, but creates conditions for human beings to recognize themselves as part of a broader process. The notion of landscape as a living body can be understood, in the light of Fischer, as an aesthetic response to modern alienation in relation to nature, operating a symbolic reintegration between humanity and the land.

Thus, by articulating art, nature and spirituality, the results of this research indicate that art can operate as a device for re-enchanting the world, a concept that should not be understood in a naïve or romantic way, but also as an aesthetic and political strategy in the face of the contemporary ecological crisis. By returning the landscape to its symbolic, affective and dreamlike dimension, art contributes to displacing the utilitarian gaze that sustains practices of environmental exploitation.^{14,15}

Conclusion

I write this conclusion in the first person because the experience that underlies this research was ethnographic and implied my sensitive and bodily presence in the territory. I did not observe from a distance: I lived the place. Writing, therefore, accompanies this situated condition.

When I arrived at Terra UMA, for the “Essence and Flow” Residency, I took the rhythm of the city with me. In living with the territory, I was crossed by another perception. The earth, the silence, the sounds and the light were not scenery, but a living presence. I felt the natural force cross me; I felt part of the whole.

Painting has become an exercise in listening and slowing down. More than living, I started to represent feelings. The creative process produced embodied knowledge, integrating environmental, subjective and social dimensions. I left the residence spiritualized, inspired, aware of the interdependence between body and territory.

This experience is close to the reflections of Ailton Krenak and Philippe Descola, when questioning the modern division between humanity and nature. I conclude that recognizing nature as a sensitive body strengthens ecological and ethical imaginaries of care, affirming painting as a space for the encounter between art, territory and spirituality.

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is no conflicts of interest.

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