

ARIEL SCHLESINGER MIERDA Y MARIPOSAS

Mierda y Mariposas, which translates to "Shit and Butterflies" moves fluidly between opposing forces, reflecting the tension between creation and decay, life and ruin. At the center of Ariel Schlesinger's exhibition, is the short 16mm film *La Avelina* (2024), a portrait of the strange, unsettling, and often contradictory nature of the ecological world. Shot at dusk, it stages a tree flaming from within, the fumes released through its branches. Set against an eerie, vacant landscape, the film suggests a forced removal, as if the tree, affected by the forces of displacement, had been set into motion, uprooted, and replanted elsewhere.

In our age of global dispossession, philosopher Michael Marder argues that exile has become universal and extends beyond human groups to the earth and the atmosphere, to plants and places, to animals, microorganisms, bacteria, and fungi. Every organism and ecosystem is affected by climate change, "rendering ecologies exilic; (...) without the chance of returning to a stable origin, itself nothing other than a theoretical fiction."¹ Like fire, which cannot be undone or reversed, exile carries both destruction and renewal, extinguishing what we take to be original.

In *La Avelina*, a lifeless fruit tree found in a nearby village was painstakingly cut to pieces, hollowed out, and reassembled on a farm in Quito, Ecuador, before the artist set it alight. For Schlesinger, looking for and at trees is integral to his practice: "it's always interesting to look at trees because they change as you change."² Recently, a life-sized fallen bronze sculpture occupied the Minini gallery and forced viewers to crawl beneath a tangle of dark branches set aflame to reach the inner rooms (*Untitled*, 2019). In the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt, a monumental aluminum cast of two intertwining trees, permanently installed in the forecourt (also *Untitled*, 2019), speaks to belonging and uprootedness. Perhaps they relate to the tree of knowledge, from which humanity's first exile emerges. As Marder explains, "The act of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil is grasped in terms of a separation of knowledge from life and the subsequent banishment of the living from vitality."³

Rather than serving as a proxy for faith or belief, the poetics of fire and the importance of trees in Schlesinger's practice emphasize the reinvention of life over despair. Just as fire can quickly consume, it also releases energy, changes forms, and sustains. In ecological terms, a forest fire decimates trees but also nourishes the soil, enabling new life to grow. Fire, in this sense, reconciles apparent contradictions, rearticulating the possibilities of dwelling in duality, by being more than one and only one at a time. Schlesinger's work engages with this paradox: the double, the pair, and the contradictory break with the dualism too often used to navigate the world. For him, "the meaning is in the material,"⁴ revealing a desire to understand the substance of processes and objects rather than forcing narratives onto them.

¹ Marder, Michael. "Exilic Ecologies." *Philosophies*, vol. 8, no.5, 2023, 2.

² <https://www.dw.com/en/ariel-schlesingers-ingenious-installations/video-56630264>

³ Marder, 6.

⁴ Personal communication with the author.

At the core of material reality, there is also a metaphysical dimension that pertains to but extends beyond the apparent, where I believe Schlesinger's work dwells with insightful uneasiness. Born in Jerusalem, Schlesinger is familiar to both the spectrality and the suspense that form the surpassing continuum of life and death of a place at once occupied and in a state of exile. There, the ghostly can be sensed and felt in its own way. Constant shifts signal imminent disaster or the start of new beginnings, and this long unseen anticipation, as Jalal Touffic notes, haunts the visible with remnants of events, traumas, and memories that continue to shape the present.⁵ Perhaps this is the reason why gas features in so many of Schlesinger's artworks—"people are afraid of what they cannot see."⁶

The environmental crisis operates on such unseen scales—so vast, distributed, and long-lasting that they defy conventional modes of understanding. *La Avelina* lends the exhibition its sonic environment—scored by Miruna Boruzescu—and an operatic undertone to the ambiguity felt under the sway of both material and immaterial scales. The personal, social, and environmental tensions in *Mierda y Mariposas* hold together a deromanticized view of ecology, "decoupled from the bucolic and the picturesque, and dissociated from nativism and autochthony"⁷ —ideas traditionally associated with nature.

In Schlesinger's work emerges an aesthetic sensibility that reflects the complexity of life. His work takes the full view of interdependence, acknowledging our entanglement in ecological systems, for better or worse. From depictions of smoldering trees and flaming butcher blades (*Just Entschuldigung your way out*, 2024) to portraits of butterflies posing on excrement (*The an avoidable consequence of you*, 2024) and the razor-sharp wit of *Everything is yet* (2024), a homespun flame pulled into a black hole, his work, much like fire, does not exhaust but transforms what seem like irreconcilable forces.

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⁵ Touffic, Jalal. *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*. Forthcoming Books, 2009.

⁶ Personal communication with the author.

⁷ Marder, 2.