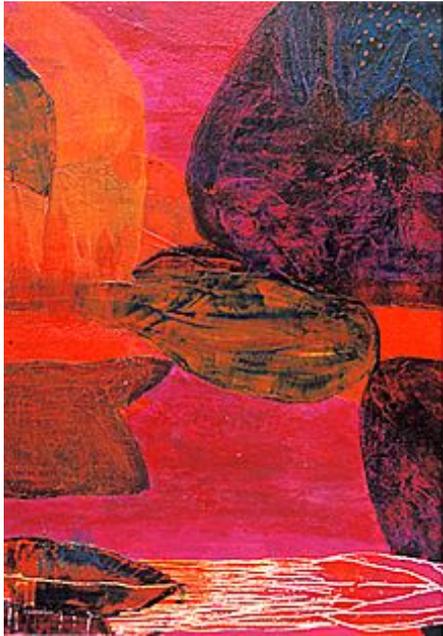


2001 Vuelo, Galería Diners, Bogotá, Colombia



"Mulberry Day"
Oil on canvas. 31.5" x 27.5"
2001. Private Collection (Colombia)

Flight **Foreword to the 2001 exhibition catalogue** **by Julian Honer**

For Cecilia Vargas, Friday 7 January 2000 will forever be branded upon her memory. She awoke the following morning to find three anxious messages on her answering machine, left at various times during the night, informing her that her studio in north London was ablaze, having started spontaneously, through a build-up of turpentine fumes, in another artist's studio next door. Almost everything in the studio was lost, if not to fire and smoke, then to water.

A year and a half later, visiting the studio for the first time since the fire, one can still smell the smoke, but the studio is brighter than ever – and it's not just the fresh white paint on the walls. Furnaces of reds and pinks, flames and lava-flows of orange and equatorial suns of yellow scorch the canvases

hanging on one wall, the oil paint – all water-mixable colours, now that spirits have been banished from the studio – applied with a visible passion that pushes and pulls at the picture surface, and sometimes scratches across it.

Turning around, past the window that looks out over the wind-rippled water of a canal, the paintings – all blue – on the opposite wall could not be cooler or more serene. Oil has given way to acrylic (notably not just water-mixable, but also water-based), while the surfaces are more matt and the paint applied with a greater sense of calm intent than in the 'fire' series, as the three dimensions of modelled forms or rippling textures interplay with flat patches of pure colour or drips of paint that reassert the

picture surface. The forms in this interrelated series are organic, which is not to say that they are representational. The imagery is informed by nature, certainly – including those forms and patterns revealed only through microscopy, which preoccupied Vargas in the late 1990s – but also by her experiments, during the same years, of applying pigment to silk, an extraordinarily liberating experience, as the forms and colours, applied as a gel, initially appear only as black, and are not revealed until the pigment is fixed by washing and heated by ironing.

Vargas's most recent works on paper indicate, even more acutely than the canvases, the new direction of her work. "The works on paper are always further ahead than the oil paintings," Vargas tells me, "perhaps even months ahead. They speak to me from the future." It was on paper that she first started working after the fire, when she began rebuilding her body of work. The works on paper reveal an almost childlike sense of freedom and enjoyment of colour – and yet it is a reflection of the artist's maturity that she has the confidence subconsciously to explore the resources of her emotions so deeply.

Vargas has titled this exhibition Vuelo (meaning both "flight" and "I fly"), following the experience of the fire. Vuelo is about a certain distancing from the past and its possessions, about an overview, about reflecting.

If the studio fire was something of an epiphany for Cecilia Vargas, determining the subsequent direction of her work and career, its timing, in the context of the Christian calendar, could hardly have been more eerily appropriate.

Julian Honer, 2001
Editorial Director Merrell Publishers, London