

COSMIC REVERSAL

A conversation between artist Luis Enrique Zela-Koort, Alessio Antonioli and Rosa Tyhurst. Director and Curator at Gasworks, London.

Maybe a good place to start would be what is physically in the exhibition? Describe the body of work you've been developing, some of it here in London.

I'm presenting a series of small paintings, which began here at Gasworks. I'm also presenting some new work in blown glass, as well as some 3D printed and casted wall sculptures in different materials. The whole idea with the paintings and the sculptures is to create a narrative atmosphere, to construct an alternate reality. The name of the show is Cosmic Reversal; it's a reversal on the narratives of modern technologists, or scientists, who carry this nihilist posture like: "oh well, the universe doesn't care about you, oh well, reality is such-and-such" as if they were perfect observers. And ultimately the exhibition is recognising us as part of the universe, and understanding that if something is important to us, we are a part of it. Everything is connected. A huge part of the show is also about the notion of world-building, it is a development of the work I've been doing at Gasworks. It's about telling a story where humanity is discovering new worlds in which they find other configurations for life. Which is very much inspired by my personal experience with chronic illness. I wanted to imagine a world where life doesn't infect, or overcome, or obey a logic of virality. And instead, fabricate worlds where all life forms would coexist or interconnect under a modality of symbiosis. Where everything is in a state of transformation or becoming something else, and it's open to that transmutation, without resistance. Globally, one of our most pressing crises is a polarisation of politics, and the idea that a self-contained ego is something that is rewarded. My show is about dissolving the boundaries that separate us from each other, and from the world. Because modernity views this loss of the self-contained ego as something that is negative or non-desirable. But that only happens in this framework of human exceptionalism. If we are open to recognise ourselves as equal, then perhaps we can unbind from this narrative maybe?

This recalls the Xenogenesis Series by Octavia Butler, where alien species start mixing with earthlings, hybridising together and it results in a cure for cancer. A lot of her writing deals with ideas of Afrofuturism, and queering of authenticity and the idea that we as human beings are part of a system and there's an inherent interconnectedness there. In the Parable of the Sower she writes about God, and God being change, and change being everything. How humans are able to direct God's malleability and how by shaping God, they can shape themselves and save themselves. This relates to what you were saying about virality, and our relationship to science, and something that happens outside of us, how it's outside but it's actually still part of us because we're all essentially part of the same thing. Whether it's the cosmos - we're still part of it as we're made of the same atoms. These ideas just start dissipating this sort of centrality of the human, or, centrality of certain theories like of man at the centre of the universe, and your work seems to open up all these different possibilities

In talking about literature, I'm very inspired by Jeff VanderMeer's trilogy, and the book *Annihilation*, which was recently made into a movie. It forms part of this science-fiction genre called "New Weird", one of the twists is that it doesn't necessarily happen within technology but all happens within nature. It's about this destabilisation of the boundaries that modernity has created for nature, to separate us from it, to distort it. And what happens is that in *Annihilation*, this alien entity arrives at a site and everything within its range mutates endlessly. It becomes a concern to the government of course. And everything within a certain area, becomes genetically remixed, so humans become plants, plants become minerals, abiogenesis occurs. Some of the people decide to participate willingly and give themselves up to it. On one side there's a kind of body horror to it, but there's also something very beautiful in it as well. Some characters become flowers and they're comfortable becoming *other*.

At a personal level, with a lot of the things I have to deal with, I try to find parallels between the transgressed boundaries I find within me and with the world around us. You know, what is my place in this world? How do I see myself reflected in the world around me? In the show, one of the images that is very present, is a fantastical taxidermy eye. It could be human, animal, most likely extraterrestrial and within it you see a landscape of stars and galaxies. This lingering sensation of alienness I carry, this otherness, where the boundary between the self and the cosmos is collapsed unlocking new potentials for life across space and time. I'm very interested in this idea of life as universal, and the universe as life. Life is precious, of course, but it's also not as rare as we think, or we imagine it is. It's a sort of logical consequence from the laws of the universe. Life can be found everywhere, and not only can it be found everywhere, it can exceed or surpass what we think life should be, or how it ought to behave. I dream of new realities at this fundamental level, imagining new bodies, new ways of existing...

Life is also like a series of coincidences, isn't it? That's another way of thinking - you can plan all you want to, there's so much in the Western world of planning and understanding and sequencing but actually, it's just a coincidence that these atoms were next to another set of atoms and then the world froze and then it thawed. Actually, if we all started talking about coincidences more, instead of sequencing, everything opens up and suddenly becomes less defined, and there's more room for possibilities that we haven't even thought of.

That's why I like to think about the universe and why my work has a very cosmic aesthetic to it. Because the universe is infinite, even if we say the universe is 14 billion years old - that's our guess! And we keep getting surprised and keep finding galaxies where they shouldn't be!

And also when we say 14 billion, it's always like "give or take 1,000,000,002" years - which is enormous!

Exactly. It's infinite! There's this infinite possibility of difference, of change, on so many different scales. Just to think we can assume life looks like it does from our experience is very egocentric. I think of reality as a computation of difference, like trying to calculate an irrational number - it's never going to end. Or never going to reach an identification of something that is static. For me, thinking about other planets is thinking about all the possibilities of life beyond the constraints and the conditions here on Earth. That's why I'm interested in the micro, microbiology and biochemistry, and also astrobiology because it's trying to link both infinities, both extremes. We're here on Earth and we can go infinitely deep within ourselves but we can also go infinitely outwards into the cosmos. It also relates to this idea of panpsychism; the concept that everything is alive, which is very present in Peruvian pre-modern cultures. But that is now being proven with certain scientific theories like dissipative adaptation which is that over time, even inanimate matter - the simplest of molecules - tend to complexify themselves. As if matter was always trying to become something different, like a latent yearning or desire to be. And that desire to be, in modernity, is always at the cost of something else. But what I'm saying is that that zero sum equation doesn't always have to be the norm, and it makes sense in a very particular time in history right now. Thinking that this is how life should behave, following the zero sum equation, where the biggest consumes the smallest...

Because a lot of that is built on those binaries. Something needs to die in order for you to exist. There's a big resurgence in the esoteric at the moment, with its topics consuming the time of a lot of artists and thinkers, and your work seems to relate to this also. Perhaps it's a thinking like there has to be an alternative, there has to be another way. It feels so claustrophobic to live within so many binaries, and within this action = consequence dynamic. There's a whole other aspect that this is blind to, that presents a world that could be out in space, but it could also be deep in the sea. This idea of something looks really "out there" but it could also be right "in there". Whether it's out in space, or deep in earth, or outside of our body, or inside of our body and your work makes that discussion - are these algae, or planets or anal beads? In your work you provide a snippet into how you're imagining your life and how you're living your life - do you ever think about the public, and what they see when confronted with your work? Because you're not married to a particular media, even just during the residency here you've gone from glass to paintings to drawings, to holograms, animation, ceramics - there's really no end! But they're all part of a cosmology, of media of ideas, and it almost feels like an environment, there's something you feel like you can go into where the rules are different. And maybe they're not even rules, and you talk about becoming - which is another word that is really interesting - and your idea of constantly becoming, you never get to the end, it's a continuous evolution and change.

That's spot on, because the way it works, when for example we see archaeological evidence and observe the production of a culture and the way they viewed the world, they did everything and we do everything and they displayed themselves across different media and materials. And you can still find defining characteristics. The way I see my work is like I'm building this sort of world, this

universe. So to just constrain myself to one media feels very limiting, and it's not representative of what my inner reality would be. Each medium has its own functionality and process, and once you think about the process it's almost like cooking, there's a difference between frying something and boiling something and putting something in the oven. And all of those things have layers, and meaning!

It's amazing what we can do with an egg. It's so many different things and it's still the same bloody egg!

I really want to engage with different processes. I talk a lot about difference, and how difference is divine and how change is the true nature of reality. And so to be consequential, I can't be doing the same thing always otherwise I would get bored, I don't allow myself that. And equally, once I understand the entirety of a medium, it's done for me. To me, the exciting part is the discovery of something new, of playing around and finding something unexpected. I'm always learning and that's something in which I'll never be done.

Which also relates to this idea of constantly becoming, as a human being, as an atom in the universe, but also an artist. It's a constant additive process. And that's why projects like residencies make sense, because they are another way of collecting information or research - during the months you're here you'll pick up from so many different places and eventually, it's a process of information, which will manifest through a glass sculpture, or a painting, or something else with just that - a memory that percolates through another work

I've found that a lot of the things artists say that their work wants to do, are actually things they want to do with themselves. So when I say I want my work to be about difference, or I want this work to invite for transformation, it's really about myself wanting and trying to embrace and open myself up to those things. In a lot of ways artists are very vulnerable and reveal a lot of themselves to the world. I think about the processes I deal with in my body, and migrating from my home country and having to deal with repressive politics, and always having to mould and transform myself and find new avenues for me to exist - I think that inevitably is my work. When I talk about these things, I am really talking about things that are important to me, things that I wish to be able to do fully, to fully transform into something different, without the pain. It's something I wish I could do.

In a sense, that's why we look at artists. A lot of the time, out of pain, out of a feeling of being out of a place, a lot of people shut down, and we have a tendency to build a shell to protect ourselves from all of that. Whereas if you go the other way, the more oppression, the more difficulties, the more pain, you realise - this can't be it, there has to be something else. And that search you do, which you put into your work, is something for us, who are not artists, to look to. Because you look to art and artists who think in that way to imagine something different, and that's the whole idea of science fiction.

It's a way of imagining a world where things don't work the way they are set here. Which brings us back to the sort of images that you have which verge on the esoteric, or on the space of fiction, or manga, on all of those things because it is about giving an opportunity to people to imagine something different because once you imagine it, then you can actually manifest and go for it, and a lot of the time that is what is lacking in society, the tools to think about how things could be different, because once you've thought it, then it could become.

Donna Haraway once said that the difference between science fiction and our reality is an optical illusion. Sin Wai Kin mentioned it in a talk the other day: is the more personal the more universal? I also believe that the inverse is true. The more universal, the more personal, it's either a logic of deduction or induction. But to go back to Haraway, this idea that it's an optical illusion, if there's no true essence to something in particular, it's about unleashing that possibility. Ultimately, we can't escape socialisation so it's about working within this framework to imagine something else. I think that's why my work inhabits a lot of in-between spaces. When you asked "what does the audience take from your work?" I think one of the main sensations I want to generate is weirdness. Yes there's intellectual discourse, and there's research, but I think the response to art is emotional - people see something and feel something. Sometimes it's beyond language but it's a sensation that grows inside of them. For me that sensation is weirdness, the idea that something could be different, that things aren't what they're used to, they're out of place, and this gives you something to think about. For me it is captivating because it breaks from the norm, or from our reality as it is right now. For me, weirdness is a very important tool, which links back to my identity, to queerness beyond sexuality or gender but deeply connected to alternate configurations or narratives.

It's like the uncanny too - something that is just a little bit off, that unsettles you

It makes us realise how arbitrary things are. It invites you to dissect things in your head. And that is ultimately what leads to imagining these new worlds we were talking about.

We touched on it a bit before, but what role does chance or coincidence have in the work?

My work is really entirely based on coincidence. I see something and it echoes to so many other things. My imagination is very visual, it's hard for me to make sense of it sometimes. For example, one of the wall sculptures in the exhibition is a 3D model that has become a sculpture, from a panel in a Marvel comic, and that is an object which is a multiversal engine that keeps narratives running. It's very meta-narrative, sometimes comics break the fourth wall, or they're self-referential. In this episode, they enter this space called the "White Hot Room", which is basically the engine-room of reality. They find this motor that's keeping the universe running. And when I saw it, I immediately saw

a ribbon - like its composition was a flowing sinuous ribbon. At the time I was thinking a lot about rewriting the narratives of life, of desire, and what is expected of life and what is desirable. And I was thinking about myself. So I took this object, I painted it pink because it references the colours used to communicate about HIV and it operates on these different levels: one is a formal coincidence but also it's about resetting the narrative of life to me on a symbolic level, it is a device that holds all these flows and potentials. These shapes resonated with me and with each other. Another piece that is in the show is a cast glass object - I was reading a biochemistry paper about how they found that different molecules could be used by different life forms in different planets to store genetic information and to reproduce. The graphics for the paper really reminded me of the illustrations I found in biology textbooks in school as it had this very diagrammatic, illustrative style. It felt didactic to a certain extent. I saw there was something in it, and there were molecules in it, so I decided to translate it to glass, which has this scientific yet sensual nature to it. Also when you translate one material to the other you find surprises too. Translating an image to a 3D object grants it another depth, translating an image to glass translates the properties of glass somehow, it's more erotic, more alluring, more porous. I'm very open to surprises and I never really know what my work is going to look like until it's done. I have an image in my head which I want to bring forth, but I never know exactly what is going to happen. And that's what happened here at Gasworks like when I did a big painting, which I hated. I'm also open to error.

The "White Hot Room" is also where all the colours are. And heat, it's an expression of energy. You could think of white in a binary way as the opposite of black, or the concept of everything. It is a colour where everything is spinning so fast that it becomes white, or like the sun. Because it has all the colours in it, we're just not seeing it. And that narrative could come into the discourse, otherwise we're trapped into a binary again. The same with hot, it means something is at work, it is producing energy and heat. Everything is in motion, everything is possible, nothing is dead, everything is alive. And if you were to slow it down, you'll start seeing the colours - they're all there.

If we have all the ingredients, and everything can happen, why hasn't it happened yet? And that question puts us on the spot. If we have all the tools, and the technology and the resources to reconfigure our experience of reality, why hasn't it happened yet?

And what is important about that is that it brings in ideas of agency. The world we live in now is so fucked it's like, what is the point? Politics decides without us, and you can feel so paralysed and unable. Whereas when you start to talk about these places, like the White Hot Room, you can start thinking that you have agency and you can make your mind up. You can build your own world and it starts feeling like it's giving back something that politics covers up and takes away from us.

One of the great achievements of modernity was to separate our agency from our power. And I think this is what rituals and the esoteric presents - the realisation that we have this innate power to transform reality. That is the power rituals and magic, that we have the power to reconfigure the world around us, through intention. I think that is why the esoteric also forms part of my work, the ceremonial aspect of manifesting realities, but one of the things that I think is important about this logic of agency is that virality overrides agency. For example, when something is successful on social media we say it's viral. It's like virality has become the measure of success - but what really is virality? Virality is overcoming the basic instincts or basic logics of something to the extent that it hijacks or tricks our biology. Like overstimulation, our minds enjoy it and it captures our attention and then you're watching three hours of tiktok without noticing. So virality overcomes agency and overcomes consent, which is why also when we think about symbiosis it's about what is the fundamental difference of bodies agreeing to coexist. Virality is one body deciding what to do with the other and that is the overarching logic of modernity and that is one of the great parallels I find with my experience with chronic illness, trying to find this fractal logic as to how things operate. Because we are part of the bulk and the bulk is reflected in us so everything that we experience happens in different levels elsewhere.

Another thing that comes to mind when you talk is the issue of balance. Take viruses, or bacteria that are swarming within our bodies, but it's excess or deficiency that creates the problem. Having certain viruses or bacteria in our body is what keeps us alive, so there's an idea here about finding a balance amongst all this because that's what is creating the environment. The air we breathe has to have a balance, and so it's finding that balance within which we can live but outside of it, if there's spikes of this, or too much of that, or too little of that it'll kill you. Like broccoli, it is really good for you but if you eat too much its nitrates will kill you. So there's a search for something, for possibilities or alternatives, or for what balance might mean. It feels really important. It's like the climate crisis. The balance on the planet is interrupted, we're upsetting the balance and we are killing ourselves. We exist within a very narrow area of balances. There is a coincidence that has created our species, but it's also what will kill it. And if we want to stretch our time here we need to maintain the balance and open up possibilities. We need to think about change and change to adapt to each other, to our thinking but also to how the world exists.

So nothing is really good, or bad, they just operate in the correct proportions for specific outcomes. When you mention balance, Kant is often read as a very strict philosopher that rewards human logic above all else, but if you read closely, he is writing about the responsibility towards future Earth and change, and that the way we should live in Earth is living in a way in that we could be ready to give away Earth to what comes after us. And I think that sort of reframing opens up a sort of radical responsibility that we have. But also that everything ends, and something always begins and it's an endless cycle of change.

In the art world, especially the "collecting" art world people used to talk about how they own an artwork and a collection, and now it's about being the custodian of a collection, and even just shifting

that language there is an understanding that you're looking after it for the time being but it'll outlive you, and so it should, and what does that mean? How does it change your relationship to ownership, to capitalism, to the way you look after the planet. The planet isn't yours, you're just inhabiting it for the time being. Even these small language shifts go back to what you're saying; you look after something and it'll look after you. But it's temporal, it's a fleeting moment...

The idea that we "own" something, that we own nature and that things can be owned, I think a lot about the way some indigenous cultures viewed and took decisions - it was by analysing the impacts of what you're doing seven generations down, and if it makes sense seven generations down, then it's something that is logical. Because everything is always fleeting, we won't be here for long.

The artist Edgar Cael made this brilliant work (The Echo of an Ancient Form of Knowledge, (Ru k' ox k'ob'el jun ojer etemab'el), 2021), which the Tate bought but it's a custodianship, as it has a Mayan ritual needed to install it. Based on Mayan thinking and custom, the Tate can have it for thirteen years, with the provision also that they support the people who's rituals are an integral part of it. It means that institutions are really having to think about ownership like a leasehold - but everything is a leasehold! It's so connected to the artist which then also creates a temporality, and an intrinsic connection between the artist and the work, as they're almost the same thing. You spoke about you creating your work and putting yourself in the work, and this piece is really connected to the artists' body so when the artist is not there, the work will shift again and will have a different meaning. And to come back to the show's title Cosmic Reversal, we talk so much about reversing the climate catastrophe, that's the end goal but maybe there is a power in accepting that things end for new things to grow. There's a type of insect that is known as pyrophilic, and that thrive in the conditions caused by devastating forest fires in California. If those burnt trees didn't exist, that whole ecosystem falls apart, out of destruction comes life. And reversal doesn't necessarily have to mean backwards, it's not about erasure it's about adding another layer on top of it, you build on top and maybe that's a way to think about reversal. Because you can't unbreak, you can't go back in time to unbreak something that is broken, but like Kintsugi, the Japanese form of pottery, you can unbreak it in a different way. It doesn't erase what's happened, it just brings it back to its function and makes it even more beautiful. It's the same thing with the world - we can't undo what's being done but we can fix it in a way that makes it more beautiful.

I was talking with a friend and they were talking about their experience at the Bienal de São Paulo and they were describing the show's axis of decolonisation, and queerness, and these important discussions, but how the curators couldn't agree on most of their choices, and they all contradicted each other. My response to that would always be that it's good. Confusion is good because what we're doing right now when we speak about decolonialism is that we're trying to define ourselves in opposition to colonialism, but I think it's trying to imagine that potential without being reactive to it. We should recognise what queerness is, not in opposition to straightness, but instead as something that is different that doesn't react to it but as something that is its own thing, and really trying to seek out its own new identity. It's not unbreaking something because we can't go back in time, but

it's really trying to think about something different without thinking about something in opposition because you can't undo history. We're still figuring it out.

There's this work by Louise Bourgeois called *I Do, I Undo, I Redo* (1999-2000), and that is the eternal process. You do something that you kind of undo it and then you redo it but it doesn't negate what's just happened, it's just a constant process of renegotiating, or it's like what Glissant says about the right to opacity - which is like "I don't need to fully explain myself to you so you can understand me, you have to take me for who I am". Some things are clear, and others are not. There is a reason why these philosophers and artists are now becoming the people we look at because they align with a necessity and a way of thinking that is pervasive as it's in the art world and in all these other disciplines and issues we have in life. As much as there is this "right wing-ification" of the world, and everything is becoming so much tighter and intense, there is this force on the other side that is trying to undo and there is constantly a doing and an undoing, and these forces are battling and mixing constantly, thankfully.

These forces are also beyond us. One of the reasons I'm very interested in space and science fiction and radical otherness, this otherness that challenges any preconception and confuses people to some extent is because when I was 13 years old, my family and I experienced this four hour UFO sighting. At that time it was very traumatic for me, it was New Year's Eve and we had arrived at my grandma's house who was a bit of a hermit - she lived by herself at the top of a mountain. We arrived at around 2am with my uncle and when we got there, the mist in the sky set and the night sky became invisible and then suddenly these huge orbs of light manifested. And they organised themselves into a massive circle hovering directly above us. When this happened the whole atmosphere started humming. Then the lights started expanding to a diameter about 10 times their size and started moving up and down growing and contracting. I was so frightened I broke down and began crying and started praying. It was like a UFO movie, the only thing missing was for a light to come down and float us away and we would be gone. My mom saw this, my grandma saw this, my aunt saw it, so did my cousin, so I knew it wasn't me going crazy. It lasted for about four hours in total and about two hours in my grandma said "if they want to abduct me they can, I'm tired I'm going inside". But I stayed, I stayed watching this and the whole area was bathed in this really intense light. Then suddenly these orbs stopped, they began vibrating and then they all opened up in different directions. The mist lifted, and then it was like nothing happened, but you had that sensation of something that was so much greater than yourself. So different. It just puts things into perspective.

Whether you see it as alien or not, it doesn't matter, what matters is that you don't see yourself as the centre of the world. That there is something else outside of you that you don't necessarily understand but it doesn't mean that it's not there. And that's the problem with everything being centred on reason and on empirical evidence, it shuts down the possibility for something being outside of that, which is what faith is about. Faith is about admitting that there's something that you don't understand. It's an act of faith to believe that there is a god, or not. That there are aliens, or

not. It's actually admitting that reason doesn't explain everything about life and that there is something outside that you've seen, somebody hasn't seen, but you don't have to reason everything.

One of the reasons I broke down, and why I was so scared, is that my family owned farms, and I used to see how the harvested chickens were treated. It was such a gruesome process, to me the logic was that they are going to do to us, what we do to other life forms, so I was terrified! With time I managed to understand that, and it felt a bit anticlimactic. I used to wonder why they orbited around us for so long, but why didn't the little green guys inside visit us, why didn't they come down, they were just there! The only reasonable conclusion I have is that I was petrified, I was so scared of them, they thought it wasn't worth it.

Or maybe they weren't there for you?

I don't know. It was like we were singled out, the UFO was over our house, above us, there was nothing else around. Or maybe they were watching us like reality television, we were a show for them. Who knows, I feel like I was so terrified they thought I clearly wasn't ready for this. But now I feel ready, I feel ready for abduction. To quote Katy Perry.