

Luzia Simons

NOTHING STAYS
WHERE IT WAS PLANTED

At first, Luzia Simons gives us flowers. Tulips emerge from darkness with an almost impossible clarity: luminous, sensual, meticulously observed. But beauty, in Simons' work, is never innocent. Behind every stem lies a journey; behind every colour, a history of movement, exchange, cultivation and possession.

Born in Brazil, educated in Paris and long based in Germany, Simons understands displacement not simply as geography but as a condition of seeing. For three decades, her celebrated Stockage works have transformed the tulip—migrating from Central Asia through the Ottoman world into Europe—into something far more complicated than a botanical subject. Using the scanner rather than the camera, she suspends flowers in a strange space between intimacy and distance, seduction and scrutiny, abundance and disappearance.

Her work asks what happens when things cross borders: flowers, people, images, languages, histories. What is preserved, what is transformed, and who gets to decide where something belongs? From the extraordinary physicality of her scanograms to gardens, architecture and the legacies embedded within them, Simons continually returns to the same unstable territory—the place where beauty becomes political without surrendering its beauty.

For The Art Talk Magazine, we speak with Luzia Simons about migration and memory, tulips and colonial histories, Lina Bo Bardi and the politics of looking—and about what it means to spend a lifetime making images of something that can never remain exactly where it was planted.

Art Talk Magazine: You were born in Brazil, studied in Paris and have lived for many years in Germany. Your work often speaks about migration without necessarily depicting migrants. Do you think we ever truly belong to one place, or do we gradually become an accumulation of all the places we have left behind?

LUZIA Simons: I believe that I carry within me all the places where I have lived. The experiences with different cultures are an enrichment for me, but also a loss of continuity.

ATM: You began Stockage in 1996, and the tulip has remained with you for three decades. It is a flower that has itself migrated – from Central Asia through the Ottoman world and eventually into Europe, where it became an object of extraordinary commerce and speculation. At what point did you realise that you weren't really making work about flowers at all, but about us?

LS: For me, that was clear from the very beginning. In Turkey, I saw just how significant a symbol the tulip is. The history of the tulip mirrors the migration of peoples. Just as the flower was transplanted, crossbred, and transformed over the centuries to adapt to new environments, we, too, carry within us that same journey of relocation and the search



Barock Endlos_2021_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija

for a sense of belonging. By depicting both the fragility and the strength of these flowers, I realized that I was essentially telling our own story of cultural exchange, trade, and resilience.

ATM: The tulip is claimed almost instinctively today as Dutch, despite the extraordinary journey that preceded its arrival there. As someone whose own life has crossed cultures and languages, are you interested in that strange moment when something foreign becomes so successfully absorbed that we forget it was ever foreign?

LS: The concept of the “foreign” strikes me as too one-sided. What engages me is what is known as acculturation – a process that holds a deep interest for me. In my work, I explore and elaborate on how the new is internalized and transformed, rather than being excluded.

ATM: There is something wonderfully contradictory about Stockage. The images are extraordinarily seductive, yet beneath their beauty sit colonial histories, cultural displacement, globalization, speculation and questions of identity. Is beauty sometimes the most effective way of smuggling a difficult idea into someone’s consciousness?

LS: Beauty creates a sensual, almost immediate connection and can then open up a space for further levels of perception. In *Stockage*, the beauty of the flowers plays an important role, yet it never stands alone. It is only seemingly contradictory that an image can appear seductive while simultaneously embodying highly complex questions. I do not view beauty as a means to conceal these questions, but as a way to make them visible.

ATM: You abandoned the conventional camera viewpoint for the scanogram – a process without the same single, privileged perspective. You have spoken about cultural plurality throughout your work. Was removing that central viewpoint also, in some sense, a political decision: a refusal to suggest that there is only one correct position from which the world can be seen?

LS: Adopting a single standpoint and championing a single truth is a hallmark of ideologies. When I began working with the scanner, I discovered that the image emerged directly on the surface – much like in painting – through contact and movement. It is a technique, then, that aligns with my interest in fluid identities and diverse modes of perception. Avoiding a single perspective is closely linked to the content of my work.

ATM: Your flowers are almost indecently close. We see pollen, bruising, imperfections, the extraordinary sensuality of petals opening – and simultaneously the beginning of their disappearance. Are you photographing flowers at the height of their beauty, or at the precise moment when beauty begins to die?

LS: Both at once, because the moment of this transition is important to me. I am looking for



Stockage 188_2020_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija



O.T. 16_2023_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija

that ambivalent instant in which both coexist: the image captures the flower at the peak of its development, even though we know it is already in the process of decay.

ATM: Flowers have always carried an erotic charge because they are quite literally reproductive structures. But in your work, magnified to almost bodily proportions, that sexuality becomes difficult to ignore. How conscious are you of the body when you are constructing these compositions?

LS: Flowers possess a very strong physical presence – especially when they are also enlarged. Yet depicting sexuality would be too simple for me. After all, sensuality is inherent in the nature of the flower itself – in its blossoming, its form, color, and structure. I often find this associative link between the plant and animal worlds amusing and, in any case, very stimulating.

ATM: Stockage also belongs to the history of the still life – the Dutch and Flemish paintings in which flowers spoke simultaneously about wealth, international trade, possession and mortality. Four centuries later, have we really changed very much, or have we simply invented more sophisticated ways of turning beauty into commodity?

LS: In advanced capitalism, societies recognize almost nothing but material assets that turn everything into a commodity. Yet perhaps we haven't changed all that much in this regard. What has shifted significantly, are the forms this instrumentalization takes and the speed of this development. For me as an artist, a flower that traverses continents, nations, and economic systems also serves as an image of a potential dialogue between cultures.

ATM: For years, the scanner gave you an almost impossible degree of precision. More recently your practice has expanded into embroidered tapestries, watercolours and collage. What made you want to bring the hand – and perhaps even imperfection – back into a practice associated with such extraordinary technological accuracy?

LS: In many of my works, I use imprecisions for the sake of contrast. And the precision for which the scanner was designed is not its only characteristic. The fact that it also possesses more diffuse layers of blurriness and darkness was a new discovery at the time – one I incorporated into my artistic decisions from the very beginning. Working by hand brings gesture, materiality, and even chance to the fore. Watercolor, collage, and tapestry hold a slower, more tactile dimension that is also part of my way of thinking. That does not mean, however, that I have abandoned the scanner. It is important to me to be able to combine different working methods.

ATM: You returned to Brazil through your recent work around Casa de Vidro and the garden of Lina Bo Bardi. There is something rather beautiful about that encounter: a Brazilian-born artist who spent much of her life in Europe en-

tering the world of an Italian-born architect who made Brazil her home. Did Lina’s garden make you think differently about your own ideas of arrival, departure and belonging?

LS: It was an important experience for me. Lina Bo Bardi’s Casa de Vidro and garden prompted me to reflect once again on relocation, memory, and a sense of belonging. The garden interests me as a place situated between nature and culture – between what grows naturally and what is designed. My time there allowed me to view my work from a new perspective.

ATM: Gardens appear repeatedly in your work, but a garden is never entirely natural. It is nature edited by human desire – we choose what belongs, what doesn’t, what is cultivated and what is called a weed. Is the garden therefore also a metaphor for the way societies construct identity?

LS: Your question contains the answer. Of course, the garden can also serve as a metaphor for identity and culture.

ATM: You are bringing this work to Istanbul with Galerija Fotografija, and Istanbul has an almost uncanny relationship with the history of your tulips. Before the flower became the European commodity we recognise today, it occupied an extraordinary cultural position in the Ottoman world. Does showing these works here feel in any way like allowing the flower to retrace its journey?

LS: As early as 2005 I held there an exhibition of “Stockage” at the Institut Français. Presenting tulip images in Istanbul once again signifies a renewed reflection on one of the many stages in their history. After all, returns and circular movements represent continuity – an essential component of identity.

ATM: You have worked with Galerija Fotografija across several exhibitions, including Stockage and Jardim and, most recently, The Scent of Flowers. What does Barbara Ceferin and the gallery understand about your work that has allowed that relationship to endure and evolve?

LS: My exhibitions with Barbara Ceferin at Galerija Fotografija varied greatly. There were thematic connections, yet each one had a different focus. Having a gallery that consistently supports one’s artistic development is a collaboration I deeply value.

ATM: We live at a moment when migration, borders and national identity have once again become intensely charged subjects. You began Stockage thirty years ago. When you look at those first tulips today, has the world moved closer to the questions you were asking – or further away from their answers?

LS: When I first articulated this topic through my exhibitions “Face Migration” and “Transit”, I could not have imagined that, decades later, it would become even more poignant. My work never aimed to provide definitive answers. My intention was al-



Casa de Vidro 07_2024_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija



Stockage 192_2021_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija

ways to ask the right questions: Where does something come from, where is it going, what happens when it crosses a border, how does it change along the way, and what kind of interconnection is ultimately possible?

ATM: There is one question that seems to sit quietly underneath almost everything you make. A flower can be removed from its original landscape, transported across continents, cultivated somewhere else and eventually become emblematic of a country in which it never originated. After a lifetime lived between cultures, what does the word home mean to you now?

LS: Living in different cultures has shown me that identity is not something static. In 2003, I held an exhibition I titled “Aerial Roots”. My “home” is not a fixed place, but a process that modifies and reconstitutes it again and again. Since art is also a process, perhaps its language is my true home.