

# Pilar Corrias

## Field Studies

James Bridle



Vivien Zhang, *Ersatz (Sterculia Lanceolata)*, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London

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There is a species of orchid, *Ophrys apifera*, commonly known as the bee orchid, which grows across central and Southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. While its existence is threatened in many places, it is the only European orchid known to colonise towns and cities, and seems particularly fond of sites disturbed by human activity, such as old quarries, airfields and the banks of motorways.

In the springtime, the bee orchid erects a column of up to a dozen flowers, each one a starburst of purple sepals cupping a fleshy, lightly-furred labellum that is striped with whorls of brown and yellow like a bee. This is intentional: the orchid mimics the specific patterning of *Eucera longicornis*, a long-horned, solitary bee, once widespread across the continent. The male *longicornis*, mistaking the labellum of *apifera* for a female of its own species, lands and attempts to mate with the plant, and is coated with orchid pollen in the process. Being thirsty, it is likely to make the same mistake with another orchid, transferring the pollen in turn.

In certain parts of the world, and particularly in the UK, the bee and the flower have fallen out of sync with one another, for reasons we don't fully understand. No longer visited by the bee, the orchid has been forced to become self-pollinating; a risky strategy which reduces genetic diversity and may yet lead to local extinction. Nevertheless, every spring, *apifera* faithfully produces a portrait of its lover in the hope of their return.

*Ophrys apifera* has yet another symbiote: the fungus *Tulasnella*, which grows around and through the orchid's roots, and without which its seeds cannot germinate. These mycorrhizal networks connect individual plants to one another at the cellular level, forming connections beneath the earth which carry nutrients, and information, from organism to organism. This sequence of realisations – that life, in the words of the evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis, is defined not by individuals but by networks – defies simple representation. What does a landscape look like which contains, without preference or priority, a flower, a fungus and a bee, their social and cellular entanglements, and the deep time of their coevolution?

Vivien Zhang's signature flower, cut up, reflected and repeated across her blood-red canvases is not truly a flower but rather a seed pod: that of *Sterculia*, a species of

tropical chestnut found across Southern China and Vietnam. Like *apifera*, *Sterculia* inhabits a network of associations, unbounded in time and space, which trouble our notions of authority and authenticity, and should trouble our forms of representation in turn.

*Sterculia* is striking in appearance, particularly in the summer, when it produces green, star-shaped seed pods that turn yellow, then orange, and finally a bright, fiery red, before popping open to reveal fat black berries the size of marbles. Its vividness, however, conceals an ambiguity: *Sterculia* is known in Cantonese as panpo (蘋婆), which is applied to two related species: *S. monosperma*, or the 'true panpo', and *S. lanceolata*, the 'fake' panpo. The 'fake' panpo is the most recognisable, due to the vibrancy of its appearance, but is inedible; the 'real' panpo is considered a delicacy, its fruit known as 'phoenix eye' and 'seven sisters' and braised, usually with meat, in seasonal dishes.

In conversation, Zhang describes a complex relationship with cultural heritage, sharpened by recent years of seclusion, and separation. A renewed curiosity about her birthplace, tempered by a wariness of being pigeon-holed. A visceral reaction to rising anti-Asian bigotry, together with a sensitivity towards the specific grievances of particular communities. The floating identity of the migrant/expat global/local citizen. Zhang's work teeters on these kind of questions: what is one's authentic culture when you left your homeland as a child? How does one represent a culture one has one's own uncertainties about? How to defend oneself, and one's own integrity – artistic, cultural – without appropriating from the styles and struggles of others?

Zhang depicts these landscapes of feeling from the inside. There is no hilltop, rocky outcrop or open field in which to situate a canvas and frame this situation. There is no fixed point of view in a complex, unstable system. Rather, there are multiple ways to read and relate: shifting patterns, partially repeated, emerging from overlays, split panels, margins and boundary layers. Zhang's paintings are entangled with their subject matter: they show the flower and the seed, the root and the fossil, the processes of looking and composing. These landscapes, rather than being flat fields, are axes of intersections, complex folds in high-dimensional space, reassembled packets of information. These connections do not have to be direct or even coincident in time and space

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to have and carry meaning.

Zhang says she has only ever seen *Sterculia* online, via digital representations she endlessly reformats and recomposes on her own screens and canvases. The differences between 'real' and 'fake' are blurred, not merely due to the uncertainties of online representation, but by the nature of the plant itself. Real panpo, fake panpo: who decides? Does the plant care? Should it? Perhaps, after all, these uncertainties are not there to be resolved but, in fact, constitute the very nature of the thing described. Not discrete or individual, but entangled; each perceived hierarchy in fact dependent on the other. An intersectionality of species.

Reality, as much as we can understand it, is composed not of discrete objects, but relationships. We constantly mistake these for category divisions: object, subject; figure, ground; art, artist; artwork, audience. Zhang's work refuses such distinctions, and the easy sense of superiority, the reification of hierarchies, that they promote. It refuses to depict the fixed thing as the definitive one. Rather, Zhang insists on the value of instability and uncertainty, of process, movement and change. Everything is entangled; everything produces everything else.

**James Bridle** is a writer, artist and technologist. Their artworks have been commissioned by galleries and institutions and exhibited worldwide and on the internet. They are the author of *New Dark Age* (2018) and *Ways of Being* (2022), and they wrote and presented *New Ways of Seeing* for BBC Radio 4 in 2019.

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