

## On Becoming: An Evocation for Adler Guerrier and Levani

By Re'al Christian

*"Because a garden is always a place of becoming, to make and tend one is a gesture of hope, that these seeds planted will sprout and grow, this tree will bear fruit, that spring will come, and so, probably, will some kind of harvest. It's an activity deeply invested in the future."*

—Rebecca Solnit, *Orwell's Roses*

*Nested in a Place of Becoming* resides in an interval between binary systems—material and immaterial, human and nonhuman, synthetic and organic, visible and invisible. This is the space of the other, a gap in-between, within interstices, within times, slipping between objectivities to exist. Hybridization becomes antithetical to a particular prescribed way of being. As a way of defining the self—not as the other but as (an)other, always in flux and never defined—the hybrid body rests at the precipice of definability and opacity. "Becoming" alludes to a state of movement, a gerund that negates fixability, stillness, knowability. "Becoming" is unfixed, unbordered, unboundaried—a state of being between being, not a here and now, but an "elsewhere, within here."<sup>[1]</sup>

Adler Guerrier's plant-filled vignettes capture diverse ecosystems. In his photographs, the ecological happenings with the landscape unfold in an undefinable state and place; myriad species blend together, drifting between light and dark, far and near, blurry and crisp, spatially uncertain and optically intimate. In works such as *Untitled (At the still point of mottled formations and a scruple of compassion)* (2022) and *Untitled (Ode to an indispensable, neat, and useful place/At the still point of the turning world)* (2022), interlaced plants form tapestries of red, green, and gold. Each plant appears to shift away from or draw nearer toward the surface of the image, at times eliciting a certain restlessness in full bloom, but Guerrier seems to capture a solitary moment, a "still point" in between movement and quiescence.

In many ways, Guerrier, born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, undermines a colonial desire to capture and typologically define a subject, a desire historically imbued into photographic media. His *Untitled* mixed media collages (2022) further abstract the subject into geometric constellations; his site-specific wall painting delves into a formal exploration, doing away with any apparent organic matter to focus instead on the interaction of color itself, demonstrating the ways in which the simplest of forms can welcome the most beautiful encounters.



Adler Guerrier, *Untitled (Ode to an indispensable, neat, and useful place/At the still point of the turning world) ii*, 2020. Courtesy the artist, Marisa Newman Projects, and Kunsthalle Tbilisi

Levani's installation *Birth* holds space for intimacies that are both physical and spiritual, bringing our attention to the spaces between beings to consider their consilience. Conjuring the feeling of being held within a bodily space, the installation envelops the viewer within undulating red curtains and soft pink light, eliciting an internal organ of unknown origin, consciousness, or host. At the center of the space, four objects sit on a modern Soviet mirrored stainless-steel tabletop, seeming to float on a pool of still, black water. Around the periphery of the room, neon signage, fluorescent horticulture lights, palm tree buds, laboratory equipment, a Georgian alphabet book, burnt wood, and items collected along various coastlines form a unique garden of the artist's own making.

Each sculpture on the table corresponds to a Georgian letter, suggesting each object's meaning and alluding to a different stage of becoming:

შ (შეჯვარება) *Mating*

დ (დაბადება) *Birth*

ც (ცირკულაცია) *Circulation*

ე (ეპისტემოლოგია) *Epistemology*

A pair of blacked-out white neon sculptures, რა ფერია შავი ზღვა? and *what Color is the Black Sea?*, present an evolving proposition for the artist. The question, which might appear rhetorical, asks viewers to interrogate their fundamental understanding of ecological markers in the region. Posed as an luminescent riddle, it invites us to ponder what ambiguities and conceptual richness lies between blackness, darkness, and light.

Levani looks to the smallest elements to understand the whole of their parts—the individual morphemes or letters used to form a language, or the strings of meta-code that build complex computer algorithms. In doing so, they deconstruct the basic building blocks of creating new epistemologies, hacking into preconceived systems of knowledge to consider the parts above the whole, ultimately questioning what it is to be human, and where the boundaries between the human and nonhuman become porous and fluid. We can engender and envision new modes of nurturance, intimacy, longing, and care in seeking out these interspecies connections.



Levani, შ. (შეჯვარება), *Mating*, 2022. Rock from Batumi botanical garden, Palm-tree bud casted in silicone and black resin, stainless steel laboratory hardware. Courtesy the artist, Marisa Newman Projects, and Kunsthalle Tbilisi

Within Guerrier and Levani's practices, the garden is a metaphor for conscious cultivation. In drawing upon ecological connections, the artists both occupy a similar space of dwelling, reflecting on the ways in which the garden reflects society at large as a microcosm for cohabitating in a common space, for taking root in new soil. Within this exhibition, the artists invite us to question our positionality alongside them: How does one grow roots when the soil is infertile, arid, uninhabitable, unwelcoming, or unforgiving? How does one define a sense of place as a refugee, an immigrant, an other?

Kunsthalle Tbilisi plays host to these evocations. In the garden, a new plurality emerges: "I am not only here-now,"<sup>[2]</sup> but in a constant state of becoming, of growth.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>[2]</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952; repr., NY: Grove Press, 2008, trans. from French, Richard Philcox), 193.