

# V A L S M E T S

## CV + STATEMENT

Born 1991 in Luxembourg

Lives and works between Helsinki, Finland and Graz, Austria

## EDUCATION

2019-2021 MA Fine Arts, Academy of Fine Arts, Uniarts Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

2017-2018 Exchange Program, Academy of Fine Arts, Uniarts Helsinki, Finland

2015-2017 BA Fine Arts, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Visuels La Cambre (ENSAV), Brussels, Belgium

## EXHIBITIONS

### // SOLO SHOWS

2021 Living Room, Galerie Zimmermann Kratochwill, Graz, Austria

2021 Gallerie Kajava, Helsinki, Finland

2021 MORE, MORE, MORE!, Schaumbad, Graz, Austria

### // GROUP SHOWS

2021 YLA - YOUNG LUXEMBOURGISH ARTISTS, Valerius Gallery, Luxembourg

2021 A.A.A.B, Roter Keil, Graz, Austria

2020 Rendezvous im Bad:Digitales Brennen, collab with Stefan Lozar, Schaumbad, Graz, Austria

2020 Badeverbot: Welle 2“, Schaumbad, Graz, Austria

2020 Kuvan Kevät, Exhibition Laboratory, Helsinki, Finland

2019 SHARING NOTES (feminist gathering), Exhibition Laboratory, Helsinki, Finland

2029 HOW TO SURVIVE KAAMOS, Vapaan Taiteen Tila, Helsinki, Finland

2019 Fantôme + Aave, Vapaan Taiteen Tila, Helsinki & De Medicis Gallery, Paris, France

2018 L'ombre du zèbre n'a pas de rayures, Espace Vanderborcht, Brussels, Belgium

2018 Exchange Exhibition, Tasku Gallery, Helsinki, Finland

2017 4ward 4what 4months 4students 4openings, Tasku Gallerie, Helsinki (FI)

2016 What Happened to the Shiny Cakes?, Chaussée de Vleurgat 311, Brussels, Belgium

### // GRANTS AND RESIDENCIES

2021 Artist in Residence, Berlin

2021 STYRIA ARTIST IN RESIDENCE Scholarship, Graz, Austria

2020 STYRIA ARTIST IN RESIDENCE Scholarship, Graz, Austria

2019 Telegrafan Impilinna: Artist in Residence, Utö

## STATEMENT

Iridescent mushrooms are floating in gravity-defying arrangements on a large-scale canvas: their intertwined bodies creating a vibrant biotope of color and form situated in the foreground of an expansive, polychromatic backdrop.

The representation of mushrooms has become a recurring motif in the works of Val Smets, whose practice is positioned between painting, and sensory intervention, allowing for immersive installation pieces. The young artist often combines her large-scale tableaux with light installation, site-specific settings, and smell, reflecting on the artist's deep engagement with the medium of painting through a multitude of techniques, and her theoretical exploration of the position of humans towards non-human agency through the paradigm of mycelium and fungi.

Smets' simple treatment of the canvas and the absence of stretchers in her large-scale paintings highlight the materiality of the medium while underlining the artist's engagement with the ongoing discourse on the traditional presentation of painting, further breaking the confines of the genre. The direct application of paint and oil sticks on the canvas without preparatory sketches speaks to the remarkable confidence of Smets' gesture, as her fluid lines and light brushstrokes form colorful landscapes of oversized mushrooms through seemingly abstracted forms. Her precise use of a bright, psychedelic color palette closely relates to the mushroom motive of her work, referencing its representation in popular culture. The intuitive combination of blues, light greens, rose tones and yellow allows for a balanced composition that furthers the joyful mood of the pieces while inviting the viewer to pause, seduced by the richness of tones and forms.

By playing with scale and proportions Smets is repositioning the viewer as the smallest entity of the scene, evoking questions of perspective as she morphs our familiar gaze on nature. The works allow us to see the world through an ant's perspective, highlighting one of the smallest (and biggest) groups within our planetary ecosystem: the mushroom. The inclusion of sensory experiences such as smell furthers the immersive quality of her work: creating a dramatic, almost theatrical moment through sculptural extensions into the room. Her pieces grow in the exhibition space like living organisms, an immersive, utopian garden of the future that evokes Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's proposition of the mushroom as the lifeform that can survive the ruins of post-capitalism.

Smets' work titles, such as "Sublime Ecstasy" further highlight the close connection of her artistic practice to the concept of intensive transfer relationships between natural knowledge, artistic practice, art theory, and aesthetics. Evoking the belief of consciousness within all living entities, human or non-human to de-center the Anthropocene world perspective towards a living reality vis-a-vis nature.

Her sujet is reflecting on the strong thematic focus on the natural realm of plants, fungi, and animals, around the 16th to 18th century, insofar as the historic reference was also interested in the material basis of fungi, inspiring numerous visual artists to reflect on the mushroom as a prototypical sphere of natural processes of formation. Smets' large-scale works can therefore be positioned within the tradition of an artistic reflection on current natural science, though the course of the differentiation of scientific research in the 17th and 18th centuries, has led this relationship to change profoundly.

The thoroughgoing temporalization of natural history within the last century has led to a reconstruction of its relations to art. It is within this interdisciplinary tradition that artistic positions such as Val Smets extend natural forms like the fungi and mushrooms as an aesthetic phenomenon to now form a complementary field in art to scientific work and thereby assume new functions in cultural self-understanding. Thinking through Merlin Sheldrake's "Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures" Smets celebrates the incredible diversity of a lifeform that can pop up overnight, lives inside all of us and, and balances the paradox of new life and decay. The artist's continuing interest in fungi has led to a deep engagement

with the biological categorization of the life form. The fungi belong to the domain of eukaryotes; however, they form a “kingdom” distinct from animals and plants, which was only assigned to them in the middle of the last century; before that, being previously ascribed to the plant kingdom, both traditionally and erroneously; today, however, it is known that they have more in common with animal organisms.

Through her visual language, Smets creates a psychedelic new interpretation of Alice in Wonderland or the setting for Anna Karenina’s budding romance during a mushroom hunt, a forest of wonder, bustling with miscellaneous representatives of mushrooms. It is the fungi’s characteristic to live in symbiosis with other animal or plant creatures as a positive force or as a parasite, including humans, which sparked the current “renaissance” of interest. Fungi play a fundamental role in the cycle of nature and for the exchange of nutrients in the environment: they are the originators of decomposition and transformation of organic matter. However, it is Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s “The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins. What a rare mushroom can teach us about sustaining life on a fragile planet” that truly made the mushroom a new symbol of “A Method for the New Materialism”. In her publication, Tsing introduces the “Matsutake” as it “is the most valuable mushroom in the world—and a weed that grows in human-disturbed forests across the northern hemisphere. Through its ability to nurture trees, matsutake helps forests to grow in daunting places. It is also an edible delicacy in Japan, where it sometimes commands astronomical prices. In all its contradictions, matsutake offers insights into areas far beyond just mushrooms and addresses a crucial question: what manages to live in the ruins we have made?” Tsing creates a tale of diversity within our damaged landscapes, as “The Mushroom at the End of the World” follows one of the strangest commodity chains of our times to explore the unexpected corners of capitalism. By following the exemplary case of one mushroom she allows the reader to “witness the varied and peculiar worlds of matsutake commerce: the worlds of Japanese gourmets, capitalist traders, Hmong jungle fighters, industrial forests, Yi Chinese goat herders, Finnish nature guides, and more”. It is this line of inquiry that so closely connects to Smet’s work, as it allows the reader or viewer to be led into fungal ecologies and forest histories to “better understand the promise of cohabitation in a time of massive human destruction”.

Tsing highlights the relation between capitalist destruction and collaborative survival within multispecies landscapes, the prerequisite for continuing life on earth. It is the hopeful notion of Tsing’s entangled world that can be found in Val Smets’ colorful, kaleidoscopic pieces: a world upside down, growing from its own ruins. Ameli Klein is based between Venice and Graz, working as a writer and curator. She is the co-founder of Collective Rewilding and has received VDAC and BCGS fellowships to the History of Art Departments of Dartmouth College and Cornell University. Ameli has been invited to participate in the Anthropocene Campus Venice by the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science and the HKW. She currently is an EPIC Fellow at the AAMC Engagement Program for International Curators with Terra Foundation and Art Fund\_ and has been a Curator in Residence at the SCL, Shanghai Biennial, the V-A-C Curatorial Lab Venice, and at artpace San Antonio. Having previously held positions at the HALLE FUER KUNST Steiermark, and Castello di Potentino, she has worked at the Venice Biennale, Il Giardino di Daniel Spoerri, the Hood Museum of Art, and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. Amongst others, she has written for Open Space London, Artishock Revista, LatinX Spaces, the Forest Curriculum, and EIKON.

Text by Ameli M. Klein