

# *O Sole Mio*

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Adel Abdessemed  
Sonny Sanjay Vadgama  
Sam Samiee  
Robert Montgomery  
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**Parasol unit**  
foundation for contemporary art

# *Homage to the Sun, a power that can lay bare Truth and Coalesce Creativity*

Just the other day, someone sent me a pdf of an article by Thomas L. Friedman published in *The New York Times* of 30 May 2020, entitled 'How We Broke the World'. It starts with the sentence: 'If recent weeks have shown us anything, it's that the world is not just flat. It's fragile.'

How incredible that humanity as a whole has finally recognised this, after having recklessly abused almost everything that Mother Nature has so generously put at our disposal. Looking back, in 2019 we were in a different place – certainly not great or secure, but nevertheless we had other plans and

perspectives on life – then here in 2020 there comes a minute but powerful virus called Covid-19 and our majestic world without the appropriate resilience falls literally flat. Like countless other people, I too see and feel dramatic changes in my life and day-to-day existence.



I have kept in good spirits all along and have been going about my life and work, although I have terribly much missed hugging my grandchildren. Sadly, I also have to admit to feeling ashamed and guilty in relation to the younger generations, particularly the very young ones, because although problems have

always existed in our world, my own childhood was a truly happy one. I was brought up having confidence in people and my surroundings, and the ability to enjoy everything in life, and I want the children of this world today to feel that way too. The shocking extent of this unexpected pandemic and now the recent racial tensions do not bode well

for them having a similarly happy future. Instead of mourning though, let's all put our hands and minds towards building a better world. We are now fully into spring with all its promise of renewal. Instead of remaining in the sorrow of mourning, I wish to encourage an

optimistic and positive outlook on life. In many ancient civilisations and still today in some existing ones, white rather than black is worn to funerals. Therefore, I offer here an image of daisies from my garden as a gesture of renewal, their white petals symbolising innocence and their yellow centres wondrously optimistic.

Interestingly, the works included in this ninth issue of *O Sole Mio* deal with the sun in different and unusual ways, hence their underlying content and connotations encourage us to consider them from various points of view, among them the human condition. Adel Abdessemed's elaborate and impressive installation *Shams* (Sun, in Arabic) sees the sun as a power capable of projecting light on some burning truths in our society and the time we live in today. In his dramatic room-sized installation the artist clearly depicts forced labour as practised in certain parts of the world, where not only is it allowed but is reinforced under the watchful eyes of some merciless looking guards. Such a scene makes any viewer shiver in the face of the social injustice. The dichotomy between the title *Shams*, the sun that should herald hope and optimism, and the actual content of the work which reveals pure evil, highlights the kind of bare truth and reality check that is very much a hallmark of Abdessemed's practice. Moreover, in this installation the artist uses clay, knowing that the fragile material is likely to disintegrate over time. For Abdessemed, the resulting dust from the work recalls the dissipation of the memories that humanity may have of

countless brutal events and occurrences.

Sonny Vadagama filmed his moving-image work, *Our Blood That Flows*, in Moscow. Amid the eerie interiors of disused factory buildings, the work's subject matter, as the artist explains, is the movement of light within those spaces and how it is connected to the wider theme of cosmology and evolution. It soon becomes clear to viewers that despite the presence of performers, in reality the main actors are light and the rays of sunlight streaming into these impressive buildings. These industrial structures, heavily laden with their past history and years of total physical abandonment, make ideal settings for any performance, whether it be the journey of the sun and light throughout the day or the uncanny scenarios danced or acted out by two performers, each of whom appears alone in different areas within the buildings. Whatever the artist's intention or our own interpretation may be, we remain intrigued. For, as much as the sun and light are capable of laying bare truth, they are also maverick actors able to confuse realities and illusions and in turn allow for a fabulous creative act.

Sam Samiee's sensuous installation, *Gay Prometheus Stealing Lighters From Beautiful Woman, Women. Homage to Motherhood*, is perplexing, uncanny and humorous. Lit with artificial light rather than by the sun, the scene here is set on a whimsical stage which lends itself perfectly well for Prometheus to manoeuvre within his mental and physical space and to find ways of

stealing lighters from women. Clearly Samiee, as an astute and innovative artist, plays here on several layers of associative meanings and in the process makes us reflect on the Ancient Greek Titan, Prometheus, who stole the art of fire-making from the Gods and passed it on to mortals. For which he was punished by Zeus, who had him chained to a rocky mountain and sent an eagle to feed on his constantly regenerating liver. As elaborate as the Prometheus myth, is Sam Samiee's work title. There is a lot going on, such as a gay Prometheus who, visibly obsessed by the act of stealing, charms women and steals their fire-lighters – but then Samiee also pays homage to motherhood.

I recently came upon a book, *The Secrets of Afro-Cuban Divination* by Ócha'ni Lele. With gratitude to the author, I would like to quote a line or two from it: 'I pay homage to the Council of the Mothers, the beautiful birds [witches] who are the Mothers of the forest. I give homage to the spirits of the forest who come to the aid of the Mothers of the forest again ...' This might tell us once more – whether we talk about supernatural forces, rituals, or we fantasise about a character from Greek mythology – that our senses and the human condition are profoundly intertwined.

Robert Montgomery's description of the almost hallucinatory state during which he executed his painting, *When We Are Gone The Trees Will Riot*, in part before he fell ill with Covid-19, then after his partial recovery, is perplexing and beautifully sensitive. On the one hand,

Montgomery highlights the intensity of his personal senses in the face of a life/death scenario, and on the other hand he refers to the collective human fragility and unity that will eventually save us. Remarkable here is how the spirit of his poem comes alive, creating an almost figurative vision not only of the pandemic but also, co-incidentally, of the riots and manifestations of recent days. There is indeed nothing more poetic than finding oneself in the silence of lockdown with pure blue skies for weeks and imagining our protectors to be present in 'the sound of the leaves in the trees', or indeed imagining a better and united world.

All the contributions from the artists in this issue recommend or require, in various forms, clarity in our complex world, which has in many ways gone astray, and remarkably, Aaron Cezar's reflections also function in tandem. How enlightening of Cezar to elaborate on the Ecuadorian artist, Oscar Santillán's work *Solaris*. Glass, made by melting sand from the Atacama Desert in Chile, was polished into photographic lenses, 6.5 x 1 cm in diameter, which suggests that the desert landscape was then observed by none other than itself. Considering this work at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic and the riots seems quite fitting and revealing, as Santillán himself has said, 'Only God Knows my Destiny'.

With such descriptions, we have good reason to wonder about the sun's power of being simultaneously the culprit in so many different situations, from laying bare a brutal truth about human acts of

abuse that eventually inform a monumental sculptural work like *Shams*; to conducting eerie scenes amid the distant beauty and uncanny atmosphere of some dilapidated buildings in Moscow; to revisiting a source of fire with the Titan, Prometheus, which turns upside-down that mythological fantasme; to experiencing the heightened senses of an artist/poet describing in his work the complexity of being ill with the coronavirus, yet finding beauty in the stillness of nature amid the streets of a mega city; to discovering a tiny work of art made of desert sand, which could in theory observe our acts and behaviour.

Like many others during the current Covid-19 pandemic, and more than ever before in my life, I have been reflecting on human life experiences.

In this process, I have been incredibly enriched by the many thoughts and innovative works provided by the artists. This whole situation has made it clear to me how important it is to be human and to feel human. Because, whether life experiences have been brutal, speak of a distant and ancient past or of diverse and different cultures, seeing human experience through art or by coming into dialogue with ourselves in the face of the current pandemic and struggling with it, much of it remains as an unresolved puzzle. How interesting to think that the sun could shed light on some of these puzzles and guide us to better see the truth.

Ziba Ardalan  
Founder, Artistic and Executive Director

# Adel Abdessemed

*Shams*, 2013



*It's very hard to live in our society today, in this atmosphere of fear, you have to always be alert. Everywhere you look, and hear, from terrorism to natural disasters, to sickness – it is very violent. But the interpretation of the violence – is implied by the viewer, how they view it, not by me directly. Giving birth is very violent – but also beautiful. Violence can also be positive, it can stand for energy, and the vitality of life. It's not only about catastrophe and disaster.*

At first sight of Adel Abdessemed's *Shams* (Sun) installation, one immediately thinks of the horrors of trench warfare. In fact, it draws attention to the brutal reality of inequalities and forced labour within society by referring to the appalling conditions of mining for gold at Serra Pelada, Brazil, which in 1986 was magnificently documented in photographs by Sebastião Salgado.

Adel Abdessemed in conversation with  
Élisabeth Lebovici.

During an interview in 1992, Salgado described the mine as: *Swept along by the winds that carry the hint of fortune, men come to the gold mine of Serra Pelada. No one is taken there by force, yet once they arrive, all become slaves to the dream of gold and the need to stay alive. Once inside, it becomes impossible to leave.*

In *Shams*, Abdessemed depicts a fraction of the hundred thousand miners who laboured, digging for gold in unthinkably hazardous conditions, using only picks and shovels, then laden with heavy sacks of rubble having to clamber up the mountainside, only to descend again into the hellish pit. Smaller figures towards the top of the installation give a sense of greater height, along with the idea of ascending towards the sun (*shams* in Arabic). Abdessemed's installation, made of clay, was always destined to crumble to dust as it dried, perhaps symbolising humanity's ability to allow the worst of human barbarities to fade from conscious memory. The title *Shams* could also be understood as a desire to shed light on what are all too often hidden realities.

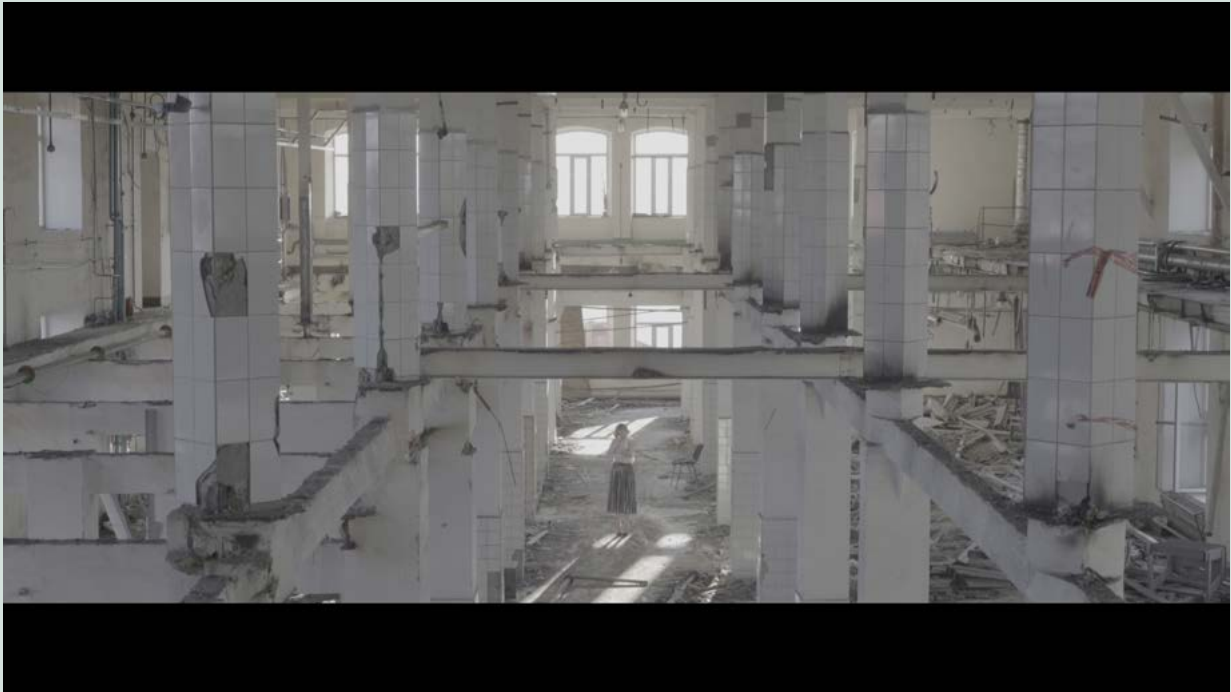
Working across a wide range of different media, including sculpture, installation, video, photography and drawing, Adel Abdessemed passionately tackles difficult subject matter and taboos within society in ways that reveal a naked truth. Yet, beyond their often challenging and provocative appearance, his works embody the fragility of life and are deeply imbued with beauty and poetry.

Adel Abdessemed (1971–) was born in Algeria. Having lived in Berlin, New York and London, he now lives and works in Paris. In autumn 2010, Parasol unit showed *Silent Warriors*, his first solo exhibition in London.

Adel Abdessemed, *Shams*, 2013. In-situ installation on 4 walls. Clay, steel, wood, jute, plastic, mixed media. Installation view from *L'Antidote*, 2018, at MAC Lyon, Musée d'art contemporaine de Lyon, France. © Adel Abdessemed, Paris ADAGP 2020.

# Sonny Sanjay Vadgama

*Our Blood that Flows*, 2016



[Click image to view video](#)

**A**n abandoned factory carries a certain weight. It is marked both physically and energetically by what was once there and what it has uncontrollably become. Ghostly outlines on surfaces hold on to a forgotten history that speaks of a prior purpose, while hulking pieces of equipment that were too big to scrap, lay discarded; severed organs lost in the final battle for survival. It is not quite dead though. Something remains, albeit a thinly lit outline.

These thoughts occurred as I walked through two abandoned factories in Moscow during a location scout. The first building, a former vodka distillery, had a façade engraved with Soviet motifs and tapestries depicting its long-departed workforce. My friend and

cinematographer Alexei Elagin held my arm as we ascended the rusted stairs that ached with each step. Eventually, we found a vantage point that gave us a clear view of the football pitch sized hall where machines and humans had previously co-existed. Sunlight beamed through the windows, hitting the symmetrical architecture, creating complex patterns. It looked, as naive as this may sound, religious. How ironic.

The functionally named Bakery No. 9 was the second location. Constructed in 1934 and noted as being characteristic of Constructivist architecture, its perfectly cylindrical interior mimicked that of its vodka-producing cousin in vacant starkness. A gaping shaft ran the length of its centre all the way to a dark



basement. Yet, once again light streamed without limits throughout. Again, light told its own story by reflecting off the many surfaces. Light it seemed was going to be unavoidable and therefore had to be embraced rather than controlled.

As a filmmaker, light forms the foundation for many of my works. How, what and why it interacts with everything beyond the lens often dictates the decisions I apply to the narrative I

For both shoots I decided the sun would guide us. Apart from a single shot in the basement, sunlight would be the only light source and thus we were at its mercy. The work featured two dancers, Dusia Maximova and Andrei Andrianov, and like the light, I wanted them to respond naturally to the environment. It somehow felt wrong to overly direct them when the environment itself already offered so many options. Pontus Pettersson, who advised on the choreography, gracefully suggested minor



[Click image to view video](#)

hope to achieve. Sunlight is perhaps the form of light with which I most enjoy working, because of its tricky character. It shifts and turns without warning, yet occasionally it illuminates an otherwise overlooked space with moments of profound beauty. Solid shapes form shadows that cut rooms in two, dust glistens, forgotten corners reveal their hidden truths, then in a moment it is all gone – the spell is over.

cues, but in essence what emerged was truly a dance with the sun and shadows. The hues of the sky changed and so did the song of the environment to which the dancers responded. Light cracked the concrete in strange and structured ways. The crew moved accordingly, trying to keep up with its unpredictable presence. I asked our assistant to scour the other floors and alert us when the sun had reached certain points where its

interaction with the architecture was synchronous.

Time moved quickly and the sun's retreat brought about a solemn language. Like petals at dusk, these mammoth structures were rapidly closing, which was reflected in what our dancers were offered. Light flows like blood, it never stays constant. We could feel the building's heartbeat slow.

highlight his political and cultural interests and has often used found or digitally manipulated material to create both two- and three-dimensional virtual environments. Since 2009, Vadgama has exhibited his work globally and in 2016 he completed an International Residency Programme in Moscow, where he directed several short films, including the work featured in this issue.



[Click image to view video](#)

One last shot, the final beams of light just before dark consumed the sky. The heavily rusted door creaked behind us as we exited.

Artist and filmmaker, Sonny Sanjay Vadgama specialises in making video sculpture, commercial film projects and documentaries that consider philosophy, human stories and architecture. He explores a range of narratives that

Sonny Sanjay Vadgama, born 1981 in London, UK, now lives and works in London, Berlin and Moscow. In 2009, as one of the recipients of the Parasol unit EXPOSURE Award, his acclaimed work *Eye for an Eye* was exhibited at the foundation's London gallery.

Sonny Sanjay Vadgama, *Our Blood That Flows*, 2016. Video, duration 6 mins 19 secs. Courtesy the artist.

# Sam Samiee

*Gay Prometheus Stealing Lighters From Beautiful Woman, Women. Homage to Motherhood, 2015.*



Light has always fascinated humans. The myth of taming fire, giving light to the hand of man, begins with Prometheus and continues to this day with all the shape-shifting undergone by the unchained Prometheus. He who stole fire from the gods and gave it to man. Like him, the myths have it that he who obtains the light will suffer in consequence.

Chained or unchained, the Promethean thief continued to seek more light, more domination over fire, and Promethean became the adjective for rather Futurist macho and manic drunkards of fire

and fury. Whether on the left or right, Promethean meant anything but softness, feminine or delicately petite gestures.

Let us for a moment imagine Prometheus to be fascinated by the light and warmth one finds in the containing function of the mother. If the men and women in the patriarchy, which Sigmund Freud recognised and Julia Kristeva formulated as one in which all are envious of the phallic signifier, what is it that the gay man is envious of? Isn't that containing function, that Da Vinci saw in the body of nature but also in the body of Mary and mother of Mary, not the same fire

that enigmatically makes the *Mona Lisa* draw us to it eternally and is never susceptible to fiery Promethean appropriation?

Passive but seductive, in the beauty that sparks thrilling feelings in one, in the moment when love unsettles the self, less visible than actual fire and light, if Prometheus was a collector of all the types of fire in the world, sooner or later he would have come across that illuminating invisible light in the other, in his manic love for fire.

Let's imagine Prometheus afresh:

A lean guy. At parties where the tempo and light allow an endless cabaret of erotics, between flashes of light and daydreaming at nights, he is fascinated by women.

The inconvertibility of that fire though, makes him the sneaky perverse collector of the lighters held by the women he comes across.

Imagine him in the smoking-room.

Can I have your lighter?

Yes, for sure.

And every time he plays a different cute little trick to steal this most banal yet magical object at hand:

*Gay Prometheus Stealing Lighters From Beautiful Woman.*

One Woman? Isn't that fire of their containing function somewhat shared between them all?

One is not enough.

After all, Shahrzad could only perform for the king on the 1,001 nights once her sister had joined them and she pretended to tell the story to her so as to seduce the king into listening indefinitely to her stories.

We try again.

*Gay Prometheus, Stealing Lighter From Beautiful Woman, Women. Homage to Motherhood.*

Painter, essayist and educator, Sam Samiee creates installations that include multiple paintings and other related pieces. By combining what is usually a two-dimensional medium with other objects he extends the potential and limits of traditional forms of painting. As a researcher, he explores Western painting, philosophy and psychoanalysis as well as examining the history of Persian literature and *Adab* (a synthesis of ethics and aesthetics), often bringing his long-term research into his practice of painting and exhibition production. As he himself says, 'Painting is a way of further developing and shaping all my ideas and thoughts.'

Sam Samiee, born 1988 in Iran, now lives and works in both Amsterdam and Tehran. In 2019, Parasol unit presented two works by Samiee in their major group exhibition *Nine Iranian Artists in London: The Spark Is You.*

Sam Samiee, *Gay Prometheus Stealing Lighters From Beautiful Woman, Women. Homage to Motherhood*, 2015. Acrylic on wood, ceramic, light, 100 x 250 x 250 cm (39½ x 98½ x 98½ in). Courtesy the artist.

# Robert Montgomery

*When We Are Gone The Trees Will Riot, 2020*



Robert Montgomery, *When We Are Gone The Trees Will Riot*, 2020. ARA acrylic and glaze on canvas, 150 x 150 cm (59 x 59 in). Courtesy the artist.

I made this painting on either side of suffering some symptoms of the Covid-19 virus, half in a fever. When London locked down, I first wrote a poem. It was about how, when the noise of the traffic stopped and the streets went quiet, you could hear the sound of the leaves in the trees better. The trees seemed suddenly more alive, the trees in the streets seemed to be our replacements, perhaps even our protectors. The poem said:

*A quiet prayer holds over London  
The trees become our citizens and guardians  
In the wind  
The trees hold their own silent riot in our honour.*

*We are stopped to appreciate the people who care for us.  
A tender percussion orchestra of applause joins the country –  
A fairy-light net of kindness.  
We try our best, we love our NHS.*

This moment has made us understand our fragility, but also our unity. Out of this we must come together to change our collective path away from the ecological catastrophe we have been driving towards in our age of speed and over-consumption. For a long time now, we have known we are heading towards environmental catastrophe, but we are lazy and think we can't change the way we live. But we are wrong to think we can't change the way we live, because we just did that to fight Covid-19, and we did it together, as a collective effort. We put our collective health first, we stopped driving to our offices and found that was possible, we cut air traffic by 50% and found that too is possible.

What are the first lines of 'O Sole Mio'? They are, in my rough English translation, *What a wonderful thing a sunny day. / The serene air after a thunderstorm / The fresh air ...*

As we come out of this, we know we need to change the way we are living and we need to do it together and we need to do it now, or else we are the thunderstorm.



Robert Montgomery brings a poetic voice to the discourse on text art. To read his rhythmic and thought-provoking texts, pasted over posters on billboards and hoardings in the streets of East London, is irresistible. So too are his dramatic light pieces and fire poems displayed significantly elsewhere in the world. Writ large in public places, his words often express a common global conscience, spurn consumerism, or rage against war and injustice, and just as eloquently offer a fresh perspective on the natural wonders of the world. Conceptually, his works share something with the 1960s

Situationists, a revolutionary group of European avant-garde writers, artists and urban theorists who created large installations in unexpected places.

In 2017, Parasol unit presented Robert Montgomery's *POEM IN LIGHTS TO BE SCATTERED IN THE SQUARE MILE*, as part of the foundation's winter light project, *Parasolstice*.

Robert Montgomery, *When We Are Gone The Trees Will Riot*, 2020. ARA acrylic and glaze on canvas, 150 x 150 cm (59 x 59 in). Photography by Benjamin Westoby.

# Reflection by Aaron Cezar

**B**eing confined indoors during the lockdown made us all more acutely aware of the outdoors. The chirping of birds announcing each day, the rustling of fallen leaves sacrificed for spring's blossoms, and the distant buzzing of bees all seemed to be reminders from nature that we were not in complete isolation. Then we witnessed animals re-occupy our apparently empty cities and places that were once their own. On social media, images circulated of fallow deer on a housing estate in East London, a kangaroo in downtown Adelaide, coyotes in San Francisco, a Puma in Santiago, a sea lion on the sidewalk of Mar del Plata in Argentina, wild boar in Barcelona, buffalo in New Delhi, fish and seabirds returning to the canals of Venice.

As I watched these videos, I wondered what those animals thought of the human condition as they curiously inspected our domain. How did they feel about our absence? And what about nature at large? Did the cherry blossoms miss our adoration – and our selfies? Was the sun trying to reach us inside by shining unusually bright during the lockdown?

These questions reminded me of Hans Ulrich Obrist's TikTok posts in which he asks various animals about their unrealised projects. One swan squawks as Obrist persistently enquires about





their unrealised projects. One swan squawks as Obrist persistently enquires about their utopic projects and unfulfilled dreams. A squirrel continues to pick away at its nuts, unfazed by the question. A duck twitches as if shaking its head, no. A heron flies away to evade both Obrist and the question. When asked about the motivation behind the videos, Obrist cites Vinciane Despret's book *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*<sup>1</sup> It's clear that Obrist hasn't yet piqued their interest. Like Despret, I wonder what animals would declare if we did. And what about the trees, sky, oceans and deserts? What are their views?

Oscar Santillán's *Solaris*, 2016–2017, provides one perspective. As part of the creative process, the artist collected sand from the Atacama Desert in Chile and melted it into glass, which was then polished into photographic lenses. Santillán effectively moulded the eyes of the desert. Through a series of landscape photographs, taken with these lenses, Santillán turned the 'desert's eyes' back on itself. In the words of the artist, 'The captured images are not a representation of the landscape; in *Solaris*, the desert is an observing subject rather than a passive object to be looked at.'<sup>2</sup> The work has many complexities to it – but put very simply, *Solaris* offers another lens through which we can see and contemplate the world around us.



In just four short months, the Covid C-19 pandemic has completely shifted our perspective of the world. It continues to hold up a critical lens, exposing very urgent issues related to our society, economy and the environment that we can no longer ignore. So, what are we going to do? This is the question that we should be asking ourselves right now. And, unlike animals, we have no excuse not to answer.

Aaron Cezar is the founding Director of Delfina Foundation, where he curates and develops its interrelated programme of residencies, exhibitions and public platforms.



<sup>1</sup> Nate Freeman, 'Conversations with Swans'. *Artnet*, 22 May 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/wet-paint-leonardo-dicaprio-flipper-1868547>. Accessed 24 May 2020.

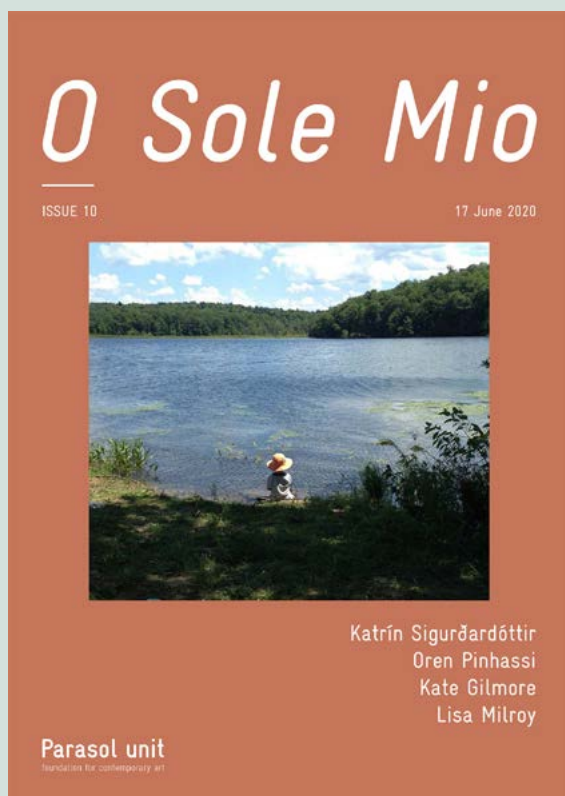
<sup>2</sup> Chiara Ianeselli, *Au*, monographic book on the work of Oscar Santillán, Studio Santillán, Netherlands, 2017, (n.p.), p. 97.



Pages 16–17: Oscar Santillán, *Solaris* (documentation images), 2016–2017.

Page 18: Oscar Santillán, *Solaris* (detail), 2016–2017.

# Upcoming Issue



**ISSUE 10** featuring works by

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Kate Gilmore  
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