

SARAH JÉRÔME

A single skin

curated by Rischa Paterlini and
Michele Spinelli

Notes for an Approach,
interview by Rischa Paterlini

Opening:
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11:00AM - 6:00PM

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Michele Spinelli had spoken to me at length about French artist Sarah Jérôme. He had followed her work closely over the years, first in the gallery and later through a solo exhibition at the Fondazione Pino Pascali. He spoke about her with the conviction of someone who knows that certain things deserve time, attention, and trust. He encouraged me to look more closely at her work. And for a long time, I admit, I only observed from afar.

Curating this exhibition together at Prometeo Gallery has also been a way for me to draw closer again. The works - many of them previously unseen - move between painting and sculpture, yet seem to share the same deep breath. In her paintings on tracing paper, the body is never isolated: it slips into the landscape, dissolves. The medium itself - flexible, resilient - conveys this same ambiguity. When you unroll these long, vertical works, you hear a dry sound, like glass being scraped with something sharp: it's the sheet opening up, speaking like a surface that cracks but never breaks. It's a sound that warns you: the work is alive, ready to reopen.

As I observe these pieces today, I realize that more than telling a story, they hold something back. A figure lying in the tall grass seems to breathe along with the green around her, protected by a dense silence. A little further on, two bodies barely touch; the boundary between flesh and landscape dissolves, as if the distinction between inside and outside no longer existed. Then there are figures turning their backs, seated in the grass, gazing upward. They seem to be waiting for something - or perhaps returning to themselves. The sculptures, on the other hand, don't reveal themselves immediately. They emerge like unearthed remains, living fragments. A head atop another, a hand reaching from the ceramic like from a clod of earth. There is a precise slowness in these gestures, a gravity that does not weigh down, but lingers.

And it is precisely here, in this suspension - between gesture and waiting, between surface and depth - that I, too, felt the need to pause. To rewind, like with images you don't want to lose. To stay. This is also the perspective from which the following interview was born: not as a conclusion, but as a listening exercise. A way to inhabit the works a little longer, without rushing to interpret.

1. Your artistic journey has spanned very different mediums, from classical dance to drawing and sculpture. How have these worlds intertwined over time? And what initially led you toward artistic gesture?

I feel that whatever the medium - performance, drawing, sculpture -

I'm always expressing the same thing. There's a constant dialogue at play: on one side, the rigor and practice; on the other, interpretation and freedom. Of course, there is a fundamental difference: on stage, the person is central but embodies the gestures or words of someone else, whereas in the visual arts, I am the one who invents my own language and breathes life into it.

Perhaps my first real connection to art comes from my grandmother. She had a studio in Paris, across from Germaine Richier's ateliers. She began sculpting at the age of 60, and although I never met her, her studio and those enormous sculptures left a deep impression on me as a child. Looking back, I know this experience shaped me. Also, my father taught me to garden, to place my hands in the soil. That tactile connection has stayed with me.

Since then, I've always felt an instinct to touch, to make, to construct. Creation for me is part of daily life - whether baking in the kitchen or stretching the body in yoga, it all feels connected to the act of shaping clay or paint in the studio. Touch is fundamental; it helps you stay grounded in the body itself. Physicality is at the root of my artistic experience.

2. The body has remained a central presence in your work, but it seems to change form - from a performative presence to a material marked by time. What kind of body are you portraying today?

For a long time, the body was central, almost overwhelmingly present in my work, often depicted as the stage of our desires and our wounds. Like a geological site layered with strata, the body carried memory, trauma, and scars - those "fossilized traces" that shape us, sometimes enabling us to move forward, sometimes holding us back.

Today, that presence has shifted. The body is no longer the sole focus but rather a fragment within a wider landscape, punctuating a broader dialogue with nature. The figures I portray now feel more peaceful: they emerge and dissolve in forests, in flowery fields, or in the current of a river.

For me, it's about immersing oneself in a garden of infinite colors, it's about merging with the landscape: letting river water run through our veins, closing our eyes to rediscover the intimacy of an inner garden, where secrets are rooted, sorrows drown, and memories fade or blossom into new loves. In this way, the body becomes landscape, suspended between memory and dream.

3. In your more recent works, there is a tension between definition and disappearance. When did you feel the need to make space for ambiguity, for the indecipherable?

Since childhood, I've been fascinated by the idea of seeing without fully seeing - perceiving forms through a surface, like looking at objects through a sheet of ice, just out of reach. That sense of partial visibility, of something concealed yet present, has stayed with me. I've never been drawn to images that reveal themselves too literally or too quickly; I prefer when they emerge gradually, through layers, leaving space for ambiguity. Working directly with materials is essential to me - it's a tactile, almost sensual dialogue. I'm drawn to ancient, organic mediums such as oil paint, charcoal, clay, or wax, because they allow me to oscillate between extremes: sometimes my work takes on a controlled, precise realism; other times it becomes gestural, instinctive, even resistant to academic conventions. My process often involves cycles of construction and deconstruction, destroying and rebuilding. This back-and-forth creates room for uncertainty and transformation - the very place where definition and disappearance meet.

4. You once wrote: "Questioning the legibility of an image or a scene is a way to explore human nature, the inevitability of misunderstanding, and the fine lines between perception and misinterpretation.". What are you seeking from those who view your work?

I don't expect any particular reaction from the viewer. What matters to me is simply that they take the time to contemplate the work and experience it in their own way, shaped by their personality, their memories, their life. I don't create with a specific goal or outcome in mind - positive or negative. Each person should encounter the work on their own terms.

When I'm creating, I never anticipate how the viewer might respond. The work is born for itself, with its own life. It doesn't aim at an audience. How it is interpreted belongs entirely to the viewer, it's something I'm not responsible for.

5. In your works, nature is never just a backdrop. It is a living, pulsating matter, often fused with the body. What meaning does landscape hold for you today? What is the relationship between the body and the environment surrounding it? Are you interested in thinking of landscape as a mental condition?

Nature - water, earth, plants, stones - is an important part of my work. For me, the relationship between the body and its environment is the very foundation of artistic experience. To engage with the living, to shape it, is something primal, almost like returning to the source.

In my recent paintings, landscape has become a site of transformation, of metamorphosis. The forest, the river, the meadow, animals - all appear as figures of passage, to the reinvention of the self. I see nature not as a backdrop but as an active force, a place where one ventures into new paths and new versions of being. Consciously, I explore the sensitive and symbolic links between humans, their environment, and the non-human beings that inhabit it. Landscape, in this sense, is also a mental condition: a space of *rêverie*, emancipation and projection. It invites us to recognize that none of us can detach ourselves from our relationship with the world and with otherness.

6. Tracing paper has become one of your distinctive materials. What fascinates you about this delicate yet resilient support? And how does it shape your way of painting?

I never want my images to be unequivocal; I want them to hold layers, to carry ambiguity. Tracing paper fascinates me precisely because it resists. It demands particular conditions - how it's stored, how it dries - and it pushes back against oil paint. That tension is what draws me in. I enjoy forging unlikely relationships between materials that don't naturally belong together.

There's also something profoundly tactile about it. Its surface is like delicate skin - at once a barrier and a window - offering a fluidity where gestures can glide. Working on it is a very physical experience: I begin with an excess of raw material, moving across the surface in an impulsive, dynamic way. Then comes a shift, a moment of quiet concentration, when I begin to search within the matter itself - almost like excavating at an archaeological site. I erase, I scrape back, I let forms emerge slowly. It becomes a dialogue between force and delicacy, resistance and revelation.

7. Your sculptures too seem born from a restrained energy. What is the starting point for a sculpture? A gesture, a form, a memory?

I often think of that scene in the film *Camille Claudel* (by Bruno Nuytten, 1988), when the heroine steals clay at night and carries it home in a small suitcase. That image resonates with me deeply as I would literally gather clay in the forest and bring it back home when I was a child.

For me, sculpture begins with the need to confront matter in all its physicality. It requires a lot of energy and is very heavy and draining. Although it doesn't seem like it in the final result, the very first stages of working with clay can feel like a wrestling match - demanding, resistant, but also exhilarating, almost cathartic.

Sculpture allows me to step outside the two-dimensional image: to shift perspective, to circle around the work rather than stand fixed in front of it, to multiply viewpoints.

Sometimes a sculpture emerges from a memory or a reference, like *Solace*, which recalls the final scene of Pina Bausch's *Kontakthof*. A woman in a pink dress is lifted by invisible arms, her body like a puppet - somewhere between tenderness and violence. That ambiguity of interpretation is central to my work: doubting what we see becomes a way to question human nature, misreadings, and misunderstandings.

Other times, the starting point is a theme, as in *En eaux vives*, which explores fluidity, movement, and self transformation through the metaphor of water - a universal symbol of life, change, and rebirth. Human figures seem to appear and dissolve in its currents, hovering between reality and imagination. I'm drawn to that threshold where forms blur and uncertainty invites contemplation.

8. Over time, your work has adopted a slower, deeper rhythm. What guides you today in the construction of a work? How do you know when it's time to stop?

There isn't necessarily a fixed rhythm while making a work. The rhythm emerges from the energy of the piece itself. My energy today is calmer, more measured, less jagged. It is closely tied to my existence and my porous nature as an artist. I've always thought of the artist as a catalyst, absorbing both personal and collective influences - intimate, political, social. With time, I've become calmer, more patient, and my work reflects this inner pace, this search for equilibrium.

When I construct a piece, I work on boards with tracing paper, alternating between horizontal and vertical positions - on the floor and on the wall - to explore different gestures and perspectives. I often begin with large, gestural abstraction, letting colors flow or puddle, and then move into a second phase of exploration. The image then emerges through absence: by removing material, shapes and figures are revealed as ghosts within the work. Completing a painting usually takes several days. The initial phase is spontaneous and

energetic; the later phase is deliberate, patient, and detailed. I know a painting is finished not by rational judgment, but instinctively. The painting tells me when it is complete - it asserts its own existence.

9. Looking at the works in this exhibition, which mark a new chapter, what do you recognize as continuity? And what, instead, do you perceive as rupture or transition?

The works in this exhibition at Prometeo Gallery feel like a continuation of a path I began about three years ago - marked by the arrival of more color and a deeper exploration of the bond between humans, with themselves and nature. For me, color isn't simply a visual element; it is a connective tissue that links things together. Everything is color - even abstract notions, words, letters, numbers, sensations. I've always associated people with colors as well. This synesthetic perception shapes the way I compose, allowing color to become both subject and medium.

These recent works also carry the influence of impressionism, which I delved into during my residency for the Normandie Impressionniste festival last year. My recent palette - blues, purples, greens, with flashes of yellow - echoes the fauves and impressionists, not only in color but in the treatment of light, in the attempt to capture fleeting sensations and ephemeral moments. There is continuity here in my attention to the body's relation to landscape, but also a new softness, a contemplative poetry that offers more sensuality.

At the same time, there has been a rupture. The works from *L'éveil* series that came just before *Revoir le ciel* were born after a violent emotional shock. I went through several months of complete artistic silence, a time when I thought I might never create again. That moment of nothingness eventually revealed itself to be a necessary pause, like trees stripped bare in winter while secretly preparing their spring leaves. Out of that silence and emptiness came a new cycle of creation.

10. Is there something you haven't yet addressed but feel close to? Where do you think your research is leading you today?

I don't really ask myself that kind of question, just as I don't think about the viewer's reaction while I work. I'm completely in the present when I create. I don't make strategies, nor project anything in advance; things need to reach me for me to respond.

Usually, my work transforms in response to external triggers - the theme of an exhibition, a specific place, an event, a residency. It's not through personal projection or planning that the work changes; it's the outside world entering my experience, entering my body, and resurfacing in the work.

Everything happens in real time, in the present moment, as an immediate, live process. Right now, I'm preparing a creative residency in the fall, followed by two large museum exhibitions in France in 2026. I believe the museums themselves and their history will have an influence on the next subjects I'll explore.