

Beyond Abstraction:
Jaime Gili's Landscape Paintings

By Santiago Valencia Parra

We need to reforest our imagination, and thus, perhaps, we can reconnect with a poetics of urbanity that restores the power of life instead of constantly repeating what the Greeks and Romans did. Let's build a forest, hanging gardens amid urban life, where there can be a little more desire, joy, life and pleasure, rather than tiles covering streams and rivers. After all, life is wild and also blossoms in cities.

Ailton Krenak, Ancestral Future.

Landscape painting has a long-standing tradition in what is now known as America, the continent. It is said that landscape painting was initiated in South America by artists like Frans Post (1612-1680), who arrived in Brazil in 1637. The Dutch painter, joined later by a ravelling force of new travelling artists who wanted to represent the 'wonders' of a 'new world', mimicked European motives, building up a pristine, vast, and untameable territory¹. And so, landscape painting was 'invented' in America. However, this landscape, or more precisely, this idea of what landscape painting is, remains rooted in the concept of a certain type of representation of nature, as well as certain discussions around beauty, the picturesque, the sublime, and the relationship that positions the power of the human gaze over a territory.

¹ Manthorne, K. (ed.) (2015) Traveler artists: landscapes of Latin America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection. New York: Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros.

Let's refer to indigenous pictorial productions before the arrival of the Europeans, which depicted mountains, rivers, flora, and fauna. Moche pottery or Mesoamerican codices are a special testament where we find this. With highly complex designs entailing what Indigenous communities, each in its encompassing and non-reductive way, viewed and experienced as nature/territory/land. To decolonise our view of the modern European landscape is to understand that our relationship with it goes beyond an objective, or factual representation, and to abandon the ghost that this is something we can accomplish in the first place. This shift invites us to see landscape as relational and spiritual, focusing on "affective cartographies"², which go beyond capitalistic, extractivist, and possessive ways of representing and living in our built environments³.

In this spectrum, Jaime Gili's (b. 1972, Caracas) latest painting series brings us closer to a different way of mediating landscape. Gili's obsession for painting, and its reframing of Latin American geometric abstraction, find in *El Conuco de Marcos* (2024-2025), *En la Ruta de Cova* (2025) and *Kope ke theka* (2026), a place for experimentation, and in the words of the artist, a slow medium to reflect on a rapid, and changing world. In here, painting faces the vacuum of modernity, and Gili's abstraction embraces the challenge of working and displacing the heritage of artists such as Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt), Jesús Rafael Soto, or Alejandro Otero. Gili positions himself here, and his painting is a locus on the history of the medium, art history, and specifically, landscape. All the paintings here started as observation, experience, and mediation. As a sort of travelling artist, Gili produced this new body of work between Caracas, Barcelona, and London. But what is interesting is that the journey of the Venezuelan artist is not based on a craving to contain the territory, but to give space for it to cry open on each canvas. To produce, via structures of colour, the opportunity to give glimpses of rivers, mountains, trees, leaves, and pathways, which constantly escape under the viewer's eye.

Conuco, or 'allotment', is a space delimited for harvesting. By referencing this name, the artist is already positioning our relationship with nature: we organise it, limit it, frame it, but ultimately, these acts can also entail a promise of care. While visiting a relative's allotment outside Caracas, on a stepped piece of reclaimed land, he found both a motive and an already lived experience. Architecture, scale, and verticality are concepts that are present in Gili's work. However, in *El Conuco de Marcos*, they acquire a sense of reverberation that wants to escape the canvas. This experience was equated by his visit to

² Krenak, A., Brostoff, A., Pinheiro-Dias, J. and Carelli, R. (2024). *Ancestral future*. Cambridge: Polity.

³ Here, I refer to the emblematic case of the Botanical Expedition of the Viceroyalty of New Granada in the eighteenth century, during which the tropical nature of present-day Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela was documented, classified, studied, and extracted for European interests. During this period, artistic representation and scientific objectivity become deeply entangled.

an allotment that his grandfather used to tend, when Jaime was a child and visited on holidays. This *Conuco* in Sallent, the inland Province of Barcelona, appeared as a possibility of life, of harvest production. As consumers of nature, we are constantly displaced from this experience, and agriculture is hidden in the cities, in the supermarkets, and in our home deliveries. By bringing the possibilities of the *Conuco* through colour, Gili's production invites us to pause and see nature from a closer perspective.

In *El Conuco de Marcos*, we start to fall apart from the spell of human organisation, of an ecosystem which is measured through the opposition of gardens, as an organised ecology, and the jungle, as supposed nature derailing. This imagined binary conceals a more complex connection to the occupied territory, and other encompassing ways of *relating* with nature that can be achieved, as we are reminded by the Indigenous author Ailton Krenak. This life-pulsion is felt in *En la Ruta de Cova* (2025). Based on the character Arturo Cova of José Eustasio Rivera's ground-breaking work *The Vortex* (*La Vorágine*), Gili constructs his own cartography of this novel that portrays the Amazonia through the eyes of its exploitation across the Rubber Boom and the enslavement of Indigenous peoples in the 20th century. In the novel, the territory is abundant and nearly endless. The tropical forest emerges simultaneously as a promise and as a man-made hell.

Arturo Cova is then a trope of the atrocities and scars of the territory, and the peoples who have inhabited it, reminding us of today's *Wars of the Interior*⁴. In this spirit, *En la Ruta de Cova* (2025) unfolds through rhythm, tracing the steps of an imagined journey, and not a repetition of the images of the jungle. The restrained composition of colours, nevertheless, hints at the possibilities of the gaze, and how asphyxiating and stimulating it can be. Is it not within this contained canvas that Gili ultimately invites us to embrace the openness of a non-exotic jungle—one that carries the weight of our historical relationship to it?

The point is not to romanticise or idealise our relationship with nature, territory, and therefore, landscape. Forms of organisation and relation can circulate through contained 'destruction', which can also be rebirthing ontologies. *Kope ke theka* (2026) comes from the Yanomami Indigenous peoples' process of cleansing the land, through a slash-and-burn technique in specific terrains meant for crop. This idea of fire and nature today brings us closer to a much bleaker landscape: that of corporations ravaging extensions of land for creating monocultures, extracting resources, and scarring the earth. The spiritual, ritualistic, and highly complex relationship of nature, its cycles, and its rebirthing process through fire,

⁴ I'm referencing Joseph Zarate's homonym book, where he investigates the extraction of wood, gold and oil through the lives of people in the Peruvian Andes and the Amazonia.

is now converted into the image of industries claiming ancestral land in the Amazonia, for example. This takes us back to *En la Ruta de Cova*, but with different consequences. *Kope ke theka* is a positive driving force mediated by fire. The ochres and reds prelude new greens, taking Indigenous knowledge into action. Fire anticipates the birthing of a new life, just as it is also portrayed in José Clemente Orozco's work, which Gili also references.

In the end, these paintings appear as omens of the contemporary landscapes that Gili has experienced and imagined. They invite to explore the desire of controlling nature, exploiting it, and most importantly, inhabiting it. Overall, they invite us to see the enclosed landscape, the one rebirthing, and the one imagined. Following Krenak, the challenge lies in rethinking not only our relationship to territory and its organisation, but also the ways in which we imagine it. In here, the constant flux of garden/jungle seems to find a non-resolution, outgrowing the binary of control or wilderness, to reach another point: forests that contain us, and which we contain in our gaze.