

# Creative Fungus: On Fredrik Vørslev's *Mildew Paintings*

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**Abstract:** Fredrik Vørslev's *Mildew Paintings* cannot be defined as paintings in the conventional sense. They are the result of mildew growth developing over the course of a year on canvases stored inside humid plastic tubes. As such, their exact nature eludes us, not being straight-forward painterly objects, nor simple pieces of fungus-eaten material. This chapter aims to define the *Mildew Paintings*' hybrid identity through the theories of interspecies entanglements of anthropologist Anna Tsing and Gilles Clément's approach to what he refers to as the third landscape in urban gardening. The paintings are regarded as the result of a new-found collaboration between human and non-human processes, pushing the artist into the background while introducing other creative entities, leaving us to question our hegemonic role as this world's sole active designers.

**Keywords:** third landscape, interspecies entanglements, abstract painting, Anna Tsing, Gilles Clément

## Introduction

At some point in 2012, artist Fredrik Vørslev found himself quite dissatisfied with the priming operation carried out on some of his canvases. Having tried to alter the initial appearance of the priming in various ways and still failing to achieve his desired result, Vørslev decided to roll up the canvases in plastic tubes and simply place them outside. The canvases were then left there, forgotten by him and the world, for twelve months. These were the canvases that would later become known as Fredrik

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Vørslev's *Mildew Paintings* (2013). The works consist of a series of primed canvases upon which mildew (the pale, mould-like filaments that develop on the surface of damp organic material) has given life to its own visual expression, by covering the canvas in shapes and patterns of cloudy hues as a result of the spreading of fungus in the humid climate of the storage tubes. These accidental and autonomous processes by the 'hands' of the fungi were given aesthetic and artistic value by the artist only at the end of their spontaneous creation. Vørslev recovered the canvases, removed them from the tubes and—as the fungus that had developed was particularly poisonous—he treated them with fungicide to stop the decaying process. Not having directly sprung out of the artist's initial intention, strictly speaking, nor having developed through the trace-making activity of the artist's hand—actually barely relying on a gesture of his of any kind—the works leave us questioning their exact nature as artistic objects. Despite their seemingly painterly appearance, they seem to linger in a definitional limbo, as they subtly slip away from standard painting categories. The lack of a solid ground to stand on in order to regard these works as conventional paintings has led to the works being given other kinds of definitions over time, such as the one given by Peter J. Amdam, who referred to them as Vørslev's 'painterly non-project' (Amdam, 2013). Rather than being paintings, what they can more accurately be described as is, indeed, a series of unprompted collaborative processes between human and non-human actors, humans and fungi, converging only at the end in a seemingly painterly form.

## Interspecies Entanglements

Upon the organic material of the human-made canvases and inside the synthetic material of the plastic storage tubes, the fungus thrives undisturbed. As a year-long process of intertwined human and non-human elements, it is tempting to see the works as the perfect visual representation of interspecies entanglements, such as the ones between fungus and humans that have been brought to our recent attention by the anthropologist Anna Tsing (Tsing, 2015). In her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Tsing takes her cue from the Matsutake mushroom—a Japanese

delicacy found mostly in North America, Europe and some parts of Asia. Tsing tells stories of how fungi, pine and humans are tied together in collaborative conglomerates, building landscapes around mutual disturbance while blurring the lines between human and non-human domains. Whereas humans seem to be unable to intentionally grow this mushroom, the Matsutake is in fact the perfect example of an element that is still greatly tied up in human actions, as it flourishes in the forest areas where human presence has made itself most known in even the most aggressive manner. Under the layers of timber production and overproduction, under the layers of impoverished soil and even, it is said, under the layers of the ruins of Hiroshima, Matsutake grows on the verge of a paradox, deeply entangled in human disturbance and, at the same time, escaping its control. As nature-made objects in human-made frames, existing at the same time inside and outside of human boundaries, the *Mildew Paintings* seem to give life to a similar pattern.

It is not the first time in Værsløv's *oeuvre* that he incorporates nature's activity into his own practice. Værsløv is in fact known for having let nature influence the final outcome of his painterly process by placing his finished canvases in the open air, exposing them to the erosion of the elements over longer periods of time (Sandqvist, 2012). Now, instead of having sun, rain and snow act as a final painterly layer, the *Mildew Paintings* witness nature significantly (and literally) stepping forward into the picture frame. No longer the last polishing, or rather de-polishing, phase at the end of a more or less standard human painting-making process, nature now actively takes on the role of a core creative agent in the artwork itself.

As the uncontrolled and unpredictable fungus development suddenly turns out to make up the very key process behind the artwork, pushing the artist further and further back, one therefore notices the entanglement between man and nature already present in Værsløv's practice, taking a turn to new, unusual patterns, introducing a sudden role-shifting between foreground and background creative elements.

In this particular intertwining of human presence and natural processes, human disturbance limits itself to the extremes of the process: it is merely present to build the foundation and set the boundaries for the

works by marking their beginning and end. Initially showing up through Værsløv's originating priming process and consequent aesthetic dissatisfaction, it is then suspended for twelve months, only dwelling upon the work in the fossilised shape of the man-made plastic making up the storage tubes. It is then reintroduced at the very end through the artist's finding, physical removal and recovery of the canvases, through the chemical stopping of the mildew's spreading and, finally, through the artist's active investing of the mildew-covered canvases with autonomous artistic value.

As a newly appointed artist, mildew in the meantime works freely, slowly and steadily, eating up the canvas bit by bit, corrupting shapes and colours: the result is a subtle progression of greys and greens meeting on the canvases in cloudy, dream-like scenarios. The visual traces that still mark their year of storage in plastic tubes thus become blurry lines stretching across the surfaces of the works as a multitude of horizons, appearing and disappearing through a distant fog.

## The Third Landscape

Through the entangled mazes of mildew filaments, the project turns the bordered zone of the painting into a form of two-dimensional landscaping, making up vertical, flattened-out gardens out of untamed natural processes. By doing so, Værsløv's forgotten corners of organic wilderness seem to echo the particular kind of gardening processes that garden designer, theorist and botanist Gilles Clément has advocated for the past twenty years. In fact, there is something about the poetic and wildly liberating aspects of Værsløv retracting from the role as the works' creator and letting nature instead build itself within the artwork while removed from human intervention that bears a resemblance to what was stirring in the fields of landscape architecture and urban gardening in the early 2000s. New directions developing at the time within this field, the very field that traditionally could be associated with the most blatantly nature-constricting aspects of humans' art and design practice, might actually offer a useful lens through which we can unpack Værsløv's approach.

In 2004, Gilles Clément published a manifesto that would make a significant contribution to the pushing of nature towards the front row

of our world's creative processes. He recognized nature as designer of its own expression even in its most seemingly undesirable and neglected aspects. At the core of the manifesto stands the concept of the *third landscape*, defined as all the forgotten, abandoned or inaccessible corners of natural wilderness that are present in our urban landscapes, where man's activity is for one reason or another suspended and weeds, wild and untamed greeneries are left alone to unfold: from swamps, moors, roadsides and railroad embankments to institutional reserves, mountain summits and deserts (Clément, 2005; Gandy 2013). Recognising the tangible worthiness, inventive force and aesthetic beauty of such wilderness on the basis, amongst other factors, of the biological complexity and biodiversity that exists in areas where man has stepped back (Clément, 2005), Clément suggested a new approach towards our present relation to our natural surroundings. The *Mildew Paintings* can be seen as minimalistically reproducing this new approach, suggesting an alternative to the current reigning split between human subjects as the sole sources of active and creative power on the one hand, and natural objects as the surrounding world of passive, ever-shapeable immobility on the other.

In such an alternative outlook, the urban gardener is invited to release his or her controlling role within the human and non-human entanglements, restraining from taming them into composites of perfect urban landscapes and instead 'work *with* nature' (Clément, 2005; Lanzoni, 2007), reevaluating its ability to creatively design its own space. To shed light on a concrete example of such an approach one could mention Clément's own design for the Henri Matisse Park in Lille, completed in 1995, where a central portion of the park was made to consist of an inaccessible and enclosed 'island' of wilderness, where natural processes and biodiversity are treasured, closely monitored though left untouched, and human presence is physically banned (Gandy, 2013).

As the *Mildew Paintings* similarly withdraw from human control while the fungi proceed completely undisturbed inside the storage tubes, nature can be seen here to reclaim its own creative space through the very making of a two-dimensional 'third landscape' on the canvas. As such, Værsløv's non-paintings can be thought of as a subtle invitation to let go

of our compulsively human desire to shape, change and control our natural surroundings, while going from subjects to respectful observers. At the same time, by elevating mildew from its usual and heavily frowned upon role as the disastrous consequence of poor storage to the role of protagonist in the work's artistic narrative, the series also resonates with Clément's conceptual repurposing of nature's waste areas, by making us witness nature's own way of visually, biologically and creatively unfolding itself, investing even nature's most unattractive by-products with a new-found dignity.

Still, compared to Clément's ideal of complete human exclusion from the beauty of these untamed urban gardens, there is admittedly one aspect of Værsløv's work that somehow lingers within the limits of human control: after the year of mildew's autonomous self-shaping process, it is the artist himself that intervenes, nevertheless, putting an artificial end to the natural process by chemically stopping the spreading of the fungus and freezing the shapes of the mildew in a deliberately chosen moment. Is this a symptom? A small but telling detail, revealing the outlook of the intrinsically controlling aspects of human nature? A sign of our innate reluctance to completely let go of our desire to shape and define the boundaries of natural processes? Or is it enough to state, as Værsløv himself has done (Værsløv, 2014/2015), the extreme health hazard this particularly poisonous mildew would cause in a museum environment if left in a totally uncontrolled state? One might even argue that Værsløv's final involvement can be identified with the very fine thread of artistic intention that binds this work to its artist: making up a minuscule, yet fundamental, grain distinguishing the *Mildew Paintings* from any other forgotten mould-covered object one might find lying around in the garage. Overall, it may be said that the paintings spring out of an overlap between species, building on the cooperation between human presence and undisturbed natural phenomena as multispecies hybrid objects of a new kind of 'third' landscape.

By both connecting us with nature's own pace and, at the same time, keeping us at a distance, Værsløv's *Mildew Paintings* can be considered a small push, dressed in minimalistic greenish robes, towards rethinking the current all-engulfing mass of our creative egos and, by doing so,

contributing to balancing out the anthropocentric hierarchies that build the foundations of our unsettling era.

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