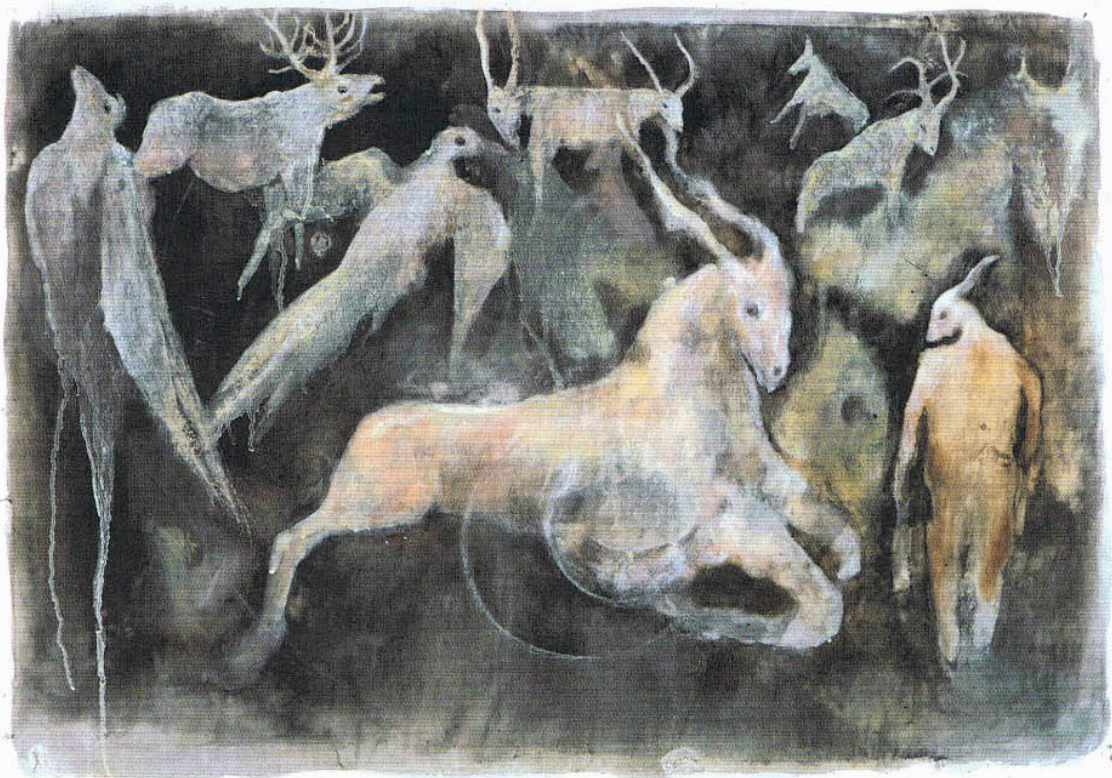


# RAWVISION

Spring/Summer 2009

## FRAGILITY & **FORCE**

**Annie Carlano** is moved and intrigued by  
the enigmatic paintings of **Christine Sefolosa**





Looking at the art of Christine Sefolosha one is immediately drawn into the cycle of life, from womb to earth, from animal to man, from waking life to the dream state, from the poetry of the paraphysical to the brutal reality of nature's way. Peering at unforeseen juxtapositions of life and death, at the paradox of omnipresent fragility and force, we are a little uneasy, a bit confused, confronted as we are with the harsh,

unsentimental truth of our existence. Moved by the startling beauty of these primal images, and by the rush of feelings and associations that fill us, we know instinctively and wholeheartedly that we are in the presence of a master artist, seer and storyteller.

One of the predominant currents in Sefolosha's body of work to date is a decidedly animist worldview. Birds and animals are majestic



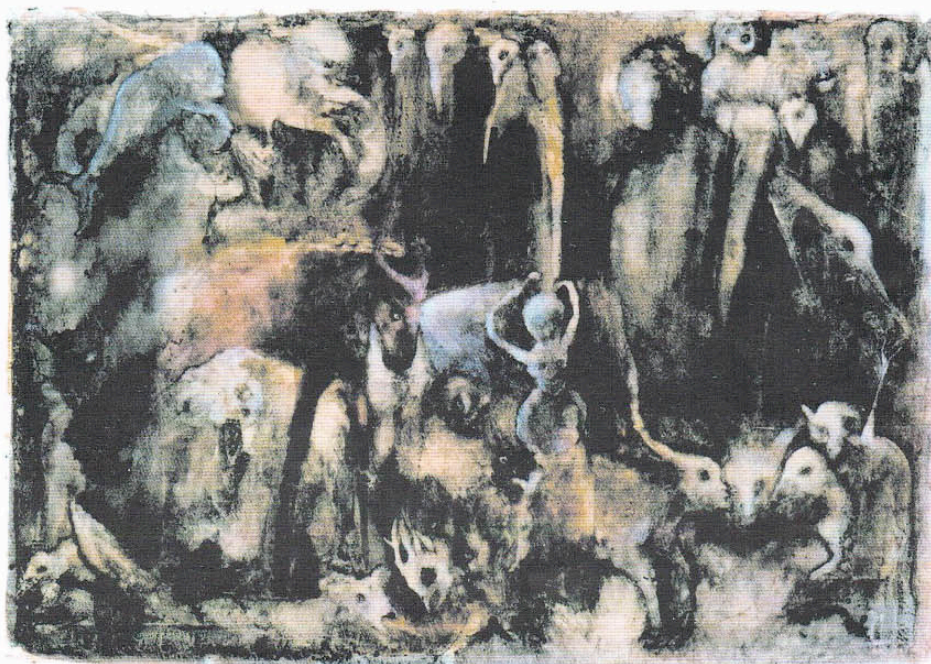
left  
*Procession*

below  
*Out of Darkness*

Both images were made using the same techniques as *Sous-bois*, the two images here are described by Sefolosha – like all of her work – as being a result of the materials or elements 'dancing together, clashing, until the images appear – I never, never know before the process starts what – or rather where – it wants to go.'

opposite page (top)  
*Endormioe (High flyers)*  
The texture of the brownish blacks in this piece result from tar and turpentine. Once Sefolosha had moved the materials around on the paper for some time, 'something comes through' and the images came into focus.

opposite page (below)  
*Sous-bois (Underwood)*  
Using onionskin paper made very wet with water, Winsor and Newton watercolours were 'thrown in' and Savon de Marseille (which is traditionally made with Mediterranean sea water, olive oil, soda ash and lye) used to 'erase' and lighten the pale areas.





right

*Hommes des bois*  
(Men of Wood)

This fiery image is also called *Gigue de l'arbre* (Jig/dance of the tree) and is described, along with other different-sized works, as 'chance encounters between pigments and binding mediums'.



right

*Metamorphosis in Blue*

far right

*Untitled, Pictos8*

The penumbra of colours that seep inwards from the dark edges of this bird-like image were created by the combination of water and Parker ink, and the chemical reaction that occurs due to the solvent in the ink.



beings to be respected, revered and emulated. With a sensitivity most often found in members of tribal societies, Sefolosha gives us the essence of her expressionistic creatures – their soul – revealing an uncanny affinity with authentic animal nature.

The examples are many. Over a decade ago she gave us *Metamorphosis in Blue*, an arresting painting in which what appears to be a lamb/horse in a fetal position has a beak jutting out of its right shoulder. We wonder whether the creature, positioned in a muddy blue wash, is floating in its placenta,

whether the hoofed animal is in fact morphing from its ancient bird ancestry, or whether the composite being is dead in the water. As ambiguity becomes clarity, transformation is right before our eyes, and we embrace the mystery of the shamanistic message. Moving agilely between what Carlos Castaneda would describe as 'ordinary reality' and 'nonordinary reality', Sefolosha presents us with a combination of the real and the mythic.

Let us not for a minute attribute her talent to mere shamanism. Sefolosha is a painter with an





left

*Self portrait (or Totem)*

Here, the materials used both combine together and repel each other, reflecting the coexisting harmony and friction between human and animal existence. The events that take place as Sefolosha applies her media draw her towards the images that finally emerge. She describes them as stemming from chance events in her processes and techniques as she follows 'what seems to be calling'.

**' Sefolosha presents us with a combination of the real and the mythic'**

astonishing imagination, a harrowing emotional tenor and an innate propensity for mastering various techniques and materials as well as discovering her own visceral materials and their application.

Sefolosha's biography certainly informs her art. She loved horses as a young girl in Switzerland, later became an equestrian, and married a veterinarian who specialised in treating horses. She then worked as an assistant to this South African man in his native country. At their Johannesburg clinic, Sefolosha got to know the equine beasts inside and out, seeing how

they were put together, how they processed pain, how they suffered, how they expressed love and how they endured. Surrounded there by the dominance of nature and living in close proximity to wild animals and birds, Sefolosha was at home. Man, not just beast, provided consolation. Delving into the forbidden world of the black community – these were the years of apartheid – she found solace in the music, dance and visual art traditions of the Zulu, Shangaan and Ndebele. Gathering natural pigments found on riverbanks and roads, the Ndebele women paint the exterior of their





above  
*Elfe des bois (Elf of wood)*  
A Kirlian halo around the black central figure clearly shows the interaction between ink and water that Sefolosha adores, which with 'much, much water... helps in making everything very unsettled and mobile'.

**'Her gift is to make us a part of the story even though we are uncertain of where we are, or where we are going'**

homes with dynamic geometric patterns, imbued with meaning. Inspired by these South African experiences, which would lead her ultimately to her own creative journey, Sefolosha returned to Switzerland. There, in the loving company of her extraordinary children, she began to make art, deliberately and instinctually. Taking an exquisite embroidered top sheet from her mother's trousseau as her canvas, she painted large colourful figures, embellished them with beads and feathers, and used this seminal artwork as a curtain in her home. Sefolosha says that this exploration of creativity was in part inspired by a book about the Indians of North America that she was given at the age of four. Thus we know that her awareness of the religion of native peoples as manifested through their communion with the animal kingdom predates her African sojourn by more than a decade.

Birds fascinate Sefolosha. Bird heads and wings and scrawny dangling legs figure prominently in her oeuvre. Of this she has said, 'There are many birds in my work. They attract me most especially because they speak of elsewhere, departure, and liberation. They often have two heads, for as ambivalent and contradictory animals, they symbolise that towards which we are reaching and what holds us back. Mouths open, we hear them whisper, cry, or sing their incomprehensible songs. And while it is true that they are ubiquitous in her paintings, and that these winged creatures deliver her most poignantly enigmatic messages of an unforgettable resonance akin to that

of the angels in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, they are part of an ensemble cast of forest-dwellers who appear together or separately in image after image, in foreground, in background, solid, opaque, or transparent.

Since ancient times, deer have been recognised throughout the world as sacred. Artemis (Diana), the Lady of Wild Things and Huntsman-in-chief to the gods, viewed all animals as sacred, but especially the deer. Sefolosha's representations of deer – stag, doe and faun – show us their splendour and strength. She seems to be in touch with the spirit of the animal sacrificed by the ancients for its gentle energy, respected and celebrated still today by tribal peoples throughout the Americas who recognise the deer as their 'brother', notably in the deer dances of Pueblo and Yaqui Indian cultures. The authenticity of Sefolosha's portrayals is as moving as those of José Bedia, who has studied and lived among the Yaqui, yet she has no experience of such rituals.

Insect-like beings, and mythological half-man/half-beast minotaurs and animals such as unicorns appear with a naturalist's attention to detail and the poet's sense of the essential. Sprouting from trees in her enchanted forests or emerging from the mist, Sefolosha's creatures are of all time and no time at the same time. So convincing is her scenography that we believe there are such beings in the world, and that the unicorn, that ever-vigilant protector of purity, walks among us.





Groups of personages in processions are painted with what seem to be veils of delicacy, so ethereal that they exude grace. In the largest of these, ghostly figures hover over similarly phantomesque animals in a rhythmic composition that has aptly been called a nocturne. Most of these compositions are quiet in tone, and we feel that the stories being told are dark and bittersweet. For these paintings are the equivalent of the images from Cocteau's landmark film of the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast*, in which his exquisitely surreal adaptation shows us that the real beasts, in life are not the animals.

Sefolosha's art also addresses the journey of life. Beginning with infancy, her interpretations include the intertwined world of man and the wild. Underscoring her role as storyteller, she gives us not Moses floating sweetly down the river in a basket but a sonogram (ultrasound) figure in a rough bovine ribcage. Such a unique vocabulary and expressionistic aesthetic make this a masterwork.

House as home is another of Sefolosha's recurring themes. Once again, what we see in these images is not the typical paradigm of stalwart domesticity. Rather, rendered in a watery haze, these houses are tenuous, devoid of life and fading before our eyes. Painting an inanimate object as sensitively as she does a person or an animal, the artist reveals the emotional relevancy of these works. Especially when viewed serially, they engulf us in their sadness, immensely, defying the small scale of their representation.

*Boats are vehicles real and symbolic. Titanic in both form and feeling, a vessel glides through the murky blue water past an indigo blue sky into our space.*

*But I, lost boat in the cove's trailing tresses,  
Tossed by the tempest into birdless space,  
Whose water-drunken carcass never would have salvaged,  
Old Monitor or Galleon of the Hanseatic League...*

(from *Le Bateau Ivre*, Rimbaud)

The Flying Dutchman has, like the *Bateau Ivre* a heartbeat and a soul. We identify with the massive being, and with the smaller slices of boats in water that Sefolosha continues to create for herself and for us. Her gift here is to make us a part of the story even though we are uncertain of where we are, or where we are going.

After looking carefully at a gallery filled with Sefolosha's art we find it hard to fathom how such artistically composed apparitions came to life. In the presence of such seemingly spontaneous visions, of such gripping scenes from an imagined animal kingdom, from the spirit world, and from our own lives, we seek answers. Then we remember that there are no answers, only questions posed here, and we sink into a comfort zone. We are changed and we are grateful, though we don't quite know for what.

above

*Nous aussi nous partons*  
(We also we will leave)

While using Parker ink Sefolosha discovered an effect that she found wonderful. Water was applied to black ink and the colour bled into a dark blue that radiated further into shades of yellow ochre or turquoise. She later found that this change in colour was due to a solvent in the ink that only Parker use.

reference

Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell and the Drunken Boat* (trans. Louise Varèse). New York: New Directions Publishing, 1961, p.99.

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