

The Tree that Holds up the World

These days —thanks to the wonders of dubbing— she is heard talking in Japanese and in the middle of the programming of the NHK (Japanese public broadcasting company) about her work and the interweaving of obsessions and intuition that are nurturing her. Cristina Coroleu laughs and tells that everything started last year, when a NHK team travelled to Buenos Aires in order to shoot a documentary about a plant species they found intriguing and, certainly, exotic: the Jacaranda.

And while the team was about to record the purplish mantle that overtakes many Buenos Aires' streets when the spring draws near its end, someone provided them with the information. In Argentina, there was a woman trained in the technique of Japanese ink wash —those watercolors of almost translucent softness— who had been pursuing a goal for a long time: exploring and painting, and continue to explore the delicacy of native flowers. An artist who, with a refined oriental technique, had set out to outline the pictorial map of native floral species.

Soon the filmmakers found out that this woman lived in Buenos Aires and that much of her work focused on the trees' blossoms of that city, which she honored —yet another coincidence— with an ancient Japanese ritual: the *hanami*. They also found out that, precisely at that moment, in the splendor of the little violet bells, she was organizing one.

The central concept of the documentary switched. And the cameramen prepared themselves to film, in a Latin American city, the reconstruction of a tradition long known in their country. But if in Japan *hanami* is a day when people meet to talk, eat and drink under the flowered cherry trees, here the small group led by Coroleu met under the shade of several Jacarandas.

“A lot of bad things happen to us,” mentions the artist, amused by the unexpected prominence that put her on the Japanese screens. “But in the middle are the blooms. You just need to raise your head and look.”

That is what she does. And in a city which is not always aware of its wealth, she sees the legacy of Carlos Thays, the French landscaper who —a century ago— designed much more than landscaping. “He created a color palette for the city,” explains the painter with enthusiasm. And in her watercolors she shows her desire to capture the elusive Buenos Aires' prisms. The pinks of *Lapachos*, the carmines of *Ceibos*, the violets of *Jacarandas*, the yellows of *Tipas*, more pinkish from *Palos borrachos*. Consecutive blooms that, throughout the year, will trace their trails of color all around the parks and tree-covered areas devised by Thays.

Coroleu has always been moved by the generosity of that man “who put beauty within everyone's reach.” But her connection with flowers was born at the end of the 90's. In the midst of mourning.

“My father had passed away, and I isolated myself,” she recalls. “I locked myself in El Botánico (Buenos Aires' Botanical Garden.)” For a year, while the sorrow drained away, Cristina took refuge in the placid shadow of that space. Somewhere in her memory, her experience as a Graphic Arts students in the Netherlands still pounded; the long hours she had spent, absorbed, at the pavilion of Japanese prints of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

Until one day everything combined. And it flourished. “I displayed the flowers,” she recalls with a smile. She plunged into the subtle strokes of Japanese ink wash. She confirmed that this was the fibre that she wanted to touch, and there she became stronger, with oriental patience: hundreds of study sketches from where the definitive pieces sprouted; hours and more hours of work in her studio. Then she began to teach and train followers in various parts of the country, convinced that bearing witness to beauty is a means of defending it.

These days, she monitors with anguish the news on forest fires in the South of the country. Moreover, she says that due to global warming, blooms come ahead of time, bees “are confused”, and flowers look “as if a storm was about to subjugate them.”

Nonetheless, during April Cristina prepares her next *hanami*: the one for the *Palo borracho* tree. Because in each plant in bloom, she senses a root to cling to. And she loves the imagery from centuries ago, that of the elephants and the tortoise on top of which everything rested. Only that she would make a small, essential, correction to that image: “It is a tree that holds up the world,” she claims.

And who could deny that?