

Sanja Marušić
The Endless Coloured Ways

HANNIBAL

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Foreword by Selin Kuşçu

A human figure with deep-pink skin crouches in a field of tall grass. The figure's hair is as dark as the pitch-black night sky. Though night, the grassland is painted a vibrant green, with yellow and red flowers and a blossom-like tree. It is as if headlights light up the scene. Why is she wandering these grounds at this nocturnal hour?

With this first image of the series "The Night Gardener" (2019), the story of *The Endless Coloured Ways* commences. This book is the second monograph by Dutch-Croatian photographer Sanja Marušić (b. 1991) and encompasses eight series made between 2018 and 2022. It traces a most personal journey, of Marušić's marriage, and her pregnancy.

"The Night Gardener" was made during a turning point in Marušić's career. Having made several self-portrait-based series before, Marušić felt the need to experiment and push the boundaries of her photography. She looked for other forms of artistic expression and gravitated towards painting. For the first time, Marušić started painting directly onto the photographs, mostly taken at night in and around Los Angeles. For this series, Marušić wanted to focus on the contrast between dark and light, night and day. LA provided the perfect backdrop for this concept. The ecstatic flora lights up in the artificial light, while the surrounding night becomes even darker. It is precisely this duality that lies at the heart of "The Night Gardener": the exotic, glamorous paradise versus the starkness of ominous night. Duality is inherent to night-time – it can feel grim and forlorn, but just as much it is a time of peace and stillness. "The Night Gardener" also marks a time of conflicting desires in both Marušić's artistic and personal life, which strongly drew her towards the night. Roaming Los Angeles during the wee hours and the diligent procedure of painting the individual pieces helped untangle her rambling artistic mind.

Before delving any further into these new series, it is worthwhile shedding light on Marušić's full body of work, produced since her graduation from the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague in 2013. Her artistic practice is steered by her love for experimenting with shapes, colours and layers. Photography is the starting point for each work, but subsequently she utilises divergent analogue and digital techniques, altering the image to the extent it is no more a photograph than it is a painting. The surreal fantasy worlds Marušić creates are characterised by vast and desolate landscapes, vibrant hues, and handcrafted costumes and props that cloak the human figure in her landscape. This figure is perpetually in motion, roving, probing. It is in the regard of these miniature performances that Marušić's work has become notably more complex in recent years. In a *New York Times* commentary from 2016, it was still said that in her work the "human presence was almost incidental", as "the real subjects are the lively landscapes". Indeed, her first monograph, *Collected Works* (2017), focuses on the relationship between humans and nature. Since then, her focus has shifted from the landscape in the background to the foreground.

In *The Endless Coloured Ways*, she invited her husband and later her son into the frame. The first time a second figure is introduced is in "Friends or Enemies" (2018), in which a symbiotic romantic bond is explored. The opening image: two figures forming a perfect circle, together they stand tall, calm, light despite the weight – like a strongly rooted tree. Sea water rages at their feet, perhaps hinting at a defying storm ahead. Will they stumble, realign? Inevitably, every relationship has to endure times of emotional distance or physical separation. Another image: a purple mount centres the frame and

the viewer's eyes follow the jagged outline of the crags until confronted with two figures that are kept at a distance from each other by a crevice. They can't get near each other, nor can they part further as a purple cloth is tightly stretched around their faces. Friends or enemies, or both at the same time.

On their honeymoon, Marušić and her husband collaborated again for "Eutierria" (2019). Newly wedded, they were madly in love and simultaneously feeling the gravity of their new union. Ideas of finding a balance together and surrendering to one another and nature are prominent in an image in which two figures take a triangular form – one standing tall, the other hovering inches above the desert-like ground, both stretching a hand toward the other. At first glance, it appears that their hands meet. A closer look reveals space between them, as if the hovering figure is kept afloat by mere magnetic attraction. The physicality of the near impossible poses, and the calmness and concentration they express, is extended in Marušić's editing process. After printing the photographs in black and white, she coloured them by hand, for it required a similarly focused state of mind.

In "Before You (Part I)" (2019) and "Before You (Part II)" (2020), Marušić captured the growing bond between herself and the life growing inside her. Moments of vulnerability alternate with a strong sense of fearlessness and determination. In one of the works, a figure jumps into the air – her floral skirt and red scarf flutter. She's rushing and reaching her arms out. Her breasts are visible through a sheer blouse. Blossoms surround her. The image evokes Spring, the impatience for a new life to unfold. Generally, the figures in Marušić's work are not gendered, but "Before You" emphasises femininity without restraint. In fact, pregnancy proved to be such a pinnacle of femininity that Marušić returned to her former *modus operandi*, working solo.

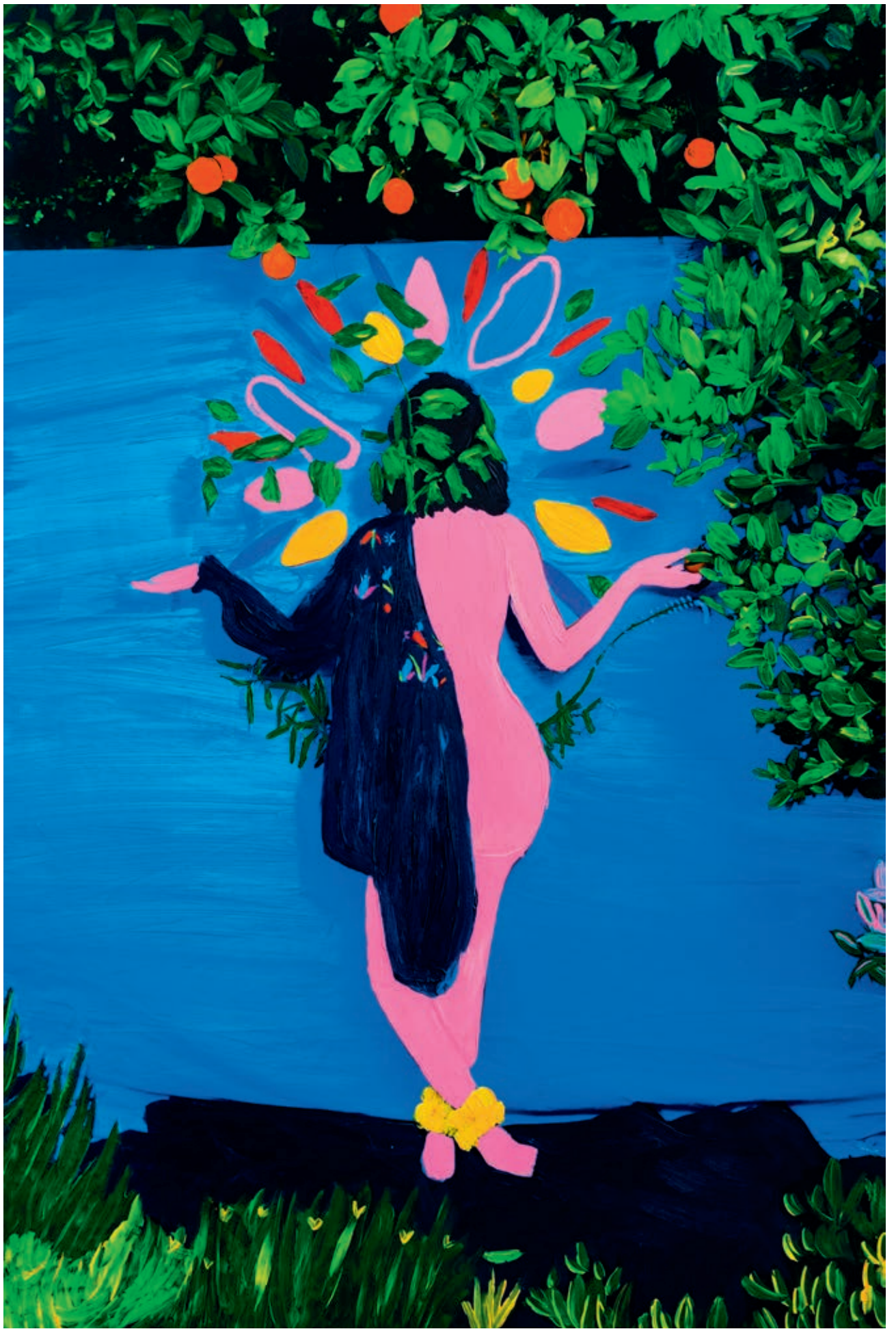
Once her son was born, two figures became three. Marušić introduces him in "With You (Part I)" (2020) and "With You (Part Two)" (2021). The closing piece: a powerful image of a red, an orange and a yellow hand against a bright blue sky. The parent's hands are open, soft, but the baby's hand is clenched into a fist, self-confident near his mother. Another photo: a meadow, half purple and half yellow with, at its centre, three figures wearing matching blue hats that delimit their view to one another. The two standing figures wear a costume with stripes on one leg and dots on the other – creating confusion about which legs are whose. To Dutch newspaper *NRC* Marušić said: "We are creating a structure for our trinity. Sometimes we move harmoniously, at other times discordant. Our postures reflect this – we balance on one leg, carry each other and sometimes we disjoin."

Lastly, in "Sasha & Sanja" (2020–), Marušić shows a selection from an ongoing series in which she depicts motherhood and the unique bond between mother and child. In one of the portraits, an orange-coloured baby sits on his mother's lap, his body hugging her chest, but his face rotates towards the camera as if he fears disruption of their moment together. Another image: her son, now a toddler, seems to participate consciously as he poses on his mother's shoulder, the two bodies becoming one as the boy's back blocks the view to the mother's head. "Sasha & Sanja" promises to grow into a treasured time capsule of a boy growing up and a comprehensive portrait of the dynamic push-and-pull relationship between mother and child.

The Endless Coloured Ways marks a new chapter in Marušić's rapidly growing oeuvre. The road to, and the arrival of, her son created an organic shift in her subject matter – from a single figure interacting with Mother Earth, to a trinity orbiting each other. A distinctive quality of her unique aesthetic is that though Marušić uses self-portraiture to visualise personal life events and emotions, to the viewer her oeuvre is far from autobiographical as her subjects are rarely identifiable and she never shows life as plain as it is. She invites her audience to wander off into a majestic fantasy world, which will resonate with anyone willing to inhabit it for a while.





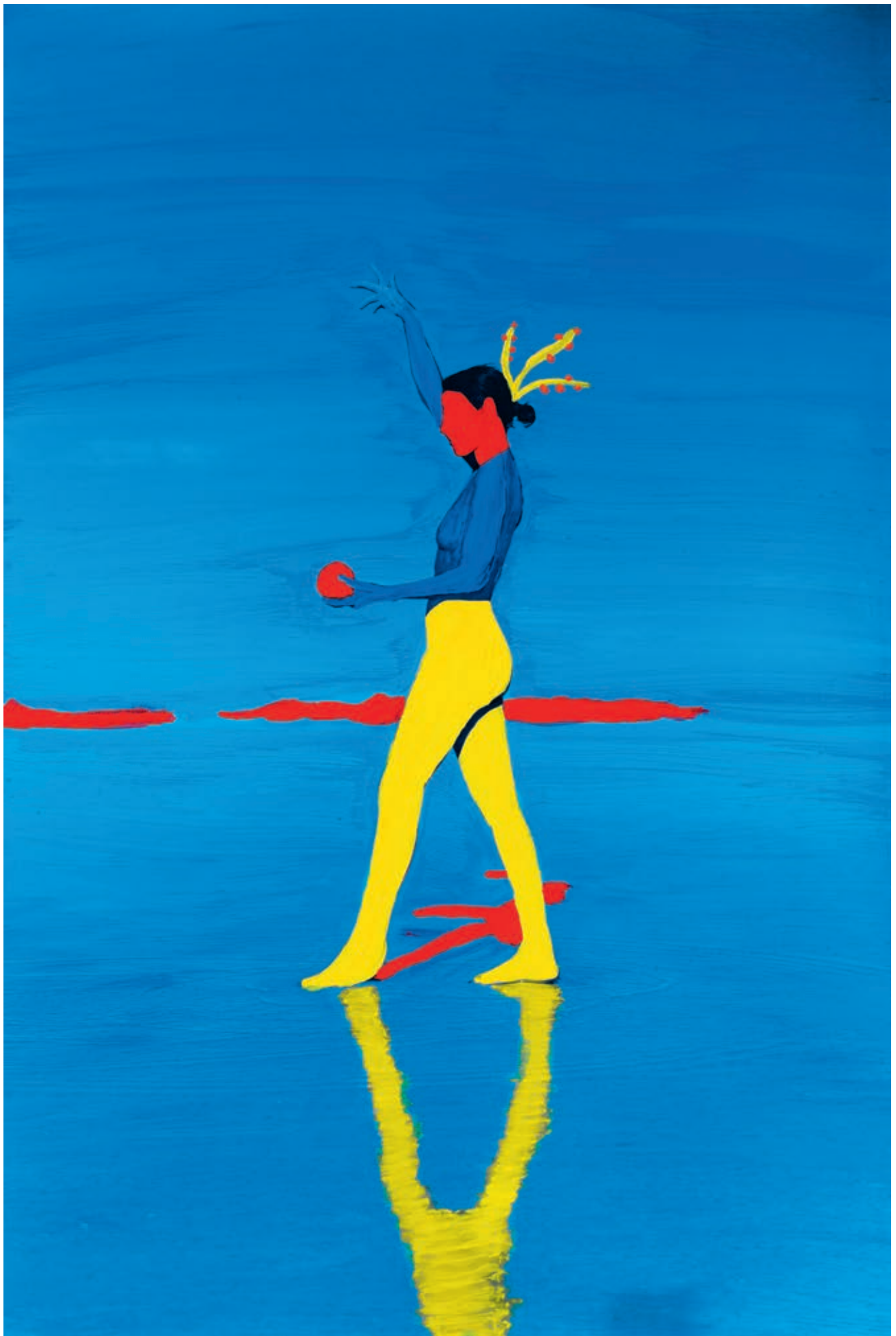


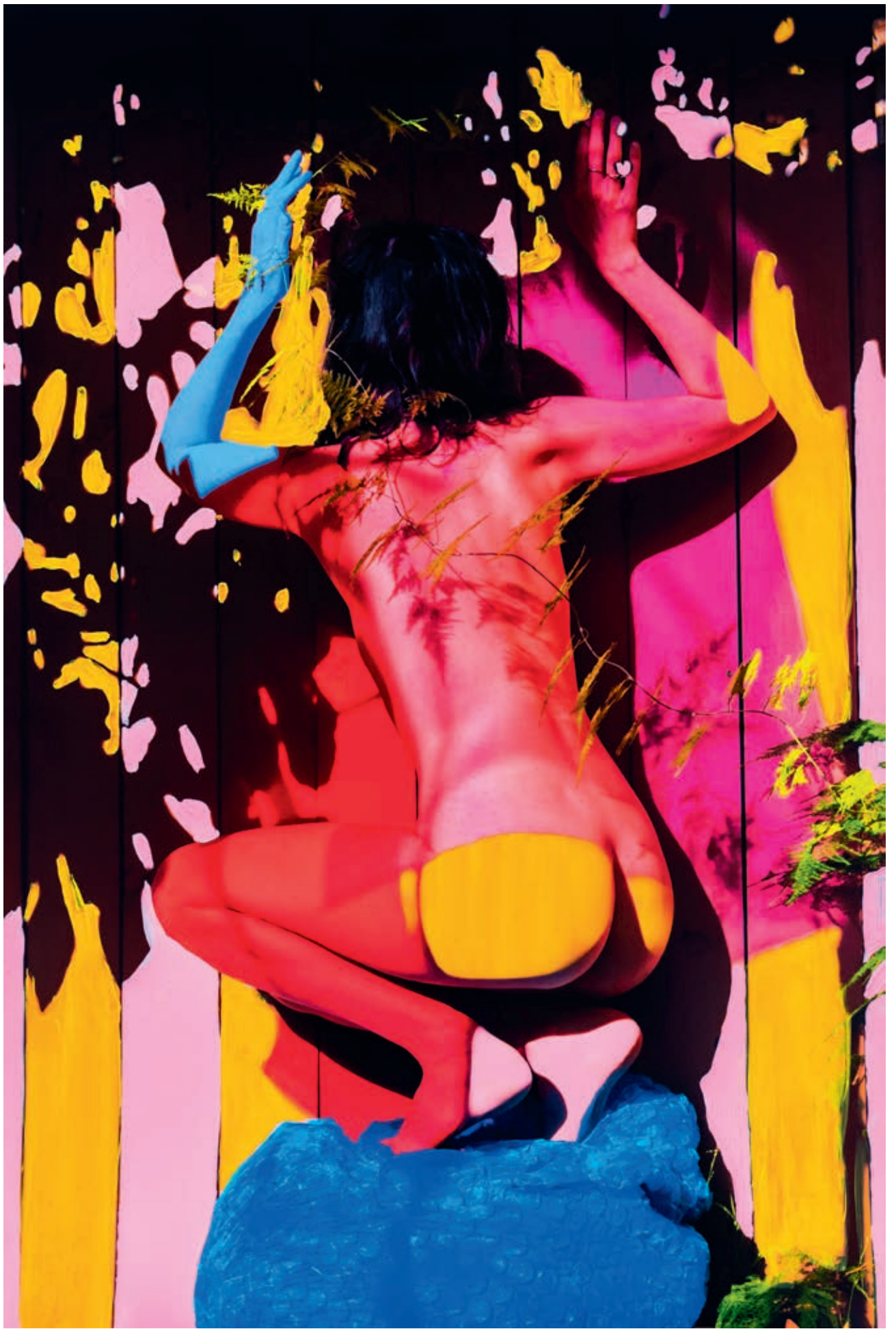




















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