

## The Golden Amphibian: A Conceptual and Aesthetic Shift

At some point in our lives, we reach a moment, often triggered by a difficult life event, where we begin to reflect on who we are, where we come from, and how everything is connected to everything else. In Fernando Montiel's case, it was his father's death that became the starting point for an inner and outer journey. The outer journey consisted of a 1,500 km camping trip across the Mexican state of Baja California, and the inner one crystallized for him over the course of the trip, as his contact with nature and his encounters with shamans opened a door to the unknown and made him perceive his relationship with the animal and plant world in a completely new way. Montiel, a city dweller who has spent his entire life in the megapolis of Mexico City, has repeatedly portrayed in his previous photographic works a lustful and self-destructive society lost in a hamster wheel of excess, gluttony, and consumption.

Now, in "**The Golden Amphibian**," a strong conceptual and aesthetic shift is observed: urban scenarios, in which man and his sensibilities are the focus, give way to photographs of plants, animals, volcanoes, microorganisms in petri dishes, and microscopic images. Montiel goes in search of our roots, our origin as a species, exploring the things and beings that surround us and trying to find the common denominator that unites us. On the one hand, the images speak of the absence of man, the natural, the pre-civilizational. On the other hand, they also show human traces in nature, domesticated nature, or analogies between nature and culture.

Montiel brings together objects that apparently have nothing to do with each other, but by relating them associatively, the viewer is immersed in a space of multidimensional reflection. These are reflections on absence, loss, substitution, the original and the replica, truth and lies, reality and illusion. The juxtaposition of the most diverse themes and motifs — as in a cabinet of curiosities — reminds us that everything is and has always been in the same place and in different ways. The artistic creative process also consists of antagonistic elements. On the one hand, with the microscopic photographs, he uses a method of scientific recording of nature. But in addition to the photos he took with the camera, which thus portray what was in front of the lens, Montiel also presents those that were generated by AI from textual descriptions. In other words, in some images, reality is not empirical; it is not based on the observation of the external physical world. It is not a physical dimension of reality, but a metaphysical one. The external and internal worlds flow into each other and dissolve in this visual imaginary.

Faced with the realization that we have lost our connection with nature, Montiel pursues a search for traces in "**The Golden Amphibian**" that illustrates his deep yearning for precisely this connection: it is a search for the primordial state, for the oldest forms of life. By photographing ancient animals or shamans who embody ancestral knowledge, he excavates like an archaeologist in the deepest layers in search of artifacts long thought forgotten. "**Nature is a mental space**," Montiel emphasizes, allowing us to glimpse that with these objects he is metaphorically seeking the primordial within us.

His shift toward the past creates an arc toward the future that can undoubtedly be described as prophetic and optimistic, in which he sees man and nature reunited. A future where millions-of-

years-old microbes will be the solution to our contemporary problems, such as plastic waste. Nature becomes the messiah of our doomed civilization. For example, he directly relates the image of an old oil can to fungi cultivated in a petri dish that decompose plastic. Montiel creates a work that gradually—invariably—grows from botanical, microbiological, and zoological study to mystifying assertion, to cosmology: the longing for a healed and reunited world of man and nature. The healing of the rift, the end of loneliness, the self and the world happily united again.

**Madlen Schering, Curator**