

## A green flame

Sunday 10 April, 2023.  
Tāmaki Makaurau  
Auckland.

MANON REVUELTA

### GREEN / VIRIDIS / VERT

*Vert, ouvert au vert.  
L'orée/d'oré, vert-d'or-dieu.*

*Green, open. O-pen, O green in green.  
The edge/of golden, the green of Go(l)d.*

These whispers are where my eye lands, the turquoise crevices of the *luzpomphia*. I do not know what to call them: seed-sockets, pupils, cores. This grappling was, I think, a reverent experience for the 12th-century mystic Hildegard Von Bingen as she cracked open tightly sealed nouns from Latin, then an elite patriarchal language, and inserted her own: *kulzphazur*, *scirinz*, *coindanz*, *miskila*. In her *Lingua Ignota*, or 'unknown language,' she bestowed her own names upon the banal and holy things of her world. Spong has referred to them as purposeful ruptures in the words; "an opening of their little cages of meaning and a renaming that points to what escapes."<sup>1</sup> Words like *luzpomphia* seem to function less as containers than they do as loose webs: full of holes through which their referents might slip and leave a glinting trace.

Spong has elsewhere described Von Bingen's embedding of her own words within Latin ones as "infecting" them, and as "freshening them with a green-sapling-word."<sup>2</sup> The applied patina embodies these definitions, painted on as a clear solution of nitrates, sulphates, and salts, to 'grow' a brilliant film of verdigris as they react with the copper in the bronze. Like the *Lingua Ignota*, verdigris takes hold of the very centre of its material and alters it, mingling with its innards to form an outer symptom – an infection, in the truest sense, from the Latin *inficere*: to dip in, or taint. This vibrant kernel of colour, sitting at the *luzpomphia*'s reproductive centre, vibrates with the power to infiltrate, to draw light from within, to envision and invent.

In other words, it possesses *viriditas*: a layered term which, though common in

Manon Revuelta explores artworks by Sriwhana Spong on the occasion of her exhibition "Luzpomphia" at Michael Lett (16 March – 15 April, 2023).

Mediaeval writings, Von Bingen infused with a wider range of meanings than it had ever possessed. *Viriditas*, in her use, defies direct translation and instead begs a litany. It is literal and spiritual, the lush expanse of Eden, the opposite of drought; it is the incarnation of such greenness, the point of contact as God communes with earth, a green fire, freshness, moisture, wetness, vitality, breath, the divine power of God to sweat germinating force through the earth's pores.<sup>3</sup> Surely the more numerous the shoots that burst forth from a word, the more holy. Surely language is at its most worshipful, its most humble, when we can sense its gentle yet persistent tendrils.

Marguerite Porete, a 13th-century French mystic, also invented her own terms to describe the ineffable contours of the divine. Namely, *le loing prés*, or 'the far-near': "an aperture, like a spark, which quickly closes, in which one cannot long remain."<sup>4</sup> In other words a flash, a brief moment of dilation, just the right amount of light to conduct an exposure, to reproduce the image and take it back to the sisters. Only a lumen is needed. Like Von Bingen, Porete makes an attempt to transmute God into language: pressing together the edges of 'far' and 'near,' their spliced form emanating a new light from its seam. Eventually, she was burned alive for having written her *Mirror of Simple Souls* in vernacular French rather than Latin, "the official language for thinking about God."<sup>5</sup>

### GOLD / AURUM / OR

The light these apples cast isn't the silver of the moon, but the blazing gold of the sun: that eye whose gaze we can never directly meet. The one whose watch we spend our days under, never daring to look up. Were we reckless enough to, we would be partially blinded by our own burnt retinal tissue, black seeds lifting from the pupils and scattering across our field of vision: tiny glimpses of the void, of the unilluminated world. Here, that fierce sun is plucked and buried. What emerges is a different eye, one we can look into and

1 – Sriwhana Spong, 'Scirinz (a running sore): particular and ecstatic scripts of the body by mystic women in the Middle Ages and early Modern Europe' (Auckland: University of Auckland, 2021), 28.

2 – Spong, 26–29.

3 – Ibid., 28.

4 – Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. E. Colledge, J. C. Marler, and J. Grant (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 78.

5 – Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 207.



Sriwhana Spong  
*zinzrinz (spiral staircase)*  
 2023  
 (bronze, patina,  
 45 x 48 x 18 mm and 40 x 50 x 18 mm)



Sriwhana Spong  
*kulzphazur (ancestor)*  
 2023  
 (bronze, patina,  
 60 x 60 x 28 mm and 56 x 55 x 30 mm)

sense the Living Light Von Bingen said she lived in the shadow of.

This is a particular alchemy. What emerges is not the impermeable oxen of gold, but bronze: a reactive ‘impure’ alloy composed of base metals like copper and tin. Spong chose to make these works using the process of investment casting, whereby the cast object retains a more intimate material presence. Rather than pouring the molten bronze into a wax mould of the apple, it floods the apple itself within a ceramic shell, immediately eviscerating it, swallowing it, flesh, skin, and stem, into hardening metal. The organic matter of the apple itself is no longer, though nor is it destroyed. Via such a sacrifice it has also been enshrined within the bronze – if not in microscopic traces of its ash, then surely in spirit.

Perhaps this eviscerated apple speaks to Simone Weil’s notion of God, who “can only be present in creation under the form of absence.”<sup>6</sup> Anne Carson triangulates Weil with Sappho and Porete in *Decreation*, a knot of an essay in which she describes the way these three women were drawn, by way of devotion, to a spiritual (and physical) annihilation, clearing a pathway for union with God. To get one’s self out of the way – and yet to tell of it, to write of what occurs in the self’s absence – is a contradiction and the beating heart of the creative and mystic spirit. “Decreation is an undoing of the creature in us,” Carson writes, “that creature enclosed in self and defined by self. But to undo self one must move through self, to the very inside of its definition. We have nowhere else to start.”<sup>7</sup>

### RED / RUBRUM / ROUGE

This is perhaps the creature Spong continued to unravel when, in the throes of a Covid fever, she decided to abandon hours of footage shot toward a film and replace them with something more corporeal. A clarity comes in those days spent in bed, those ecstatic states as we slip beside ourselves. *I think with my body which effervesces*.<sup>8</sup> So we arrive in the basement, where dreams take shape, at *This Tree is Mine!* – a careening, hypnotic descent beneath earth and body, beneath the thinking mind. Tree roots dyed blood-red, writhing and alive as snakes; pulsing xylem lending spirit to celluloid, to the deep inner workings and structures of the living. And surely to a disciple of ‘The School of Roots,’ the final step on Hélène Cixous’ *Ladder of Writing*, in which she describes the ‘nether realms’ where the true treasure of writing lies as

we move “through the vegetal... toward disassembly, toward decomposition.”<sup>9</sup>

At moments these frames call to mind human skin. For a time, living in a dark city, I studied microscopic cross-sections of the dermal layers. I was fascinated by the body’s response to light: not only that the eye could detect a single lumen in darkness, but that the skin could somehow dilate and contract like an eye, translating sunlight to build bone. We would stop in our tracks when the sun emerged, standing on bridges with eyes closed, feel it turn red through our eyelids; it became as seemingly ordinary a ritual as any other. Bananas ripened quickly in the heat of my apartment, shrivelling around their insides as they dissolved into sugar, split open and leaked. At night, at the restaurant where I worked, the chef would leave the steaks to rest after frying them so that the muscle could ‘relax’ after contracting from the heat. There did not seem to be any place that wasn’t furiously opening and closing to the world, not even the flesh of dead animals.

Spong stays close to these porous borders. A world of ‘legendary animals’<sup>10</sup> appear constantly throughout her work as harbingers and frontiers, markers of the *immundus*, the ‘unclean’ that Cixous urges us to seek as we turn from rational forms of knowing. Rats, those famous decomposers, got into the apples when they were at the foundry for casting. Spong recalls the metal-worker calling to give her what he thought was the bad news, only to find she was delighted: a perfect blessing, she said (and of course, she was already well acquainted with these opportunistic creatures from her 2018 work, *Tasseography of a Rat’s Nest*). I see where they took their share in the gnawed edges of *Kulzphazur (ancestor)*, a mark of those who have scuttled the earth long before us.

Elsewhere in the room another pair of eyes, *Robin Vote*, sits much lower to the ground – in fact, at the level of a dog. Robin Vote, a character from Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* (1936), is part of a transgressive scene at the novel’s end: in a candlelit church, she enacts a seemingly possessed exchange with a dog in which she starts barking on all fours, the dog snapping and whining in response. As canine and woman blur, *Robin Vote* in turn speaks to Spong, who writes of visiting her father’s home in Bali. Having grown up in New Zealand, she has not undergone the *Metatah* teeth-filing ritual and so feels a kind of kinship with the local dogs:

6 — Simone Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. G. Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1977), 162.

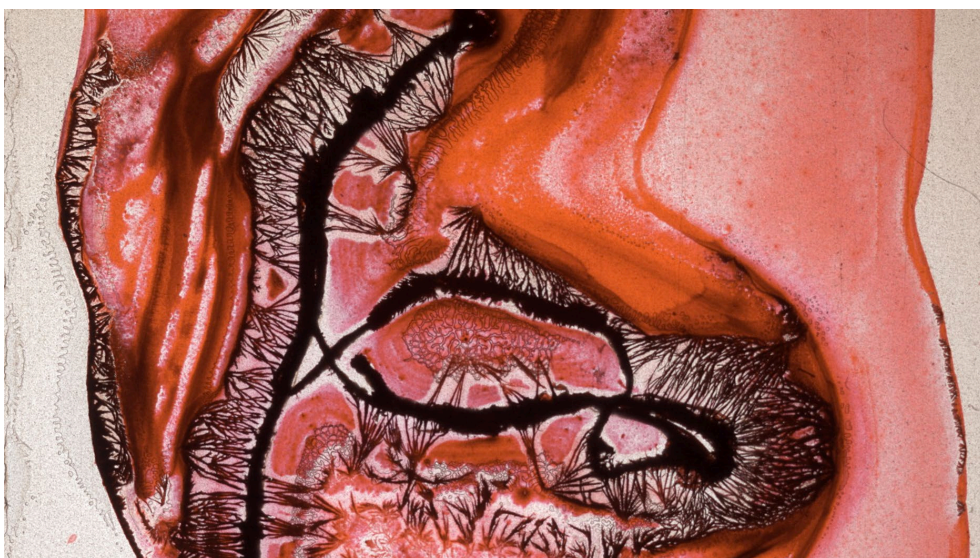
7 — Carson, 179.

8 — Anna Swir, ‘My Body Effervesces’, in *Talking to My Body*, trans. C. Milosz and L. Nathan (Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1996), 66.

9 — Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 151.

10 — Clarice Lispector, *The Stream of Life*, trans. E. Lowe and E. Fitz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 45.





Sriwhana Spong  
*This Tree is Mine!*  
 2022  
 (stills taken from 16mm film transferred to HD video,  
 Duration: 08:11 min.)  
 Edition 1 of 3 + 1 AP  
 Sound: Owen Pratt Voice: J. C. Brazil

“She runs her tongue across her upper canine teeth, which should have been filed flat at puberty but remain sharp, meaning that in this setting she has not yet transitioned from animal to human. She is a *scamizio* (trickster), a shape-shifter, shimmering on the endless sea of meaning, changing from one setting to the next, now animal, now human. Here, she is both disrupted and a disruption, like the half-wild dogs who would quietly wait outside her door.”<sup>11</sup>

Spong recognises the power that lies in her most mutable parts: an ability to cross thresholds, to peer through windows from either side of the house. I sense that wandering most strongly when I look at the hand in *scirinz* (*running sore*), seen from above, as it plunges into the sprawling vermilion innards of a fish. The gesture is bold, inquisitive, loving; it suggests a cut that functions as “an opening that forms connections.”<sup>12</sup> This is blood that does not just bleed, but runs – flowing with its own gravity, an unclotted river that may connect up with a sea.

Manon Revuelta is a writer based in Tāmaki Makaurau, working mainly in poetry. She is one of three 2023 Writers in Residence at RM Gallery, and has written recently for *The Art Paper* and Enjoy Contemporary Art Space. In 2019 she completed a Masters of Creative Writing at the IIML, Te Herenga Waka Victoria University, Wellington, and was awarded the Biggs Family Poetry Prize for her collection. She published a chapbook, *girl teeth*, in 2018.

11 — Spong, 46.

12 — Ibid., 63.



Sriwhana Spong  
*Luzpomphia*  
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