

Beatriz Ruibal, Silences and Voids of the Landscape

By Javier Díaz-Guardiola*

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a plant is considered endangered when it faces a very high probability of extinction in the near future. This status is based on a series of scientific and measurable criteria, including population size, geographic distribution, and current threats. Among these threats, deforestation is evident—whether driven by agricultural expansion, urbanization, or logging—destroying the natural habitats where these plants thrive. Furthermore, as a consequence of climate change, wildfires (both natural and human-caused) resulting from shifts in temperature and precipitation patterns are rapidly altering environments that have developed over millennia.

It goes without saying that fewer plants lead to more imbalanced and impoverished ecosystems, altering the entire natural system. Plants are responsible for producing oxygen and counteracting the CO₂ released into the atmosphere by human activity, as well as stabilizing soil and providing food for numerous animal species.

Without looking far, it is estimated that more than a hundred plant species are on the brink of extinction in Spain—a figure that surpasses even the number of threatened animal species on the Iberian Peninsula. However, plant species carry an additional curse: while the list includes species like the Canary Islands dragon tree, whose sheer size would make its absence immediately noticeable, in many cases we are dealing with species we know nothing about or barely notice, turning this trend into a silent tragedy.

All of this aligns closely with the work of Beatriz Ruibal (Pontevedra, 1969), an artist working with photography, moving images, and installation. The themes addressed in her projects, developed over an extensive career, revolve around the idea of the image as an archive, cultural memory, and a deep interest in Nature, political ecology, and various forms of disappearance.

She arrives at Galería Ana Serratosa with the solo exhibition *Still It Breathes* which also marks her first solo show in a private space in Valencia. The exhibition takes its title from an ongoing work linked to this same line of research. Although it is a distinct piece, its title captures the spirit of the show and key ideas running through the entire collection: persistence, fragility, and the capacity of living matter to endure. The exhibition brings together works from two long-term, ongoing series, *Amenazadas* (*Endangered*) and *Always Alive*, alongside a site-specific intervention at the gallery's second venue in the city, located at Calle Cabillers, 5.

To understand *Amenazadas*, one of the two ongoing series, one must go back to 2023, when earlier interests in disappearing plant species began to converge in Ruibal's work. She had previously explored these themes through video, in projects such as

No lo encontrarás en los mapas (*You Will Not Find It on Maps*)—a multichannel audio-visual installation exploring the fragile relationship between humanity and Nature, stemming from research conducted at the gardens of the Royal Academy of Spain in Rome and the city's Botanical Garden, proposing a kind of “perfect storm”—and *Noche Botánica* (*Botanical Night*), of a similar nature but set in the former Quinta de los Molinos, Havana's historic Botanical Garden.

That same year, the artist undertook a residency at C3A in Córdoba, which was intended to follow a similar path and use the same medium. At the city's botanical garden, in dialogue with its then scientific-technical director José Luis Quero—a biologist by training—she gained access to its germplasm bank: a vital archive dedicated to preserving Andalusia's genetic heritage, housing seeds from 90 percent of the region's threatened plants. It was an extraordinary place for Ruibal, who was already familiar with the Svalbard Global Seed Vault—the world's great container for the future—and had long fantasized about creating a project there.

Thus began a research project cataloging endangered plant species through their seeds, preserved in this Córdoba facility at temperatures between -5° and -20° Celsius. The intention was to give presence to plant species that disappear silently every day, often before we even get to know them.

In addition to working with this germplasm bank, the Galician artist collaborated with Casa Árabe, which supported research focusing on species linked to the Al-Andalus period and their current state of conservation. To do so, she cross-referenced the species preserved in the bank with official lists from the Ministry for the Ecological Transition. This served as another entry point to her interests: while the idea was not restricted solely to the centuries of Islamic presence in Spain, it was essential to highlight that the Córdoba archive was one of the most radical Ruibal had encountered, containing living organisms that embody, in her words, “cultural memory, biological and ecological memory, and the possibility of a future.”

For the artist, giving these species scale through photographic embodiment was fundamental to granting them prominence. Only then could they enter our collective imagination, where they currently occupy no space. The series encompasses over a hundred species, which she plans to expand by looking at other seed banks—perhaps in Galicia, her birthplace—though she acknowledges that each specimen opens up endless possibilities without ever leaving this context.

Working with seeds means dealing with specimens that are virtually imperceptible to the human eye. Through the Scientific Research Service of Córdoba, dependent on the city's university, she was able to create microphotography of each specimen using powerful electron microscopes. The high magnification makes it impossible to predict the final visual results. This marks the first layer of creativity in the process, as the artist must select seeds based on intuition. Objective data shared with scientists regarding conservation status or extinction risks leads to far more subjective—poetic, if I may say—conclusions. In fact, given the precision of the technology used, each specimen could yield thousands of images, forcing her to choose once again.

Ruibal's goal is to approach each seed and dignify it with a portrait, as majestic as those historically reserved for authorities or grand figures in classical painting. She confessed to me that her approach even caught the attention of the scientists due to her unique "way of using" the microscope. Every nook and cranny on a plant surface could give rise to fantastic abstractions, offering the chance to enter crevices containing spectacular organic landscapes—possibilities the photographer chooses not to pursue for now. Her goal is to bring these species to light, not to fantasize. In this sense, her photography maintains a clear bond with documentary imagery.

The second series, *Always Alive*, predates the first chronologically. While it shares a similar starting point, it addresses the topic differently. It focuses on species with rich symbolic meaning, not necessarily facing immediate extinction, but whose ecosystems are undergoing transformation due to climate change, pests, and other threats. These species are deeply tied to our cultural memory and the Mediterranean context. Hence the selection of the olive tree (a staple of our gastronomy and the plant Athena used to win the patronage of Athens over Poseidon), the laurel (symbol of victory in Ancient Greece), and the pine (sacred to Dionysus and representing immortality, fertility, and resilience due to its evergreen nature and ability to survive in arid soils). The goal remained to present them differently: steering away from a purely documentary feel to focus on a single part—the flower—and elevating it to a monumental scale, exceeding two meters in some cases. Once again, the intent is to draw attention metonymically, taking a part of specific plants to represent the whole, focusing on details we tend to overlook.

In this collection, the digital images layer different perspectives of the specimen. It is effectively the record of a two-stage process: one in black and white, which suspends the temporality of each specimen, granting it an almost phantasmal quality; and a second in color, highlighting what persists against what disappears or fades away. The composition of each work is completed by introducing random flowers into each image, establishing a harmonious dialogue with the central proposal, conceived here through the lens of eco-existence and counterpoint.

The yew tree (historically associated with the duality of life and death, immortality, and spiritual rebirth), the ash tree (venerated in Norse mythology as Yggdrasil, the axis of the cosmos, and in Celtic tradition for its magical properties including protection against witchcraft, healing, and spiritual connection), and the orchid (inextricably linked to eroticism, fertility, and divinity, whose mythological and historical attributes function today as symbols of seduction, transformation, and purity) were later added to this investigation and make their presentation at the Valencian gallery. Up to twelve species currently round out this project, which began in 2024.

Let us pause for a moment and trace our steps back to the olive tree. Ruibal pays special attention to this species due to the deep symbolic, political, and ecological significance it holds—concepts embedded in our culture such as resilience, victory, and hospitality. The surface of its leaves serves as the foundation for a new project, *La piel del olivo* (*The Skin of the Olive Tree*), which occupies the gallery's Window space on Calle Cabillers. It represents another non-conventional approach to this slow-growing living being, emphasizing the creation of a second skin—a new protective layer that welcomes the visitor, offering hospitality while interacting with the space's architecture.

An invitation to the Bienal de Pontevedra brought this vision to life. In an initial version using translucent vinyl, the work transformed the glass facade of the Pazo da Cultura during an edition whose motto invited participants to "become human again" and "feel the pain of others". The piece behaved differently by day and night: after sunset, the structure turned into a kind of botanical lantern, its resilience becoming more poetic; during daylight, it was navigable, enhancing reflections and merging the work's surface with the skin of those walking through it.

In Valencia, the piece is designed to be viewed from the outside, in a space that also activates after sunset. Reconfigured into backlit photographic panels arranged to form an enveloping structure, it creates a new second skin that provides warmth and invokes hospitality.

The artist's show holds two more surprises. In one of the gallery's corners rests her first sculptural installation: *Scrophularia* (2026). It draws inspiration from the surface of a lesser-known seed of the same name (a herbaceous plant growing in damp areas with anti-inflammatory properties, previously photographed for *Amenazadas*). Here, it is transferred onto semi-rigid gelatin bio-sheets—a living material that transforms much like seeds, while its structure engages once again with the surrounding architecture. This represents an intriguing shift in the artist's practice: avoiding a literal representation of the seed, she highlights the fragility and vulnerability inherent to it and all invoked species, inviting viewers into a more physical relationship with them. Scale and transparency aid this interaction, as directional light projects the piece's shapes onto the floor, walls, and even the viewer's silhouette.

The second surprise is a monumental projection, also conceived during her C3A residency, featuring ten other plant species—almost all of them extinct. Titled *Plantas de cristal* (*Glass Plants*), part of the *Botánica frágil* (*Fragile Botany*) project, it depicts the fall of various plants against a neutral background, dropping from the sky toward the earth, where they shatter due to the vulnerability of the material into which they have been transubstantiated. Created in collaboration with Francisco López—a Spanish biologist specializing in recording natural sounds worldwide who created the audio track—the accompanying soundtrack evokes the sense of ecstasy and mourning characteristic of *Semana Santa* (Holy Week). A subtle latency of the *saeta* (religious sacred songs) remains, carrying a dual meaning for the artist: on one hand, mourning the loss of these species, and on the other, an autobiographical resonance given Ruibal's personal and family connections to flamenco singing.

Thus, within the ideal setting of the gallery, and following a grueling summer during which we watched many of our forests fall to flames, Beatriz Ruibal invites us to notice the invisible, attend to the natural world, and immerse ourselves in the plant context. We do not hear the flutter of a butterfly's wings, nor the germination of a seed; yet from such modest gestures, an entire world originates.

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