

Pilar Quinteros: *Ferula Communis*

Text by Debbie Meniru, 2024

Pilar Quinteros arrived at La Boissière, a country estate in the southwest of France, searching for a plant that could carry fire: *Ferula communis*. Mythologised as the plant that the ancient Greek god Prometheus used to bring fire to humankind, *Ferula communis* has a toxic core which has made it hated by farmers and, therefore, rather difficult for Pilar to find in the surrounding countryside. Unlike the farmers, Pilar saw the plant's burning centre as something to celebrate, recognising its role in bringing light, warmth and sustenance to humankind. Her search for the plant was ultimately unsuccessful, so she brought it into being herself, giving physical form to its hidden properties. Inspired by an architectural column she happened upon in Barcelona, she crafted *Ferula Communis* from wood, emphasising its role as a foundational pillar of human society.

Pilar is interested in realising unrealised projects, whether bringing to life a plant that could not be found or a building that was planned and never constructed (like her *Cathedral of Freedom* (2015) in Ljubljana). Sometimes, as Pilar describes, these unrealised projects are simply floating around in the ether, ready to be grabbed onto and made into something physical. Art is nearly always about the rendering of ideas into physical form, but in Pilar this impetus seems stronger than usual. Her work is very physical: during the residency she worked long days in the studio to construct her wooden *Ferula Communis*, which was taller than her. For her work *Impossible Phoenix – Customs* (2024), she lugged a huge cardboard replica of a fragment of Barcelona's customs building around the city. Her body is always at work to create her art. The physical toil of creating seems natural to Pilar. After all, she tells me, much of her work is about dragging things out from history to carry them with us into the present and future beyond. A task which, when I really think about it, does seem like it would take a Herculean effort. Much of Pilar's work is big, sometimes comically so. For her film *Patagonian Orchids* (2023), she made a giant Chinook salmon from painted cardboard, which is carried, as both fish and fillet, through various landscapes. Although constructing a large architectural column doesn't seem so strange at first, when you remember that it is the physical representation of an elusive skinny tree with clusters of delicate yellow flowers, its absurdity becomes obvious.

Throughout the residency, Pilar was considering the question "What do we do with the knowledge that we have?" She uses the knowledge brought by Prometheus to bring people together. On the last Saturday of the residency, she invited a group of us staying at the estate to join her for a barbecue. When we arrived at the designated strip of land, near a shaded canopy of trees, we found Pilar in her navy blue, paint-splattered boiler suit, tongs in hand. In front of her, *Ferula Communis* was laid across two wooden supports, its belly opened up to reveal a barbecue grill over hot charcoal. Vegetables and meat had already started to char. Her artwork created the centrepiece of a temporary community brought together by the residency, gathering around hot food, the smoky scent of the barbecue and the freedom of being out in the countryside. The Latin word *communis* means common or shared. Here, Pilar had created a moment to share knowledge and create different ways of interacting, a new setting for conversations and laughter away from the formal dining table.

At the end of the residency, Pilar set the column on fire, leaving only fragments and ashes. Fire features in much of Pilar's work, often in reference to the phoenix and its symbolism of

both destruction and rebirth. Her work operates like the myths she draws upon. It does not remain in physical form, but lives on as a story, recorded in short films and physical remnants. After its destruction, the column also became an archeological fragment, ready to be distorted, twisted and rediscovered, to shift over time and perhaps be remade in a different image. It is the process of making and destroying that is important in Pilar's work. She looks at the world as a provider of materials that are ripe for her interference. Ideas that are floating around either in the air, the land, the architecture, the plants, in stories or in fire. Ideas that are ready to be made, destroyed and remade. The learning is done through the physicality of doing, not necessarily in looking or thinking. She brings ideas and myths into the physical plane where we can interact with them, only to destroy them and send those ideas back up into the air as newly available repositories for meaning making.