

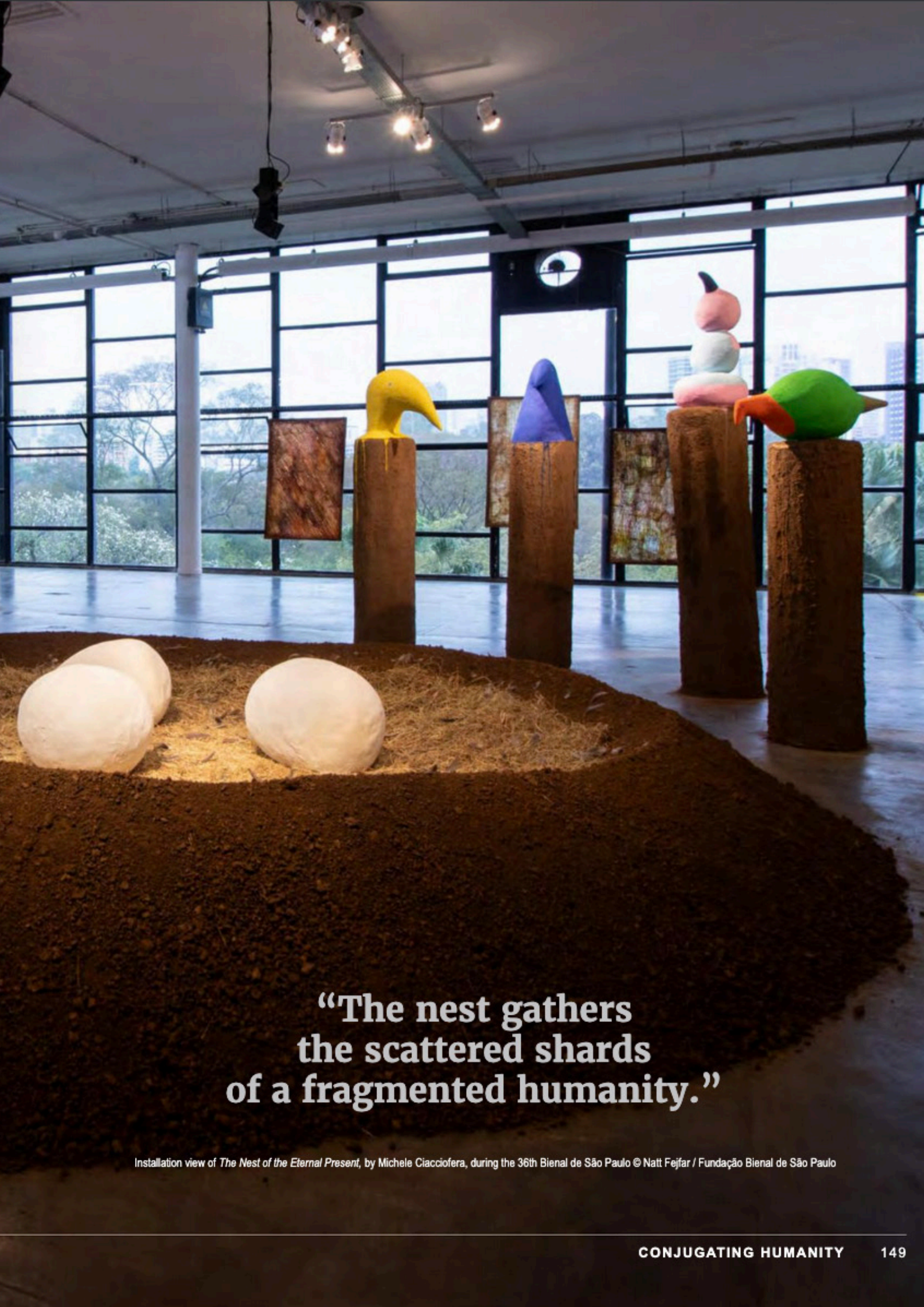
INTERVIEW 13

36th Bienal de São Paulo

Michele Ciacciofera

**On dwelling, perception,
and the poetics of being in the world**

In this conversation, Suzette Bell-Roberts speaks with the artist behind *The Nest of the Eternal Present*. This installation rethinks how we inhabit space, sense time, and perceive one another. Blending architecture, memory, and embodied experience, the work offers a contemplative site where dwelling becomes both refuge and reflection. Here, they discuss perception, presence, and what “nesting” might mean in an increasingly unsettled world.



**“The nest gathers
the scattered shards
of a fragmented humanity.”**

Installation view of *The Nest of the Eternal Present*, by Michele Ciacciofera, during the 36th Bienal de São Paulo © Natt Feijfar / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

Suzette Bell-Roberts: *The Nest of the Eternal Present* draws from Indigenous, Afro-diasporic, and European building traditions. How did these intertwined knowledge systems shape the conceptual and material foundations of the work?

Michele Ciacciofera: To stitch fractures back together, to gather the scattered shards of a fragmented humanity—this has become my enduring obsession. In this work, the nest stands as the pulsating heart from which vital energy springs forth: an energy that draws together and interweaves humanity in all its facets, as well as every form of life across the universe. It is born of a holistic vision of reality, one that binds the natural and the spiritual realms into an inseparable whole. From the outside, this central core takes the shape of a crater—a form that has allowed me, conceptually, to enter into dialogue with the poetics of Oscar Niemeyer, creator of the iconic Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion that houses The São Paulo Biennial.

The Nest of the Eternal Present invokes a humanism of solidarity as the only viable path through the myriad crises besetting the planet, human societies, and the natural systems that sustain us. Such a humanism—social as well as ecological—can arise only through a collective, constructive, and egalitarian dialogue in which Indigenous, African, and Afro-diasporic traditions serve as guiding voices for all cultures striving toward shared horizons of global balance and harmony.

Your practice often bridges mythology, ecology, and cultural memory. What resonances emerged for you as you connected the Persian poem *The Conference of the Birds* with the titanosaur nests of Minas Gerais?

In March 2022, *Nature* reported the discovery of the first Titanosaur nests dating back to the Late Cretaceous, found not far from São Paulo, in the district of Ponte Alta, Minas Gerais. These nests held twenty fossilised eggs belonging to a species that disappeared some 65 million years ago. This discovery—destined to fill crucial gaps in our understanding of evolutionary history—inevitably summons the concept of time, which, like the others you mentioned, lies at the heart of my research. To inhabit the present while remaining aware of the significance of origins is, for me, essential.



Installation view of *The Nest of the Eternal Present*, by Michele Ciacciofera, during the 36th Bienal de São Paulo © Suzette Bell-Roberts



“Origins help us know ourselves.”

We are living in a historical moment in which science and technology allow us to reconstruct with precision the sequence of evolutionary phases, at the very same time that humanity is confronted with the possibility of its own extinction. This information provided me with the pretext for a work aimed at forging connections. I previously spoke of socio-political connections, which for me can never be separated from poetry. Thus, the radical lesson offered to the world in *The Conference of the Birds* by the Persian poet Farid al-Din' Attar became my source of inspiration for this piece.

The birds are ourselves—compelled to rise again from the ruins for which we are responsible, through the regeneration of fundamental humanist values. The eggs placed at the centre of the work symbolise vital force, creation, rebirth, transformation; they hold within them an infinite memory. It is up to us to act, to grasp the universal message ideally contained within the eggs—an indispensable condition for walking the path toward the future, symbolically reaching the Simurgh evoked in the poem. The poem is a metaphor for our condition, for who we are and the journey we undertake.

In the same way, the discovery in Minas Gerais would become a metaphor for knowing ourselves more deeply—to reach our essence by returning to our origins.

The “pau a pique” technique grounds the installation in both land and history. What does working with clay, wood, and gravel reveal to you about the relationship between dwelling and ecology?

My first works in raw earth and adobe date back twenty years. This ancestral material carries for me a symbolic weight, weaving together the history of human life and the natural world. It embodies the soul and, at once, the archetype of Nature and life itself—echoing the twigs, fibres, soil, and saliva with which countless animal species build their nests.

The construction techniques of raw earth unite the traditions of the Global South—Indigenous, African, Mediterranean—yet they resonate across Asia and throughout history in every civilisation that has come before us. Today, renewed ecological awareness is reclaiming these methods even within post-industrial Western contexts.

In São Paulo, I deliberately employed the ancient Brazilian pau a pique technique, honouring local culture while creating a direct, almost tactile dialogue with the viewer. Natural materials and environmentally neutral methods are central to my practice: wood, straw, earth, and water, charged with vital force, form the essence of the four totems and the nest. They cultivate a space for an inclusive, ecosystemic dialogue, allowing the human dimension to dissolve into the vastness of the natural world, as theorised by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro through the lens of multinaturalism.

Layering is at the heart of the work, both materially and metaphorically, mirroring the unfolding of history. Raw earth, applied by hand, builds the totems; papier-mâché forms the large bird heads atop them and the colossal eggs resting in the nest, upon layers of straw and organic matter. Each stratum speaks of time, geology, culture, memory, and life itself. In this layering, I find the key to understanding the present in all its depth.

Sound is central to this piece, especially your manipulation of the voices of thirty bird species. How do these sonic elements expand the ecological and spiritual dimensions of the installation?

Almost all of my installations incorporate a sound element that complements the material and visual elements. In this piece, the recorded songs of 30 birds have been electronically reworked in collaboration with musician and DJ Andrea Blanco. The sound imbues the work with a living quality, like that of a vibrant organism, creating

“The nest is a site of care.”

an acoustic environment that envelops the sculptural components of the installation. I want the work to breathe, allowing the viewer to feel the vital and spiritual force of the present moment. This force calls for humanity's extraordinary participation to emerge from the critical juncture it faces.

This aspect addresses one of the Bienal's central concerns: the necessity of restoring listening as a fundamental mode of relation. For centuries, dominant systems of knowledge have privileged looking over listening, reducing the world to something to be observed, classified, and controlled. This failure to listen has contributed directly to dehumanisation, ecological destruction, and the dispossession of land. To listen again—deeply, attentively, and without hierarchy—is therefore a radical act, capable of reawakening collective sensitivity and reorienting our relationship to Nature, to others, and to ourselves.

Our daily lives are constantly bombarded with an endless stream of images that represent the most superficial and often superfluous layer of our humanity. Restoring a sense of listening is, for me, a revolutionary act—fundamental to reestablishing collective sensitivity and living in accordance with the principles of joy and beauty.

The installation takes shape as a circular nest — a site of congregation and care. How do you envision viewers entering and participating in this spatial and symbolic gathering?

As I mentioned before, the work was conceived to offer the visitor a multisensory, immersive experience, in subtle dialogue with the architecture that houses it. At the heart of the space lies the nest—an archetype of the cocoon, a symbol of unity and harmony—inviting the viewer to move in a circular path, not as a passive observer, but as an active participant. Its form, imbued with a hint of the magical, awakens thought and imagination toward life itself: a life in constant renewal, offering protection,

reassurance, and the quiet promise of continuity. The golden straw and, above all, the three luminous white eggs create a radiant, almost hypnotic convergence that, combined with the delicate chorus of bird songs, draws the visitor into a realm suspended between reality and the supernatural, reminiscent of the Simurgh that Farid al-Din Attar so beautifully envisioned.

Encircling the nest-crater, four totemic sculptures rise, crowned with vividly colored bird heads, watching over and guarding the central space. They too extend an invitation: to join in contemplation, recognise within the nest the cosmic rhythm of life, and to feel, however briefly, The pulse of the universe flows through the fragile, regenerative heart of creation.

***The Nest of the Eternal Present* frames dwelling as an essential human act. What sense of “home” or “nesting” do you hope visitors take away from the work?**

The nest represents, within the human imagination, a reassuring archetype—warm, solid, and welcoming—something to which we instinctively return in the face of human suffering. As I mentioned earlier, its circular form is an ancestral element of union, knowledge, and harmony, existing outside any hierarchy. At the same time, it is a place of necessity for life in many animal species, such as birds. Symbolically, then, it binds the human being to animals and to their natural environment. Standing before this gravitational centre, the visitor thinks, listens, looks, and senses the world—and with it, life itself.