



225 II - II.SSP.I., 2021, Idea Idea SSP Idea butterfly wings mosaic on museum cardboard, framed: 35 x 35 x 6 cm / 13 3/4 x 13 3/4 x 2 3/8 in. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

GABRIEL DE LA MORA

LEPIDOPTERA

Opening reception Wednesday, November 3, 6-8pm
November 3 - December 23, 2021

Perrotin New York is pleased to present an exhibition of new work by Mexican artist Gabriel de la Mora, opening on November 3 and on view through December 23, 2021. De la Mora's practice focuses on the construction of seemingly minimal yet extremely complex surfaces that are underlined by intense mathematical precision. As both a collector of objects and fascinated by science, he began to make geometric compositions with elements that contain genetic material – human hair, feathers, eggshells, or most recently, butterfly wings. For this new body of work, titled "*Lepidoptera*," De la Mora mines the rich cultural symbolism of the butterfly, sourcing the material from butterfly conservation farms in Peru, Indonesia and Madagascar.

The following text was written by writer and curator Gabriela Rangel to accompany the exhibition

Butterflies are known for their delicacy and discreet charm, qualities enhanced through a capacity to keep unnoticed: *It is astounding how little an ordinary person notices butterflies.*¹

Despite their colorful wings, which fast and concise movements perhaps would only allow us to get a glimpse on the elaborate patterns, designs, and chromatic combinations that some species display. Like

other organisms, butterflies are prone to mimicry. They can resemble a flower, a tree or look like fallen leaves in the northern autumn or in the tropical rain forest. Their unassumed beauty and familiarity can transform a solitary spot in a forest into a site for spiritual introspection and delight. It is not accidental that the angel of death was represented by the Gnostics as a winged foot stepping on a butterfly. Psyche, the Greek goddess represented through butterfly wings, prompted psychoanalysis' interpretation of lepidoptera as symbols of resurgence.² Butterflies also dwell on Mesoamerican iconography, in particular the Mexica of Tenochtitlan, which considered them as the fleeting souls of deceased warriors.

Beyond the realms of natural sciences and entomology, lengthy literature on lepidoptera proves their aesthetic allure and symbolic potency as the paradoxical insects with wings that they are. From opera to social sculpture, butterflies inspired metaphoric interpretations that transcend the binary model of gender and sexuality as well as the polarities of life and death. Martin Johnson Heade represented a *Blue Morpho* type in perhaps one of the most arresting paintings ever made of a³ living butterfly in which two of its wings, expose a singular iridescence while the other ones, slightly bent towards the left, were depicted in black as if they belong to the afterlife. The background shows a fantastic land-

1 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited*. Vintage International, New York, 1989.

2 J.E Cirlot, *Diccionario de símbolos*. Editorial Siruela, Madrid, 2011. p. 306-307

3 It's been stated that the Parangoles (wearable paintings) by Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica were influenced by his collaboration as a research assistant to his father's work as a distinguished entomologist. The young Oiticica classified specimens and performed other tasks.

scape that leads us to the equinoctial regions so keen to the nineteenth century art travelers influenced by Alexander von Humboldt.⁴ But as Vladimir Nabokov observed, butterflies are largely unnoticed by people. Nabokov, who suffered a severe pneumonia at a very young age, lost his “monstrous gift of numbers that had made me a child prodigy during a few months (today I cannot multiply 13 by 17 without a pencil and paper; I can add them up, though, in a trice, the teeth of the three fitting in neatly); but the butterflies survived (...)” According to the writer, a year later he “gained absolute control over the European lepidoptera as known to Hoffmann.”⁵

Intriguingly, artist Gabriel de la Mora showed an unusual disposition to play with language at a very young age. Comparable to Nabokov’s gift of numbers and his skills to solve complicated mathematical operations, which the Russian American writer characterized rather as “a demon”, de la Mora can read straightforwardly a sentence backwards and disorganize a word to compose an instant riddle. Dyslexia prompted him to perceive words as images, fragments in magnified dimensions: “cuando no entiendes la información que tienes enfrente o que escuchas, inmediatamente se convierten en imágenes, en fragmentos, en ruido, en sonidos y en un sinfín de cosas que no tienen nada que ver con la realidad de los contenidos o las cosas (...) Veo las letras y los números de una forma diferente, me fascinan ambos y siempre he visto a las letras, los números, las palabras y las matemáticas de una forma diferente.”⁶

De la Mora’s early works after graduating from the Pratt Institute were under the spell of language as a problem to be solved through visual forms and transitional objects. More recently, he dedicated his artistic investigation to renovate the language of modernist abstraction using bodily elements such as human hair for his *Capilares* non-representational drawings, and egg shelves, feathers, and butterfly wings to compose geometric, monochromatic, or hard-edge paintings.⁷

Gabriel de la Mora’s new Lepidoptera series composed of thirty-three works made of eight different species of butterflies, seem to complete a cycle of *difference* in which the artist merged modernist lessons by Joseph Albers with his own propensity to isolate fragments as compositional elements for transforming images into a scribbled discourse. If the Mexican mythologies added a cultural layer to De la Mora’s formal endeavor of bringing the opalescence of butterflies to abstract painting, their unnoticed beauty appealed as a language in which color always hides the nature of the element that you see. Mimicry is their “demon” or to put it in words by Roger Caillois: “it is not the presence of the elements what is perplexing and decisive, it is their mutual organization, their reciprocal topography.”⁸

More information about the artist >>>

4 Blue Morpho Butterfly (1863-64), Christal Bridges Museum Collection.

5 Op. Cit. 123

6 Interview with the author. August 2021.

7 De la Mora began using human hair in figurative drawings made in 2005. The works created a narrative with children. See: Sergio Rodríguez Blanco, *Alegorías Capilares*. Trilce Ediciones Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, Instituto de Bellas Artes, Monterrey, México. 2011.

8 Caillois, Roger, and John Shepley. “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia.” October 31 (1984): 17–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778354>.