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Melanie Smith, film still from *Axolotl*, 2025

Only One Thing Was Strange,
to Keep Thinking Like Before.

Melanie Smith

IVAM

Curated by
Helena Chávez Mac Gregor

Coordinated by
Ramon Escrivà

Exhibition design
Germen Estudio / Giacomo Castagnola, Erik López

What does it mean to experience
extinction? How is it perceived?
How is it seen? How does it feel?
How is it thought? Is the extinction
of a snail the same as that of an
axolotl? How might they themselves
begin to notice their disappearance?
Will they realise that fewer and
fewer of them remain? Will they
recognise that they are becoming
increasingly alike? Will you notice
yourself gradually becoming alone?



Melanie Smith and Patricio Villareal, film still from *Tixinda*, 2025

Only One Thing Was Strange, to Keep Thinking Like Before brings together nearly 40 works by the two most recent productions by the British-Mexican artist Melanie Smith: *Axolotl* (2025) and *Tixinda* (2025). Both projects revolve around two endangered animals: on the one hand, *Ambystoma mexicanum*, also known as the Mexican axolotl, an amphibian endemic to the Valley of Mexico, of which between 500 and 1,000 individuals remain in the wild; and on the other, *Plicopurpura pansa*, or the purple snail, a species that has historically been used to dye textiles purple across different regions and which today survives, also under threat, only along the coast of Oaxaca, Mexico.

Through an exploration of vision and the image, the artist uses a range of media – such as painting, drawing, sculpture and video – as ways of approaching these forms of life without producing deterministic representations. The works move through different scales of vision and perspectives allowing to propose an encounter with the animal's own agency through its corporeality, plasticity and colour; in short, through its particular way of existing.

With these works, Smith raises a series of questions about the relationship between culture and nature, challenging the notion that the two are separate. In doing so, she evokes a poetics that invites another way of looking – perhaps more empathetic, more curious – that seeks, within the limits of art itself, to learn from the other living beings with whom we share our world.



Melanie Smith, *Animation drawing for Axolotl 2*, 2025
Mixed media on watercolour paper, 38 x 67 cm



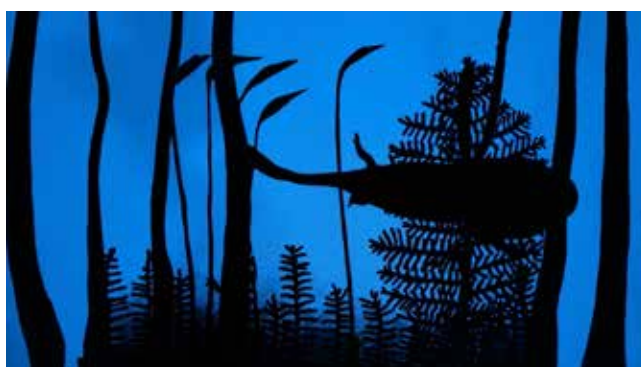
Melanie Smith, *Animation drawing for Axolotl 32*, 2025
Mixed media on watercolour paper, 19,5 x 35 cm



Melanie Smith, *Animation drawing for Axolotl* 29, 2025
Mixed media on watercolour paper, 19,5 x 35 cm

Ambystoma

Axolotls belong to the genus *Ambystoma*. Of the 33 species identified in North America, 18 are found within the territory of Mexico, and 17 are endemic to the country. Like salamanders, axolotls possess an extraordinary capacity for regeneration. They can regenerate muscles, bones, nerves and entire organs as many times as necessary. This plasticity has also endowed them with a remarkable capacity for metamorphosis. Of the 17 Mexican species, 7 transform into salamanders. This means that they change from aquatic animals that breathe through gills into terrestrial animals that breathe through lungs. Species such as *altamirani* and *velasci* may or may not undergo metamorphosis, depending on environmental and intrinsic conditions, while others, such as *mexicanum*, remain throughout their lives in a larval state known as neoteny. This means that, in addition to not undergoing metamorphosis, they do not need to lose their juvenile characteristics in order to reproduce. The *mexicanum*, better known as 'pink' it's in fact albino, have unexpectedly become a symbol of Mexico City. They appear on banknotes, digital applications and city's police vehicles, as well as on T-shirts, soft toys, key rings and countless other products. Yet while the city is becoming increasingly 'axolotlised' – a term used by the city authorities for its cosmetic appeal – it is estimated that only around 500 individuals remain in their natural habitat. As their image is reproduced endlessly, they are disappearing from the wild.



Melanie Smith, film stills from *Axolotl*, 2025

Plicopurpura pansa

The purple snail, also known as the ink snail and called *tixinda* in the Nuu Savi language, is a mollusc that inhabits the Pacific coast, from Baja California to Peru. Its distinctive feature is that it secretes a white 'milk' to immobilise its prey; when exposed to sunlight, this secretion turns purple and stains the surfaces it comes into contact with. Although many civilisations have historically used different species of marine rock snails for dyeing, very few places today still maintain traditional practices that allow these species and human communities to coexist. One such place is the Mixtec community of Pinotepa de San Luis, whose principal cultural and economic activity is the dyeing and weaving of huipils using this purple dye. Unlike other extractive industries, members of the community milk the snail's dye directly onto cotton fibres without harming the animal. They do so on the seashore rocks and, once the fibres have absorbed the dye, return the snail to the exact place where it was found. The community has developed around the animal, and its worldview embraces not only its use but also its care.

Plicopurpura pansa is endangered as a result of rising temperatures, ocean acidification and changing ocean dynamics, as well as the decline of the species on which it feeds. It is also threatened by unsustainable harvesting carried out by dye-producing companies. What will become of purple when they are gone?



Melanie Smith, film stills from *Tixinda*, 2025



Melanie Smith, film still from *Tixinda*, 2025

Biography Melanie Smith

Melanie Smith was born in England in 1965. She lives and works between Mexico City and London. Her work across various media has reflected the expanded field of painting within art history and its entanglement with the moving image. Earlier pieces illustrate the idiosyncrasies of crowds, chaos, and aberrant forms within urban environments. The spiral serves as a recurring motif and a mode of thought; functioning like a double helix, it constellates relationships between the city, the body, archaeology, tragicomedy, and nature. She is interested in fragments that do not add up or stories that have neither beginning nor end, as well as backstage productions that allude to political farce. To a large extent, her work dismantles any rational meaning of production, serving as a way to consider contingent forms. Her work has been exhibited at numerous institutions, including PSI and MoMA, New York; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Tate Britain, Tate Liverpool, and Tate Modern, London; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; Museo Tamayo and MUCA Campus UNAM, Mexico City; Museo Amparo, Puebla; The Modern, Fort Worth; and the SITE Santa Fe Biennial. In 2011, she represented Mexico at the 54th Venice Biennale. A comprehensive exhibition of her work was presented at the Milton Keynes Gallery in 2014, subsequently traveling to the CAC, Vilnius, and Museum Boijmans, Rotterdam. In 2018, she was included in the Liverpool Biennial. *Melanie Smith: Farce and Artifice* was presented at MACBA (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona) in 2018; in 2019, it traveled to the MUAC (Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM) in Mexico City and the Museo Amparo in Puebla, Mexico.



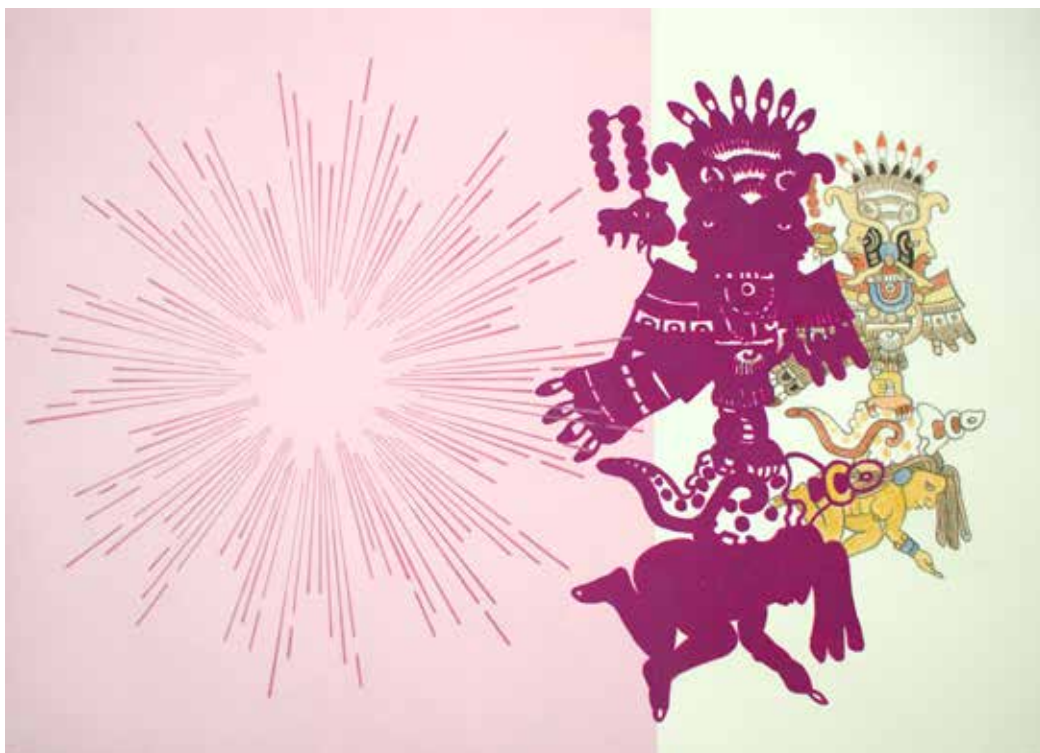
Melanie Smith, maquette for *Tixinda 12*, 2025
Mixed media



Melanie Smith, film still from *Xochimilco*, 2025



Melanie Smith, *Animation drawing for Axolotl 50*, 2025
Mixed media on watercolour paper, 19.5 x 35 cm



Melanie Smith, *Tixinda VIII*, 2025
Acrylic on paper, 35 x 50 cm

Activities

Exhibition opening

*Only One Thing Was Strange, to Keep Thinking
Like Before. Melanie Smith*

Date: October 7, 2026

Time: 19h. Presentation of the exhibition via a conversation between the artist, Melanie Smith, and the curator, Helena Chávez Mac Gregor, in the IVAM auditorium.

20h. Opening and cocktail reception

Contact

Communications Department IVAM
comunicacion@ivam.es

ivam@ivam.es
963 176 600
Guillem de Castro, 118
46003 València

Tuesday to Sunday from 10:00 AM to 7:00 PM
Monday close
Check for holidays and other exceptions

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