

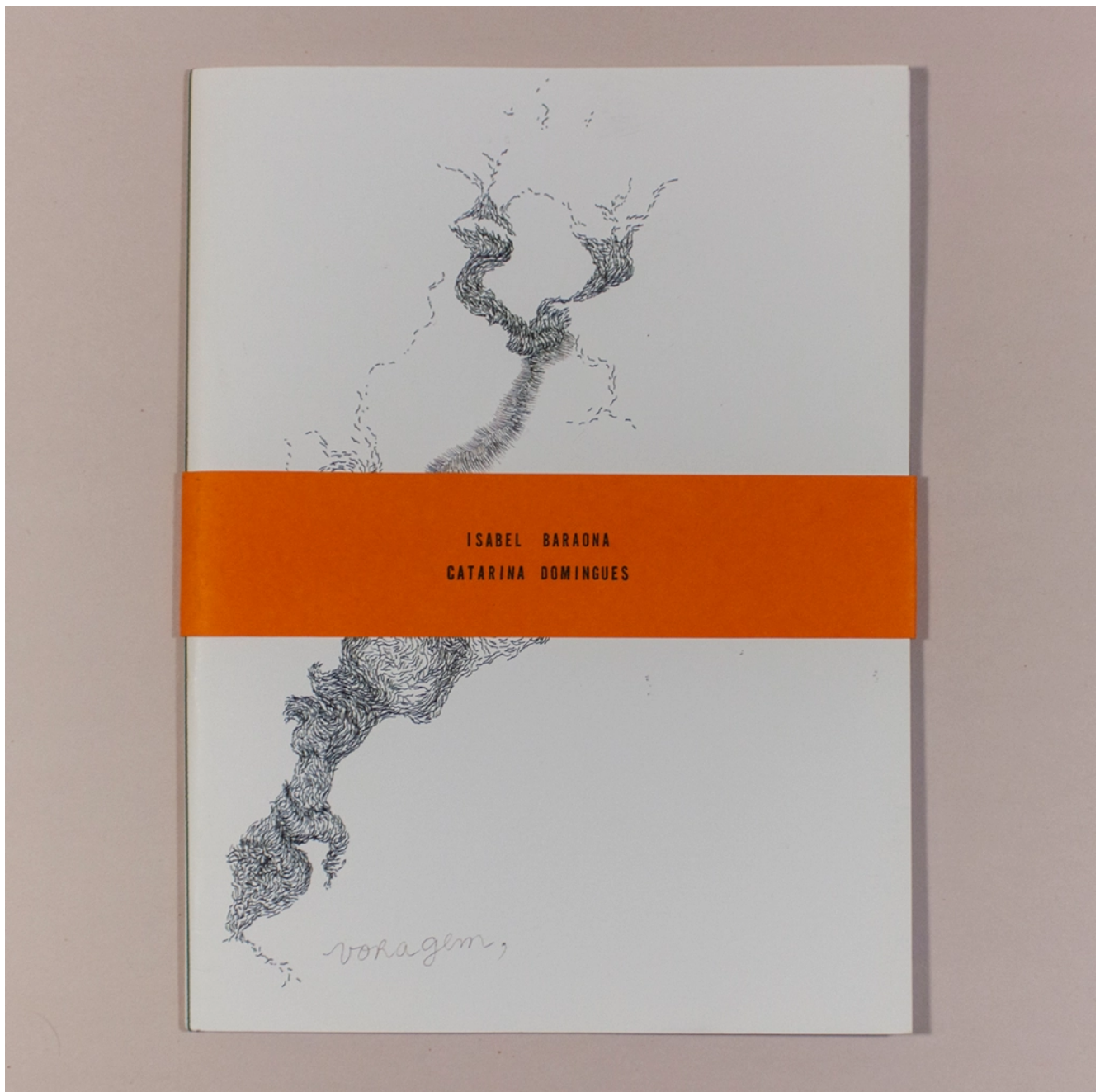


ARTISTS' BOOK REVIEWS

Monthly reviews and occasional interviews

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Voragem



Voragem

Isabel Baraona and Catarina Domingues

2016

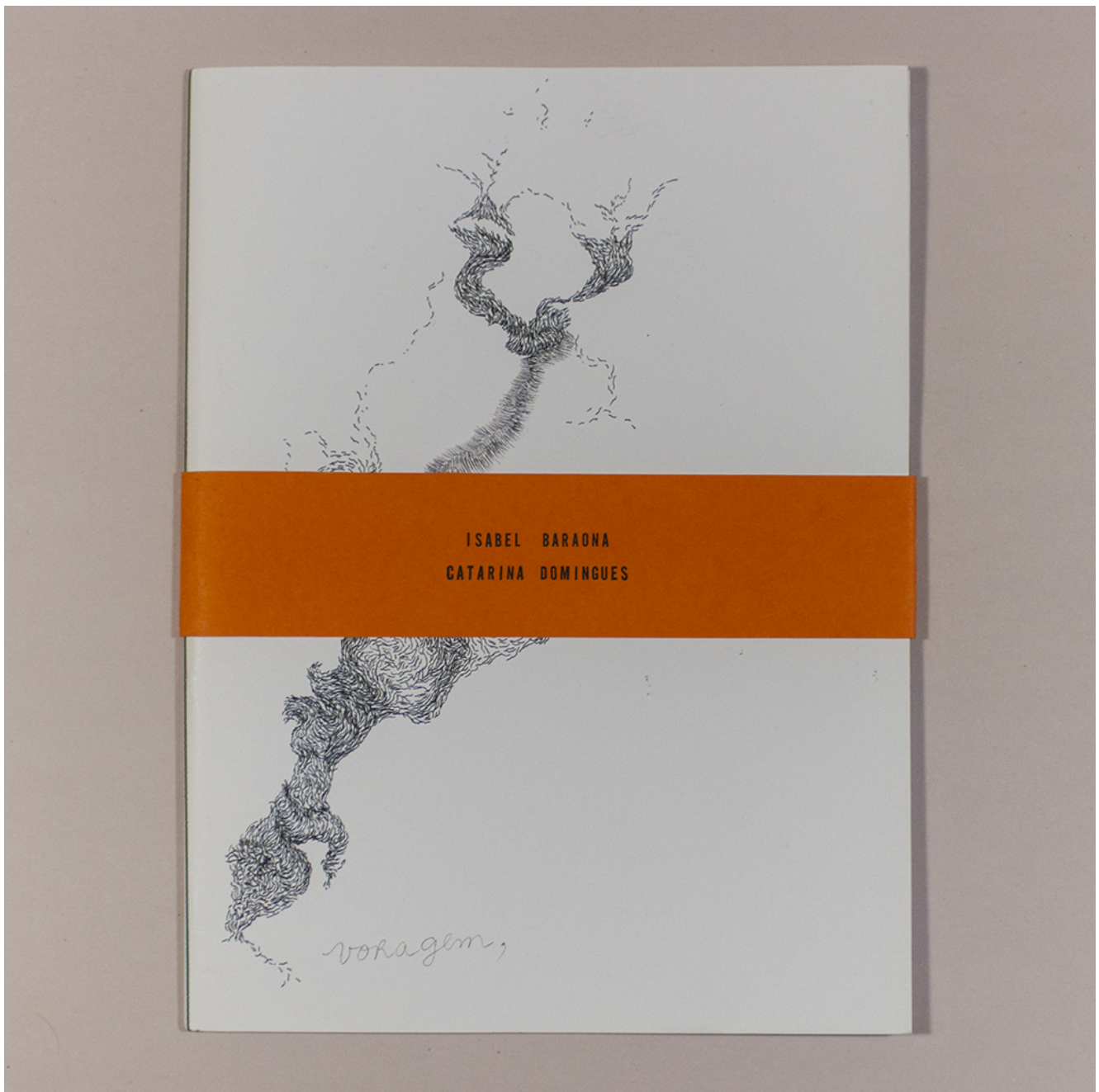
7.625 × 10.25 in.

32 pages

Binding: Dos-a-dos; saddle-stitched pamphlets tied into the cover,
with an unbound pamphlet inserted

Digital and offset printing

Edition of 100



As a medium, books are noteworthy for their finitude. This seems increasingly significant in an era of infinite internet and endlessly reconfigurable data. So it is perhaps surprising that the artists' books of Isabel Baraona often resist closure. *Voragem*, a collaboration with Catarina Domingues, is one such book. Its dos-a-dos binding makes each ending a beginning, and the content is well suited to this cycle. The lyrical, fragmentary text operates through invocation more than syntax, and suspends narrative resolution. The passage of time is an important theme, and yet there is an emphasis on presence and present-ness. *Voragem* physically embodies a combination of linear

and circular time through the inclusion of a third (finite) pamphlet within one half of the larger dos-a-dos. The artists shrewdly use a removable belly band to print the title information, further equalizing the front and back covers. This is just one of many subtle decisions that show a sophisticated understanding of how the book's structure works in concert with its content.

Voragem means "maelstrom" in Portuguese, and there is certainly turmoil in Baraona's signature figures and Domingues' distinctive mark-making. (I should note here that all of the book's text is in Portuguese, and that I am very grateful to Vera Romiti Stecca Diani for sensitively translating the poetic writing.) The text proceeds in single words and short phrases. It is visceral and erotic, though the book points to an intersubjectivity more complex than mere sex. It is written in second person, addressing the reader directly and also inviting them to inhabit the absent I. This, along with the faceless, silhouetted figures make it easy for the reader to project themselves into the narrative.

Two visual modes dominate – dense, frantic line work and unpredictable, organic blotches of wet media. The contrast between is more than visual. The chance operations of the wet media are inscrutable, whereas the artists' hands are visible in the drawn marks. Time has passed. A body has labored. If mark-making is a primal act, the delineation of the sacred from the profane, then *Voragem* brings something fundamentally human into dialogue with nature, the vicissitudes of physics acting on the liquid pigment. *Voragem* seems to celebrate the creative act, anguished though it may be.



Both methods are combined and the images are worked into multiple times, creating tangled, tempestuous compositions from which figures are subtracted as stark silhouettes. This play of positive and negative, presence and absence, helps establish the setting as mental or metaphorical. The visual integration of hand-drawn text within the imagery furthers the sense of a mental place. The words seem to emanate from a knot of neurons, thought rather than spoken. The figures cast no shadows as they tumble and writhe, falling through the space of the page. Or perhaps the setting is outside the mind, physical but primordial. Baraona's narratives often have an archetypal,

mythological quality. The book's primary color scheme adds to this foundational sense, though there is relatively little yellow. Blue and red predominate, evoking veins and arteries in the dense tangle of tendrils.

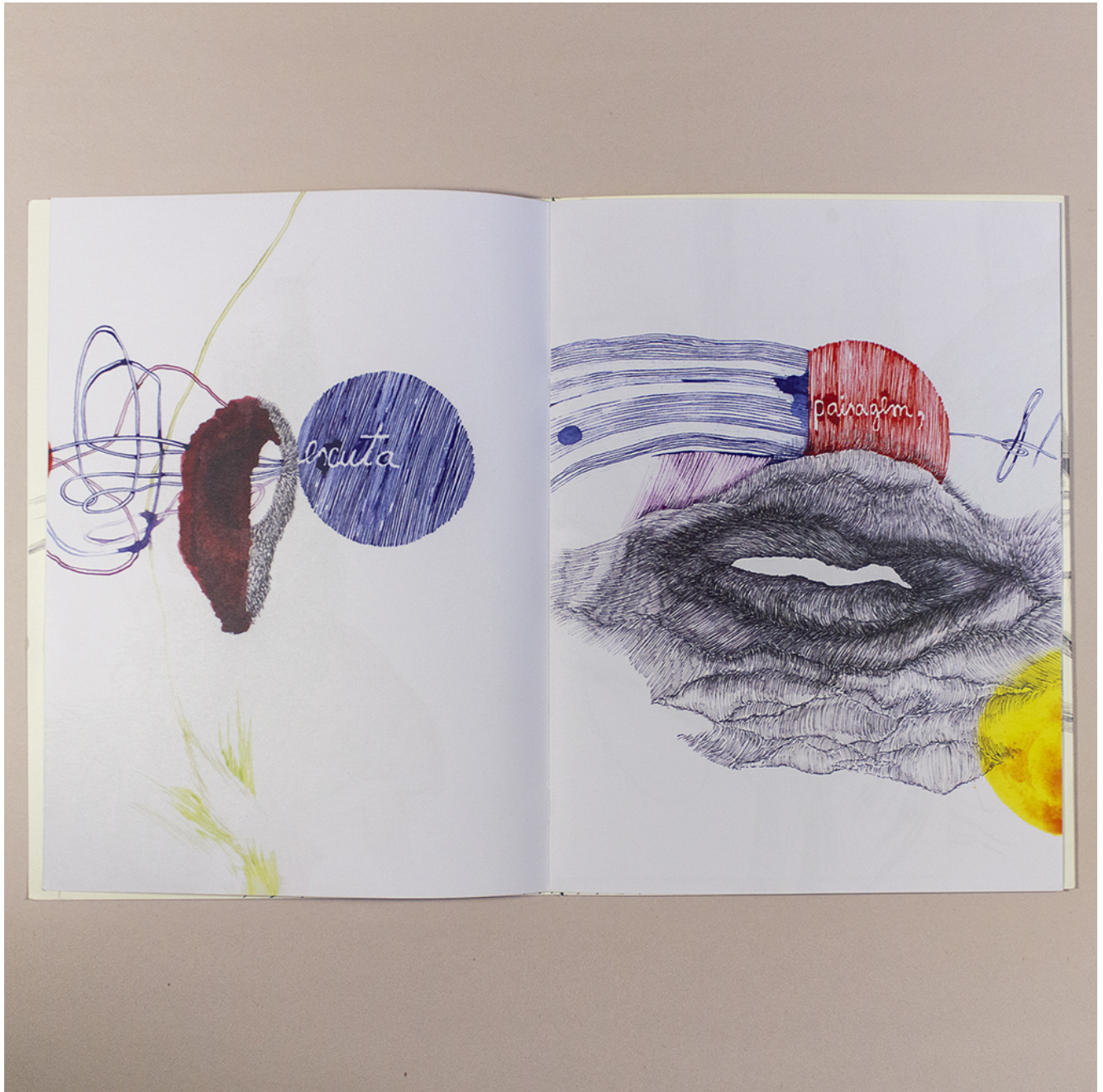
The subject matter is decidedly anatomical, but Baraona and Domingues abstract the visuals enough to include more than the vascular system. One drawing is clearly a heart, but specific organs are mostly left to the text (head; mouth; the tip of the nipple). Neurons can be seen in the fractal diffusion of wet media. Hair and guts are present in the varied line work. Still other marks appear to be something less physical, though surely of the body. By combining blood and nerves with neurons, the artists transcend any opposition of thinking and feeling. Braids and tangles erupt from, connect, and consume figures in this collapse of mind and body.

Interestingly, the anatomy challenges the human–nature binary set up by the contrasting mark making. If the deliberate line work speaks to something especially human, then the actual rendering of those humans reminds the reader that humans are just animals. The figures are contorted and asymmetrical. All the parts are present, but they assume unfamiliar shapes. The boundary between flesh and meat seems to waver. Just as body and mind are joined, so too are human and nature, but in the hands of Baraona and Domingues this is not a peaceful unity. Rather they speak to the difficulty of being in the world with no hope of transcending the embodied, natural order.



The book's sequence shifts between figuration and abstraction, employing both to maximum effect. The first opening is a relatively straightforward representation – the negative silhouette of a one-shoed woman with a positive rendering of her missing shoe. More human figures follow until a blank page interrupts the sequence and an abstract, cosmic scene unfurls. The next spreads pair text with highly abstract compositions. The letterforms emerge from organic shapes that could be something very small – perhaps in a brain – or very large, like the universe. When the turn of a page reveals a figure, it is a startling return. She is bisected by a patch of hairlike lines, which

leave a gaping absence where her abdomen should be. Her mouth is open, one hand is clenched and her toes curl in what could be either agony or ecstasy. The contemplative mood of the preceding pages is shattered, and this first half of the dos-a-dos concludes in an explosive, figurative manner.



The second half opens with abstract, almost surreal compositions. These demonstrate the strength of Baraona and Domingues as collaborators. Both artists use line masterfully. Thickets of short black strokes seem almost stitched onto the longer striated forms beneath, which are visually distinct and rendered in color. A relatively limited

visual vocabulary is extended with a surprising repertoire of optical effects and compositional choices. The design feels unified even as each artist's contributions remain distinct.



The inserted pamphlet achieves a similar balance. It is unbound, attached to the larger book by a thread through the gutter. (There is, in fact, a green thread looped around the gutter of each side of the dos-a-dos. The staples that bind each signature do not attach the cover, which is good and bad. The threads are somewhat distracting, especially their color, but they also avoid unsightly staples in the cover and the inevitable tearing that would result in the coated cover stock.)

The drawing style in this smaller pamphlet is related, but only its cover has a white background. The rest of the negative space is filled with color washes. It makes the rest of the book feel stark by comparison. Baraona and Domingues are clearly aware of the power of this contrast. After the book-within-a-book concludes, the next page turn reveals another completely blank verso with a recto that is visually distinct from the book's other imagery. Simple devices, like the dos-a-dos structure, let Baraona and Domingues synthesize a variety of visual approaches in a single work. Both artists thoughtfully engage the book form, and it is hard to picture *Voragem's* collaborative content succeeding similarly in another medium.

The book within a book does draw attention to the book-ness of *Voragem*, but I would argue its meta-commentary is about the creative act more broadly. It speaks to our drive as storytelling animals, through image-making and written language alike. As the text and image explore one kind of relationship, the project itself posits another – collaboration. Perhaps the two share the same elements: vulnerability, compromise, history and hope. Baraona and Domingues forge a unified artistic statement from their distinct contributions. Fortunately for the reader, they achieved this through the democratic medium of the artists' book. By thoughtfully engaging the book as medium, with elements like blank pages and short sheets, the artists are able to bring their time-intensive studio processes into an object that is more than a series of reproductions. The complex verbo-visual narrative demands much of the reader, but rewards them accordingly.

Levi Sherman February 25, 2020 Review

2016, art, art and writing, art writing, artists' book, Belly Band, book review, Catarina Domingues, Collaboration, Dos-à-dos, Drawing, Isabel Baraona,

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