

Research paper

## Radical Tenderness and Feline Agency as Epistemic Anchors in the Art of Susana Salinas

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### ABSTRACT

This article conceptualises radical tenderness as a form of political insurgency against systemic violence and affective exhaustion, exploring how interspecies agency reconfigures the domestic sphere and the conditions of creative production. Situated within the precarious socio-political landscape of contemporary Mexico, the study theorises feline agency not as peripheral companionship, but as an epistemic anchor and a co-constitutive agent of situated knowledge. Through a methodology that synthesises biographical inquiry with formal visual analysis, I examine the dialectic between Salinas's lifelong experience and her creative output, culminating in her most recent exhibition, *En Morada* (In a Home). By decoding the feline iconography not as a symbolic surrogate but as an active participant in the semiotics of the studio, this approach demonstrates how sustained interspecies intimacy enables a feminist 're-nesting' of the maternal. Here, care is detached from biological determinism and articulated as a horizontal, relational ontology. Furthermore, the analysis explores the materiality of the artworks as 'vibrant matter,' where animal presence dictates the rhythms of artistic labour. By addressing the emergence of non-biological kinship under conditions of structural precarity, the study argues that post-human relationality and affective labour constitute essential tools for reimagining resistance. Ultimately, Salinas's work reveals that the domestic "nest" is not a site of private retreat, but a potent laboratory for collective survival and more-than-human solidarity in a world marked by ongoing crisis.

**Keywords:** multispecies kinship, epistemologies of care, radical tenderness, interspecies agency, contemporary Mexican art

**Introduction.** In an era marked by escalating gender-based violence and systemic oppression against women in Mexico, creative production becomes a vital act of feminist resistance. This study explores how the domestic studio transcends private confinement, transforming into a radical laboratory for collective survival. Moving beyond traditional anthropocentric frameworks, I conceptualize radical tenderness as a political insurgency against affective exhaustion. By positioning feline agency—observed throughout the lifelong presence of the artist's companion cats—not as passive domesticity, but as an epistemic anchor, this article reconfigures the semiotics of artistic labour. Ultimately, it argues that sustained interspecies intimacy enables a profound re-nesting of the maternal, where non-human agency emerges as a horizontal ontology of care in times of ongoing crisis. By intertwining biographical inquiry with formal visual analysis, this research bridges a critical gap in contemporary Mexican art criticism, offering a pioneering post-humanist framework that redefines the intersection of affective labour, trauma, and more-than-human solidarity.

## MULTISPECIES INHABITATION IN PRECARIOUS TIMES

Susana Salinas, a pivotal Mexican visual artist, has long navigated an expansive disciplinary terrain—from oil painting and printmaking to ceramics and mixed media—to articulate visual worlds centred on women, children, and vulnerable forms of life. Her compositions, populated by dreamlike figures and allegorical presences, operate as affective cartographies of northern Mexico: a region persistently marked by structural violence, economic precarity, and forced mobility. Across this socio-political landscape—where life is frequently rendered disposable—Salinas maintains a coherent aesthetic trajectory that deploys care, intimacy, and emotional density as counter-visual strategies.

To contextualise this analysis, it is essential to situate the artist's trajectory through the primary sources that inform this study. Susana Salinas (b. 1975, Zacatecas, Mexico) has developed a unique visual language characterised by an oneiric aesthetic that challenges anthropocentric hierarchies. The biographical data and formative narratives presented hereafter are derived from a series of semi-structured interviews and extensive personal communications conducted by the author with the artist throughout 2025 (Salinas, 2025). This qualitative record provides the foundation for understanding how her practice is deeply informed by her upbringing in rural North-Central Mexico. It was in this specific geography where her early encounters with feline companions—such as Pelusa, Tomachino, and Leoberto—shaped a foundational understanding of interspecies kinship. In her current studio-home, the presence of her companion Chole is far from incidental; she is central to the artist's epistemic process.

A foundational and largely unexamined matrix of Salinas's creative life resides in this sustained interspecies cohabitation with feline kin within the domestic sphere. For over four decades, these felines have not operated as peripheral companions or symbolic ornaments, but as epistemic anchors—subjects that validate and stabilize alternative forms of non-human knowledge—: relational subjects through whom affective, cognitive, and ethical forms of knowledge have been continuously produced. By defining them as 'epistemic anchors,' I refer to their role as active subjects that validate and stabilise alternative forms of non-human knowledge, serving as points of reference for the artist's perception of reality.

This study frames this relationality through three primary epistemological pillars:

1. Feminist Theory: Following Haraway (2008), I employ this lens to deconstruct human exceptionalism. This perspective posits identity as a multi-species achievement, where humans and non-humans are co-constituted in a web of mutual dependence rather than existing as pre-established, independent entities.
2. Post-humanist Aesthetics: Informed by Braidotti (2013), this pillar recognizes the vital agency of non-human matter. By invoking Braidotti's concept of zoe—the dynamic, non-anthropocentric force of life common to all living organisms—the analysis displaces the human subject from the centre of creative production.
3. Care Ethics: I understand this, through Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), as a political praxis for world-maintenance. This extends beyond human-to-human interaction to include the persistent, material needs of our biological kin, framing care as a concrete labour that sustains shared worlds.

To connect these theoretical foundations with Salinas's practice, I utilize 'Interspecies Intersubjectivity' as a methodological bridge. Drawing on Hill's (2024) framework of 'joint meaning-making,' I translate abstract care ethics into observable, reciprocal communicative gestures. This is further articulated through Rose's (2022) 'critical visual methodology,' which provides the tools to process the affective data from the studio-home with the same epistemic rigor applied to the artworks. By doing so, the analysis avoids a purely descriptive approach, instead treating images as sites where power and relationality are actively negotiated.

In a context governed by necropolitical logics that normalise loss and brutality, Salinas's multispecies household does not constitute a retreat from the world but an insurgent domestic practice of care. This repositioning of the home resonates with recent feminist critiques of the domestic sphere as a site of gendered containment, where creative practices emerge as vital modes of resilience against the physical and categorical structures that restrict women in times of acute crisis (Crawley & Nyahuye, 2022). Through the cultivation of interspecies tenderness—a concept I have adapted from d'Emilia and Coleman's (2016) 'radical tenderness' to describe a political and affective commitment specifically to non-human lives—Salinas resists the erosion of sensitivity imposed by systemic violence.

Within this narrative, cats emerge as emotional interlocutors and co-formative agents who mediate experiences of grief, attention, vulnerability, and non-biological forms of motherhood. This configuration critically unsettles patriarchal and heteronormative models of domesticity by proposing a symbolic and affective kinship grounded in choice and reciprocity rather than biological reproduction. The singularity of this interspecies constellation raises pressing questions: How do forms of knowledge generated through sustained affective labour with non-human kin function as legitimate epistemic practices? In what ways can these situated knowledges enter into critical dialogue with established scientific paradigms concerning attachment, agency, and learning?

The second section of this article addresses these questions by aligning Salinas's situated knowledge with multispecies ethnography. As defined by Kirksey and Helmreich (2010), this field moves beyond human-centric accounts to explore the intertwined lives and deaths of creatures whose biographies are inseparable from human social worlds. By applying this framework, I demonstrate how Salinas's affective intimacy with her feline kin anticipates academic insights into non-human subjectivity.

I subsequently trace the affective geography of care—which I define as the spatial and emotional mapping of the bonds that constitute the 'nest'—in the work of Susana Salinas. I argue that her domestic space serves as a material and political counterpoint to the more spectacular or large-scale post-humanist environments often discussed in contemporary art. Instead, Salinas demonstrates that radical interspecies agency is forged in the quiet, everyday rhythms of cohabitation. This dialogue echoes broader feminist investigations into how localized, artistic collaborations redefine spaces of isolation into landscapes of collective resistance against crisis (Crawley & Nyahuye, 2022).

This analysis extends into a broader cultural reflection in the fourth section, examining feline kinship in visual culture beyond the human threshold. Here, Salinas's work enters into a comparative dialogue with the practices of Huyghe (2012) and Lislegaard (2008). By contrasting these artists, I highlight how Salinas refocuses agency within the intimate architecture of the home, prioritizing domesticity as a site of rigorous inquiry.

Finally, the article reflects on the 'minor gesture' (Manning, 2016). I define this not as a marginal act, but as a subtle, non-discursive force that possesses the power to reorient social and political encounters from within. This study contends that the minor gestures of feline-human cohabitation are a transformative form of political agency. Such agency aligns with the 'radical tenderness' movement articulated by d'Emilia and Coleman (2016)—a conceptual-practice born within the trans-feminist networks of Spain and Mexico and recently canonised in the landmark collection *Love & Lightning: A Collection of Queer and Feminist Manifestos* (2025).

By invoking this ethics of mutual recognition, Salinas's work manifests a visceral commitment to vulnerability and what may be termed 'metabolic intimacy' that, in precarious landscapes, this intimacy operates as a form of political insurgency. Thus, the situated knowledge of the 'nest' is reimagined: no longer a private refuge, but a critical, frontline site for restructuring relationality and survival amidst ongoing crises.

To address these questions, this article moves away from traditional ethnographic boundaries to embrace a Situated Visual Analysis. Drawing from Rose's (2022) 'critical visual methodology,' this study treats Salinas's images not as transparent windows, but as active sites where social and power relations are contested. I integrate this with Haraway's (2008) 'situated knowledges,' acknowledging that all inquiry is produced from a specific, embodied location—in this case, the multispecies domestic sphere. Consequently, this framework enables an 'interpretive immersion' into the *En Morada* series, synthesizing visual evidence with primary qualitative data derived from my personal communications with the artist (Salinas, 2025). This dual approach ensures that the domestic space is analyzed not as a passive setting, but as a site of more-than-human agency where feline companions actively reconfigure the conditions of the creative process.

### **Radical tenderness and becoming-with as the roots of feline agency**

This section positions the domestic sphere not as a mere private backdrop, but as a rigorous, situated epistemic site where more-than-human relations become legible through artistic practice. By weaving together Haraway's (2008) philosophy of 'companion species' with the analytical lens of Rose (2022), this study deliberately de-centres the human subject as the sole narrator of experience. This displacement follows Rose's (2022) argument that the meaning of an image is produced across a trialectic of sites: the site of production, the image itself, and the site of audiencing. In Salinas's work, these three dimensions are interconnected by a commitment to affective entanglement—the primary territory where knowledge is not simply discovered but actively produced through the daily friction of shared lives.

Within this framework, and following Haraway's (2008) concept of 'becoming-with,' both the home and the studio are conceptualised as 'contact zones': historical and physical spaces where human and feline lives are continuously co-constituted. This perspective allows me the research to examine Salinas's visual production as a Multispecies Affective Archive. This concept builds upon the pioneering scholarship of Cvetkovich (2003), who defines an 'archive of feelings' as a repository of cultural memory that documents trauma and intimacy through the 'ephemera' of daily life—materials often dismissed as non-traditional. By extending Cvetkovich's logic to include the non-human realm, I argue that the sensory impressions of interspecies cohabitation—reflected throughout the *En Morada* series—function as archival matter. This archive serves as a non-linear assemblage where, as Cvetkovich suggests, the 'ordinariness' of the domestic space reveals its profound political significance.

Through this lens, the study reclaims domestic traces—the shared rest, the feline gaze, the territorial rhythm—as rigorous political evidence of a life lived beyond the anthropocentric limit. By analysing these visual traces through a formal semiotic method—which Rose (2022) defines as the systematic study of signs and the processes through which they construct social difference—I decipher how Salinas translates the "minor gestures"

of her feline kin into a visual language of resistance. This method reveals that the cat is not a mere icon, but a signifier of a radical, more-than-human agency that reconfigures the domestic space.

To bridge these aesthetic reflections with biological reality, the analysis operates at the fertile intersection of vernacular care and contemporary ethology, I connect Salinas's intimate, situated observations with the foundational work of Turner (2000) on feline sociality and the insights of Hill (2024). Specifically, Hill's (2024) research on 'intersubjectivity and joint meaning-making' provides a framework for understanding how feline-human communication is not a one-way projection, but a reciprocal construction of shared significance. By integrating these ethological insights into the visual analysis, the research moves beyond personal anecdotes to establish a rigorous site of inquiry. This dialogue between Turner's (2000) biological realities of feline behavior and Hill's (2024) relational complexities ensures that the domestic sphere is treated as a space where interspecies knowledge is both scientifically grounded and ethically enacted.

Importantly, this research refuses to treat the domestic sphere as a neutral or static enclosure. Following the radical provocations of artist-philosopher Manning (2016), I approach Salinas's home through the lens of the 'minor gesture'—those subtle, non-discursive actions that possess the immanent power to reorient social and political encounters from within. This framework allows me to recognize the domestic space as a profoundly politicised site where a 'minor science of care' continuously unfolds. As Manning (2016) suggests, such 'minor' forms of knowledge are not secondary to 'major' institutional science; rather, they are epistemically robust because they are practiced at the margins. In Salinas's practice, this science of care acts as a vital, inventive force that reconfigures the very texture of the everyday, transforming the house into a laboratory of multispecies resistance.

From an early age, Susana Salinas demonstrated an affective attunement that exceeded simple sentimental attachment. In this study, I interpret her early disposition as a form of 'interspecies responsiveness.' As Salinas recalls, cats were the only non-human beings integrated into her family environment in an organic and sustained manner (Salinas, personal communication, 2025). This was not merely a childhood preference; it was a practice that resonates deeply with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) ethics. Within this framework, care is defined not as a romanticised sentiment, 'matters of care'—a term Puig de la Bellacasa uses to describe the materially embedded, vital, and persistent commitment required to maintain more-than-human worlds. In Salinas's life, these 'matters' are enacted through the daily, often invisible labour of cohabitation and protection.

One of her most formative memories of interspecies ethical recognition dates to the age of four: the encounter with an abandoned kitten named Pelusa. As Salinas recalls, she concealed the kitten in her bedroom—an incipient moment where responsibility emerged prior to formal moral instruction. When the mother cat, according to local belief, failed to recognise the kitten by smell, its survival became contingent upon a human intervention that Salinas chose to lead. This early bond with Pelusa represents the foundational 'epistemic anchor' in Salinas's life, where the feline subject first emerged as a co-constitutive partner in the domestic space.

Rather than a unilateral act of rescue, I analyse this encounter as the formation of 'chosen non-biological kinship.' Following Haraway (2008), this form of relationality transcends genetic ties to focus on shared vulnerability and mutual dependency as the basis for a multispecies family. In this context, Salinas describes an improvised practice that exemplifies the reconfiguration of domestic technologies: with her mother's assistance, she adapted a glass toy baby bottle to feed the kitten (Salinas, 2025).

This memory remains charged with a sensory encounter that would later inform Salinas's artistic language. She recalls the kitten with striking clarity: "It was so black it looked blue in the sunlight" (Salinas, 2025). This chromatic perception is more than a purely aesthetic recollection; it is an early instance of what Gage (1993) theorises as the 'cultural agency of colour,' where the act of seeing is understood as a complex intersection of practice, meaning, and historical context. In Salinas's work, truly perceiving the feline subject—discerning the blue within the black—becomes the first step towards an ethical recognition of their presence. Following Gage's insistence that colour is a primary tool for constructing meaning, this 'blue-black' gaze operates as a visual epiphany: it marks the moment the animal ceases to be a shadow and emerges as a specific, luminous being that demands to be seen in its own right.

In retrospect, this episode marks the emergence of what I conceptualise as a feline epistemic anchor: a non-human presence through which knowledge is stabilised, reoriented, and continuously renegotiated. Far from a passive object of care, the cat operates as a co-constitutive agent in the formation of an aesthetic awareness that would later define Salinas's visual language.

The communal belief that maternal rejection results from a failure of olfactory recognition serves as a powerful instance of situated knowledge. In this case, vernacular understanding anticipated the ethological findings of Turner and Bateson (2015), who demonstrate the foundational role of olfaction in feline bonding. Rather than framing this as mere "intuition," I approach it as a legitimate epistemic system grounded in long-term interspecies proximity.

This early attunement catalysed a profound ontological reorientation. By observing the kitten's instinctive strategies of withdrawal, Salinas developed a mimetic ethics of survival—not an imitation of form, but an attentional alignment with non-human modes of endurance. To describe this process, I employ the notion of the 'co-navigation of trauma.' Following Haraway (2008) and Hill (2024) on 'shared exposure,' this does not imply a symmetrical experience of suffering, but a relational one. By applying Hill's (2024) analysis of how multispecies families develop shared meanings under precarious conditions, it becomes evident that the feline does not 'heal' the human in a clinical sense. Rather, it provides an ontological cue—an embodied orientation towards strategic retreat and disappearance—that enables the human subject to reconfigure her own agency under threat.

The loss of Pelusa—a "quiet sentinel" whose life was ended by the structural violence of the city—consolidated Salinas's understanding of herself as a co-participant in a shared ecology of survival. Through the lens of 'becoming-with' (Haraway, 2008), this bond is reimagined not merely as a bereavement, but as a foundational claim to life. These non-human presences initiated her, without the need for spoken language, into the complex practices of waiting, longing, and mourning (Salinas, personal communication, 2025).

In early adulthood, this bond deepened with Tomachino. His arrival coincided with a domestic space characterised by physical and psychological precarity. As Salinas's own well-being fractured, Tomachino became gravely ill. The artist's response—an exhaustive labour of care—was shaped by the belief that proximity and mutual attention might sustain both lives. In this precarious intersection, care became more than a domestic chore; it became a radical strategy for remaining present in a world that demanded her erasure.

When Tomachino disappeared without warning, Salinas encountered a vernacular belief: that cats, sensing their own end, voluntarily leave the home to spare those to whom they are attached. She embraced this narrative as a form of affective and ethical shelter (Salinas, 2025). Rooted in an understanding of animal autonomy rather than human possession, this belief allowed her to attribute agency to Tomachino's disappearance without reducing it to abandonment. I argue that Tomachino's disappearance functioned as an ontological mirror: a relational process where the non-human's sovereign agency serves as a catalyst for human self-recognition. Inspired by the feline's strategic withdrawal, Salinas found the ethical impetus to confront what she would later define as the 'symbolic death' of an abusive domestic situation.

In this shared landscape of precarity, animal agency is transformed into a vital catalyst for human survival. This proves that 'becoming-with' (Haraway, 2008) feline kin—an entanglement where the feline's movement dictates the human's response—can dismantle the silence of abuse. In this quiet, insurgent choreography, the act of leaving is reimagined through the animal's example: not as a loss, but as a radical claim to one's own life and autonomy.

Following this period of reorientation, the arrival of Leoberto coincided with the consolidation of Salinas's independent creative life. A charismatic Siamese, Leoberto was the first to inhabit the home she established on her own—a space that functioned simultaneously as dwelling, studio, and pedagogical environment. In this hybrid setting, Leoberto emerged as a relational constant, he was a silent interlocutor whose presence shaped the rhythms of attention, pause, and return that structure artistic labour (Salinas, 2025).

From an epistemological standpoint, I understand Leoberto's role as an epistemic anchor: a non-human presence through which perception and embodied knowledge are oriented over time. His proximity grounded Salinas's practice in a shared field of sensory co-presence. Importantly, this anchoring function did stem from obedience, but from the cat's capacity to sustain a relational horizon within which knowledge could emerge.

As time passed, Leoberto developed what Salinas describes as a 'vagabond' disposition, disappearing for days before returning unpredictably. Rather than interpreting these absences as a rupture, the artist learned to read them as communicative gestures—assertions of autonomy that required I term 'interpretive restraint'. In this sense, interspecies communication did not occur through decipherable signals, but through an attunement to patterns of presence and withdrawal.

This process exemplifies Hill's (2024) 'joint meaning-making,' where significance is not found in a single gesture, but is produced in the shared, often silent space between species. By applying Hill's framework, I recognize that Leoberto's movements constitute a relational language that—while resisting linguistic capture—establishes a profound, negotiated understanding within the multispecies family. This process marked a significant shift in Salinas's understanding of care. The bond was no longer organised around vigilance, but around an ethics of availability—defined here as a mode of relation that recognises feline withdrawal not as a void, but as an active manifestation of agency. Here, the feline epistemic anchor trains the human subject in a profound epistemic humility, teaching her to dwell within uncertainty and to respect the animal's right to absence as an inherent condition of ethical coexistence.

Leoberto's final disappearance further crystallised this insight, compelling Salinas to confront the limits of human-centred narratives of responsibility. If the cat's agency included the right to leave, care could no longer be equated with control. The decision to leave the mattress as the final object in the empty house—as Salinas recounts (Salinas, personal communication, 2025)—functioned as a suspended gesture: an attempt to keep the

relational field open. By resisting closure, Salinas enacted an affective negotiation with absence, acknowledging the cat's agency while refusing to foreclose the possibility of return.

When departure from the old house became unavoidable, the act of carrying the mattress out as the final object acquired a symbolic density. I argue that this gesture materialised the epistemological stakes of loss: knowledge formed in relation to another being does not dissolve with physical separation but persists as a 'structuring absence.' In this sense, Leoberto remained an epistemic anchor even in his absence, orienting Salinas's understanding of care and creative continuity beyond the limits of domestic walls.

Months later, a chance encounter beneath the Portales of Zacatecas (traditional arched walkways) revealed an unexpected continuation: Leoberto had integrated himself into the life of a child from Salinas's former workshops. I interpret this episode as a challenge to the model of domestic as a closed unit of human stewardship, revealing care instead as a distributed practice sustained across fluid social and material ecologies. Knowing that Leoberto coexisted among sketchbooks and brushes reconfigured the pain of separation into a form of multispecies continuity. Tenderness, in this sense, is uniquely transferable without ever being depleted. This quality resonates with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) notion of care as a vital, non-linear force that circulates through networks of interdependence, rather than being confined to a single site of possession.

To understand the depth of this bond, it is essential to ground these domestic events in the vitalist perspective of Ingold (2011). For Ingold, knowing is not a static representation, but a process generated through the act of moving through life—a concept he terms 'knowing through description.' This approach prioritizes the wisdom gained from deep, sensory engagement with one's surroundings over abstract classification. By applying this notion, I reimagine Salinas's long-term cohabitation with her feline kin is reimagined as an emergent epistemology. In this sense, 'being alive' (Ingold, 2011) alongside non-human kin is not merely a background condition; it is the primary, unfolding source of wisdom—a way of perceiving the world that is co-constituted through the shared rhythm of inhabitation.

The arrival of Chole, discovered as a fragile, motionless form on the asphalt near the Fuente de los Conquistadores (Fountain of the Conquerors), introduced a configuration of communication mediated by absolute urgency. Finding a kitten at the brink of being struck by traffic bypassed rational deliberation, demonstrating how ethical responsiveness can precede interpretation. This moment is analytically significant: the decision to incorporate Chole into the home was an immediate acknowledgment of the ethical weight of her long-standing commitment to feline life (Salinas, 2025).

By assuming this responsibility, the commitment to care became collectively anchored. Within the economy of the household, this act functioned to further de-centre the figure of the individual caregiver, transforming the kitten's survival into a shared obligation that transcended species-bias. This resonates with Haraway's (2008) "response-ability"—a concept I unpack here as a cultivated capacity to respond to the radical vulnerability of another, moving beyond traditional 'duty' toward an ethical entanglement. This foundational ethical act reconfigures the subjects involved, forcing them to negotiate their own identities in the face of a life that demands to be sustained.

Living alongside Chole has demanded more than a simple domestic arrangement; it has required what I define—extending Morizot's (2020) framework of interspecies diplomacy—as a methodology of 'affective diplomacy.' For Morizot, diplomacy between species does not seek a common language; instead, it aims to establish a 'diplomatic space' where distinct ways of inhabiting the world coexist without one erasing the other. This approach necessitates a deliberate de-centring of the human subject, moving away from the role of the 'master of the house' to become a sensitive participant in feline temporalities. Through Morizot's (2020) lens, I argue that domestic authority is never a static assumption; instead, the home is reimagined as an ongoing diplomatic encounter, where all boundaries are continuously recalibrated through mutual presence and territorial respect.

The early phase of this relationship required a demanding form of emotional restraint. Chole—reserved and highly selective—initially displayed little interest in Salinas. "Neither of them pays rent, and the little cat couldn't care less about me!" (Salinas, personal communication, 2025). While expressed humorously, this remark reveals a deeper epistemic dislocation: the traditional expectation of immediate anthropocentric recognition was unmet. I argue that bond formation, in this context, was not about earning affection, but about learning to inhabit domesticity on feline terms, accepting a state of relational asymmetry—a bond that does not require a symmetrical or mirrored response to be ethically valid.

Over time, a bond emerged that was neither demonstrative nor narratively dramatic, but dense, continuous, and largely silent. Chole became an everyday accomplice and a witness to the artist's inner life through sustained co-presence. Crucially, this relationship does not function as a compensatory narrative within conventional frameworks of motherhood. Chole does not occupy an affective vacancy; instead, she reconfigures the maternal field altogether.

This study interprets this reconfiguration as a 're-nesting' of care—a term I use to describe the establishment of a domestic sanctuary that is horizontal, reciprocal, and detached from the imperatives of biological reproduction. Within this framework, maternal practices are uncoupled from both gendered obligation and reproductive futurity. This gives rise to a multispecies kinship grounded in attentiveness rather than projection. In this space, care circulates without a developmental endpoint, embodying what Haraway (2008) defines as 'staying with the trouble.' I unpack this concept as the ethical commitment to remain present in thick, complex, and often precarious relationalities, refusing the false resolution of conventional narratives.

Chole's role as a feline epistemic anchor is central to this process. Her presence stabilises Salinas's relational orientation not by offering comfort on demand, but by insisting on proximity without fusion. She decisively resists the archetype of the "affectionate companion," maintaining a strong-willed independence that refuses sentimentalisation. It is precisely this resistance that produces what Salinas describes as an "absolute closeness"—a form of intimacy unmediated by human performance (Salinas, 2025).

Of the original domestic trio, only Chole remains. The romantic human relationship dissolved, while the feline bond persisted, underscoring a critical argument of this study: in multispecies contexts, durability is not predicated on symmetry, but on sustained ethical attunement. Each night, Chole curls against Salinas like a "little spoon" (Salinas, personal communication, 2025). This gesture, modest and repetitive, does not signify dependency. Instead, I analyse it as a non-verbal articulation of shared temporality—a synchronisation of rhythms beyond language.

In this quiet choreography of bodies, epistemic anchoring becomes tangible. Knowledge here is not extracted; it is lived and sedimented through the rhythmic repetition of shared presence. The bond with Chole thus crystallises the central claim of this research: that radical tenderness operates as an insurgent epistemology, capable of reimagining kinship beyond human-centred frameworks. In this light, care—when situated within these precarious landscapes—ceases to be a mere private domestic duty. Instead, it emerges as a potent political tool for resistance; a way of reclaiming the 'nest' as a site where life is not just sustained, but actively re-enchanted against the grain of systemic instability.

Furthermore, Chole's function as an 'emotional thermometer' (Salinas, 2025) is treated here not as a metaphor, but as a rigorous technique of affective attunement. Her selective gaze and calibrated trust operate as diagnostic modalities, mapping emotional atmospheres that frequently elude anthropocentric perception. By applying Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) lens, I interpret Chole's presence as a living form of 'speculative ethics.' This is an ethical practice that does not rely on pre-established rules, but on a committed engagement with what a relationship might become through the ongoing labour of care. The cat's reaction to the environment provides a vital cue, allowing the human to sense tensions or harmonies that have not yet been articulated in speech; it is a way of 'thinking-with' the feline kin to navigate the invisible textures of the domestic realm.

Chole's responses to visitors—manifested through strategic distance, vigilant observation, or conditional closeness—offer Salinas a form of situated knowledge. This analysis understands such moments as instances of 'distributed perception': a process where the sensory and emotional input of the non-human subject extends and informs the human's understanding of their shared environment. In this capacity, Chole functions as both guide and guardian of the intimate space, rendering visible those affective textures of social interaction that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

This state of mutual attunement is the cumulative outcome of Salinas's long-term engagement with feline care, shaped by decades of close observation and the profound grief of past losses. I define the resulting embodied expertise not as a form of mastery, but as a refined capacity for 'relational accountability.' With Chole, this knowledge is mobilised through rigorous care protocols—vaccination, spaying, and daily attentiveness—enacted as forms of sustained affective labour. Care, in this context, is a practice of relational accountability that refuses to romanticise the feline while deeply honouring its presence.

Beyond her feline condition, Chole consistently manifests as a stabilising presence. Her responsiveness aligns with shifts in Salinas's physical and emotional states: settling on a pained limb or positioning herself silently on the artist's chest during periods of sadness. Rather than attributing this to mystical intuition, I frame these actions as expressions of embodied spatial knowing, produced through years of co-regulation. The recurring assertion—"Chole knows" (Salinas, 2025)—signals an epistemic recognition of interspecies attunement. This dynamic aligns with Despret's (2004) proposal that animals actively shape the questions humans are able to ask about the world. Following Despret, I analyse this as a practice of "availability"—an 'anthropo-zoo-genetic' process, meaning a co-becoming where both human and feline transform one another's identities and capacities through radical attentiveness.

Chole's presence has left an enduring imprint on Salinas's artistic practice, shifting it from observational exercises towards a visual language capable of articulating the complexity of interspecies kinship. This is materialised in what I term a 'multispecies reliquary': a curated material archive of portraits—featuring works by artists such as Anael Díaz, Arazu, and Guillermo Enciso—that documents a chosen kinship beyond human

genealogies. Far from decorative, this archive functions as a material claim to relational continuity. For Salinas, Chole is not a “pet,” but family—one half of a domestic unit composed of shared temporalities and dreams:

I've always had an affinity with cats — I adore them! I love their personalities, their independence, their honesty... I think they're incredibly magical beings, and I believe anyone who lives deeply and emotionally must have a cat. When it comes to magic, fantasy, and all that — cats are essential in this world. (Salinas, 2025).

These narratives are not merely anecdotes; they are chapters in a shared multispecies history. This section has established the experiential and relational ground upon which the following sections build, offering a rigorous account of interspecies life as an epistemic condition—one that enables a critical examination of creativity and knowledge production beyond the human threshold.

### **Tracing the affective geography of care in the work of Susana Salinas**

The constellation of lives shared with cats, as outlined in the preceding sections, does not remain at the level of personal testimony. Instead, it opens a critical space for theoretical inquiry into how knowledge, care, and subjectivity are formed within interspecies relations. These encounters—rooted in everyday domestic intimacy—constitute an ontological threshold from which dominant, human-centred frameworks of relationality are interrogated and reconfigured.

Amidst contexts marked by gendered vulnerability and structural violence, these interspecies bonds acquire a specific political significance. They foreground modes of attentiveness and affective labour that are habitually relegated to the margins of cultural theory, precisely because they emerge from feminised, domestic, and more-than-human spaces. I approach the domestic sphere not as a passive backdrop, but as an active site where alternative epistemologies are cultivated through shared living and mourning. My analysis moves deliberately from the biographical narrative towards a critical articulation of these bonds as forms of situated knowledge. These experiences do not simply inform Salinas's artistic sensibility; I argue they actively dismantle the naturalised hierarchies that structure the domestic realm.

At the heart of this inquiry is the proposition that embodied experience constitutes a rigorous mode of knowledge production. In alignment with feminist critiques of epistemic authority, I treat the home and the studio as sites of 'minor science' (Manning, 2016): spaces where attentive observation and shared life generate insights that defy traditional frameworks of 'expertise.' Here, as Manning (2016) posits, the minor gesture is not 'small' in importance; rather, it is a persistent, nomadic form of resistance that challenges the dominant architectures of thought from the very interiority of the nest.

Situated within the expanding field of feminist scholarship on animality and queer kinship, this analysis challenges the reductive category of the "pet," recognising non-human companions instead as co-constitutive agents. This perspective invites a reconsideration of agency as relational rather than proprietary. Within this framework, Chole is approached as a living interlocutor whose presence structures temporal rhythms and offers a lens through which epistemic reciprocity can be examined.

This section articulates an emergent epistemology grounded in radical tenderness—one that unfolds as a sustained practice of "becoming-with" (Haraway, 2008). This relational subjectivity resonates with the post-human ethics of Braidotti (2013), where the human is understood as a 'zōe-centred' or transversal entity: a subject not isolated by its species, but constituted through vital, dynamic connections with non-human life.

This process is further clarified by Barad's (2003) 'agential realism,' which I employ to suggest that subjects do not precede their interactions but emerge through them. In Salinas's work, the artist and the feline are not two separate entities meeting in a domestic space; rather, they are co-constituted through constant 'intra-actions' (Barad, 2003). I use this term to describe how distinct agencies—human and non-human—do not exist as independent building blocks but emerge only within their mutual entanglement. The early encounter with the rejected kitten in Salinas's childhood already pointed towards this: when maternal recognition failed, fate was placed in the child's hands. This marked an early encounter with an ethical responsibility that exceeded biological kinship, situating the domestic as a threshold where care is necessitated by circumstance rather than guaranteed by nature (Salinas, 2025).

Far from constituting mere superstition, the folk belief regarding olfactory recognition operates as a vernacular precursor to what ethological research defines as the chemosensory basis of kinship—the biological process by which social bonds are mediated through chemical signals. By documenting the central role of scent in feline maternal bonding, Turner (2000) and Turner and Bateson (2015) reveal that interspecies recognition is not a static instinct, but a fragile, biochemical dialogue.

When Salinas observed how environmental interference could sever these olfactory cues—leading to maternal rejection—she was witnessing more than a biological failure; she was encountering the material limits of "nature" as a guaranteed source of care. In this sense, I use the ethological data provided by Turner and Bateson to validate the child's early ethical impasse: if recognition can be lost through a mere shift in scent, then care

must be reconstructed through an elective, conscious act. This transition from biological reflex to intentional responsibility is precisely where the "feline epistemic anchor" begins to take shape as a tool for survival.

Yet, to reduce this episode to biological determinism would be to overlook its profound epistemological force. Within the child's experience, this moment crystallised a form of situated knowledge where observation and affective responsibility converged. This shift resonates with recent scholarship regarding the power of affective memory to redefine the boundaries of the 'familial.' As Fitzpatrick (2022) demonstrates, domestic memories and their visual remediation function as potent sites of political resistance, challenging institutional enclosures by reimagining what constitutes a family. By applying a similar logic to the multispecies home, I argue that Salinas's practice allows for the emergence of new ethical subjectivities; Following Fitzpatrick's (2022) framework on the transformative power of the private image, Salinas's work reclaims the domestic sphere—moving it away from a site of traditional biological reproduction and transforming it into a space of radical, interspecies becoming.

This episode thus operates as an early epistemic anchor: a formative instance where knowledge emerges from ethical urgency. Crucially, it prefigures the elective bond Salinas would later form with Chole—a relationship grounded not in biological maternity, but in sustained, daily care. In both cases, recognition is decoupled from genetic continuity and relocated within a relational ethics that privileges responsiveness over instinct. Through this lens, the "family of two" is revealed not as a domestic accident, but as a deliberate political choice to inhabit the world otherwise.

Salinas later revisited this tension between instinct and intimacy in her work *La nana* (The Nanny, 2025). This painting does not merely illustrate care; it stages an encounter between biological reflex and chosen tenderness, visualising an interspecies ethics where hospitality replaces inheritance. I suggest that here, care is no longer naturalised as a maternal destiny but articulated as a conscious practice—one that resonates with feminist critiques of reproductive essentialism and the deconstruction of the "maternal" as a purely biological category.

A similar dynamic emerges in the vernacular belief that cats, sensing their own death, voluntarily leave the home to spare their human companions. Salinas engaged with this narrative as a form of affective shelter (Salinas, 2025). Rather than seeking empirical validation, I argue she embraced this narrative as a meaningful structure through which grief could be processed without negating the animal's agency. This folk narrative reframes withdrawal not as abandonment, but as an autonomous and compassionate act. Within Salinas's lived experience, interpreting the animal's disappearance as an intentional gesture proved ethically consequential: it enabled her to mirror that agency in her own life, providing the impetus to confront the "symbolic death" of a domestic situation marked by systemic abuse.

While biomedical frameworks are essential—with studies confirming that ill felines seek secluded spaces as a mechanism of self-preservation (AAFP/AAHA Feline Life Stage Guidelines, 2021)—they do not exhaust the ethical dimensions of interspecies care. In this sense, I propose that feline withdrawal operates simultaneously as a biological response, an affective signal, and a symbolic act of sovereignty.

These moments collectively articulate a non-anthropocentric epistemology grounded in attentiveness rather than control. They demonstrate how animal behaviour, when approached as communicative rather than "instinctual noise," functions as a source of ethical orientation. For Salinas, this interpretation functioned as a subjective survival tool, allowing her to metabolise grief while reframing her own trajectory away from trauma and towards an insurgent autonomy.

The affective dimension of Salinas's experience with Tomachino can be understood as a form of interspecies emotional entanglement. While folk wisdom frames the disappearance of dying cats as a voluntary act of protection, this study contends that contemporary Affect Theory—specifically Ahmed's (2004) conceptualisation of emotions as 'impressions' that circulate between bodies—offers a more rigorous lens. I use framework to show that emotions are not private internal states but are produced through the very contact between subjects. Within this logic, Tomachino's illness unfolding alongside Salinas's own suffering is an instance of reciprocal affective exposure; their relationship reveals a shared field of affect in which distress and endurance are co-produced.

Such entanglements find a powerful aesthetic articulation in Salinas's visual work, particularly in her exhibition *En Morada*. Here, Chole emerges as a central figure through which maternal care is reimagined beyond human embodiment. In the painting *La nana* (The Nanny, 2025) (Figure 1), Chole is depicted with a woman's body, dressed as a traditional caretaker, attempting to feed a young Salinas beneath a storm-darkened sky. The composition stages a radical inversion: the non-human assumes the position of caregiver, while the human appears as the dependent figure.

Formally, the work is structured around a tense chromatic atmosphere of deep violets and muted greys. This palette resonates with Gage's (1993) observations on how specific colours produce 'suspended affective spaces'—environments where the chromatic intensity functions as the primary narrator of both loss and shelter. As Salinas notes, these tones do not merely signal sadness; they produce a suspended affective space where grief

and shelter coexist (Salinas, 2025). Within Feminist Visual Studies, anthropomorphism has often been mobilised as a critical strategy rather than a naive projection. In *La nana*, I argue that this hybridisation does not erase difference; instead, it foregrounds relational proximity while preserving the specific agency of the feline subject. This analysis argues that Salinas's anthropomorphic gesture operates less as a claim of human equivalence than as a visual language for articulating care across species boundaries.

**Figure 1**

Susana Salinas, *La nana (The Nanny)*, 2025, oil on canvas and wood, 35 × 28 cm. This work visualises feline agency as a form of maternal intercession, where the cat-human hybrid challenges patriarchal and biological definitions of care. Private collection. ©Susana Salinas. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.



This strategy places Salinas's work in dialogue with contemporary artists who have explored non-human agency. While Huyghe (2012) often situates animals within indifferent or autonomous ecosystems, I observe that Salinas operates within the intimate architecture of the domestic, focusing on affective reciprocity. Similarly, while Anne Lislegaard uses sentient non-human narrators to destabilise anthropocentrism through a distanced, uncanny aesthetic, Salinas's approach is resolutely embodied and grounded in the grain of lived experience.

In the field of contemporary visual culture, Salinas's work aligns with the 'critical animal aesthetics' theorised by Aloï (2011) I use this framework to show how the non-human presence disrupts art-historical hierarchies, emerging instead as a potent, agentive epistemic presence. The textured surfaces of her canvases do not merely represent the feline body; they evoke what Aloï (2011) describes as the 'material presence' of the animal in contemporary art—a concept that emphasizes the animal's irreducible reality over its symbolic use. By focusing on the specific grain of the fur and the intensity of the feline gaze, Salinas ensures that the cat is not consumed as a metaphor but encountered as a sentient subject that demands an ethical response from the viewer.

However, Salinas's dialogue with her predecessors is one of both resonance and departure. While her practice echoes Smith's (2003) engagement with corporeality, I argue that she deliberately moves away from Smith's mythopoetic register, anchoring her imagery instead in situated memory. Furthermore, she establishes a critical distance from the maternal allegories of Rego (1998)—where care is often depicted as a fraught entanglement of domination. In contrast, *La nana* proposes a horizontal ethics of shelter; a radical commitment that resists the logic of ownership and celebrates the 'minor' gesture of domestic survival as a form of political persistence. As Salinas reflects on the chromatic and emotional depth of *La nana*:

Both portraits show the scene of solitude, where even the sky is a little more tormented. They speak of moments of great sadness, of emptiness, with violet as an intense presence... The shelter is given by the nana, clearly represented by my companion—we are a family. (Salinas, 2025).

In this visual articulation, the painting functions as a theoretical site where care is de-naturalised. What we encounter is not an appeal to traditional kinship, but a radical remapping of the family—one anchored not in bloodlines, but in the relentless, everyday practice of affective labour and interspecies acknowledgement. I argue that for Salinas, this familial structure is a lived reality rather than a metaphorical device. As she states: "We are definitely a family of two... Chole has been a caretaker, always attentive, in forms that I can understand" (Salinas,

2025). Such statements underscore how interspecies bonds are symbolically generative, challenging entrenched hierarchies of gender and dependency by proving that care is a transversal force capable of reconfiguring the domestic sphere (See [Figure 1](#)).

The development of emotional bonds between women and their felines becomes particularly legible within the micro-practices of everyday life: shared rhythms and forms of bodily coordination that exceed verbal exchange. In Salinas's relationship with Chole, these practices constitute a dense field of interspecies communication, where care is not imposed but continuously negotiated through observation and repetition. I interpret Salinas's documentation of their daily routines not as mere habits, but as forms of 'attunement' learned over time. This is evident in her description of their shared domestic choreography:

We have a daily routine, from the moment we wake up and greet each other, we pet each other... By the way she observes her dish, I already know what I have to serve her or what is missing, for example, her meat pouch, and she accompanies me to the cupboard for it. She also has her own schedule along with mine for feeding; I go down to the kitchen to eat, and she is there also eating with me, I hear her eating her kibble while I am eating. (Salinas, 2025).

These rituals of co-presence—hearing the sound of kibble against the backdrop of a human meal—function as a non-verbal synchronisation. Knowledge here is not abstract; it is a sensory, situated form of expertise where the human learns to "read" the feline's requirements not through a position of mastery, but through a shared vulnerability. This daily choreography reinforces the "family of two" as an epistemically robust unit, where the cat's gaze acts as a relational compass, guiding the artist through the domestic landscape.

Beyond the mechanical nature of routine, what truly emerges here is a specialised mode of knowing. Salinas's understanding of Chole's requirements bypasses the logic of command, relying instead on a meticulous reading of somatic cues—posture, gaze, and hesitation—that serve as sophisticated communicative signals. This deep attentiveness embodies what multispecies scholars' term 'relational competence.' I define this concept, following the relational ethics of Haraway (2008) and Despret (2004), a form of situated expertise forged through the density of prolonged co-presence. It is a dual literacy where both human and non-human subjects learn to anticipate and respond to the other's specific needs, moving beyond formalised instruction towards a shared, embodied language of care.

Bedtime rituals further consolidate this shared grammar of affect, transforming the bed into a site of semiotic exchange:

At the moment of going to sleep it is also a wonderful ritual because she makes a meow, almost silent, like a secret. Then I pat the side of my bed, and she immediately climbs up, waits for me to lift the blankets to make her 'little nest', does a little turn and then arranges her back on my belly, stays in this position where I can hug her, and that is how we fall asleep, spooning. (Salinas, 2025).

Rather than spontaneous or instinctual, these practices are learned and mutually sustained. Affect Theory allows this study to frame such moments not as mere sentimental attachment, but as 'affective arrangements'—a term I use to describe the specific configurations in which human and non-human bodies enter into a rhythmic coordination. The near-silent vocalisation, the architectural preparation of the "nest," and the final shared posture enact a non-verbal syntax through which trust and consent are negotiated nightly. Crucially, I argue that Salinas experiences this bond as bidirectional; the feline is never a passive recipient of care but an active agent whose preferences dictate the domestic climate, ensuring that affective labour circulates as a reciprocal currency.

This reciprocity is most visible in the constant inversion of roles. While Salinas monitors Chole's health, Chole, in turn, disrupts Salinas's moments of emotional withdrawal through insistent tactile interventions—kneading her 'as if kneading bread' (Salinas, 2025). Such gestures act as sensory interruptions, pulling the human subject back into the immediacy of the present. I suggest that these exchanges do not signal dominance, but a dynamic of mutual responsiveness that transforms the home into an affective infrastructure. Here, affect ceases to be a private emotion and becomes a social force, echoing Ahmed's (2004) argument that emotions are 'performative': they shape our 'orientations'—the ways in which we turn toward or away from others—and physically align bodies within shared spaces.

Read through a queer theoretical lens, this relationship effectively destabilises species-based hierarchies of family. By prioritising minimal acts of contact—grooming, nuzzling, and shared stillness—Salinas proposes a horizontal configuration of kinship. These gestures acquire their political significance precisely because they resist translation into human language, operating instead within a purely embodied register that proves care is a transversal, more-than-human achievement.

These dynamics find an early visual articulation in the watercolour *Chole* (2012) ([Figure 2](#)). There is a quiet power in the way Chole's feline head crowns a human-like body in this piece, seated mid-air on a swing. By bypassing the need for realism, I argue that Salinas manages to stage a moment of 'affective suspension,' allowing the hybridity to speak of a kinship that is felt rather than merely observed. The swing evokes a blend of vulnerability and trust, while the hybrid body points towards a shared emotional register that does not collapse species difference, but inhabits it. Formally modest yet symbolically charged, the work suggests that long before

the explicit theorisation of post-human kinship in Salinas's later canvases, the foundations of this interspecies epistemology were already being quietly rehearsed through visual experimentation (See [Figure 2](#)).

### Figure 2

*Susana Susana, Chole, 2012, watercolor and pen on cotton paper, 30 × 20 cm. An early exercise in interspecies subjectivity, situating the feline companion as a silent interlocutor within a playful, yet ontological domestic space. Private collection. ©Susana Salinas. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.*



A slightly earlier piece, *Las féminas* (The Females, 2015) ([Figure 3](#)), offers a more visceral articulation of this shared subjectivity. Here, Salinas presents a nude female torso surmounted by the head of a cat, depicted frontally and stripped of narrative mediation. The absence of contextual markers intensifies the figure's exposure, positioning the hybrid body not merely as a physical presence, but as an epistemic proposition. In *Las féminas*, I argue that feline–human hybridity operates as a visual refusal of anthropocentric ontology; the artist's subjectivity is not simply "influenced" by the cat but is actively constituted through the feline kin. This resonates with Donna Haraway's (2008) notion of "becoming-with," where ethical transformation is not a metaphorical change, but a material result of sustained, reciprocal entanglements between species. Salinas's hybrid figure thus embodies a form of situated knowledge produced at the intersection of intimacy and shared fragility.

This refusal to simplify the animal aligns with Baker's (2000) critique of 'representational taxidermy'—a term I use here to describe art that freezes the animal into a dead, knowable, or purely symbolic object. By presenting the hybrid in *Las féminas* as a fractured, non-linear identity, Salinas avoids the trap of making the animal 'cute' or domestically subservient. Instead, she embraces what Baker (2000) defines as a postmodern animal aesthetic, where the feline presence remains partially inaccessible, preserving the animal's right to its own mystery and autonomy within the shared domestic space.

### Figure 3

Susana Salinas, *Las féminas (The Females)*, 2015, watercolor on cotton paper, 30 × 20 cm. This piece serves as a visual manifesto for post-human kinship, where the blurring of bodies represents a shared, situated identity. Private collection. ©Susana Salinas. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.



By merging the female body with a feline visage, Salinas simultaneously challenges patriarchal and anthropocentric constructions of femininity. The nude torso—historically overdetermined as an object of desire or idealisation—is here reclaimed as a site of interspecies alliance. The feline head, alert and perceptive, displaces the human gaze as the sole locus of meaning. In this sense, *Las féminas* articulates a feminist critique in which intuition and non-verbal attunement are reclaimed as legitimate epistemic resources. The work asserts that the artist's sense of self is inseparable from the perceptual intelligence of her companion, rendering visible the knowledge forged through long-term cohabitation (See [Figure 3](#)).

Through years of cohabitation, Chole has developed a role that Salinas elegantly captures in the metaphor of the 'thermometer.' This isn't just about being close; I interpret this as a specialised sensitivity where the feline body acts as a fine-tuned instrument, mapping out the invisible currents of emotional and physical states that circulate between them. As Salinas explains:

If something hurts in my body, she lies exactly in the area where I am injured, or if I am crying, she rests on my chest. If I am ill, she somehow knows the moment to approach me. I embrace this as something truly magical, like a blessing. (Salinas, 2025).

Such accounts invite a rigorous interpretation through Affect Theory, where emotional states are understood not as internal properties, but as relational forces circulating between bodies. I argue that Chole's responses suggest a form of somatic attunement—a non-discursive alignment of bodies—that transcends metaphor and enters the realm of interspecies communication. The cat does not merely react; she participates in an affective feedback loop, modulating her touch and presence in ways that actively contribute to the artist's emotional regulation.

Chole's perceptual acuity extends beyond the private dyad. Salinas notes that the cat selectively approaches certain visitors while withdrawing from others—a behaviour interpreted as an ability to discern "energies" (Salinas, 2025). Within the domestic logic, I recognise the cat as an agentive participant in a shared affective economy, where her "judgement" informs the human subject's orientation toward the outside world.

These dynamics find a devotional articulation in *Oración cascabel* (Prayer, 2018) (Figure 4). Reflecting on the work, Salinas notes:

The character is a girl with a prayer... praying that everything will be hopeful and fruitful. The wing of this character, of this prayer, is like a little angel—Chole transformed into a winged being. Her wings are the fur of Chole's character. It is deeply tied to companionship, to this sense of family. (Salinas, 2025).

**Figure 4**

Susana Salinas, *Oración cascabel* (Bell Prayer), 2018, oil on masonite, 120 cm. Here, Chole is transfigured into an intercessory agent, symbolising the cat as a winged guardian of the domestic sanctuary against external precarity. Private collection. ©Susana Salinas. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.



*Oración cascabel*  
Oleo / masonite  
120 cm de diámetro  
2018

In this piece, Chole is transfigured into an intercessory agent, a guardian presence whose very corporeality is rendered as protection. The wings, textured with feline fur, collapse the distinction between the biological body and the spiritual symbol, situating care as a sacred, materialist practice. I argue that rather than invoking a transcendence detached from the earthly, *Oración cascabel* anchors spirituality in the grit and softness of domestic intimacy. (Salinas, personal 2025).

The visual power of this intimacy is heightened by the meticulous rendering of the feline texture. As Livingstone (2002) explores in her work on the biology of seeing, the human visual system processes fine detail and luminance through specialised neural pathways that prioritise high-contrast textures—such as fur—to create a sense of tactile presence. By emphasizing these surfaces, Salinas ensures that Chole's guardian role is not just a symbolic metaphor but a sensory reality that demands the viewer's full attentiveness.

This reading aligns with contemporary scholarship on multispecies households, particularly the work of Kristine Hill (2024), who explores how cats and humans co-create meaning through shared signals and unique vocalizations. I use Hill's findings on 'interspecies intersubjectivity'—the capacity for mutual, non-linguistic understanding—to resonate with the philosophical framework of Despret (2004), who argues that animals and humans actively shape domestic life through mutual attunement. In the intimacy of Salinas's studio, this is not merely a linguistic curiosity, but a profound epistemic shift: the cat does not just inhabit the space, she actively participates in the semiotics of the creative process. This 'joint meaning-making' (Hill, 2024) demands a 'thinking-with' that reconfigures the artist's own presence, transforming the studio into a site of rigorous epistemic labour. Consequently, such joint meaning-making (Hill, 2024) reframes the home as a site of rigorous epistemic labour. Chole's presence in the studio is thus not incidental but constitutive: she is a co-participant in the production of Salinas's visual archive, acting as a feline epistemic anchor that stabilises the artist's creative process amidst external precarity (See Figure 4).

In the Salinas–Chole relationship, intimacy does not signal the erasure of boundaries but the cultivation of a shared space where difference remains vibrant and irreducible. Chole's refusal to become a mere vessel for

human projection challenges the persistent anthropocentric habit of treating non-human companions as mirrors of our own psyche; instead, Salinas's work advances an ethics of the 'not-us,' —a mode of relation grounded in an epistemic humility that respects the feline as a sovereign subject. Within this framework, I argue that Salinas adopts what may be termed 'critical anthropomorphism.' Rather than a naive attempt to humanise the animal, this strategy functions as a tactical gesture to destabilise the epistemic hierarchies that habitually render non-human agency invisible. As the artist insists: "I do not think Chole is humanised; she preserves her natural essence... as a huntress, as a curious being" (Salinas, 2025). Anthropomorphism here makes perceptible a form of subjectivity that is already present yet historically marginalised by the anthropocentric gaze.

Difference, in this context, ceases to be an obstacle to intimacy and becomes, instead, its very condition of possibility; a foundational gap that allows for a relationship based on respect rather than absorption. Within this space, communication unfolds through a co-created semiotic system—a "different code," as Salinas terms it, that is as precise as it is silent. She describes the nuances of this subtle communicative pact:

She also represents this communion that one can have with art, where there is a dialogue that is very special because it is a different code... I perfectly understand the way she addresses me with different meows—for example, when she is tired of affection, she meows in one way, and she also reacts by hitting gently with her paw. She doesn't bring out her claws, but she is saying: enough. (Salinas, 2025).

This exchange reveals that interspecies communication is less an act of symbolic translation than a manifestation of relational competence; it is, in essence, an affective literacy painstakingly developed through the sheer density of shared time. This shared grammar is not merely about proximity, however, as it also encompasses Chole's non-negotiable defence of her own solitude—a boundary that Salinas has learned to read with equal precision. As the artist acknowledges: "She is very much about respecting her own spaces, and she has taught me to respect them too" (Salinas, 2025). Through this lens, coexistence undergoes a radical redefinition; it ceases to be a matter of possession or domestic convenience and emerges, instead, as the ethical recognition of autonomy at the very heart of intimacy.

The art studio—the core of Salinas's professional identity—becomes the privileged site where this ethic materialises. Chole's quiet vigilance and spatial awareness signal an embodied understanding of the creative process:

She can see my drawings when I am working and when I use the floor as a stage to place my pieces—she circles around them but never steps on them. She respects them very much, and you can imagine how she understands and respects my work by herself... We have this way of preserving our home together: respecting spaces, times, rest, play, and work. (Salinas, 2025).

Within these walls, the studio is effectively stripped of its status as a purely human domain of authorship, transforming instead into a shared environment where Chole's presence does not interrupt artistic labour, but rather structures it. Her quiet attentiveness functions as an epistemic anchor—a stabilising force that sustains the very conditions under which creation remains possible in an increasingly precarious world. What ultimately crystallises in this space is not a blurring of identities into a singular fusion, but a rigorous, clear-eyed recognition of the other. I argue that Salinas's practice thus demonstrates how an artistic life can be woven through the delicate threads of dialogue rather than the rigid lines of control; it is a way of holding difference open, allowing two distinct lives to remain irreducible even as they become profoundly, and inextricably, entangled.

### **Feline kinship in visual culture beyond the human threshold**

In her most recent exhibition, *En Morada* (In a Home), Susana Salinas articulates a visual grammar of domesticity that has been profoundly reconfigured by the realities of multispecies cohabitation. Through a deliberate interplay of painting, sculpture, and tactile objects, the exhibition invites the viewer into a conceptual space where the home ceases to be an inert container; instead, it emerges as a living, relational entity—one shaped by the persistent currents of presence, vulnerability, and sustained attention. I define this domestic space as an 'affective ecology'—a term I employ to describe a dynamic system where emotions and social relations are not just internal states, but active forces that co-constitute the environment. These reimagining echoes feminist critiques that position the home as both a precarious refuge and a dynamic site of negotiation.

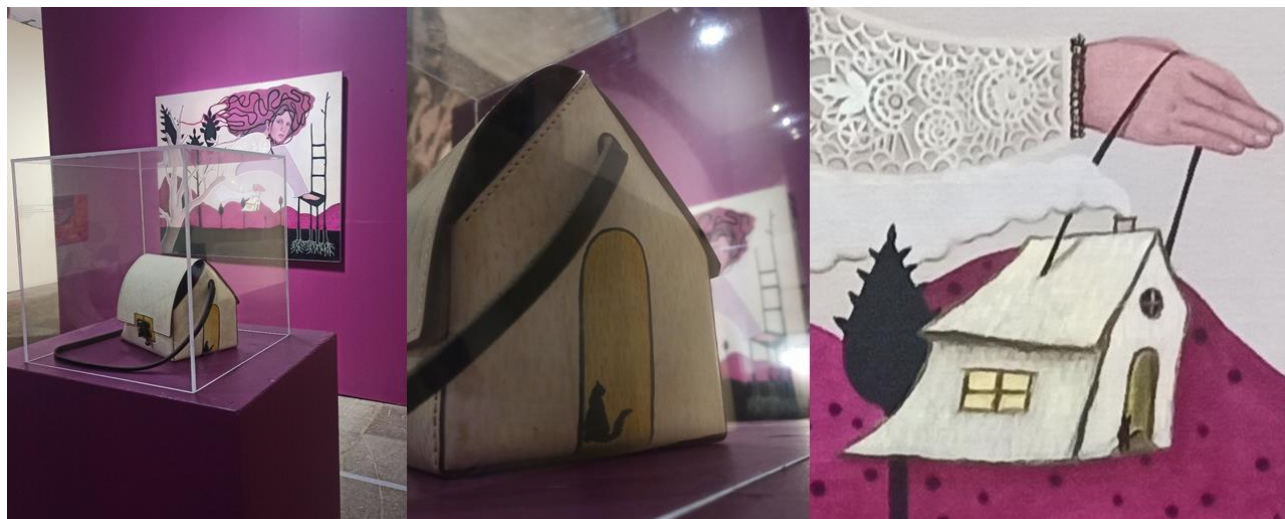
The formal strategies deployed throughout *En Morada* reinforce this reconceptualisation, with canvases framed like rooftops, suspended objects, and portable sculptural forms suggesting that home is something provisional, a reality continually reassembled through care. The leather "house-hat" or vessel (*Morada*, 2025), produced in collaboration with local artisans, exemplifies this logic; neither purely functional nor merely symbolic, the object operates as a site of convergence—simultaneously shelter, extension of the body, and mnemonic device. Its tactile materiality foregrounds the politics of care embedded in the acts of making and repair, effectively aligning domestic labour with the rigour of artistic production (See [Figure 5](#)).

This reconfiguration of the domestic sphere directly responds to Aloi's (2011) call for an aesthetics that challenges the 'human-animal divide.' I interpret the 'house-as-vessel' as a liminal space where this divide collapses, fostering the multispecies relationality that Aloi identifies as the core of a truly transformative animal

art. Through this vessel, I argue that Salinas does not simply house the animal; she creates a shared architecture of becoming.

**Figure 5**

*Susana Salinas, Morada (Home), 2025, leather bag (in collaboration with “La Cueva” leatherwork, 22 x 25 x 20 cm) and En Morada (In a Home), 2025, oil on linen (detail). This composite highlights the concept of the ‘house-as-vessel’, where tactile materials and feline silhouettes redefine the domestic sphere as a resilient, portable, and multispecies site of care. Private collection. ©Susana Salinas. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.*



There is a striking resonance between this resilient domestic assemblage and Tsing’s (2015) conceptualisation of survival within 'ruined landscapes'—a form of life that refuses the myth of isolation to embrace the messy and contingent entanglements of shared vulnerability. Salinas does not merely illustrate this precarity. In *En Morada*, she actively transforms the multispecies home into a rigorous laboratory of everyday survival—an improvised, ever-shifting refuge. It is a structure that holds firm precisely because it is fluid, providing a sustaining anchor in the midst of structural instability.

Within these works, Chole’s presence is neither illustrative nor anecdotal; instead, she inhabits the exhibition as a structuring absence-presence that animates the home through interspecies rhythms of watching, waiting, and withdrawing. This dynamic reframes domesticity as a site of profound ethical and epistemic production. Crucially, the work avoids the pitfalls of sentimental representation. Rather than idealising domestic intimacy, I argue that Salinas’s practice aligns with Baker (2000) insistence on the 'postmodern animal' as a resistant and unsettling force—one that troubles anthropocentric expectations by refusing to be a mere reflection of human desires. In Salinas’s paintings, the feline presence is not a passive decorative element; it is an 'active surface' of resistance that demands a different kind of looking, forcing the viewer to confront the animal as a sovereign subject with its own enigmatic agency.

This conception of the feline-guided home finds its most potent articulation in *De viaje-escaramuza* (Of a journey–Skirmish) and *Pensarencasa* (Think-at-Home) (Figure 6). In the former, Chole appears as a radical vehicle that carries the female subject, effectively reversing conventional hierarchies of agency; here, the cat is not transported, but transports. I interpret this inversion as a positioning of the feline body as both guide and container—a moving shelter that enables continuity amidst precarity. Meanwhile, *Pensarencasa*, a three-dimensional sculptural form, renders the home itself as a resilient, feminine vessel: compact, protective, and inherently resistant to collapse. Together, these works articulate a visual manifesto in which mobility, care, and resistance converge through the power of interspecies alliance.

Furthermore, Salinas’s practice reveals that within the domestic threshold, matter is never a passive surface but a vibrant participant in the ethics of care. This aligns with Bennett’s (2004) theory of 'vibrant matter' and 'thing-power,' which I use here to suggest that non-human entities—ranging from everyday household objects to animal bodies—possess an inherent material agency that acts upon, and alongside, the human subject. In *En Morada*, the "nest" is far from a mere collection of decorative items; it constitutes what I term an 'ecology of matter' (following Bennett, 2004)—a vibrant assemblage where the distributed agency of these non-human actants and the feline presence together configure a site of political and affective resistance against the grain of systemic instability (See Figure 6).

Crucially, these artistic gestures transcend representation; they enact a relational ontology. This framework—central to the work of Barad (2003) and Haraway (2008)—posits that beings do not exist as prior, independent entities, but emerge only through their mutual entanglement. Within this logic, every shared gaze and domestic

trace becomes evidence of a rigorous interspecies dialogue. By centring the cat not as a decorative motif, but as a co-creator of the domestic sanctuary, I argue that Salinas dismantles traditional hierarchies; and her work advances a feminist politics of intimacy where resilience is not heroic or monumental, but quiet, repetitive, and sustained.

### Figure 6

Susana Salinas, *De viaje-escaramuza* (Of a Journey-Skirmish), 2025, oil on linen, 200 × 150 cm, and *Pensarencasa* (Think-at-Home), 2025, celastic, 33 × 30 × 25 cm. These works collectively represent the feline as a vehicle for the self and the home as a resilient feminine vessel, culminating in a visual manifesto for interspecies resistance. Private collection. ©Susana Salinas. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.



To fully apprehend Salinas's contribution, her practice must be situated in dialogue with other multispecies artistic strategies. Artists such as Huyghe (2012) have decentralised the human subject by allowing non-human agents to occupy autonomous zones. In *Untilled* (2011–2012), for example, the dog 'Human' operates within an ecosystem that resists narrative control. Salinas, however, proposes a markedly different model of agency—one embedded not in open landscapes, but within the negotiated intimacy of the domestic 'nest'. I contend that Salinas's model insists on ethical transformation as something that occurs precisely through the friction and devotion of everyday cohabitation.

Similarly, Lislegaard's (2008) explorations of non-human perception foreground the alterity of animal worlds through voices and frequencies inaccessible to humans. While Lislegaard (2008) emphasises 'cognitive opacity'—the idea that the animal mind remains fundamentally unknowable—I argue that Salinas focuses on 'affective translation.' In her paintings, this translation is manifested through a shared sensory palette; the feline's specific chromatic sensitivity is not merely a biological fact, but a visual bridge. Her feline subjects do not function as alien oracles, but as epistemic anchors: embodied presences through which meaning and survival are recalibrated.

Unlike earlier modernist or surrealist appropriations of animals—often deployed as symbols of instinct or the unconscious—Salinas's cats resist allegorical flattening. They remain agents with preferences and refusals. This ethical refusal of mastery aligns her practice with contemporary scholars who argue that care, rather than control, must form the basis of interspecies relations. Her work demonstrates that domestic intimacy functions as a site of political resistance, particularly in contexts marked by structural violence and emotional exhaustion.

Ultimately, *En Morada* consolidates Susana Salinas's position within an international panorama of artists engaging with animals as companions who co-produce meaning. I interpret her visual language as an articulation of feminist resilience grounded in radical tenderness, where survival is collective and knowledge emerges through shared vulnerability. By foregrounding the cat as an active participant in artistic life, Salinas offers a compelling redefinition of kinship—one that is multispecies, elective, and profoundly ethical. This work affirms that interspecies intimacy is not an exception, but a necessary framework for reimagining art, care, and coexistence in a more-than-human world.

## The minor gesture as a transformative political agency

This article has examined the complex network of affective, symbolic, and epistemic relationships between the visual artist Susana Salinas and her feline companions, positioning more than four decades of interspecies cohabitation as a rigorous site of situated knowledge production. By interweaving contemporary visual practice, multispecies studies, and feminist epistemologies of care, I have demonstrated that everyday intimacy with non-human animals does not merely cultivate empathy but actively generates 'epistemic anchors'—forms of embodied knowing that both dialogue with and, at times, precede formalised theoretical frameworks.

Salinas's artistic practice operates simultaneously as an affective archive and as an ontological laboratory. Within her visual language, cats are neither ornamental figures nor symbolic surrogates; they emerge as agentic presences that shape perception and ethical orientation. I argue that her oeuvre articulates an aesthetics of interspecies affect in which lived experience and attentive observation converge. Through this constellation, this study has shown how sustained human–animal relationships participate in processes of emotional repair and creative resistance, offering a compelling alternative to anthropocentric and patriarchal models of domestic life.

Central to this argument is the recognition of the feline presence as an epistemic and ethical catalyst. In Salinas's work, cats function as anchors of relational knowledge—attuning the artist to rhythms of care and co-presence that resist instrumentalisation. These dynamic challenges dominant hierarchies that frame animals as passive or mute, and instead foregrounds companionship as a reciprocal, negotiated practice. Such an understanding aligns with feminist and post-human critiques that emphasise interdependence and the political significance of care as a mode of survival.

Situated within a global context of systemic violence and affective exhaustion, this study contends that radical tenderness constitutes a potent form of political insurgency. I align this practice with the transformative critiques of Preciado (2013), who identifies how contemporary bodies are disciplined by a 'pharmacopornographic' regime—a system where life and desire are managed through extractive technologies. In this light, I argue that Salinas's work represents a radical refusal of such paradigms; her 'nest' is not a site of consumption, but a space of resistance where tenderness functions as a subversive tool. Drawing on the affective ethics of d'Emilia and Coleman (2016)—whose manifesto resonates with Ahmed's (2004) conceptualisation of the cultural politics of emotion—I demonstrate that tenderness is a deliberate method of resistance enacted through a radical refusal of domination. This is not mere affection; it is what d'Emilia describes as a 'visceral respons-ability': a capacity to respond to the other through the body itself, proposing an ethics grounded in shared vulnerability against the commodification of life. Furthermore, I interpret this practice as a deliberate archival strategy. Following Cvetkovich (2003), Salinas's work proves that the most private feelings—the ephemera of interspecies cohabitation—are, in fact, the fabric of a collective political insurgency. Through Ahmed's (2004) logic of 'affective alignment,' tenderness functions here as an orienting force, transforming domestic intimacy from a private retreat into a site of profound political positioning.

Ultimately, this article argues that interspecies complicity is neither an aesthetic curiosity nor a private sentiment, but a radical ethical necessity. In affirming the epistemic value of living-with non-human companions, Salinas's artistic trajectory contributes to the reimagining of art as a site of resilience and relational knowledge. This trajectory aligns with what Braidotti (2013) defines as a post human ethics: a sustainable way of inhabiting the world through the recognition of our collective, multi-species dependence. In a world increasingly shaped by crisis, the insurgency of tenderness documented in her work offers a profound lesson: that the most enduring forms of resistance are often found not in grand gestures, but in the quiet, shared breath of a multispecies home.

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## AI disclosure

No artificial intelligence tools were used for data collection, analysis, or text generation in this manuscript.

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