

Bernardo Pinto de Almeida

Memories of the present

Isabel and Rodrigo Cabral in transit through Portuguese art

1. Context: life, trends, style, attitude

The 60s in Portugal have been considered by several art critics as a breakthrough decade. On the other hand, we should not forget that in his comprehensive survey on 20th century Portuguese art, José-Augusto França – for a long time the author of the only available work on that period in history – abandoned his studies at the end of the 50s, leaving the 60s and what they represented in the context of national art on hold. Whoever, in good conscience, approaches Portuguese art at the beginning of the 70s has to start by understanding the deep contextual and cultural significance changes that took place during those years: a substantial change closely connected to the transformations that had occurred in the previous decade, during which a completely new landscape in the field of practices and concepts in the art world had emerged in Portuguese art and culture, reflecting wider debates at a moment in which a new surge of globalization was secretly taking place.

One way or another the authors that approached that period all agreed on realizing that if there was something that could efficiently mark it that was precisely the event of a deep transformational period that would have been accelerated by a new generation of artists whose works suddenly appeared charged with the spirit of the first avant-garde movements new energy, which – as I have written before – doesn't quite account for all those multiple events. As I have equally explained before, the emergence of that generation was thus previously connected to the appearance of a new political consciousness and simultaneously of a new aesthetic consciousness that was now translated into a completely different approach to artistic practices.

Without professing the notion of *disruption* – that I have questioned a number of times and, as a consequence, the concept intimately related to that one of *avant-garde* emanating from the Hegelian-Marxist historiography – since the notion of *avant-garde*, referring to the art of the

first two decades of the 20th century was already worn out in those years and in that context – I should nevertheless stress that a profound change was happening then, one that was related to the transformations taking place since the 60s, when leading Portuguese artists from that generation imposed, internally and externally, a new protocol to the understanding of the *art thing*. Around that time they weren't interested anymore in being in synch with the outdated and inconsistent equivocal Portuguese modernism, for the most part of its specific examples, but rather project themselves onto a new order of understanding and thinking, that was taking place in the experimentations going on in the artistic international scene.

One has to accept that this modification, which was a long time in the making, reverberated – not in an obvious or illustrative manner but rather through subtle threads – the very same epistemological transformation that around that time had started to become obvious in the international art scene and which several authors have already mentioned. First of all as the result of the impact created by mass media communications which immediately translated into a more complex relation between high and low culture of which the Pop Art phenomenon – initiated in London and then transferred to the United States with a different meaning – was the most obvious result.

Also in the 60s, in Europe and in the States, another new aesthetic and theoretical orientation was progressively taking place and it questioned precisely the concept, asserted for a long time during the 20th century, of *avant-garde* and in so doing consequently atomized the Modernist aesthetic discourse – that had organized itself for many decades around the critical validity of that word – and progressively formulated another conceptual frame. A narrative that in turn defined significant new axes of understanding regarding the place and function of art as well as the meaning and form of its actual practices – public, institutional or market wise.

As I've mentioned before and I get back to it now “if something new had taken place – and indeed I believe that something radically new had happened then – it was precisely the fact that the artistic movements were no longer placed in the Modernist reasoning theoretical-ideological sphere yet without the need to deny it or even shut off from it in a reactive or conservative attitude that would consist in pretending to highlight any

given golden age that Modernity might have interrupted and that they themselves were coming to return to its previous dignity”.

At the same time the cosmopolitan and internationalist pattern that Modernism had forever wished for – but had never been able to attain because of political alliances and disagreements – was being fulfilled. So in those momentous 60s, and this should be underline, the passage from one situation to another took place, from one consciousness to another and, more particularly, from an idea and an aesthetic of form to an idea and an aesthetic of *attitude* (“When attitudes become forms” according to the expression used by Harald Szeeman to name an important exhibition). These deep transformations that took place in the field of arts crossed continents and resized market and geographic factors, namely the growing loss of European and, particularly, Parisian, influence and the increasing importance of North-American culture within the time-space sphere of big decisions.

In Portugal in the 60s – even if at the level of some understandable diminished exposure – a series of young artists’ work had gained an enormous visibility in the narrow art *milieu*: Ângelo de Sousa, Paula Rego, Jorge Martins, Alberto Carneiro, Álvaro Lapa, Ana Vieira, Lourdes Castro, Costa Pinheiro, Helena Almeida, João Vieira, Manuel Baptista, Joaquim Bravo, Jorge Pinheiro, José Escada, António Sena or João Cutileiro, amongst others. Nevertheless, this multiple group of artists had introduced a contextual change and for a number of reasons. On the one hand, because a lot of them heavily bet on leaving the country – and not even for strictly political reasons for the most part – but for the obvious aesthetic and sociological option of trying to show their work in new contexts.

That was the case for Jorge Martins, Escada and Manuel Baptista, that left for France, or that of Paula Rego and João Cutileiro who left for England where they studied and built their careers; and also those that, immediately in 1962, had been associated as a group under the cryptic acronym KWY divulging their activities from Paris and integrating in its midst Christo and Jan Voss.

This new affinity towards the international *scene* (where they reaped successes albeit relative ones) encouraged those who had stayed to pursue their experimentations with conviction. Some new exhibition circuits,

equally eager to show their work, were welcoming these statements, from the new galleries to the new ways of exhibiting, like the Biennials, that little by little started to create hosting spaces that were also backed up by a new generation of critical intellectuals like Rui Mário Gonçalves, Salette Tavares or Fernando Pernes, amongst others.

This new situation could not fail to have repercussions in the education for the arts. Indeed, many of those that stayed in Portugal – like Ângelo, Jorge Pinheiro or Alberto Carneiro, some of which had trained in international schools – tried to take ahead a reform of the old fashioned teaching methods that prevailed in the major schools. Meaning that, particularly in the case of Porto's Fine Arts School, the mood during those years was one of deep transformation experienced with euphoria at various levels. And even if those hadn't been able to transform the School completely, artists like the ones briefly united under the group Os Quatro Vintes (The Four Twenties) – António Quadros or Alberto Carneiro that had recently joined the school as teachers – had introduced significant alterations in the didacticism and exemplification that Carlos Ramos intelligent management knew how to integrate in the best way.

Thus, a new ambiance of artistic behaviors gained strength, also through independent and active cultural nucleus that, spreading out of the School, connected themselves to urban life by way of informal discussions in coffee houses (Majestic, São Lázaro), or in open gatherings harbored by Cooperativa Árvore and Cineclube do Porto, bringing together architects, critics, painters, poets and musicians, that little by little were leaving their mark in the city with a new cultural attitude.

This new lifestyle was becoming particularly attractive to a young generation of Portuguese that around the end of the 60s had emerged from a parochial and closed environment identifying themselves with the new trends and consumption habits that were suddenly entering the country, propagating its imagery. This was happening thanks to the growing media coverage of new alternative trends, lifestyles and type of relationships, generated on the skirts of the international metropolises and that Pop culture, especially from London, had strongly accentuated and was quickly echoing amongst us.

From Mary Quant's mini-skirt to Sylvie Vartan and Jonhie Halliday's songs, from the Beatles' and the Rolling Stones' music to sunglasses with metallic round frames, from flowery shirts to new hairstyles or to richly patterned dresses that fashion was promoting and magazines were increasingly divulging, it was a whole new look that was taking the stage promoting more cultural changes in a few years than any organized political movement had done in decades.

Like American and European youngsters, Portuguese youth couldn't resist the new consumption practices – that Pier Paolo Pasolini would harshly criticize during the 70s in his passionate column on *La Repubblica* – and that new mood, as paradoxical as it might seem, kept them curious about everything that touched and concerned Pop culture, spread out all over the new urban imagination, particularly the one channeled through art and cinema. That consumer society on the rise hosted in trendy shops – from fashion boutiques to music record stalls – showcased the signs of a new youth culture, more open-minded and liberal, fed on strong images that echoed amongst us like an unexpected novelty to the older generations, against which the new generation was in a collision course. From Black Panthers to Bob Dylan, pop culture was turning everything into a visual icon and thus disseminating its values.

Also, little by little, Goddard's or Antonioni's radical cinema made their entry into the film club circuit promoted by students and conquered an audience that also rushed out to buy the Rolling Stone's latest record or attend a brief performance by the Living Theater.

Some of those that were already into the habit of travelling – because they had the required financial means by way of their earnings through social or work status – were the ones in particular bringing in the enthusiastic news of that kind of smooth youth revolution that, long before May 68, set the stage for the social, cultural, political and economic transformations that would allow for a new socio-aesthetic model that came to be called Post-Modernism, and that brought the big town closer together thanks to these new habits.

Likewise when – after four decades of dictatorship – the fall of the Portuguese already decaying corporate regime took place under the disorderly and anarchic pressure that became known as the Carnation

Revolution – in a way a *pop revolution* as well – the youth that recognized itself in this messy outbreak mixed up all the signs coming out of it: the long hairdos with their protest songs, the bell-bottomed jeans with their interest in politics, the left sympathizers wearing leather jackets like young New York rockers, unexpected fusions cross-cutting throughout the whole of society and its political and social practices. It was the generation of Marx and Coca-Cola children, as Goddard called it, one that some more watchful European academics, like Herbert Marcuse or Henri Lefebvre, amongst others, were quick to understand outside of a strict Marxist sociological frame which they were moving away from.

That was the context of this widespread transformation that affected Portuguese culture during the transition between those two decades and also what would leave a deep mark on the new local artistic practices in their new relationship with the international context whose ways they are still trying to properly integrate within the frame of the Portuguese history of culture.

2. The ballad of objects: echoes from Pop culture

In the field of arts these processing forms were – one way or another – historic and sociologically inevitable because they coincided with a deep mentality change that the aftermath of war had brought upon Europe with its new patterns of a consumer society through which the new economy had answered the dramatic situation of the European crisis and, accordingly with the progressive hegemony that had come from the North-American cultural patterns, that had easily made their way through an impoverished and devastated Europe.

Like I wrote before, “since Modernism had reappointed painting and sculpture to the restrictive dimension of an art and culture elite, after the effort Modernity had made to make it more democratic, it was only ‘natural’ that before that cultural model’s crisis – with its frailties and limitations exposed by WWII – this rebellion would start by causing the demise of the modernist thought and gesture with an accurate gunshot that would definitely turn it into past history”. Like Johanna Drucker mentioned, “Warhol used merchandise like an icon, he turned commodities into icons thus reducing the value of an artistic image to the crudeness of the mass produced object’s value which couldn’t be redeemed in terms of the aesthetic content ‘myth’ that had validated Picasso’s work or the parody of found objects and designating techniques that had turned Duchamp’s activity into a success”.

The famous interpretation developed by Walter Benjamin (1936) regarding the role of photography at his time in history – almost prophetically defined as the *age of mechanical reproduction* – would become an unavoidable thought that, although without really pretending to do it, foreshadowed the future collapse of Modernism as an historic form by announcing the coming of an art for the masses that mechanical reproduction alone would make possible, with the inevitable loss of the aura.

Pop was thus the ‘art current’ – if this designation even then made any sense – that better than any other knew how to correspond to Benjamin’s prophetic intent. It presented itself at last, without any prejudice, as an art practice that was clearly looking for the integration outside the elite circuit, admitting to be a happy consequence of the *mechanical reproduction* which Benjamin had mentioned before WWII. “An object is a fact, not a

symbol”, wrote John Cage in his famous 1961 text on Rauschenberg, reviewing the artist’s exhibition of his first *Combine Paintings* in New York.

That was after all the new litany – which I’ll call the ballad of objects – Pop culture was introducing, finally assimilating, without modesty or hesitation, and even with a fearless and naïf democratic enthusiasm, the emerging imagery of low culture to the intentions of classical art. This was in fact a challenge to all artists and it had to be meaningful in Portugal and to all the young Portuguese artists coming into their own at the time.

In Portuguese art, since the mid-60s, Pop had already conquered some passionate affinities. Sá Nogueira had discreetly brought from London a sense of urban realism that walked away from the big themes and Nikias Shapinakis had started – with a series of portraits he had named *For the study of Melancholy in Portugal* – to get close to a certain poster like aesthetics, very close to Pop Art. Likewise certain works by Jorge Martins, like others by René Bertholo and Lourdes Castro, formally closer to the French Nouveau Réalisme, conveyed a taste for urban imagery and didn’t show much interest in the great pictorial themes. Or, with greater consistence, Cruz Filipe whose use of photography equally touched the core of the Pop question.

This new feeling – which one could say aimed at quietly framing the *memories of the present* that in different ways ran through all of European and American art – hadn’t found in Portuguese art a consistent form of making itself visible because it was confronted with the country’s cultural reference frame, one still defined by a social-economic development based on an agrarian regime. Like Boris Groys mentioned before, talking about art in the USSR before the Perestroika, there were no requirements there for a Pop Art since, to a certain extent, Socialist Realism exhausted the figurative form on the representation of the heroes of regime and nobody would care to see portraits of Marilyn or Elvis in Russia, inside or outside its borders. So was the case amongst us.

Actually, no popular figure – from music, cinema, art or politics – had enough charm, and even less so the typical visibility of the star-system, in which the representations made abroad (Mao, Elvis) were based. Apart from that, the visual culture emerging from the consumer society was still

relatively modest in Portugal to convey the typical shapes of a Pop Art imaginary supported by the national situation. It was the case then that the Pop imagery couldn't have had, at the time, direct forms of reference in Portugal's typical cultural elements and so could only happen through the direct import made by those that had studied abroad – Batarda and his series around comic strips, but also Emília Nadal, whose cans with packaged slogan were a direct reference to Warhol's, or further still Clara Menéres – or in indirect quotes like the ones mentioned before.

Thereby, only at the beginning of the 70s would a new generation of artists come to integrate such elements, particularly in the later assimilation of a certain type of multicolored figuration, often of psychedelic hints that brought them closer to graphic design. What happened for example with Eduardo Nery whose color shapes and figurations projected in space indicated a visual approach to such patterns; or, also, with sculptor João Machado whose later involvement in graphic design would bring forth a series of Pop posters of great plastic invention. And, particularly, with António Palolo, a young artist from Évora who emerged with paintings of Pop shudder, with direct psychedelic references that were then appearing on the images of the movement's second generation of artists.

To these we should add another example, in its own way quite exceptional and clearly set apart from the others, that of José de Guimarães who was perhaps the one that came closer to Pop Art, as I have endorsed before. And, thus, since he certainly was the one that most absolutely integrated, from his first pieces of work and in his construction method, the most obvious questions of the movement: using popular images for mechanical reproduction techniques, from serial to industrial production forms, to the direct and indirect integration of elements connected to production and consumption. With few exceptions, these were the main echoes of Pop Art in Portugal right at the beginning of the 70s.

3. Present memories: Isabel & Rodrigo Cabral

And so Rodrigo and Isabel Cabral's work is clearly integrated in this process under which it must be perceived. A body of work that – truth be told – has yet to be studied and collected at the museum and historiographical level it should, given the relevance of its contribution.

Both young students at Porto's Fine Arts School they belonged to a generation of artists that, right at the beginning of the 70s, benefited from that well informed teaching that I've mentioned before, guaranteed by the presence at the School of the likes of Ângelo, Jorge Pinheiro, Alberto Carneiro, but also from the cultural environment that I've mentioned previously and, above all, from the more and more active presence of the artists from the 60s generation in the Portuguese cultural and artistic context.

During that intensely creative and experimental period, artistic activity in Porto had become relatively substantial keeping up with the tradition of being quite independent from Lisbon, at a time when new and relevant galleries opened their doors – like Zen/111 or Alvarez Dois – and others which at times had a short life span. Such galleries started welcoming this new generation of artists that were also applying for Biennials, namely the one organized by Fundação Cupertino de Miranda in 1972 (whose poster was designed by Isabel) which brought to light a series of young artists.

At the same time, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian – then standing in as a replacement for an inexistent Office of Culture – regularly showcased updated images of international artists and supported the development of Portuguese art. The exhibitions of English art – of which Gulbenkian had a very good collection due to its strong connections to England – among which stood out the exhibition of Hockney engravings, left a deep impression in the this young generation of artists, just like the informed teaching of the artists that were now their teachers and the frequent exhibitions of the previous generation as well as the ensuing debates.

The opportunities for greater openness – brought about by the so called “primavera marcelista” (the political and cultural “spring” under the last Prime Minister of the Estado Novo historic period, Marcelo Caetano, from

1968 to 1974) that preceded the end of the dying and corrupt regime initiated by Salazar – also favored that mood. And it was particularly favored by another circumstance, which I've already mentioned before but which hasn't still been pointed out to its fullest relevance, that of Porto being far from the regime's cultural traps and procedural regulations which allowed artists and intellectuals the possibility to venture into other types of more experimental aesthetic connections.

A new generation of young artists, which included João Dixo, Pedro Rocha, Dario Alves, Carlos Carreiro, Maria José Aguiar, Fátima Martins, Graça Morais, Maria Luís and, obviously, Isabel and Rodrigo Cabral, to quote the most significant ones that emerged from the Porto's Fine Arts School.

They would soon be joined by the slightly younger Silvestre Pestana, Fernando Pinto Coelho, Albuquerque Mendes or Gerardo Burmester – some of which teamed up under names like the Puzzle Group – that brought into the art world at the time a new sensitive understanding and a new aesthetic flavor that ran through different genres, from video art to performance, from photography to installation, from sculpture to painting. If early on Carlos Carneiro took the path of his own imagination – very oneiric and pop – artists like Pedro Rocha and Fátima Martins revealed clear influences from the London School, while Maria José Aguiar took the risk of a more bold and peculiar adventure which deserves to be studied urgently.

Thus Isabel Cabral (that at one point went by the name of Maria Cabral) and Rodrigo Cabral's creative paths started by being close, which was only natural given they went to the same school and that later they would become a real life couple.

Because such paths weren't absolutely coincidental they should be analyzed separately before they can be seen as an ensemble with its special bond, from 1987 onwards, the moment the two of them became a team, one of the very rare formed in the field of Portuguese art and one that has had to this day a long and exceptional duration.

Looking at the pieces from that first period, especially those from 1972 onwards, Maria Isabel Cabral's works carry a delicate plastic presence that brings them close to the experimentations that – around those years – were

being carried by Palolo, with great critical and market acceptance, found between stylized figurations and a surprising stylized and hard-edge synthesis of color and shape which incorporated that penchant, suggested at first by Frank Stella, that would later bring color to the American minimalism when transposed to painting.

The use of color was vivid, unexpected, and suggestive as it was the case of Maria José Aguiar's paintings created around those years although in a different manner. But here, without any aggression, rather floating between different shades of rose, violet, emerald green, whites and thus moving away from that panoply of dark colors, shades of grey or dark green still very much in vogue (and almost mandatory) in the Porto School, where only Ângelo, in those days, truly was an exception with a palette that didn't shy away from experimenting freely with the whole gamut.

But what stands out more vividly, on the subject of her references, and precisely by the closeness to the hard-edge cut-out shapes, is precisely a subtle echo from Jorge Pinheiro's paintings, also a teacher at the School, whose abstract geometries produced at that time, reduced to very precise areas, can be sensed as referential in the paintings that were then starting to appear by this young artist.

Although in these – beyond those almost cut-out shapes with their rigorous exact lines – one can always feel the emergence, in a strong tone that signals their belonging to another formal family, of the delicate feminine fondness for figurations which in their voluptuousness almost evoke the frenzy of Aubrey Beardley's whimsical drawings.

From this first and very personal record, Isabel Cabral's paintings would move on to more figurative stages, developed all along the 70s, incorporating precise figurations of the human shape right at the beginning of the 80s, with works such as "Saturação" ("Saturation") or "A outra janela" ("The other window"), both from 1983, in which the urban images appear normally associated with signs of a kind of exhaustion from that fascination and lose the appeal they once had.

Regarding these figurations one could maybe talk about a disruptive pop, disenchanted, keeping all the same a certain visual allegiance to the poster image trend, but already transpiring some references of disenchantment, or of distanced irony, mixed together with some melancholy, without ever

abandoning the sense of a personal form of expression, lyrical, and without going into the hedonist inhumanity of some American pop.

From the mid-80s and until the end of the decade, her painting will revolve more and more around small everyday life situations, like in “Gasolina” (“Gasoline”) or “Paisagem” (“Landscape”) (both dated from 1986) with their photographic suggestive framing in which, either in “Paisagem” or “Retrovisor” (“Rearview mirror”), a reflection on a glass and again in a car rearview mirror offer a reference to a space situated outside the painting suggesting in both an idyllic landscape that the paintings can no longer contain.

“Porta aberta” (“Open door”) (1986) will come curiously closer to a kind of landscape that evokes Hockney’s, which in time became even closer because of the visual simplicity with how it relates to daily life, opening up to the possibility, unfortunately soon to be cut short, of a figuration rarely seen in Portuguese art and which was taking an unexpected breath in Isabel Cabral’s paintings.

Contained light images reduced to a minimum of visual elements, seducing us with their efficiency, be it a door knob, a mirror, a rearview mirror, and the mere suggestion of some kind of human presence give these paintings by Isabel Cabral a remarkable quality, a quality of contemplative silence, with their graphic depuration in a scale of visual potential ignored amongst us and a possible post-pop character exit for figurative work in which the proximity to Hockney was more than a purely formal contamination.

Likewise we see the emergence in Rodrigo Cabral’s painting of strong signs of a peculiar practice. Arising from a safe relationship to material abstraction – that at the end of the 60s was adopted by some painters from the Porto School in an open dialogue with a certain Spanish abstraction – Rodrigo stood out thanks to the use of strong, sensual – even bold – colors.

In fact, colors and gestures that went beyond that contained fondness for the volume of the matter. Thus we have a surprising and even unexpected object-painting from 1972 – “Sem título – Objecto experimental” (“No title – Experimental object”) – that gives us the exact perspective of how far his project aspired to get at the time.

Not just painting anymore, nor exactly sculpture yet, but somehow referring to both by placing itself in the ambiguous level of an *objectualism* that Portuguese art has barely knew, this significant work creates a strong poetic and plastic spatialism that opens up to new perspectives and placed its author at the level of a very advanced investigation regarding the means of differing the pictorial space, far beyond what was the custom practice in Portuguese art, with rare exceptions like that of Noronha da Costa. And that somehow was a reference – albeit an abstract one – to the notion of objectual space that had been experimented with by Peter Blake, back in the 60s, in the context of London's Pop art scene.

Moreover, we should make clear that during this period the activity of most of these artists built an unexpected bridge unto English art, which hadn't happened before, when most references and dialogues were established with French or Spanish art. This was very likely due to the close contact with a generation of teachers that had been through London, of which we can point out Ângelo or Carneiro, that brought with them quite different information. During this period of time Rodrigo's pictorial work developed other spatial possibilities, based on the experimentation around cut-out shapes and, particularly, in the exit from the two-dimensional plane towards the outside. Something that although still contained within the limits of painting was finding its way towards the unexpected field of an approach to objectuality which – as I referred previously – had almost no tradition amongst us. But also – in the process of getting rid as well of the aforementioned obscurantism, typical of Portuguese art, and particularly Porto's art, around those years – he was getting closer to a strong use of color. At the same time he was abandoning the gesture or even the tendentiously informal way with which it started, opening up to a new type of plasticity.

Bright reds, blues, yellows, monochromatic plain backgrounds or abstract stylized shapes of vegetable reference were in the first years of the 70s the component parts of this work without any other meaning than that of painting itself but of great, enormous even, visual intensity and a strong sense of visual experimentalism. A process which was free at last from its debts towards that fondness for Informalism that had dominated much of European and Portuguese art during the 60s and which, in Portuguese art, prolonged itself beyond its due historic limit of viability. Also the new

cultural contexts could no longer relate to it, since it had been born out of the tragic post-war era.

Rodrigo's work was then rather situated in an experimental level that was coincidental with some of the most advanced American and European art of the time, with which his work was actually in a properly historic dialogue, which makes it even more incomprehensible not to find it in museum collections that were dedicated to this period whose census is still to be made. The memory of 70s Portuguese art goes inevitably through his work and history will end up acknowledging it even if that record is still to be completed.

From 1976 onwards, a series of works conveying a new figurative taste – usually referring to indoor spaces – started a new phase in Rodrigo Cabral's paintings. Bright lit indoors, highly simplified, show us the typical taste of a new style of urban life that democracy had provided to the generation that most fully could embodied it. In fact, at a deeper level, those almost sociological records refer to a contamination – deeply contemporary to the art of the time – between the images of painting and the images of architecture. This would come to be further developed in a latter series of drawings, also from 1976, whose titles – “Habitação Um, Direito” (“Dwelling One, Right”) – bore a significant allusion to urban life, or even the inside of urban apartments – open to a surprisingly figuration of bodies, either children's or adult's, that reflected an ability to take painting to a level of expressive signaling of daily life.

However the works from the following years and until the end of the decade would abandon this lightness and the brief sense of notation to dive deep into more oneiric dimensions, marked by the search of a climate of absurdity that made itself visible in works like “Janela” (“Window”) or “Balão” (“Balloon”), both dated from 1978.

A deep change though was to take place around 1980 one which a work titled “Tilt!” would announce. The artist resumed – with a sense of irony – the complex Velazquian space, almost in the fashion of Arroyo or *Equipo Cronica* in their appropriation of images from painting – an artist he was very close to – and, instead of the genial Spanish painter's portrait, he placed a truthful self-portrait, holding a camera in his hand, photographing the scene.

The scale of the painting is enormous and signals a brilliant intuition when without ever leaving the canvas inscribes in it a notion of the presence of photography, fundamental to contemporary thought, inevitably in the making. Exploding in the top right corner of the painting, in bright red and in a vivid poster like typography, the label – “Tilt!” (evoking Lichtenstein’s visual language), closes this excellent contribution to a rare testimony of Portuguese Pop art.

Since then onwards, and until the end of the decade, Rodrigo’s work would use references to images of Art History or Portuguese culture into his field of intervention, with more or less irony, but keeping itself faithful to a Pop art that communicated from afar, for its almost candid irony, with that of Tom Wesselman.

Likewise, some objects constructed during the 80s fill in this coherent approach to a transformation operated within the habits of Portuguese painting, remaining however in an area of critical twilight that the artist’s discreet temperament only would have helped to reinforce since they as well as we would have deserved a different destiny.

4. Two artists, one collective

In 1987, Isabel and Rodrigo Cabral take the decision, unheard of amongst us, to work collectively on the painting and sculptures they would develop from then on, without any mention of an individual authorship.

Before anything else this new decision should be carefully viewed in all its consequences and even in its contextual singularity. When building their collective – because a collective it is and not a group like Puzzle or even before them Grupo Acre, Os Quatro Vintes or KWY with different purposes but all of them very important to Portuguese art – the two artists clearly took on a collective identity, with a strong political sense, but one which kept in its denomination the identification of both names. Thus, while preserving the identification of each other, they assert nevertheless the work as being achieved collectively by their own accord, as if the relationship they had in life was being fused together in art. It is, in that sense, an absolutely unique case.

The work accomplished by the collective diverged quite significantly from what their individual work had been and thus opened itself to new meanings, moving away from what they used to do individually and creating new visual atmospheres. If we can say that in this group of paintings there is a certain sense of landscape, it's a fact that they show also the two moving away from the typical Pop connection they had pursued in their individual work, prevailing instead a more significant approach, more pictorial, less defined by drawing, creating a third path when compared to the previous work.

We are now in the open field of free figuration, simplified, quick, uncommitted, open to the suggestion of random notes (even if they really are not that random) in which the simplified forms, reduced to small elementary shapes, of the alphabetic kind, run through spaces of cartographic invocation and inscribe themselves inside successive screens that generate new shapes.

A little bit similar to the evolution followed by the paintings of Sonia Delaunay in her day, one remote possible reference, or more recently those of Alan Davie whose way of mapping pictorial spaces was close to this one but without really moving into the field of resemblance and much less influence. It is, on the contrary, a question of a subtle affinity or of a

procedural kinship, a search for relationships that respond to each other in the singular distance of each project.

Festive shapes, almost playful in character, whose first experimentalist was certainly Miró, under the blazing Catalan sun, but that in this case are applied in disseminated fashion over the canvas, in an *all over* distribution, motifs that remind us of those found in folk or even ethnic decorative patterns. Signals that live mostly of color connections or of the simultaneous presence of highly simplified shapes – if not almost archetypal – like circles, spirals, rectangles, triangles and squares, but without a precise geometric demarcation, rather floating in the eve of almost-shapes, set free in the space of the canvas and reinforcing their intensity as such.

They are in fact *shapes for nothing*, reduced to little signals of an almost organic nature, that rather randomly populate the space of the frame obeying dancing rhythms and wandering around in painting suggestions which, in fact, lead back to a primitive matrix with somewhat enigmatic references to ancient, anthropological records or to signs of Ancient Egypt or Mayan or Aztec traditional ornamental shapes... and to local popular roots.

In their simplicity one could recognize them as emerging shapes of a tribal urban regime, with a resemblance to graffiti, even if they require an elaborate fracture and a deep knowledge of materials and art history. But despite their brief figurative notes this painting is more affiliated to abstract patterns. And what makes it obviously more curious is, from the start, the way these little shapes, that are born from painting, transpose themselves, from early on, to the three-dimensional plane of sculpture that the collective put regularly into practice from the start, despite the fact that both came from a typical painting education.

They started by applying these small shapes over long, slim canes that ended up crossing each other like lines, somewhere in space, and that could either be laid down on the ground or eventually suspended in the air, generating pictorial connections to the places in which they were inserted.

Those sculptures too were supported by an elaborate drafting principle and were, in their intention as much as in the final form they took on, of a highly metamorphic nature, thus evoking in the viewer the desire and even

the meeting with the possibility to rebuild, reorganize or replace them in space, according to a playful principle conveyed from the beginning by their forms as if these were part of the process.

If, as we've seen, these pieces echo a traditional quest for simple alphabetic shapes, almost ethnical even if urban, as I mentioned before, capable of elementary communication – when retaking archetypical elements like the stain, the circle, the serpent, the sun, etc. that started maybe with Miró, ran through COBRA or Nikki de Saint-Phalle and proceeded later in Alan Davie's pictorial and alphabetic incorporations, along a line in which we can also place artists like José de Guimarães – also because they aspire to an almost direct connection.

This is why the perfect place for these pieces would be public spaces, even large outdoor spaces, preferably squares or gardens, where their playful presence would tend to establish connections of a quick and highly communicative visual empathy. That is the case of a work titled “Árvore-Pássaro” (“Tree-Bird”) (1991), in which through the simplified elements, evoking birds, and the light structure, suggesting the branches of a tree, the artists were capable of inscribing a playful relation to the garden where the piece was set for a while. Actually, the great vocation for this type of work, either because of their structure or their communication simplicity, as well as for their visual lightness, is to occupy public spaces, developing positive connections to the surroundings, both natural and human, somehow helping to redesign the landscape and the space in which they are placed.

In fact, these clear scale shapes with their tridimensional sculptural presence, charge the space – be it indoor or outdoor – where they are inserted with what could be called a *presence of painting*, that being to a large extent the way this visual tradition operates, clearly in tune with a utopic conception of the urban sphere.

This happens too because these shapes are first born as pictorial – and not only because of the use of color which is the least of the reasons – since their very constitutive elements arise from a figuration that was originally pictorial and are still in that more or less recognizable level (small shapes, small figures, color spots, etc.), and apart from anything else appear first in the paintings. Thus, in the way they stand out against the backdrop, natural

or urban, they charge it with a pictorial meaning, as if these same backdrops were converted into canvas' allegories.

“Crescente Dourado” (“Golden Crescent”) (1992) is a good example of this aesthetic purpose. A huge piece, 140 meters in height, stands up, made of wood, paper, resin and metal, painted with bright colors that delineate simple elements. From that bigger piece, comes out an extension that holds in suspension a Moon crescent.

The whole stands out against the landscape in such a way that, seen against the sky, or framed by a massive vegetal background, further afar, the shapes are inscribed as if over a canvas. It's simply a kind of orphic joy, happy, like a body in the sun, aspiring to the eternity of the moment. That is its time and place. Just like that of painting, that exists only when we look at it.

However the scale gives it a fundamental dimension which should be noted. As it gets bigger – I'm thinking, for example, of the installation “Espiral de Ouro I” (“Gold Spiral I”) (1994) – the amplification inside the space tends to subdue it and in a more sovereign way which is not merely quantitative but first and foremost *expressive*, gaining a different sculptural dimension. More dense and enigmatic, but without abandoning in its essence the previous formal vocabulary, it expands nevertheless its plastic and visual meaning and gains a new *presence*.

From 1997 onwards, the works of these two artist united under this collective have come to acquire a progressively stronger sculptural meaning – autonomous from the paintings they produced simultaneously – by abandoning the elementary references that brought them closer to the pictorial construction I mentioned. Instead, they adopted the free exercise of more pure and purified forms – cones, threadlike shapes – with the metal covering and the use of bright colors giving it a new spatiality.

This is the case, for example, and to choose a significant piece, of a work like the one titled “Origem” (“Origin”) (2006), with a particularly outstanding spatial presence, with its sculptural dimension denying the previous ties to painting and opening up to a new type (or a new way) of space presence and, immediately, in the relationship to the body of its viewer. In this case, given its scale, the piece alters the connection to the space, from the viewpoint of the spectator.

With the change in scale, it's the very symbolic operation of the work that changes, paving the way to a whole new horizon and plastic ambition. It would be rather interesting that at least one of these works would find a way of fulfilling their large scale presence in a public space, where it would certainly fill in the purposes of *public art* which a series of the collective's special projects has managed to suggest.

A brief text written by the artists in 2007 sets the record straight, with great clarity, on the deep meaning (and even the philosophical and existential quality) of their research. They wrote:

“Now we have established only the direction of movement and we have a feeling the path is already drawn: We like the way history is established, we don't feel coerced or responsible by the need to save the species. It's not the written or spoken words that define the shapes but rather these that determine the words; from silence comes action, emptiness gains meanings that question us; the elementary emerges as the essential.

Thus, these sculptures are instruments that register each inner moment, quantifiers of the space they in a way give a name to and stand out as precarious marks of our walk, ephemeral memories of our ancestral connection to landscape, natural or urban, under the guise of a need for playfulness, abandoning space. The matter they are now made of simulates thus the eternity to which they are not meant for.

They are fleeting objects that connect us to the surrounding reality, questioning it. They are almost like notebooks where thoughts run one after the other, loose notes that we organize towards somewhere... monuments to the future, clocks of time.”

We could hardly synthesize any better the deep meaning of this work...

Bernardo Pinto de Almeida

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