

The Line and the Outline

Emília Ferreira: What is the founding element in your work? Drawing or colour?

Pedro Calapez: If one thinks in historical terms, the first works are drawings, but drawings that have a structure similar to painting. They are not the founding drawings for painting nor for any other works, study drawings... They have nothing to do with the idea of the drawing as a concept. They are drawings that come out directly onto the paper as if they were a painting. However, in that sense I started out with drawing just as I could have started with painting, but in fact drawing makes sense, not only because of the initial training I had and which placed great stress on drawing, but also because of the studies

I did in the seventies with Sá Nogueira, on the Bauhaus colour schemes and colour contrasts, on the exercises proposed by Johannes Itten. Shall we say that the colour side was latent, perhaps? In the early eighties there is a material that gets privileged treatment, which is graphite, and so all the works started like this. But it is necessary to clarify this issue about what is drawing and what is painting, in the sense that for me they were just ways of expressing an idea on paper.

How do you start a project? Do you have a common modus operandi or does it vary from case to case?

I've worked a lot in series, and there naturally are titles of works that enunciate other series. However, the transitions between series are often carried out through interpenetration; so during the development of the series there are works that enunciate the next ones and so at a certain moment one might ask why there is one that is called "moments" and another called "place", because there are similarities and areas of connection, which really do not typify the series of works through their titles. But there are sets of concerns that have to do with the structure of what one is doing, of an idea that one wants to study and think about how it will be turned into a work done in a certain way. This, to some extent, typifies sets of things that I do. In that sense there are series of works, and if we take a look at the nineties, for example, we see there is great insistence on producing more monochromatic works, which are not really monochromatic because there is a lot of texture in the paint, there is a furrowed drawing... In the nineties those backgrounds become more colourful, and the drawing is there sometimes. Other times it disappears, but it took almost five or six years to disappear. For example: the first time I used those more colourful backgrounds was around 1996/97, and in 2003 some works still appear in which the drawing is mixed in with the

background. And we come back to the matter of the drawing and the painting, which in my case is very clear because either they are very strong areas of colour, which work as a background for a drawing or they are autonomous and function as abstract painting and on different registers, whether as a more landscape or architectural connotation, or of the purest sensuality of the colour and of the expansion of conditions intrinsic to the different colours. Anyway, in my case what typifies drawing is the reference to representation – of the landscape, of the architecture, of the space, whether inside or outside, spaces surrounding a figure, perhaps an observer. These are subjects that have always been with me and which do not function in opposition. If I make drawings out of architectures, then I can stop to carry out a work only in painting, in which the colours come to the forefront in a clear and evident way. Indeed, the two situations coincide, or work in parallel, with their being situations in which they are interpenetrated and in which the space of the colour and that of the line sometimes compete, sometimes come together and are contaminated.

But when you start a series do you know what you are looking for, or do you start out on a track that you don't know where it will lead?

There is indeed an idea of something that was seen, whether this is a work that one has liked in the history of art, some detail, theme or subject that one thinks that might be explored. Following this there is a natural development, often on paths that stray considerably from these starting points. Besides the computer, where I keep my memory banks, I have some notebooks in which I keep drawings. I also gather newspaper cuttings or other things that I have leisurely put aside, photographs, and material that I can work on in the future. Now the paths that appear later are... (.) it's funny, for example, that a ground dried by the sun, which is the subject of one of the works that will be in the cistern, a floor work, which is "Ground 02" (2006), provoked another, now vertical, work. Now a tension appears – the different possibilities on what a work might become. The fact of my having considered that alteration has resulted in a new series of works, aluminium cut-outs that are placed on the wall. So we no longer have floor works but something else that has started from that reference. And after this all references to wall and to architectures may disappear in order for us to have something else. In that sense there is always a need to take advantage of the options that turn up in the working process, and when they cannot be developed at the time I make a note of them in my book and they remain there so I can work on them later on in the future.

Referring to the computer – you mentioned the data bank. How do you work on the images that come to you from a history bank? Mariano Navarro talks about them and you have quoted them for years; for example Giotto, Fra Angelico or others, to whom you “turn” for questions of architecture, of space. Is the influence still the same? And how is it with the computer?

Yes. For me the computer is just a practical and easy system. On the one hand a image warehouse; on the other, the applications – let’s say the software – that the computer provides allow those images to be transformed and allow one to add new data to it, and the process that, besides being an archivist/document storage, is a process of hard use of technology. In fact I use several different computer programmes in order to transform and alter the images I have collected, whether these are drawn by me or photographed by me or made by others; whether they are from the history of art, comic strip drawing, architecture or whatever... I take details or the whole thing, I alter it, I transform it the way I want, on a piece of work with the screen, I mean, with the computer screen. There is a text in which I discuss the issue of the manipulation of images on the computer and in which I reflect a little on that issue of speed, of the problem of the infinitely small and the infinitely big, on the alteration of the notion of scale that takes place when one is working on an “image rectangle” that has to do with the method of perception that has been developed and transformed with the coming of television. Nowadays the question of the screen is a fact that I am sure has changed our way of seeing the world in the concrete visual sense, which has determined a new way of gazing. In the XIX century the framing of photographic characteristics sets itself over the traditional window that started to be discussed in the XV century. For example, in Degas or Manet one feels the experimentation of framings that denote knowledge of camera chiara and of photography; like for many artists, at that time there is a clear reference to the gaze/photographic image, and then to the cinema. Even if some artists had never physically experienced the photographic process, the way of fixing the visual field represented defined the manner of the gaze. And I also think that television provoked it, not just for the person who is looking, because they observe with these referents, but also for the person who makes it, because they work within that technology.

Coming back to the issue of scale and how work on the computer alters it: how do you define the final scale when you apply the work to other supports?

Some of the most important works for me have a relatively large scale... What defines scale? What defines is it human proportion. It is our size that defines what is big or small. And we, when we look

at a painting at a certain distance, generally the distance of our hand, as if we could touch it, are looking at that which is considered to be the size that might be called "normal". But when visual positioning goes beyond the limits of the so-called "window" that the painting provokes on the gaze, the involvement of the gaze becomes processed in a different manner. It is the image that ends up moving forward to the "house", the "city". That is, the spectator's situation becomes different and his relationship with the image is altered. That aspect of the atmosphere, of the involvement of the gaze, of going beyond the limits of the traditional painting in which there is a movement outward, to "this side", ends up confronting us in a much more physical manner. What led me to make large size paintings or drawings was the possibility of questioning where the end of things is. When the images go beyond our gaze, as if escaping behind our heads, an infinite that we can't control and we want to understand, is projected. In that sense the works that appear on this screen, in this computer window, are systems of slides, of projection. Systems that help to determine the final amplification of the image. Yet there is nothing to predetermine the large sizes. I've done some drawings on the computer in which their physical manifestation is practically translated into the same scale as the original. The computer is a cold technology. It is sets of pixels, electronic elements, more or less luminous dots, predetermined colours and simulations of reality. The software simulation systems in which, for example, when drawing a line the resulting image suggests a watercolour brushstroke. The paradigm of that which is considered art is promoted to the point of us being able to be impressionists, pointillists... Let us say that everything can be translated within references that characterize the field of "Art". The software programs are there to do it. It is obvious that we can use those instruments to then transform them and take advantage of unsuspected potentials. In any case, returning to the beginning, we are in a dialogue with the virtual world, there is no physical materiality and so we are at the opposite pole to what happens when one works on paper or on a surface with paint paste. These are situations that are so "tactile" (visually tactile), given that one can touch them, feel the relief and the thickness, the way they spread or flatten the surface, that it is imperative for me to transpose myself from the virtual to the material, because there is a set of data, of different situations, that highlight interaction with the spectator even more.

Do you still look for influences from the Old Masters only in the spatial elements of your work? Because there is still no human presence, which is interesting because in that non-mimetic space that you create we have, as spectators, a

silence, a freedom and an approximation of ours to those "places", which becomes very appealing for the person who is looking.

The human presence for me has been the spectator. And thus to face the question of involvement, not only of the gaze, but of granting the work with presence. Maybe I haven't developed this enough yet; I haven't yet managed to introduce those phantoms into my work, like when we see ourselves reflected in a space, like in those works by Pistoletto, which have mirrors, and we are inside them in a dialogue with the images that he sticks there or with the objects that he juxtaposes in those mirrors. From the outset I don't rule anything out; I want to be open to all possibilities, and if up until now my work hasn't included the figure it is because I was more interested in the devices in which figures move, coming across a pre-determined spectacle.

Two aspects I would like to clarify: on the one hand you continue to recover scenographic and spatial elements from those masters, without a human presence; and secondly in the Mysteries there are hands. How do these human elements appear?

Well, the case of the Mysteries is specific to a commission. In any case, I have already depicted the human body, but it has not been the object of concrete works. I can use everything, these are very subjective choices; it has to do with what seduces me, with my liking for strolling around cities, for looking up at the tops of buildings, for looking at my feet, looking at the ground that is passing by under my footsteps... Many of the choices I make are determined in contact with the surrounding space of the architecture, with the space of the landscape, but, as I said, the field is open and I do not rule out representation of the human body, just as I couldn't do in the case of the Mysteries. This was a commission for the new Church of Fátima, the Church of the Holy Trinity, and in which it was obligatory to represent scenes depicting the twenty subjects of the Mysteries of the Rosary on the panels to the side of the main doors. The question there is that on the one hand I tried to synthesise and abstract the drawing to the utmost, maintaining the reading of the scene, but on the other hand I wanted the drawing to have strength in itself and a certain autonomy. Of course a certain balance had to be struck, because I could not start on a hand and end up in a field of colour, because that hand had to be seen, or the drawing of a head had to be present. Everything depended on the subjects that it was necessary to represent. But

I tried to take the most synthetic line possible so that it might also have an alternative reading, showing a line that wanders across a surface. I think I managed a certain degree of abstraction, of

transformation of the reality of the subjects into a parallel reality, a plastic reality that has to do with the elements of the drawing in itself. And so that hand I mentioned, which is constructed by the lines that make up the representation of a hand, is also a line that in a certain manner travels across a surface.

How do you deal with commissions?

I have mixed feelings. I mean, I really like the challenge, but it is a different type of work, which always brings up different kinds of difficulties for me. I have responded to the challenges presented to me, like in the case of this church in Fátima or other works in which I have made architecture projects. And looking back on what has been done in these circumstances I can state that I have found solutions that have pleased me. There are works in which the results end up being closer to the interests of those who commission them and others that are further away, but I have always been excited by having to comply with a programme defined by other people. I've also done some scenography works where I came across the same type of problems, because they are conceptions of spaces that resolve a text. When one asks, "so, do me a drawing of a sea there", the person who is asking has a more or less preconceived idea about the intended result. All I have to do is to contribute with something more than that which is expected. And this "something more" often depends on the expectations or conditioning factors of whoever is commissioning it.

For you is the creative process – whether in drawing or painting – more mental or more intuitive? For example: in painting, how do you choose the colours?

The choice of the colours is very intuitive, and also very visual. Thinking about what I learned – and thirty-five years ago I used to make little squares with colours in order to study the mixture, contrasts and "dégradés" – both Rocha de Sousa and Sá Nogueira are fundamental references, because in the exercises they proposed they forced us into systematic study of colour. And yet it is necessary to forget all this in order to go back to working in a natural manner as if that universe of references had disappeared. But is always present, hidden. When I am putting a set of colours on a set of panels and when one of the principles followed is that of the associations or dissociations between colours, it is inevitable for that forgotten aspect to be present in the options of choice. For example, I may not have a shocking pink, but a softer pink, a sea green instead of a turquoise green, but the choices reflect old learnings that are always at the service of what is being done. I recall a text in which I state that I sometimes line up a palette of colours as a starting point. I start to paint like that and sometimes say as a conceptual premise "I'm only going to paint with these five

colours that I have here and I am going to do everything I can, but I cannot use any other colours"; it is an exercise and a challenge that poses just as many problems as if I had said I could use all the colours. It was a question of defining a horizon that might provide a result that was not anticipated. And there is always the discovery that takes place in the work, the options that one takes and in which there is neither premeditation nor conceptualisation. Indeed, I think that there is something intrinsic to the "making" that is involved in the exact moment of "being making". So there is nothing that can replace this. One of the most interesting situations for me comes from amazement. There is an expectation... an expectation of amazement. If the work doesn't add anything for me, then normally I will redo it until it brings me something new, surprising. And the combinations are infinite and the situations are infinite. When I am working I sometimes can't stop until I reach a determined "moment". Then I have to stop looking for a certain time, and when I look again it may be that it isn't working. I have to intervene again. Sometimes when it isn't right, and one doesn't know why, one has to risk and try a different colour, for example. But it might turn out worse. But that worse is always better, because when something isn't right it can't be, it can't exist.

And when it can't be, what happens?

It gets thrown out. And one makes grey paintings, because in the meantime the colours have all become mixed up and become all grey or brown. In the case of the work being a drawing, one covers over the painting and it can be all black; and then a small line has changed from being a black line on a white background to becoming a completely black background. There are situations in which one doesn't know how to stop. One may have had "a moment" and carried on painting and that special moment was lost, right? There is no point being sorry then, but one should carry on because the whole work is a result of the experience, of the continuous working. There is an awareness that is built and developed with time being part of a never-ending process of learning. Every time I start painting I expect something new, but I work as if having forgotten everything I have done before. Things aren't added up to each other. There are new situation which take place, and one has to understand that "this might be immense for everyone else, but it isn't for me"; it is thrown out and one starts over.

That was one of the questions I had: do you throw much out? But to some extent you have answered.

What I throw out most is probably dirty paint. But I usually take advantage of the material to repaint. Indeed, I think Strindberg states that the best moments, the most relaxed ones in his act of making, where when he came to the end of a working session and

had all those leftovers of mixed up paint, and that he would relaxedly apply to another painting.... That easy-going attitude about the excellence of the colour or of the materials would grant him great freedom, because what he was experimenting on was something that in theory he was already going to throw out, so he was just using it for unbridled pleasure. Sometimes I have finished with three or four litres of paint that are completely dirty, those dark greys or browns that are the result of the colours that get mixed from what is left over from the colours and get put together into pots. And I think "well, now I'm going to put this on a surface and spread it just for the pleasure of spreading it". And sometimes ideas have come about for other pictures, for other paintings. Finally, perhaps I don't throw a lot out; I like to re-use things.

Can you talk about the drawings in parts? What is your intention in setting them apart from each other? What new aspect does that space between them allow?

Well, large drawings are either on a large sheet or on several sheets that reconstitute them through a reading of the set. In the past I have turned a four-part drawing into eight parts. I cut it up and increased its discontinuities. It isn't the same thing to have a drawing in four or in eight parts, because the number of broken lines increases, and the gaze stops at each frame in order to continue on the next one. That fragmenting of the gaze may be an additional aspect in the drawing that one is making. However, the act of re-combining, that is, swapping the order of the parts, is something that I haven't explored much. What has happened is to associate two different drawings due to thinking that such a confrontation creates a new situation. It's what happens with fragmented paintings, even abstract ones. There are continuities of colour that are reflected in different spaces within the same painting, and the paths of the gaze are short circuited in the fragmenting of the elements that make up the painting.

Works like "Ground 02", which then moved onto the walls, created something that doesn't normally appear in your drawing and painting, which is shadow. When you are making the work you obviously don't know how that shadow will function, because it depends on the angle of the light, etc. How do you deal with that issue?

In that expanded painting, let's say, the painting that comes off the wall, the shadows of their parts became a part, or even, the supports themselves become elements that complete the work. There is a recent work, "Mod 02" (2007), which has some tubular structures, which become visible when we come close and their interference cannot be ignored; it is one more element in the work, like an additional part. And if on the one hand I started to move the

works away from the wall for them to look like they were almost floating, without a support, of suggesting instability and movement, given that some of them also moved relative to others due to the different distances they were from the wall, the presence of the supports also created the shadows that initiated new dialogues with the colours on the panels. Something like this had already happened before in the case of the painted aluminiums, which are structures with brims that form a sort of U-shaped rim which are attached to the wall. These brims, the side parts of the works, as they are not painted, reflect the surfaces close to them, creating new planes. The simple painting of a painted rectangle was transformed by the alteration of the visual dimension of the structural components of its support.

What about in relation to the cubes? The cubes are very curious because the painting is on the inside, not the outside. What was your main idea when you started making them?

The first cube – cube... I prefer to call them containers – appeared in 2002. (I made four containers, one in 2002 and three in 2004). It was presented for the first time in a gallery, in which the space was a shop window, and in which I decided that I didn't immediately want to reveal what it was; I wanted to control what one could see from the outside, from the street. Normally one looks in a shop window and one immediately sees what is being shown. In this case one could see a box with an industrial appearance, and one felt curious about seeing what might be inside that box. Only after going into the window space could the visitor observe the inside. In that case the idea was to enclose the painting, to put it in a confined space and to force the spectator to bend down and penetrate it. And in fact one wants to put one's head inside the cube to see what is going on inside it – that container has the title "Inside" – and, as it can't be lit uniformly, when we are bending over it our shadow is projected onto the inside of it, creating a new dynamic of reading. That was how these works that I call containers and which have different titles appeared: besides "Inside" (the five inside surfaces with large abstract areas of colour), there is the "Landscape Container" (a mixture between urban and rural landscape, using the superimposing of the landscape with the ruin, with destruction), the "Housing Unit" (four building façades placed on the four surfaces with an abstract background on the fifth, with the title referring to Le Corbusier), and finally "Terra Firma" (two oil rigs facing one another, with one inverted, promoting a dialogue of instability). And the time we spend looking at these insides will show that what is inside each container has to do with the paths of the gaze.

A prosaic question: how do you make these containers? You paint them first and then assemble them, I imagine.

The drawings were done on the computer. Then scale models were made to see how they would work. Then the panels were made and assembled, after being painted.

When is a work finished?

It is essential to realise that even in works that are very projected, as is the case of the containers, there are moments in which the presuppositions may be altered within the working process. In that sense a work is finished when we think that the situations are resolved, and above all when there is something that maintains the challenge of a proposal. That object is not neutral for us when we place ourselves in the situation of the spectator: it raises questions, doubts and reflections.

Just one more thing: how do you choose the supports?

I choose the supports in a variable manner. For example, I have used aluminium because it is light, stable and because it doesn't warp like wood. On the other hand, the appearance of mechanical, industrial, prefabricated manufacture, which I want the structure of some works to have, is important for me. I thus make explicit the duality of an object that will probably be in the aseptic space of the museum, and which is still looked upon with a certain reverence because it is an object from the world of "art", and at the same time is made out of common, banal elements, with elements to which the spectator would normally not grant any importance, because they are not noble. That status maintains an open dialogue, a constant creative questioning.

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