

## *How Wan-Fo was saved*<sup>1</sup>

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“If we wish to state a formal characteristic that might identify, up to now, the whole of Calapez’s work, it would have to be found in the importance of the act of crossing out”.<sup>2</sup>

It is now commonplace to state that the matter with which artists work comes from that which has already been worked on by their peers. The genetic lines that are thus set out and rooted create the imaginary and grammar of each artist. *To gaze on the gaze of another*, to see the real world through the filter of imagination, of the hand, of another person is artists’ favourite exercise. Not because each artist is incapable of seeing things anew. But because, just as words have a history, images also bear worlds and traditions, manners of seeing. And because in the approach to and the learning that each of us makes about what surrounds us, the filter of third parties – particularly when they possess the category of masters – means being half way there. However, half way does not mean that it is all done, but, on the contrary, that the rest of the path remains to be seen and followed.

Starting from this supposition, what needs to be asked here is what is the half way travelled by Pedro Calapez as a starting point for the construction of his own personal grammar. To start with, that of the history of art. Calapez has always stated his interest in the spatial treatment used by Giotto, Fra Angelico and authors from the XVIII century like Piranesi. He is interested in an experience of the gaze that he then interrogates, explores, and adds to. Consider: Giotto captivated him due to the representation of the space, of architecture and of volumes; Fra Angelico due to the relationship that the space (as a hierarchy) has in his painting. But he may “capture” other aspects from other artists, as took place with Sousa Pinto<sup>3</sup>, from whom he explored the mechanisms of perception and of memory.

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<sup>1</sup> Title borrowed from a story by Marguerite Yourcenar. See *Contos Orientais*. Publicações Dom Quixote.

<sup>2</sup> In MELO, Alexandre, “O Sol de Maiorca”, *Campo de Sombras*. Exhibition catalogue by the Miró Foundation, Majorca, Spain 1997.

<sup>3</sup> See the case of the exhibition *Memória Involuntária*, Chiado Museum, Lisbon, 1996, in which he worked from eleven pastels by Sousa Pinto.

Often added to that half way, which we may characterise as a clear liking for quoting and appropriation, there are other references: those of images and experiences from everyday life. It is starting from this initial territory that Pedro Calapez's continuity arises, his authorial trait. That is, his liking for marking out surfaces, for filling them with dense and material areas of paint, for exploring them in a frank chromatic explosion, in a clear luminal contrast. For fragmenting them and working the gaze – his and ours – over multiple spaces, geometrical or organically-made. For manipulating the supports (paper, canvas, wood, brick or aluminium) without hiding them, accepting them as an unequivocal part of the colour, light, texture and body of the work, as a contribution to its visual and sensual labyrinth. For furrowing the surfaces, in a line that the hand draws out in a clear exercise of the gestural, leaving in his script the registering of a space that seems almost real, but never is, which is eternally recombined in its tiny constituent particles, as if seeking the greatest possible conjugation, the best of the possible worlds -- as Leibniz would state.

One may state, without a large margin of error, that space is the major issue in all of Pedro Calapez's work. On the one hand, the space of the painting, its limits (the space inside, the space analysed in the solutions and proposals by other authors), the space on which one reflects and which results from the *aisthesis*, from our body's occupation of its physical surroundings, the space between the paintings, our position in relation to the works and the space of the confined painting (containers).

The confrontation with and the entering into these domains thus demand of the spectator a dual exercise of imagination and opening to the information of the senses, in a clearly plural manner. Which means that the atmosphere greatly goes beyond the mere conviction of the gaze, and instead demands of us a total, eminently *aesthetic* exercise, something which is only possible through the corporeal quality of the visible element surrounding us.

How can these effects be achieved only with paint? The contrast with the support saturated in colour (or already possessing colour itself) is affirmed through the scratching of a material with as much ballast as pastel (like, years ago, the furrowed paint, scraping away the matter that would reveal the drawing through its absence), or graphite. Or with as much transparency as watercolour. The density of the backgrounds (they themselves thick and quivering) or their reflective capacity (as in the case of the aluminium) and the vibrant contrast with the line or with the stain (watercolour, Indian ink, acrylic...) that is inscribed on it, is an invitation to loss, to the

dizziness of the step taken over the abyss. The painting involves us, as this false Ariadne's thread also encircles us. False because it does not guide us, but rather hurls us forward, pulling us directly into the heart of the labyrinth.

Calapez's somewhat vestigial drawing is often reduced to an outline, which indicates or recalls more than it describes. Indeed, in eroding (almost) all human presence, in only maintaining the register of what remains of human presence in the world, he creates a silence; the same heavy and phantasmagorical silence that one feels among ruins. Through this erasing, the place becomes a simple indication. It is not a dwelling, but a memory. Architecture is a constant presence, but we clearly know that we owe the feeling of un-inhabitability and the echoes that bring us suspended time more to its incompleteness and exercise of suggestion than to its two dimensional nature. Indeed, the notion of time is so obvious in the treatment of the line (breathing of the gesture, discontinuities, knots, doubles), and also in the creation of these non-places, that they are only momentarily "inhabited" by those who pass by and allow themselves to become involved in their appeal. It is thus not "the house", given that once we leave it, nothing remains of our presence in it, but merely a set, no matter how sumptuous it may be (for an opera, in an ideal creation), a vestige that nature claims back.

His liking for detail and for fragments, for staging, whether in the line, in the installation or in the assembly – the idea of a placing of the works on a somewhat nineteenth century register, with groups of works of different sizes, laid out very close to each other and at studied distances, and the fragmented reading provided by such a layout, or the very creation of objects the reading of which might follow an effort on the part of the spectator – underline the option for the spectator's progressive involvement in his landscapes. A similar experience is reinforced by the quality of the line, the paths of which, albeit linear in nature, involve us due to the infinity of possibilities of reading: within a painting, in communication with other paintings, rolling itself up, multiplying itself, around our field of vision, growing like magical tree branches, tree barks, mirrors of lakes, fissures or folds in mountains, scars on walls, outlines of stairwells, bridges, castles, tables, chairs, pots, hands or crowns of thorns. The drawing's absolute lack of explicitness, indicating only and rejecting the literal exercise of *mimesis*, skilfully moving towards the paths of abstraction, mixing with the nature of the painting, in its luminous adventure created in the vibrant contrasts of the colours and in the transparency of the coverings, also

contributes towards making the spectator's convocation greater, deeper. We identify with these landscapes, those non-places, the nature of which may be completed by our own experience of the gaze and of the world. As the US essayist and playwright David Mamet states, when a story presents us with a character which is ill-defined, any one of us can take his place and thus feel empathy and identification with the narrative. It is an exercise similar to that which takes place in confrontation with Calapez's painting and drawing, the deliberate formal incompleteness of which convokes us into dialogue.

Yet that convocation is not restricted to the sinuous nature of the line, but also, in an unequivocal manner, to its corporeality, to the clear material tendency of the work. In fact, the line always has texture, whether in the positive – a corporeal residue on the support – or in the negative, furrowing the support, leaving a groove behind it. Perhaps for this reason, when we encounter his painting, often carried out in wide-spread areas of paint, we have the feeling that the world is closer to our gaze, that we are seeing it through a magnifying glass that increases the line until it touches us, and includes us.

The fact that Pedro Calapez's work is greatly based on the act of working (feeding off its own exercise) means that risk and pleasure go hand in hand. Each obstacle is welcome, accepted as coming with the territory, and in this aspect it is itself, literally, a structuring element for the skeleton of that which is his making. Accepting error and obstacles as something that has to be overcome, as a challenge, is a part of the intrinsic pleasure of making, of the process of observation of the metamorphosis of the material world, which goes on being generated and managed, being discovered in the process of its contexture. In the same manner, accepting that the work's moment of ideal balance has already gone by, lost in a gesture or in a colour that would have been excessive, means understanding that the process cannot be controlled nor subordinated to the passion (enchantment and pain) of making.

Allow me one final literary leap. Many years ago, taking as a pretext a set of oriental narratives, the writer Marguerite Yourcenar wrote a short story entitled "How Wan-Fo was saved". In this story an old landscape painter is invited to the court of a prince. The prince, who has only recently come to power, whose childhood was spent in the benevolent surroundings of the wonderful landscapes painted by Wan-Fo, had a short time ago discovered that the world was not as perfect as the old master's paintings. He feels disillusioned and cheated, and thus condemns him to death; but

before he does so he asks him to paint a last painting. Wan-Fo does so. The painting he paints is stunning and as overwhelming that the waters he paints come off the paper and flood the hall, drowning all the guards and even the prince, but allowing the painter to flee, riding on the tide inside the painting.

This is an exercise that would not be alien to Pedro Calapez. Given that, as he once stated, he creates in order to be absorbed in the painting. Fortunately for us, disillusionment and hurt have no place here, and for this reason we remain in the position of the apprentice whom the master saves along with him. We will thus not fall into the error committed by the prince, nor will we condemn him for creating landscapes in which our desire for the world's perfection, like that we see in the paintings, might ruin the balance of the painting and the fascinating labyrinth of the drawing.