

Intervals, distances and likenesses

Delfim Sardo, a conversation with Calapez

You began your career in painting but before that you were a photographer. Did your work in that field have an effect on the work you have developed in painting?

The other day I was just thinking about that. I held two exhibitions of photographs, although professionally I was a commercial photographer. I'm not sure whether there is a relationship. I first displayed some work at a group show at the Sociedade de Belas-Artes, Figuração/Abstracção, (Figuration/Abstraction) in 1976. I wrote a text for the catalogue and displayed some picture frames with glass but no images. At another exhibition I displayed a huge photograph in black and white in marked contrast, which was part of a series of negatives which I could enlarge for a retrospective, and which, good or bad, were art work. I also took part in a group show with photographs of television screens, the photographs did not get a good reception, but they showed a definite leaning towards the plastic arts or what used to be called photography-as-art.

If there is a constant in my photographic work, it is a sort of preoccupation with the idea of surrounding space, images of wrapped volumes, cars with covers and such like. My work at that time was also greatly influenced by Christo, who had a very important effect on my work. Most of all, however, I have retained this interest in space and with the focused/unfocused in retouched photographs. I have a series of photographs of my father, highly contrasted and out of focus, I like them. They indicate my attention to dark and light, that's how I see it now, and that was my past in photography. In 1980 I began my art career in collaboration with Ana Leon.

Your first exhibition was in 1981 with Ana Leon...

The first two exhibitions.

Before we go on, I would like to talk a little more about your more eccentric side in relation to painting, more specifically set-design.

I started to design theatrical scenery, not entirely by chance, yet it was not planned either. It's work I greatly enjoy. The first experiments were carried out with Nuno Vieira de Almeida, at his invitation. The problem I have with designing sets is that it is very absorbing work, and I cannot work on two projects at the same time, so it is difficult for me to paint a picture when I am designing, or at least working in-depth on a project. I always do some drawings, but as I like working in series, the time I spend on set design uses up painting time. Nevertheless, the question of involvement, the spatial situation of sets, interests me. I remember when I was at the School of Fine Arts, I read a book about Abstract Expressionists, which was a revelation to me. Oddly enough what interested me most was colour-field painting, because of the involvement of the spectator in the chromatic field. Ever since my first exhibition with Ana Leon, my painting has had this idea of involvement.

I didn't see that exhibition.

It was exhibited in two rooms. The first was covered with raw canvas painted blue with red spots and on entering everyone had to put on special slippers, there were also some objects and background music. The second room was all white, with a slide projector showing views of the first room, which was rather didactic, but still, and at the end of the room there were other objects similar to those in the first room. The encompassment of space has always led me to deal with situations on a large scale, almost out of proportion, and also makes me study questions of perspective and representation of space.

In this context, was Barnett Newman one of your important references?

He most certainly was. As a matter of fact, I have a canvas with two spirals, an impression of what I imagined to be an impression of a painting by Barnett Newman which I'd seen in a photograph.

Returning to set design, in a text he wrote for the catalogue "Cidades Continuas", Alexandre Melo, commented that your work is "architecture without a city and scenario without a drama", which is an interesting, intriguing statement.

I believe that drama always exists, especially if we take drama in its widest sense, as a projection of whoever is looking, as the gaze of whoever is looking projects a quality which can be dramatic. I agree, in so far as this statement subtracts from the space the symbolic character which I have tried to avoid. I prefer my picture to be free of this weight. I have developed a series of works, however, in which there is some interaction with a religious, profound, or mysterious feeling, like an exhibition which I held in "Diferença", alluding to the painting of Fra Angelico. There was a heavily, symbolic character there, though the paintings were situated at a distance in time as regards this present work.

Is there a certain, dramatic expectation in relation to the spectator?

I do, at least, have a specific interest in enchantment, and a question as to what is the right place. Perhaps I sometimes construct my work so as to be one of its spectators.

Has this anything to do with your interest in architecture, in the sense in which you construct spaces which you are the first to inhabit?

What really interests me in representing space is, first of all, the way in which the problem was dealt with before the XV century, when it was not in itself a subject. I am interested in the way in which space in cathedrals or Byzantine churches is represented, because of changes in architecture and non-standard ideas as to the representation of space. My first interest began with doing it "wrongly", when I understood the multiplicity of vanishing points and the hierarchy of representation.

Are you interested in unorthodox representation in your work? The example that springs to mind is your work *Muro contra Muro* (Wall against Wall), in which the spectator is overpowered in relationship to distance which is too close or intrusive.

There is in this work a component you don't know about, the walls were not parallel. When I was installing and placing the walls, I settled on a point, the correct point, that of the small cross on the floor in churches so the columns can be seen in *trompe l'oeil*, and decided to place the walls visually parallel, increasing the space between them at one of the ends which logically caused a funnel-effect when the journey was made in the opposite direction, which doubly pleased me. Perhaps I should have marked the cross on the ground.

Does this interest in the perceptive alteration of space, indicate an interest in these non-canonical mechanisms of the construction of space?

Well, in a way, when I am constructing a work, I define rules, canons, which have some value for me. I basically want these rules to function as a measure in the proper sense, to work as a relationship.

It is curious how you refer to levels of representation, which is a classical problem of landscapes.

In the case of *Muro contra Muro* (Wall against Wall), there was a rule of confrontation of the walls which mutually conferred scale. In the case of the exhibition at the Ferme du Buisson Art Centre, there was a rule of symmetry, which was used but, at the same time, ignored. The paintings were symmetrical, they were done in front of a mirror, but later corrected, which is completely different from mechanically inverting an image. In *Manuscrito Incompleto* (Incomplete Manuscript), which was an exhibition at the Quadrum gallery, there was an inversion of the rule of perspective, This really, is one of my concerns. There is an exercise I suggest to my students at Ar.Co, which is as follows: at the beginning of the year I give them certain formats which they have to follow. The fact that I give them this rule and afterwards see how they respond to it, is perhaps another form of this same preoccupation with the measurement of the process.

Does the fact that you use distorted mechanisms, such as two lines, ambidexter exercises, corruptions of symmetry, etc. have to do with the central idea of a slight perceptive alteration and not with a structural perceptive?

The fact that we live surrounded by visual information, makes me seek narrow spaces where something might happen. This is a permanent, banal interrogation, but constant: is it possible to conceptualize the making process? There are certain situations which are important as references, as determinant factors in the way in which we see and do things. The practice of drawing is very symptomatic of this thinking, as regards the visual process, and it has always been important to me ever since I attended courses by the painter, Sá Nogueira, where I learnt drawing as a code of practice for representation or in the sketchbooks of landscapes I do today.

Do you usually do sketches when you travel? This is a feature of various romanticisms, from the precepts of Ruskin... Curiously, in your work there is a fragmentary character which historically links you with these drawing processes, as Raquel Henriques da Silva noted in a text...

This fragmentary character is reinforced by the use of double line mechanisms, or by the very casualness of the process, in the way in which I break the chromatic layer.

In your work you have been affected by certain issues and the work of specific personalities. Piranesi is, I believe, a classical example?

That's true. I am interested by the character of representation of the world as it is seen in the work of XVIII artists, almost from the tourist angle. Buildings in ruins, crumbling, which Piranesi drew, were perhaps the first source of my fascination with his work. I also have an enormous fascination for romantic gardens, English gardens. Why? Perhaps these environments fascinate me because of the atmosphere which they induce.

In your work there is also a romantic temporality, in the same way as your relationship with Piranesi is not a relationship through an intermediary but direct.

There is no intent to appropriate in these dialogue situations, we are trying to find a narrow space. The issue is to represent an image and, in fact, the works alluding to works by Piranesi seek to see an image and represent it again. In the case of Piranesi, besides the methodology of representation of natural landscape, where rules are established for the duration of the sketch, the procedure. In an inverted process, there is still the transfer to etching. A drawing reproduced in a mirror, as a framing and recording process. These mediation mechanisms interest me.

Are you fascinated by optical devices?

Yes, I am, and also by mechanisms for constructing and framing landscape. By dioramas and panoramas, which, in reality, mark a transitional phase between landscape painting and the cinema. Some panoramas have movement and smells which constitute a sort of substitution for the journey.

We always return to this idea that there are mechanisms of perception which carry the spectator to altered universes. I am reminded of a text by Anton Ehrenzweig, in which he says that the reduction of Pollock's work to a style has destroyed the possibility of seeing it ever again as a game of form. Is the problem of style a question of disruptive mechanisms?

Only in so far as style creates a system which cannot be viewed from outside. I have considerably altered ways of doing things, but there are situations which are repetitive. This does not bother me as the situations, when they happen, if they happen, are always different. I believe that everything has not yet been done, and when I stop in the middle

of doing a work, I ask myself the reason for my stopping. We are super-informed, if there are works which are stimulating, there are others which prevent me from going on, because the problem has already been solved. You might say, my attitude is rather scientific, in so far as I have to be informed and make the most of what is happening in my universe of projects, primarily because I believe that everything done by my hand would not be done in the same way by somebody else.

Another question associated to this, in relation to this exhibition, is that of distance. What we see at a certain distance is quite different at a different distance. That is, style is not a subject for discussion. When an artist makes up his mind to change, what is he doing?

For some this is a problem, for others it isn't, therefore it isn't a matter worth discussion.

Let's talk for a moment about this exhibition. Is there a difference between one way of looking and the recollection of this way of looking. How is this applied to this exhibition?

What fascinated me here was looking at a look. There is other work which I would like to do, and that is to draw what is beyond the wall and behind the house in landscapes, places which I do not know, as if the landscape were part of something never to be known. I am dealing here with another situation, which presupposes the existence of a window, it is this window, the window which is the drawings by Sousa Pinto. Reading Walter Benjamin where he comments on the eye of the other which looks at us, and his considerations about the aura of an object has to do with this reflection of feeling, a look which looks at us. We do not usually expect a drawing to look at us. It is something which might happen, or might not, or may never happen. Proust said that *mémoire involontaire*, involuntary recollection is a chance reaction. We may discover the agent which sparks this memory, or we may never find it, and the involuntary memory is never awakened. I don't know if I have found it, but it fascinates me that I might have found an object, a drawing that looks at me. There are many occasions when you look at a painting, one in which one is involved in a specific way, and this involvement has something to do with you, with that which you are giving back.

How did you deal with this involvement with the drawings by Sousa Pinto?

It was a series of chances. I was offered an opportunity to work with the collection at the Museu do Chiado. My initial idea was to do something related to sketch books, so I went to look at the whole collection because I thought there would be something of this kind there, notebooks with ideas and comments. However, there wasn't, other than some notebooks belonging to Columbano and Ramalho, but that wasn't what I was looking for. I then went on to look at drawings. I looked at and photographed everything, but it was only in the Instituto José de Figueiredo, where they were being restored, that I saw these drawings which immediately appealed to me with their rigour, factuality and precision, colour and ambience. There seemed to me to be a special vitality of line and in the pastel treatment.

I didn't know these drawings and the first impression I had was that they didn't fit within their period. They were done between 1911 and 1938. Now, 1912 was the year when Duchamp produced *Nude descending stairs*.

Sousa Pinto lived between Paris and Lisbon, but he was a man who, in artistic terms, lived in the middle of the XIX century. There is, however, a touch of Fauvism in these drawings as regards the colour and details of the composition.

Was this lack of adjustment in relation to his time important to you?

No, because we are seeing them from a distance in time which allows us to look at them without a hegemonic idea of the tendencies. Obviously this is not valid as a recuperation of all late-Naturalism, but these drawings interest me, I don't know whether it is because of the luminous touch of the pastel which is a very difficult technique... The fact that they are not in harmony with their time was not a determining factor.

The first time you mentioned these drawings to me you spoke of how distance and proximity affects seeing something, as if this change of distance was a metaphor of this other temporal relocation which these drawings mirror.

No, I didn't make that connection, but I think it is interesting to make these points of contact. Speaking of the material itself used in the painting, the hand which did the work, I was interested in an almost political way, to work with this material and in this field. In the final analysis, what is difficult is being retinian, because if one tries to be aware of the visual processes which are used, a criticism of these processes has to be constructed, which is also visual. Eliminating, tout court formalist and retinian work as some critics have wished in recent years, only makes me want to be a pure formalist. The seduction of the eye, no, seduction is not sufficiently strong...

Gerhard Richter called it impact...

Yes, eminently visual processes, which appeal to the eye. I'm in the habit of looking at a painting from different distances. This may seem a rather silly process, as between the XVIII and XIX centuries there was a long discussion about the right distance from which to look at a picture. This is the essence of painting, that which has always interested me. There is some very fine painting among Portuguese Naturalists, in the way they use brushstrokes, in the subject. In this work, I wanted to think about the way in which the background effects were created. These backgrounds and brushstrokes made me wonder about a work with paint as a base on which a drawing might emerge which obeyed the standards of reference of another drawing.

Colour also touches this same note...

Yes, because I emphasized and used the palette which was used by Sousa Pinto. This relationship also affects all the formal structure of the work: I took the average of the dimensions of the drawings by Sousa Pinto, I saw how many were vertical and how many

were horizontal, I set an average - for purely pragmatic motives and established the rule which is the basis of my work. However, as I wanted to extend the size of the drawings I multiplied the dimensions of my work by 2, 3 or 4. I did not use the golden rule, I used the rule of Sousa Pinto, because it made no sense to impose a rule that was not a consequence of the work which was the basis for this exhibition. Besides, to tell the truth, I even checked to see whether the drawings of Sousa Pinto were constructed according to the golden rule, but, as a matter of fact, they weren't. This would have given me another axis for my work.

Are you playing with the various levels of physical and mental distance that the spectator is going to construct, in the way in which you relate your work with your reference?

Yes, though I always limit, in physical terms, the distance that the spectator has in relation to the works, because they are in a room which is within another room, which imposes limits, because I want to play with two situations, as if each of these drawings were a window and would vanish because of the proximity of the other. Therefore, on the second plane, this room is not a space with windows, but is defined as an environment of landscapes which intersect, repeat and fragment. The spectator is supposed to enter an ambience, and not project his mind outside it.

By the almost aggressive form of the profusion of works in a strictly limited space, you almost compel the spectator to form a relationship with your painting.

Absolutely, the tendency of the spectator is to move away until he can go no further, and has his back to the wall.

How did you decide to distribute the works on the various walls?

At the beginning I defined a rule, but the rule didn't work. I then decided to place the pictures according to a cabinet d'amateur, but in a gestalt form borrowed from Mondrian, for the idea of de-composition of the landscape. Each set forms a cloud.

Chronologically, the process was as follows: knowing how much space there is in the room, what is the size of the walls in relation to the space, how does the size of the walls affect the space for the group of things to be placed on each. In the end, the criteria was unplanned, or decided by just looking.

You have followed various historic forms of representation in painting - capriccio, vedute ideate and now cabinet d'amateur. Why?

We have already talked about the fascination I have for studiolo, being able to enter spaces which close in on themselves, My model, might be said to be the studiolo of Francis I in the Palazzo Vecchio, in Florence, which is the most extraordinary encasing that I know. All the paintings that I have done recently have obeyed this logic of installation. However, as I always have this tendency to fight against systemization, one of these days I shall change something, as I have changed since 1988, which was the year

in which I reinitiated an inventory of forms, and where the logic of representation chosen was a large-sized, squared grid.

Let's go back almost to the first question: is there is no personal narrative only a spatial narrative.

My major concern always ends up with my discussing the edges of painting. I always want the picture to extend beyond them. These paintings are only one work, that I cannot imagine separate, on each wall. Each painting goes beyond itself, each wall is one painting only, so the look is not fixed. This is perhaps rather didactic, but the fact is that the eye takes over control of the way in which we look at a picture. Reason invokes a discourse made up of these fragments of vision. The picture can be penetrated by invoking these very details. It is not the general idea of a painting which is important, but the small stroke or line. What is important is the particular, the detail.

Lisbon, September 23rd and 26th