

The face of Alexandra

Just as Paul Celan dedicated his book *From Threshold to Threshold*¹, the text which gives this exhibition its title, to Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, Pedro Calapez could have dedicated the works revealed here to Alexandra, his wife. Always present, she never missed a meeting, cigarette after cigarette, maintaining the wise silence of someone who sees everything and says little, because that is how it is with art, this unresolved enigma.

This new series of paintings on paper emerged at a time when Calapez was reading Paul Celan, in a Portuguese translation, which, from the outset, is for us a limit, a threshold, as there are meanings that elude us in the dense, alchemic poetry of the German-language writer.

This encounter between the painter and Celan had already taken place previously, in other readings, but, this time, the approximation went much further. The works emerged first, but later, *From Threshold to Threshold* supplied not only the titles of the works – lines from poems – but also provided a reflection by Calapez about each work, either in their visual dimension, or in a kind of poetic commentary about their phenomenological experience: the moment in which the gaze touches the representation.

Artists rarely undertake this kind of exercise, let alone transcribe it and make it public. But it is important to understand the process of the paintings' inception and to ask ourselves what the relationship is between Pedro Calapez and Paul Celan. I find the answer in the face of Alexandra: it is essentially a loving relationship, to which we are led only through the need to say, to paint, to write, to translate into art, this feeling that comes out of nowhere, without words or things.

I saw the face of Alexandra in all the paintings the artist showed me in a hotel room, in Aveiro, one September morning, after the opening of his solo exhibition the night before. That day, after breakfast, we also went to see, with two other friends, the tomb of Princess Joanna (1452–1490), who asked to be buried in a shallow grave, her subsequent worship leading to the construction of a mausoleum, which took eleven years to complete. Curiously, the Princess received a marriage proposal from Richard III, in 1485, an arrangement that never came to anything due to the English King's death in battle.

In the Museum of Aveiro there is a portrait of the Princess, an oil on oak panel (60x40cm), by an unknown author. Little is known about the work except that it is dated circa 1472 and belongs to the Portuguese School. The portrait, practically a religious icon, was described at the time it was made as follows: 'An elegant face, the forehead very graceful, the green eyes very fair, a medium, well-shaped nose, the mouth thick and upturned, the skin white with a bit of colour in the right places, a very refined neck (...)' ²

The face of Alexandra accompanied me there also, after looking at Calapez's paintings, pieces of paper laid one by one on a flat surface, like a book. And it was also a text I had in front of me: the *Conversation in the Mountains*, written by Celan³ after an encounter in Sils-Maria, in Switzerland, with sociologist Theodor Adorno, deliberately missed by the author who was born in Chernivtsi, now part of Ukraine.

This failed meeting was Celan's response to Adorno's famous phrase, dated 1955: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.'⁴ Among the various influences that appear in the text of the writer, John Felstiner, a biographer of Celan, in his book *Poet, Survivor, Jew*, points to the novella *Lenz*, by Georg Büchner, and to Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka, Martin Buber and Ossip Mandelstam: 'It's "goodbye silence" I hear Celan saying in this tale from the summer of 1959, drawing a communal self from a mortally wounded Yiddish-German. Recalling those others who lay around him, Jew Klein walks along "paths on which language gets a voice" (as Celan later put it), saying "I here and I there, I, companioned perhaps – now! – by the love of those not loved, I on the way to myself."'⁵

Let us return to the book that gives the exhibition its title, *From Threshold to Threshold*, a work with 47 poems written between the middle of 1952 and end of 1954. Regarding the title, now appropriated by Calapez, Celan wrote, on 22 February 1954, that it suggested 'besides a certainly not inessential trait of the poetic, namely its liminal character, also the never-coming-to-rest of the poetic as well as any statement's – plainly unrealizable – infinity-claim (...).'⁶ Elsewhere,⁷ Celan told Karl-Eberhard Felten, from the work's publishing house, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, in Stuttgart, that the book was meant to be called 'Argumentum e Silentio', adding: 'too bad that I let myself be persuaded to rebaptize it. But: water signs: they also exist'. The dedication to Gisèle, whom he had met in November 1951, is an exception: it is the only one he ever made to a living person.

Calapez chose lines from several poems in this book. These lines, which appear, in parentheses, after an 'untitled' common to all the works, evoke Celan, the text from which they were taken, and the relationship the artist establishes between his work and that of the writer. They are followed by brief impressions of a poetic nature in which the painter adds more information about the relationships between himself and the other: the poet, his work, the intersection between both universes. As the painter observes: 'Fleeting memories, these verses are now ephemeral references out of context. As reminiscences, they fulfil the purpose of designating the forms, lines and colours that lie on blank pages.' An example: painting #15 *Untitled (we have tread on One and the Quiet)*⁸ is accompanied by Calapez comment 'it looks like water – it flows – a continuous lapping of the watery layer – the inward becomes outward.'

On that morning in Aveiro I saw a series of 25 acrylics on paper. In each passage the face of Alexandra appeared before me. Today, a week later, I realise that it was also the face of Calapez, of Celan, of Gisèle, of Princess Joanna: my face. I could not make out eyes, a mouth, a nose, ears. I observed only changes in warm tones, in expressions, some more expansive, others of a more extreme reserve. It should be noted that the artist previously used drawing in his paintings, also stating that he would like to make them on a different scale.

The definition of spaces and vibrations of colour that Calapez creates appear to our eyes as abstractions. The evocation of Celan's poetry is what allows us to read them differently. To see in them the face of Alexandra is one of these possibilities. The paintings look at us. In this deathly silence from which so many words echo. 'So it was quiet, quiet up there in the mountains. But it was not quiet for long, because when a Jew comes along and meets

another, silence cannot last, even in the mountains. Because the Jew and nature are strangers to each other, have always been and still are, even today, even here.’⁹

The face of Alexandra is a landscape, an abstraction. It is each one of Calapez’s paintings. And each verse that accompanies them. And even the notes of the artist on each of his works.

We all have the same face: this unresolved enigma.

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¹ Paul Celan, *Threshold to Treshold*, 1955

² *Santa Joana Princesa Museum Guide*, pages 63-75, DGPC, Lisboa, 2013

3 Paul Celan, *Conversation in the mountains*, Paul Celan: Selections (Volume 3), University California Press, 2005

⁴ *The Meridian: Final Version – Drafts – Materials*, edited by Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmult, translated by Pierre Joris (2011)

⁵ John Felstiner, *Poet, Survivor, Jew*, page 146, Yale University Press, New-Haven and London, 1995

⁶ Paul Celan, *Memory Rose Into Threshold Speech*, Pierre Joris, page 395, Farrar Stratus Giroux, New York, 2020

⁷ Ibidem, page 395

⁸ Ibidem, page 96

⁹ Ibidem, note 3

The Meridian: Final Version – Drafts – Materials, edited by Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmult, translated by Pierre Joris (2011)