

ÀS NONAS

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↳ GALERIA DE ARTE DA CÂMARA MUNICIPAL DE ALMADA

FILIPA OLIVEIRA I would like to start by asking about your artistic practice in general. What are the key concerns?

FRANCISCA CARVALHO My key concern is to make it possible for the work to keep on going, considering the conditions under which it's being developed — it's always an uncertain equation of balances. In abstract terms, I can say that I am concerned with producing work that creates space and time or a breath of fresh air when it goes well. This requires a constant vitality. Creating the conditions for this vitality, even when it is not obvious, is a job in itself.

FO What do you mean by a “work that creates space and time”?

FC A work that welcomes us. Enthusiasm. A work that makes us work.

FO Your work is very much associated with drawing, but for this exhibition, and for some time now, you have been working with painting on cotton. Can you talk a little about this other dimension of your work and how it relates to drawing?

FC My training is in painting and philosophy. As for painting and drawing, in a way, I don't separate them. I understand that they are distinct fields and separating them may be cause for good debates and very different market prices. But, in my work, they exist together. I produce a lot of work on paper (and this doesn't mean that all work on paper is drawing). These paintings on cotton canvas are a natural follow-up to what I was already doing, adding to the fact that I already had been in India learning these mineral and vegetable dying processes, which was, by the way, one of the best experiences I've ever had. Drawing is always between disciplines. It's fungal — it happens everywhere. Perhaps that's why it's so interdisciplinary. I still find the word ‘discipline’ to be very important. In this era of growing homogeneity, that the transfer of knowledge is only possible through human relationship. Knowledge is relational at its root and includes all the problems brought by these relations. Drawing, painting, thinking are acts for an-other (we may not even know who they are for sure), but they always require some kind of presence, without whom, there is no vibration. My work was very much associated with drawing for economic reasons — it's cheaper. A certain hard materialism has always been part of the history of Western painting. In the Renaissance, only those who could afford it painted in blue (which came from Lapis Lazuli). It's curious to see Botticelli's early palette: ochre, earth, oxides, but not a shadow of blue.

That only happens later, one can say that blue came with his recognition. In the history of colour, I can spot a socio-economic map and this amuses me: the idea that matter speaks for us. Whenever there's painting, there's drawing. To put it in simpler terms, whenever there is a high and a low, left and right, limits on any surface, there is drawing. In painting, you apply colour and enter a twilight zone. Colour is quick to the senses; it has a direct effect on our nervous system. Knowing how to manipulate that is literally magic. My answer to that was to slow down, that is, to apply the colour slowly, to look for phased processes of slowing down.

FO Could you explain a little bit more, how do you use colour to slow down the process of drawing?

FC It has to do with the production of vegetable and mineral paints, I have to cook them. I also have to prepare the fabric, wash it, remove the manufacturing gum, let it dry. After the painting is done, I have to let it dry and wash it again. Everything is phased. The slowing down of the hand has to do with the surface of the fabric, its own roughness, the absorption of inks.

FO What's so special about painting on cotton? Is there something to it that you can't find in other techniques?

FC It is more of a learning process that implies a certain kind of slowness and phasing. I feel that the process is much bigger than me, that I'd need a lifetime to 'get the job done'. The search leads me somewhere, but once I'm there it's good to let myself go and follow whoever knows best. That's what happened in India, the dyers, the Kalamkari painters, the 'Chhipas' (printers), they are the ones who know. Each material requires a modality of our body that is neither repeatable nor transferable to other materials, each one has its own speed, rhythm, habits — work — without this, there is no knowing how. The painting I produce on cotton is part of an ancient tradition whose knowledge is passed on orally and in the presence of families and, lately, tourists (whose money in exchange for workshops helps to maintain these families). What happens in the making of these paintings is that it evokes a whole background or setting, that is, the materials (vegetable and mineral paints) presuppose work cycles, from plant harvesting and collection of iron scraps in factories to the manufacture of the paints at home, building brushes and kalam from local tree branches, etc.

FO When we talked about this work, you mentioned a dimension and scale of the body. How does this bodily dimension come into your work?

FC The body is built and enters from all sides because there is no work without a body and vice versa.

FO In India you discovered both the technique and the materials. How did your residency there influence your work?

FC The internship I did during the months I was in Rajasthan, more precisely, in Bagru, an industrial village near Jaipur, opened a world for me. I was on a scholarship granted by Gulbenkian and Fundação Oriente. Otherwise, it wouldn't have happened. The second time I went to India, I learned a lot from a family of Chitara (Kalamkari painters) Mata ni Pachedi (which means 'Behind the Goddess') in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Here procedure and working environment lead directly to form. It is a phased, slow dive that transforms the urban rhythm of the body into availability and breathing. The handling of vegetable and mineral substances makes us participate in a flux that is as ancestral as it is nascent and that extends beyond us.

FO Can you reveal a little about the process of creating this body of work?

FC You transform your studio into a kitchen.

FO And what do you prepare in this kitchen? It's a much slower process than painting or drawing, isn't it? How did you adapt the techniques you learned in India and your own techniques to create these works?

FC Moving from the outdoors of the small textile factories or the kitchen of the Mata ni Pachedi family in India to my atelier in Lisbon was difficult, I had to jump in, be methodical and at the same time avoid thinking too much about it, because if I had done that it would be clear I was plunging into near madness. I had to adapt everything to the workspace, deal with those conditions and accept that the work comes from that, it talks about the conditions in which it was done. There are a lot of colours I can't produce here, in my workspace, so I had to stick to the possible palette. Nevertheless, working with limitations sometimes clarifies the path and strengthens the focus.

FO In India you can also find the Tantra philosophy that greatly influences your work. How is this spiritual, sexual, and philosophical dimension present in these works?

FC Even if I only found about it later, Tantra has been always present and influencing my work. I recommend Sri Abhinava Gupta's *Tantraloka*, *The Doctrine of Vibration* by Mark Dyczkowski and published by SUNY, and *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* by Alexandra David- Néel.

FO The issue of temporality is central in this work, they live in an ancestral but simultaneously futuristic time. Can we talk about your interest in time?

FC It's curious, I'm much more interested in geographies and spaces than in time. Time is always here, whether I'm interested in it or not. That's why it's decisive in whatever we do. It is an unsymmetrical relationship. As for my interests, I always see them as timeless. The liveliness of a fabric from the Mohenjo-daro civilization reaches us, it is our contemporary. It's a matter of tuning our antennas and being interested in studying what falls into our nets.

Futurism (I'm referring to the 20th century avant-garde movement) is thirsty for titanic values, speed, virility, and so on — it is dazzled by the inordinate. It's an entropic celebration. The fabrics of India, especially those of a religious character, celebrate goddesses and gods who embrace a certain titanic side but only as a footnote. The stories are full of veils, paradoxes, little games that dilute reality and dreams, layers of time and space. The game is engaging and invites us to discover ourselves in the middle of it.

FO The issue of temporality, which I mentioned in a conversation we had in which you said that you were interested in creating works that couldn't be specifically framed in this time, but rather as heirs of a millenary tradition. This notion of 'out of time' that you mentioned just now seems to be an important feature of your work. And because you are not interested in fashion, trends, and follow your own path — which in my view is profoundly unique — I see this path as 'futurist', not in the sense of the avant-garde movement, but rather in the sense that it foresees or anticipates a future.

FC The question is — how can one know how to be in the here and now? Being alive now, I'm part of contemporaneity. My way of being aware of this throws me into the arms of ancient traditions. I need to turn away to look at the (or 'a') centre.

FO So, what's this interest in geographies and spaces you mentioned?

FC There are geographies and spaces whenever there are communities and, in that sense, cultures, ways of living and doing. When we are immersed in a different culture we are always in a position of vulnerability, and this is a transformative and decentring experience, an opportunity for learning and a motivation for work.

FO You said that "drawing, painting, thinking are acts for an-other". Who is this 'other' in your work?

FC I don't know. I only know that they are 'others'.

FO I sense a very strong female presence in your work. The woman, an ancestral woman, powerful and almost magical, inhabits many of your works. Is there a feminist concern in your work? Is it autobiographical or perhaps self-presential?

FC It's me who performs them and I find myself in a female body, I mean, my perception and sensations are rooted in this body and I work with them, so yes, there is an autobiographical dimension in the works, but this woman you're seeing, she's not me (laughs).

FO Finally, I want to ask you how do you see this body of work developing in the future?

FC It will involve several stays in India, collecting pigments and processes, and researching dye plants and minerals in Portugal. Building bridges and working my way forward.

INTERVIEW BY

Filipa Oliveira