METTERE AL MONDO IL MONDO

(2023)

↳ PAVILHÃO BRANCO, GALERIAS MUNICIPAIS, LISBOA

Alighiero Boetti — And so I realized that we hold an enormous power: that of inventing the world, of putting the world into the world.[1]

— I'd like to talk about the wind: this force that makes things light, that moves and transports, that lightens even heavy things. Wind is a moment of grace.[2]

So wrote Alighiero Boetti in 1988, in a text in which, reviewing the more than twenty years of his activity, the Italian artist paused to reflect on the most significant elements of his work. He said: "The forms created by the wind are always forms of energy, of movement. The wind, furthermore, makes things temporary, and also creates a temporal dimension, for it actualizes within shapes the succession of instant after instant after instant... (...) The wind continuously transforms forms: you can see it in the snow, in the dust, in the sand. It's a real, living force, like the sun's rays, only lighter—even though its energy is at times extremely violent. But its image remains that of lightness, even mentally: words that are light, ventilated..."[3]

Francisca Carvalho's recent work seems to have captured this kind of energy so much so that it evokes, even in the very title of her latest exhibition project, precisely the wind. Pantalons pour attirer le vent is, according to the artist's statement, a happy juxtaposition of words, which does not refer to something concrete beyond the verbal locution itself or to a particular image; it is an expression that seems to have been whispered to her by the wind, the words being magnetized together.

When thought of in relation to the works that are part of the series of the same name (but also to her practice more generally), the wind evoked here by Francisca Carvalho is akin to the wind described by Boetti, who places the emphasis on its transformative power, on the disorder and disarray that its action produces, on its invisible and vital energy, manifest only in the forms that change in response to its pressure—forms that are nevertheless transitory, never fixed, ready to become other forms, urged on by its breath. It is a force at the same time also light, metaphorical, that passes through the mind and propels the word.

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[1] Alighiero Boetti, Dall'oggi al domani, edited by Sandro Lombardi. Brescia: L'Obliquo, 1988; republished in NERO, No. 23, spring/summer, 2010, from which this English translation by Tijana Mamula is taken, p. 46.

[2] Ibid.—The part of the writing in which Boetti focuses on the wind is certainly influenced by his stay in Japan in 1985 during which he created a group of works on different ideograms that define the word "wind" in Japanese, in collaboration with the master calligrapher Enamoto San.

[3] Ibid., pp. 46–8.

The wind seems to have functioned as an accomplice in the creation of the paintings in the series Pantalons pour attirer le vent, made in gouache on large sheets of paper in 2023, presented in the exhibition. If we can identify the wind as the craftsman of the choreography that, for example, moves the fans in Abanicos as if they were leaves scattered on the tiled ground in a domestic (and ironic) symphony of autumn, the same seems to have contributed, in a more subtle way, to the "disjointed" composition of some of the paintings in the series, acting more in the drafting and spatial organization than in the subject matter. In Lawnmower,

129 Suspension Hatnetsuki or L'amateur de plis, the composite image, made up of several elements, lacks a single center, radiates in different directions and is not subject to the force of gravity, as demonstrated by the floating fries in another work, French fries united. Polycentric or perhaps centrifugal, often not exactly framed in the sheet of paper, the image is as if stirred by a breeze that gives a great dynamism. The reference to the lightness and vaporousness of fabric, moved by swirls and folds, is clear: scraps of cloth, stretched or bulging, form a patchwork, alternating with elements of various kinds, volumetric or hollow anatomical fragments, everyday objects, geometric patterns, natural elements, food. Although they are painted, the colored silhouettes appear as if they were lying on the white sheet, which does not function as a mere background, but enters into a dialectical relationship with the subjects, passes through them, and with its voids participates in the composition, giving airiness and plasticity to the whole. The alternation of solids and voids, of white areas and colored forms, as well as of abstract and figurative elements, makes Francisca Carvalho's paintings assimilable to that category of ambiguous images, or rather, of Potential Images studied in depth by Dario Gamboni, described as "fundamentally unstable and metamorphic,"[4] which are found scattered throughout the ages of art history. These are images that presuppose the presence of the viewer for their potential polysemy to be activated, producing a non-unique experience as they oscillate between two elements or fluctuate among several others. These can be "accidental images", such as the veins of marble—which for artists function as "imaginative triggers"—abstract and entirely random forms in which familiar figures are recognized and become the subject of representation.

The grotesque is included in Gamboni's analysis, defined as an ornamental pictorial genre borrowed from Antiquity that found a new impetus in Western art, in the late 15th century, thanks to the rediscovery of the painted interiors of Nero's Domus Aurea in Rome. It is not only due to the fantastic and colorful aesthetics, the taste for the bizarre and eccentric, for hybrid decorative motifs, for the stylization undergone by plant and anatomical elements, that Francisca Carvalho's work can be juxtaposed with the grotesque, but also for a particular kind of the ambiguous perception it triggers: those double visions that alternate as the viewer focuses on one detail instead of another, the backdrop instead of the foreground surface, discovering with surprise different images that cohabit in the work, often not directly related to each other.

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[4] Dario Gamboni, Potential Images. Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art. London: Reaktion Books 2002, p. 18.

Quoting Philippe Morel, Gamboni intends to show that the grotesques "do not merely establish 'an ambiguous blend or relationship between animate and inanimate, unsettling the status of the image, its representative content and its ornamental function' but introduce a 'hesitation of the eye between the figure and zero degree of the iconic, the ground' when the figure 'emerges out of the ground or is absorbed into it'."[5]

In an interview with Filipa Oliveira, published on the occasion of her solo exhibition in 2021 at Galeria Municipal de Almada, Francisca Carvalho names vitality as an essential trait of her work: "In general, abstract terms, I can say that I am concerned with producing work that creates breathing space and time. This requires a constant vitality. Creating the conditions for this vitality, even when it is not so obvious that it should be there, is a job in itself."[6]

This essence of vitality—the attempt to open a breathing space / time in the work—in the series Pantalons pour attirer le vent is not rendered exclusively by the fluctuating character of the subjects and their treatment, nor uniquely by the "transpiration" allowed by the different levels of images that overlap, interpenetrate, or juxtapose on the sheet leaving open white gaps between them, resulting spaces that often suggest other forms and figures, as we have tried to highlight so far. In front of these works the viewer's gaze is hesitant, oscillating between figures from different semantic realms, momentarily brought together on the sheet of paper, vibrating with them.

In other works in the series, the vital rhythm is suggested by the extremely transitory and dynamic dimension of the subject, as in Gymno counterpoint in which two silhouettes of gymnasts, whose pose recalls Greek statuary, rapidly cross the white sheet and in turn are crossed by oblique bands of warm colors that emphasize their fast pacing. In Attirer le vent, whose chromaticism and circular progression are reminiscent of the famous Matisse dance, the bodies soar in a choreography that expands with centrifugal motion, starting from the center formed by the hands of the figures. Or, perhaps, of a single figure repeated in different poses within the same scene, a structure reminiscent of an expedient used in Renaissance painting to include the dimension of time in a single representation, or the effect achieved through chronophotography, a rapid photographic sequence that breaks down the movement of the body into multiple images.

The artist's gaze is open and seeks to capture and convey in the work the density that exists in the world, whose transposition into a single image is never exhaustive.

Francisca Carvalho's visual universe does not crystallize into a definitive form, as if the paper could barely hold the images; the same is true even for scenes with a more narrative / anecdotal framework. Among these, in Fra ha fatto l'uovo and Areal e a História Dramática de um Ovo (a

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[5] Ibid., p. 37.

[6] Francisca Carvalho (interviewed by Filipa Oliveira), Às nonas, Midas nos dedos medram e mondam (publication edited on the occasion of the homonymous solo exhibition curated by Filipa Oliveira, which was held at Galeria Municipal de Almada between April 30 and June 12, 2021). Almada: Câmara Municipal de Almada, 2021, p. 52.

piece that was not shown at Pavilhão Branco) one or more frames of a surreal action seem to materialize on paper, which has the rapidity of a cartoon—the comic strip is among the sources of the artist's eclectic visual vocabulary. While it is not possible to fully understand the purpose of the action depicted, certain elements can be recognized: human bodies with dissected and reconfigured anatomies and clothing, as well as bull's- eye eggs.

The artist's gaze that investigates the world in its complexity in order to analyze it thoroughly comes to dissect the matter of which it is composed, finding within it real microcosms, mechanisms in operation, a proliferation of colored particles—and the human body is not exempt from this operation of analysis.

Often broken down into its external as well as internal organs—a limb, a penis, a glans, a head, hair, intestines—the body becomes a fetish, and is sometimes stylized and repeated, transformed into decorative motif, into pattern. The co-presence of the outside and inside of the body in the same image extends to the relationship between the body and the clothing it wears, which envelops it, emphasizes its forms, fits, or betrays it, and suggests its new, possible configurations. Speaking of the correspondence between body and dress, the idea that content and envelope create or modify each other, Francisca Carvalho names the work of Christina Ramberg (1946–1955). A U.S. painter linked to the Chicago Imaginists movement, Ramberg is the author of paintings whose subject matter are female busts composed of a set of objects and representations of textiles, derived from elements of the body itself. Fur and hair become textures of underwear, the blood vessel system the texture of fishnet tights, the epidermis and muscular tissues sleeves and corsets, sometimes the vagina itself is transformed into upside-down clothing,[7] making explicit the critique of the representation of the sexualized body of women by male culture (always latent in her work), in the direction of a feminine / feminist reappropriation of the body, turned and armored, rather than sensual.

The relationship between dress and body in Francisca Carvalho's work is not only explored on paper. Fabric is one of the artist's most congenial among her materials of choice, which led her in 2018 to a research trip to India, in the Rajasthan region, to learn manual dyeing techniques, with pigments of plant and mineral origin. The outcome of the residency was the exhibition Hasta, presented in the same year at the National Crafts Museum in New Delhi. Hasta means "hand," and with this title the artist seeks to bring back to the center of the work the craft manual value inherent to a technique that imposes a slow rhythm and processuality.

The artisanal production also distances itself from any type of monumentality or epic nature of the subject, preferring prosaic elements, details that reveal the taste for the secondary elements of the narrative. The artist says: "The fabrics of India, especially those of a religious character, celebrate

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[7] Dan Nadel, "How Would a Comb That Cannot Untangle Hair Look? The Art of Christina Ramberg," in Artforum, February 2018. Available at: https://www.artforum.com/ features/dan-nadel-on-the-art-of-Christina-Ramberg-237540/ (accessed: Nov. 10, 2023).

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."[8]

Starting from this experience, the artist developed an original work, based on the experimentation of different techniques of dyeing, printing, and painting on fabric and, vice versa, in this experience, Francisca Carvalho found confirmation of some previous intuitions: the search for a harmony, of a unity between body, gesture and material—and more.

Upon returning to Portugal, she transformed her studio into a kitchen—almost an alchemist's laboratory—to make dyes. The limited range of colors obtained naturally constitutes a stimulating contrainte: the color itself becomes material, it does not pre-exist the work, and seems to give shape to the fabric, cut with irregular contours, not as if it was acting as a support, but as part of a garment package, tailor-made for a body with an unknown physiognomy. Just as the color does not pre-exist the fabric, the fabric takes shape only when it is dyed. "The thought is formed in the mouth," says the famous motto of Tristan Tzara; "the thought is formed in the hand" echoes in Francisca Carvalho's work.

The use of ancestral knowledge and the use of mineral and vegetal substances make the artist part of a tradition, of a flow, of a circuit in which nature and culture are indissolubly intertwined, and in which the border between natural and artificial vanishes. In this regard, Boetti, in the same text cited at the beginning of this

essay, wrote: "Take the pair natural/artificial: for example, is a bamboo basket natural or artificial? The fact is that once man enters into things and natural phenomena enter into human culture, all the apparent antitheses blow up, all those hierarchies and separations that usually transform the world into a prison. There exist, in other words, certain categories that, if discarded, would allow us to reach a higher level of understanding of things."[9]

The abolition of these hierarchies is another cornerstone of Francisca Carvalho's work, and it is a process conducted in an undertone from the wide range of heterogeneous subjects that coexist in her painting, whether on paper or fabric: high and low registers, pop figures, cartoons from comic strips, images from the world of consumption, food, advertising, iconographies taken from the history of art, abstract motifs, geometric shapes, details from scientific manuals, herbaria, anatomical details, animals, tailoring patterns, symbols from Indian mythology, kimonos, and games from Japanese culture. These are all elements that come together and aggregate thanks to the clinamen represented by each sheet of Pantalons pour attirer le vent, in which there is no center and from which the artist tells, without ascending to a cathedra, a world in which the human, mineral,

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[8] Francisca Carvalho, op. cit., p. 56.

[9] Alighiero Boetti, op. cit., p. 45.

vegetable, animal, and artificial kingdoms, the fungi interkingdom, East and West, different spaces, rhythms, and languages coexist, without imposing one on the other.

The very process of displaying the images, their compositional structure, denies a hierarchical or perspectival approach, in favor of a development that derives from the transformations found in nature: branching, budding, rhizomatic or fractal course. The titles of the works also go along with this polycentric and polysemic nature, mixing different idioms: English, French, Portuguese, Italian, German, the Latin of the scientific nomenclature of some plants, and terms from Eastern cultures dear to the artist, reawakening the never dormant utopia of a universal language—which like the wind knows no boundaries—made up of words, bodies and things.

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