

Translation of a text of Bruno Marchand from Chiado 8

Uma história de amor

“There is a condition in the world the sight of which is barred to us, but that things sometimes expose here and there when we find ourselves in a state that is excited in a particular way. And only in this state do we glimpse that things are 'made of love'. And only in it, too, do we grasp what it signifies. And only this state is then real, and we would only then be true.”¹

The excerpt transcribed above is taken from *The Man Without Qualities*, Austrian writer Robert Musil's seminal unfinished novel. Written in the diaristic style of Ulrich, the book's main character, this passage is part of a wide-ranging and peculiar reflection on the status of love: what it is, what relationship does it entertain with the world, with truth, with that abstract and agglutinating entity we call 'feelings'... Rather than in any answers to these questions, it will fall to the process of a methodical, judicious, and eminently rational search to yield a brilliant speculative incursion into the idea of love and the possibility of experiencing it – both crucial elements in major humanistic narratives. The conjecture Ulrich puts forward is clear: love is a genesic entity that manifests in all things, but can only be attained through a special level of attention, perhaps a predisposition. In any case, love is something that can only be reached in exceptional circumstances, probably because its continuous experience would be unsustainable and certainly cancel its aforementioned (and essential) exceptional quality.

The title of the exhibition Bruno Pacheco (b. Lisbon, 1974) now presents at Chiado 8 directly refers to Ulrich's musings. Contrarily to what it might seem at first, the phrase 'Uma história de amor' [A love story] is completely irony-free. In the light of what we have detailed above, this title is, in fact, quite enlightening in terms of the method, tone and objectives that have lately oriented his work. More than that: there is a metaphorical correspondence between the finds of Ulrich's inner search and the experience offered to us by Bruno Pacheco's pieces that not only helps us understand this artist's task but also the way it responds to the challenges presented to contemporary painting by the image's ubiquity and ultra-mediatisation.

Two pictorial models in the era of the image

Given that photography is the referential source for most of his works, the matter we have just

¹ Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, Picador, 2011.

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described plays a crucial role in the work of Bruno Pacheco, as well as in an important number of artistic positions from the last decades. In fact, the near-asphyxiating presence of images in our everyday life must inescapably be factored in whenever we consider the stance of artists regarding this ever-expanding panorama, particularly of those artists who work in painting.

As it is well known, the roots of this troubled relationship lie in the profound change the invention of photography, during the 1830s, brought to a visual culture that had been so far dominated by the pictorial image. At the time, the shock-wave that ran across the artistic community could only be compared to the amazement the earliest daguerreotypes had inspired in the scientific community and society at large. The immediate effects of the photographic image's dissemination include a veritable revolution in the methods for observing the material world and in the dissemination of its knowledge, as well as a fundamental contribution towards the consolidation of a wholly new way of considering and communicating identities within the anonymous sphere of the large metropolises and, of course, the drifting condition it has imposed on the modern visual arts field.

In terms of the practice of painting, and its response to the cultural reality it would henceforth share with photography, it is interesting to read the following statement, made by artist Antoine Joseph Wiertz in 1855: “Good news for the future of painting! As one knows, art is divided into two parts – the material and the intellectual. (...) The painter who renders well is the mason who constructs; the other is the architect who invents and composes. (...) A century from now there will no longer be a mason in painting: there will only be architects, painters in all senses of the word. Let it not be thought that the daguerreotype kills art. No, it only kills the work of patience and pays homage to the work of thought.”²

The variety of paths taken by the visual arts in the aftermath of photography's emergence advises against the taking of a univocal stance regarding the history of painting over the following decades. However, Wiertz's words are representative of a current that believed that the survival of painting depended on a reinvention that would lead it away from the paradigm of technical proficiency anchored in illusionism and the faithful reproduction of reality, to focus instead in exploring its identity as an autonomous field, with the critical analysis of its material, formal and conceptual specificity as a crucial objective.

² Antoine Joseph Wiertz, “Photography” in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed.), *Art in Theory, 1815-1900 – An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 655. It is impossible not to read these words of Wiertz as a direct response to the famous statement, attributed to painter Paul Delaroche when confronted with the daguerreotype: “From today, painting is dead!”

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The various movements that were part of this historic current were all engaged in what can be called the “ontological upsurge” of painting. What this means is that an important part of the developments in the pictorial field between the late 1800s and the 1960s took the form of the production of paintings that focused on those qualities that made them absolutely distinct from the other artistic typologies. Generally speaking, paint, colour and surface became the pillars that held up the ontological edifice of painting, which contained works by countless artists, from Paul Cézanne and Henri Matisse to Ad Reinhardt and Robert Ryman.

The apparent exhaustion of this approach was repeatedly announced throughout the 20th century's first half, particularly whenever formal simplification seemed to attain an unsurmountable extreme (monochrome being one of the most evident examples of this). Nonetheless, this idealistic project of modernity resisted until the mid-1970s, when the sedimentation of a number of phenomena – such as Pop Art's vernacular devices, the minimalistic miscegenation of sculpture and painting, the ascension of conceptual art, the reciprocal contamination between artistic forms or the emergence of happenings and performance art, to name but a few – ushered in a comprehensive critical reappraising of the modern project that managed to replace the then usual ontological model with an epistemological one³. The implications of this change are vast and complex but, as regards pictorial practice, they can be summarised as follows: in spite of embracing a rekindled allegorical impulse⁴, the painters of the post-modern period are no longer interested in developing an idea of painting as an analytical, self-absorbed and tautological process, but rather in assessing how that form can become a means to share a unique knowledge and experience of the world, a world in which painting itself, in its material, iconographic and semantic forms, unhesitatingly plays a part.

We did it, it's true

Bruno Pacheco's painting fully enjoys this renewed status of freedom. His work is unconfined by that 'mourning' many modern painters have explored since photography and its industrial reproduction have triggered the previously discussed crisis in painting. That fact confronts this artist's work with the fundamental question of knowing exactly what kind of iconographic reality

³ Cf. Robert Hobbs in AAVV, *Words of Wisdom – A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, New York, Independent Curators International, 2001, p. 87.

⁴ V. the discussion of this term and its use in the postmodern era by Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism”, in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed.), *Art in Theory, 1900-1990 – An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 1051-1059.

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can in fact be incorporated into an artistic practice that is part of an increasingly image-mediated universe. It was precisely on this reality, as well as on the mechanisms that support it and on their specific uses, that the artist began focusing his attention. Roughly around 2004, Bruno Pacheco started a series of works based on images that depicted groups of people and that combined in them the two major uses that photography, as a mass technology, has been put to in contemporary society: the production of memory and the production of identity.

Drawn from a vast archive that is kept by Bruno Pacheco and which has been fed over time with photographs taken by himself or drawn from a variety of media and supports – newspapers, magazines, adverts or the Internet – the images that acted as raw materials for these pieces depicted groups of nudists, clowns, cheerleaders, choirboys, senior associations, paintball teams or excursionist groups⁵, with all individuals clearly posing for the camera. Besides the interplay of looks that characterises such images – while short-circuiting the usual univocity of the observer/observed binomial – what immediately stands out from these paintings is the fact that the sitters voluntarily offer themselves to the image, indicating a conscious, collective desire to preserve the memory of an event that, in order to achieve that purpose, must paradoxically be suspended. In most of these pieces, the specific event or action that is taking place and is the cause of the various gatherings cannot be identified clearly, and in the rare occasions this is possible – as in the case, for instance, of *Eclipse* (2008) – the cause is out of shot, relegating the image to the shallowest representational role and reducing it to the condition of a supplement for a deferred memory.

On the other hand, a very clear connection exists between this set of works and the tradition of the portrait, as well as the resources from this genre that can be used for identity-building purposes. And while it is these pictures' mise-en-scène – that is to say, the landscapes, costumes, props or instruments featured in them – that allows us to access the various contexts suggested by the paintings, it is also important to notice how the constant presence of items such as masks, hats, visors or dark glasses, combined with the near-careless way in which the faces and expressions of the people featured in these portraits are rendered, stresses how important the deletion of individual features is to the construction of any community.

This group of works is especially illustrative of Bruno Pacheco's stance (at the time) regarding the uses and supposed virtues of everyday photography. The images we find here present themselves as

⁵ Respectively, *Au naturel* (2006), *Happy Hour* (2005), *Girls Shape* (2006), *Boys Shape* (2006), *Red Hat Society* (2006), *Let's Paint* (2005) and *Miracle Search* (2006). For a reference to this set of works, please consult the artist's web page, in www.brunopacheco.info.

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pure facts, as self-contained and self-sufficient items. In this sense, they are archetypal instances of the image's declarative function, as well as of its probatory vocation and face value; all this has been cleverly summed up by the artist in the title *We did it, it's true* (2008). This also means that these paintings are the result of a careful selection that attempted to highlight photography's limitations regarding some of its more ambitious goals, not exactly to criticise them, but because their peculiar structure made it possible to create a tension between the extremely circumscribed content of the photos and the exuberant pictorial value the artist has added to them. A tension that actually feeds itself, changing with each new view.

I. Genealogy and eschatology

Roughly over the past three years, Bruno Pacheco's work has undergone a development that, while never fully abandoning the strategy we have just described, has allowed him to explore other systems and scrutinise a variety of approaches to the same epistemological search for the pictorial image. Organised as three separate but concomitant sections, the exhibition at Chiado 8 allows us to map out some of these developments, and also gauge their progressive sophistication.

In the first of three rooms, the viewer is confronted with the presence of a spherical object, measuring about 180 cm, the surface of which consists of strips of canvas, arranged as the leather panels in old footballs. This object, with its dubious condition, between playful suggestion and artistic statement, is part of a branch of this artist's work that is characterised by the construction of three-dimensional pieces out of materials recovered from the studio. Paint-pots, bowls, basins and even cacti: many items in that workspace have become materials for the artist, who, by means of simple material recombinations, creates objects that often mix features from painting and sculpture⁶. If we take this peculiar condition into consideration, we will find it easier to recognise, in many of these objects, subtle commentaries on minimalist art. This is precisely the case with *The Possible Ball* (2009), whose size was so calculated that the piece could be neither an object (in other words: something one could handle) nor a monument (something whose scale exceeds the measure of our body, imposing itself over it), since it directly evokes the seminal productions of a major name in

⁶ Such is the case of *Studio Ashtray* (2005) and, more recently, *Untitled (Buckets)* (2009). However, not all of Bruno Pacheco's sculptural production resorts to this recycling of materials, as shown by *A Pot of Gold at the End of the Rainbow* (2008) or *Pedestal* (2009).

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so-called minimalist sculpture: American artist Tony Smith⁷. The fact that it is a sphere – probably the most gestaltic form of all⁸ – further deepens the connection with the minimalist context, even though the piece is by no means confined to it. This is essentially due to the nature of the pictorial intervention we see here, and also because of the metaphoric quality the piece develops when confronted with the two paintings in the same room.

On more careful inspection, it quickly becomes evident that the stains on parts of the sphere's surface are the result of paint seeping through the canvas strips, which suggests the existence of an image that is turned to the inside of the sphere and is thus denied to us. This strategy of concealment – which will become preponderant in the next room – is not aimed at preserving an iconoclastic gesture, but rather at creating a disruption that, by enhancing the piece's provocative quality, generates an interplay between the desire to see and the possibility of experiencing this body fully and autonomously, in the terms of the physical relationship it demands.

It would seem that this interdiction places the exhibition's keynote on the notion that our access to the image's core depends on how we deal with our own expectations, as well as on our level of autonomy regarding the stipulated visual regimes. However, a substantial part of Bruno Pacheco's work is founded on the multiple unfoldings and contaminations the pieces establish between themselves, a fact that reveals editing as his method par excellence and dialectic perception as the basic requirement for experiencing his works⁹.

It is precisely thanks to this dialectic relationship that the presence of *Nudists.com* (2009) and *Revelation/Shelter* (2010) lends a metaphoric meaning to *The Possible Ball*. Taking their iconographic content at face value, these pieces show us a couple of nudists who walk across a landscape on the open air, and a pair of spaceships on a backyard. Obviously, the burden of finding meaning in this combination – as is the case with all other combinations in this exhibition – falls fully to the viewer; however, the unavoidable link between the nudists and our shared imagistic legacy concerning the Garden of Eden sets off a whole series of associations that place these pieces

⁷ Cf. Tony Smith, *Not an Object, Not a Monument: The Complete Large Scale Sculptures*, London, Steidl mm, 2006.

⁸ On the fundamental relationship between the minimalist project and gestaltic theory, v. Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture 1-3” in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed.), *Art in Theory, 1900-1990 – An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 813-822. This article also references the work of Tony Smith.

⁹ This statement takes into consideration the influence of cinema on Bruno Pacheco's work. It should be mentioned – for its important position in the artist's career, but also for its deviation from the current condition of his work – that Bruno Pacheco carried out, between 1998 and 2005, an important exploration of video as an artistic medium.

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in the realm of genealogy and eschatology (that is to say, directly inserting them in the biblical narratives about the origin and end of the world), consequently turning the sphere into a (rather secular) image of the world itself.

II. Frame, body and substance

The second room of Chiado 8 is fully occupied by seven devices similar in form and use to those display racks found, for instance, in poster shops. The incorporation of common display devices into Bruno Pacheco's work dates back to 2005, the year he created *25 meters of piece* – a work consisting of 25 metres of canvas painted in seven vertical stripes, as many as the colours of the visible spectrum, rolled around a structure similar to the cloth dispensers in haberdasher's shops. The pieces shown here share with *25 meters of piece* not only this appropriation of everyday display elements, but also the reference to the colours of the visible spectrum, though in a more discreet way.

At the room's entrance, the viewer encounters a silkscreen print displaying an apparently random typographic arrangement, punctuated by subtle colour rectangles. More inquisitive visitors will find out that, when read from the bottom up, the columns of letters form the sentence 'Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain', the well-known mnemonic aid to the colours of the rainbow (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet). Clearly acting as a preamble, this piece is doubly tasked with remembering viewers that nothing in Bruno Pacheco's images is exactly gratuitous, while defining a correspondence between the number of colours invoked and the number of items presented, allowing us to intuit how each of the colours superintends the content selected for each display device.

Having approached these devices, we observe that all of them consist of movable frames that display pictures on both sides, thus echoing the effect of pages in a book. Faced with this peculiar material structure, we will inevitably be led to reflect on the reasons that led to the frame being chosen as the main structure in this set of pieces. On the one hand, the sculptural quality they acquire when closed prolongs the gesture of interdiction of the image that is present in *The Possible Ball*; on the other, the syncopated cadence in which these elements are arranged on the wall directly references the work of another famous minimalist sculptor, Donald Judd¹⁰. The latter realisation

¹⁰ Cf. Óscar Faria, "As ilusões da arte" in *Público*, Suplemento Ípsilon, 12 June 2009; Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed.), *Art in Theory, 1900-1990 – An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, pp. 809-813.

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confronts us with a gigantic paradox, because the programme behind this American artist's work counted among its objectives the creation of a typology of objects between painting and sculpture (which he called 'specific objects'), whose concreteness would thoroughly dispel any kind of pictorial or spatial illusion. Well, the primary function of a frame is precisely to create an illusory space. A frame is a device that by itself suspends reality and tells viewers that they are facing a representational space, whose content is fully dominated by fiction.

The conceptual shock these frame-built sculptural objects trigger is a sign of something that is fundamental when looking at Bruno Pacheco's work: the absolute need to see his paintings both as images that fully embrace their iconographic, representational and fictional content, and as (concretely) pictorial bodies, whose characteristics support an extrapolation of the experience of the image that goes beyond its interpretative valency, placing it within a haptic (tactile) and perceptual relationship. Naturally, these two conditions are inseparable, and their concomitance manifests itself right at the start of each piece. In fact, the artist's method for selecting images is guided by such parameters as iconographic relevance and associative suggestion, as well as by criteria of visual preponderance and pictoric potential. Once selected, these images undergo an intensive process of alteration of their formal features – framing, light, colour, sharpness – which dilutes their umbilical connection to the photographic object in favour of the opaqueness that characterises every pictorial creation. It should be noted, however, that this process of deviation from photography does not imply that the referential connection between the painting and the image at its source is rarefied. On the contrary: the many transformations to which the artist subjects photography essentially serve to free it, not from its referentiality, but from its complete inability to edit any part of the visual field it captures. In spite of not being properly concerned with signaling or creating an artificial *punctum*¹¹, this process is doubtlessly invested on reinforcing the significant quality the image already possesses (in a patent or latent way) via an expressive set of formal and pictorial resources that even comprise the addition and subtraction of elements as a viable and necessary strategy.¹²

That strategy is, in fact, visible in the paintings present in *R., O., Y., G., B., I., and V.* (2010). The

¹¹ And it could never be so; the *punctum*, as it is formulated, is a phenomenon that is circumscribed to photographic, rather than pictorial experience. Cf. Roland Barthes, *A Câmara Clara*, Lisbon, Edições 70, 2010.

¹² This paragraph follows, while refuting it, Pablo Lafuente's theory regarding the relationship between Bruno Pacheco's paintings and the photographs on which they are based. Not only are we convinced that this artist's paintings preserve the referentiality of the original images (though they do indeed lose their indexical valency, given that they are a double mediation of reality), but we also believe that, in this instance, Lafuente's reading concerns itself only with the formal aspects of Pacheco's work. Cf. Pablo Lafuente, "Balões de ensaio: o trabalho de Bruno Pacheco em cinco capítulos" in *Bruno Pacheco*, Porto, Galeria Quadrado Azul, 2006.

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remarkable body of works gathered here offers us an opportunity to identify the ruptures and continuities that run through this artist's current work. While his manifold representational options no longer allow an iconographically-based reading similar to the one we applied to his group portraits series¹³, we can nonetheless observe that a recurrence of the same motif (as is the case of the *G.* module, which consists only of pictures of rubber gloves) or the same context (the *R.* and *O.* modules, which are clearly dominated by the presence of female figures and trees, respectively) defines the iterative structure as a model for highlighting differences, details and deviations, which consequently allows the viewer's attention to focus on these subtle movements. On the other hand, the repetition of certain types of images (namely the presence of horses in *O.* and *B.*) or of circumstantial models (people with their backs turned in *V.* and *R.*) suggests that these images' apparent iconological diversity actually responds to a set of specific interests that shape a potentially limited but particularly disconcerting sphere of concerns.

It is essentially thanks to that relative limitation that we are able to feel the presence of a narrative that runs through these pieces. Rather than in the emulation of a book-like structure that these devices so clearly assume, it is in the unfolding relationships between works, in their inter-remissibility, in the way they prolong and contaminate each other, that this possibility gains weight. In any case, and even if it exists, that narrative would never be measurable in terms of the author's intention. What we have here is not a communicative process. Consisting more of intervals than of conclusive moments, this will always be an elliptical narrative that relies fully on the viewer.

As to the pictorial features of these works, it is important to notice how the artist's approach to brush-strokes and chromatic treatment makes an important contribution towards the definition of a range of resources and, consequently, the creation of an authorial universe that is under permanent critical scrutiny. Punctual deviations notwithstanding (such as the stylised, quasi-pictographic paintings of birds in *I.*, the use of monochrome in *V.* or the hard-edge explorations in *B.*), there is an evident interest of the artist in exploring washes, tonal contrast and vibration, as well as short brush-strokes defining volumes and directions, purposefully losing sharpness and lending diffuseness to the picture. This pervasive loss of detail directly calls to mind the subject of memory, though that does not mean memory has any programmatic value here – indeed, the artist has clearly refrained from appropriating images that may, even marginally, evoke identifiable historic or social contexts, as was the case with *HELP* (2004) or *Finalle* (2005) – appearing instead as a levelling process and a

¹³ Indeed, the series as an operative structure has practically disappeared from the artist's work.

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place in constant construction, where reality and fiction have precisely the same value and interact without hierarchies.

III. Ethics and repetition

Perhaps it is here that the political aspect of Bruno Pacheco's practice can be found. Perhaps this deliberate and conscious openness to worldly phenomena, this unprejudiced attention to what is minuscule, common, nearly insignificant, is the defining feature of a personal ethics that inevitably extends into his artistic practice. Not that this stance defines itself in opposition to the great or noble subjects his painting also encompasses; to the contrary, it defines itself by means of a coexistence of modes, models and intentions, lending concrete form to a willingness to examine the surface of things in search of a path towards the deconstruction of our eminently functional experience of them, nullifying conventional relationships and replacing them with a posture that constantly questions its own premises, methods and results.

This posture is clearly visible in the set of works displayed in the exhibition's last room. In these paintings, which depict quite ordinary paper boxes, the artist performs a strict programme of variations on the same theme. Out of this unmistakable insistence emerges the aforementioned movement of approximation, testing and constant inquiry, which incorporates the imperative need to see again, perhaps more, certainly better. The pulses of that perseverance make up the love story Bruno Pacheco presents to us here, like someone who guesses that the ecstatic moment evoked by Ulrich – that episode of special attention that leads to the experience of love, to a state in which we will be, finally, true – is reached through immanence, through the openings certain bodies display under peculiar predispositions, through the revelation of the unfathomable mystery that is kept beyond all appearances.