

## In praise of curiosity

Some forty years ago, a historian from South India gave me a cornucopia-shaped object that was unfamiliar to me. This object, amidst a flutter of colourful fabrics in a series of zigzagging strips, holds two small mirrors, positioned centrally and of different sizes. Seeing my puzzlement, he enlightened me: 'for each mirror, in each small part of reality that you see reflected there, you will find a part of god.'

Forty years is also around the length of time that Cristina Ataíde, a sculptor by training, a curious traveller and unrepentant forger of relationships, has been demonstrating the very same thing. In her work, she explores a very particular way of opening to the world, reflecting, if not that ability to find god in the details, at least an element of sweetness (in both the benign and the tragic sense that the word can hold) in the face of the creative and renewing capacity of life and death.

Her intent and inquiring gaze, her attention to the other, to its nature, its actions, extends from the corporeal matter of the world—stones, trees, rivers—to the more volatile—wind, rain, snow, dust—gathering and observing and showing all of it, possessing the ability to identify, in everything, some kind of tension: that which creates life and its inexorable path towards death, and the way that the uniqueness given to each part contributes to the fragile beauty of the whole. As a traveller, Cristina Ataíde knows that (as the Norwegian thinker and explorer Erling Kagga wrote) each expedition starts with a step. A similar awareness of the value that each element gives to the whole is also that which, in some eastern philosophies, such as the one I mention at the start of this text, is given to the part in relation to the whole.

Without imposing any hierarchy on objects or actions, Ataíde acts, reacts, gathers, mixes and shows, bringing to each of us the world she is passing through and with which she is in dialogue, constantly observing and listening—the same relationship she later establishes with the exhibition space. This desire and ability (which we must admit is particularly common to sculptors) empowers her exhibition narratives and routes, her penchant for making us change place, altering our perspective, involving us not just through the gaze but through the whole body.

The praise of curiosity is something dynamic and concrete in the work of Cristina Ataíde, whose questions—like that of the title of this exhibition—involve us and make us responsible too, as they surprise, disturb, welcome us. It is that whirlwind of tensions that we discover in the exhibition '*¿A Terra ainda é redonda?*' [Is the Earth still round?], devised for the Sala dos Fornos in the National Museum of Contemporary Art – Museu do Chiado, and in which various coordinates such as high and low, inside and outside, see and feel, envelop and be enveloped, make and gather, are proposed to us like data for a study not just of what we see, but of how we see, and of how we are able to build, as a conscious process, a new knowledge of what surrounds us.

Drawings, sculptures, video and found objects all mix together and, above all, relate to each other so that we can relate to them (and to the act of discovery) in an active, intellectual and sensory way. In other words: on a broad aesthetic level.

Exhibitions devised and created in this way are group works, with aspects of challenge for the sculptor and for all those who work with her, building as a group these emotive scenes that exhibitions must also provide.

For the originality of her work, and its representativeness in the national and international art scene, this exhibition by Cristina Ataíde, an artist with a far-reaching international career who has for some years been part of the MNAC collection, is also a way to broaden knowledge and thinking about her artistic creation, integrating her in a broader and not just Portuguese context. This is exquisitely expressed in the brilliant essay by David Barro, curator of this exhibition and an expert in contemporary art whose knowledge of Portuguese and international art makes introductions unnecessary.

To all those involved, from the museum team to the external contributors, particularly Cristina Ataíde, David Barro and Beatriz Horta Correia, who was responsible for the exhibition design and the catalogue in your hands, my heartfelt thanks. To the visitors to the exhibition and the readers of this catalogue, I hope that your encounter with these works raises many more good questions.

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