

Cristina Ataíde. ¿A terra ainda é redonda? [Is earth still whole?]

David Barro

Cristina Ataíde examines the different dimensions of changing matter. She does this by surrendering to the shapes with a keen awareness of time and space, embracing their rhythms, with a concentrated and contained pictorial focus that stems from drawing and which is projected, paradoxically, in works with a markedly sculptural presence. These are works based on transformation, in many cases modelled with minimal intervention by the artist, who poeticises time and its circumstances, never ceasing to critically question the mutant invasion that humans impose on the world. As Merleau-Ponty would say, looking at Cristina Ataíde's work, it is not just a matter of us moving closer to the works and seeing ourselves in them, but of being able to see the world in a more sensitive way through her works.

Cristina Ataíde's work is like a memory map: of place, space, time, matter and its alterations, of our actions... In some of her works, such as the recent creations made with beeswax, modelled from stones that the artist gathers on her journeys, we can clearly see this touching absence, embracing the sense of loss to which Georges Didi-Huberman refers when he states that seeing is feeling something that inevitably escapes us; in other words, when seeing is losing. It seems as though forms and the world grow only towards their extinction. As though any means of drawing closer to matter in fact signifies moving away. Everything is configured and disfigured, transformed, represented.

We notice this in all of Cristina Ataíde's works where nature is the starting point: whether in her drawings, in which the driving force is the action of nature and the wind; or in representing that same nature in other noble materials; or in the way the works present themselves, letting themselves be seen in a tense and different manner. This is demonstrated by the circular marble pieces suspended throughout the room in the MNAC, which in some cases contain the knots of branches found in nature that live, side-by-side, with their identical representation in bronze. The same happens with the huge tree trunk, suspended from the ceiling, the only support being some straps to keep it balanced. In these works, Cristina Ataíde does not change reality; what she does is changing the way we apprehend it. After all, as John Berger notes, all art based on an intense observation of nature ends up modifying the way we see, either confirming what we already know or proposing a new way of seeing. Observation is thus a political attitude, in this case able to impart a criticism of the present and, consequently, allude to an uncertain future.

Let us think of the tree as a starting point, with all its symbolic potency, a solitary figure, overcoming a threatening context, with a presence that acts, paradoxically, as a singular representation of humanity. The tree as an element that allows us to call forth

the political from the poetical, in a work in which the artist carries out a brilliant transposition: nature becomes sculpture and sculpture becomes nature. Or of the stones that emerge from her waxes: the artist does not reveal the defeats, nor the deterioration of the material, but instead brings to light its flaws and fragilities, which are none other than our own as inhabitants of an affected planet that we must urgently care for in another way. Her gaze is therefore critical and reflective, as that of art should be, always able to configure itself as a social sound box, demanding and ironic, albeit without the cynicism of politics. The artist thus uses the multifaceted quality of art to work on the natural. It is a matter of understanding the space we inhabit, and through which life happens. Technology is not required to achieve this; sometimes all it takes is a stone or a tree trunk, or its representation in bronze, as a tribute or abbreviated monument of that compressed and suffocated landscape.

Cristina Ataíde introduces the idea of fictional reality and combines it with true reality to create a kind of political ecology and re-signify the concept of nature, hearing that increasingly distant nature in distress. That quest could perhaps be compared to that which we find in mythology, with the ardent Apollo who, captivated by Daphne's beauty, pursues the nymph and ends up causing her to become a tree. While the biblical man was expelled from nature to enter culture, Cristina Ataíde transforms culture into nature. The physical and ideological cross paths in this attempt to channel the future as an urgent possibility, questioning its structures starting with the smallest, most artisanal, to remind us that what matters is not just what we see, but more than anything how we see. Godard said something similar, about it not being just a reflection of reality, but the reality that results from a reflection. For this reason, the truth, a political condition of Cristina Ataíde's work, remains momentarily invisible, because it is not just born of a relationship with the form, but with the biological time of life. It is rather like Friedrich's landscape dominated by heavy clouds in which the tiny figure of the monk is overwhelmed by the vastness of the sea that, when exhibited for the first time, sparked complaints from the public, who claimed they could not see anything. Friedrich depicted a void that, paradoxically, saturates everything. Like the tree that Cristina Ataíde makes levitate, like the lava stones, survivors empowered by being spat to the surface, like the fossils that resist being shown as works of art or like the enveloping circular drawing that the artist prepared as a site-specific work for the MNAC.

It is a matter of expressing as far as possible the poetics of the image as observation, as in Tarkovsky's films, and that ability to circulate around or move closer to the different scales. The image as an unfathomable field, a tense wait, an impossible revelation. Maximal in that disproportionate circular drawing, made on paper more than twenty metres wide, which envelops us, creating a colourful and brilliant atmosphere that astounds us. While all of Cristina Ataíde's works lead us to an atmospheric interstitial state, with elusive outlines, it is in her smaller and subtler works that also evoke the immeasurable, like a poem, and where the proposal of the enigma is always kept moving, that we could say that, in that profound desire that is impossible to take in with just one glance, we feel the tremor of the possible, as

though we sense something emerging. The pictorial is taken to an extreme situation and the drawing expands to transform into a huge sculpture. Meanwhile, the gaze translates a sort of vertigo that dominates the experience, generating a mirroring situation able to transport us as spectators to the domain of the indiscernible.

I cannot help but think of the sedimentations and degraded colours of the photographs of enchanted mountains by Antonioni, near to Rothko's play of opposites marked or separated by the horizon line. They are images situated between the typological and the psychic, able to contain the breadth and thickness of the sky and the earth, or of the sea. Rothko confessed to never having forgotten the sensation created by the sight of a car that he saw as a small speck in an empty, mist-shrouded landscape. From then on, his paintings extended mentally beyond the canvas, resolved by optics that are much more emotional, like the red drawings by Cristina Ataíde, which seem to have no creator other than the wind itself, but which have become her unmistakable and singular artistic legacy.

Before entering this circular work, which conditions the exhibition space, as though it were an ancient Celtic shape immersed in nature, we find another two works that are drawings with the body of sculptures, thanks to their three-dimensional construction. One of them guides us within the space so that we enter the huge enveloping drawing. The other fattens its body to welcome us from a distance, as soon as we enter the exhibition space. Once again, the weight of the structure combines with the lightness of what is stated through the red pigment, which in some cases is so light it disappears, although it still manages to impose itself, because in the unmistakable red there is something essential: its tactile quality, achieved by the artist's particular way of working with the dry pigment. These are drawings that seem to be dominated by a patina of wear, by the experience of time, as though inviting us to a sensory intimacy.

That is the feeling we have when we arrive in the MNAC exhibition space, where some of our perceptions are eroded or singled out, although the atmosphere around us does not change. In that sense, neither her drawings nor her sculptures, nor the way they are exhibited as a group, show any fear of becoming sensual or beautiful, and in their condition as landscape combine in a haptic dynamic, allowing the matter to show itself and breathe, creating its own place. As she does with her works, allowing time to refine them, Cristina Ataíde managed to mark out her own style and language as an inner need. To describe it, architect Peter Zumthor uses the term 'tuning' which, as with pianos, means something like finding the right inner pitch, a kind of physical and psychic temperature, noting that materials have no limits: 'Take a stone: you can saw it, grind it, drill into it, split it, or polish it – it will become a different thing each time. Then take tiny amounts of the same stone, or huge amounts, and it will turn into something else again. Then hold it up to the light – different again. There are a thousand different possibilities in one material alone,' he wrote in his book *Atmospheres*. Zumthor claims these 'atmospheres' and speaks of the sound of the space, its temperature, that which surrounds it, how the light falls on it, how when we

move we can do it somewhere between calmness and seduction, in short, the different 'levels of intimacy.'

In the exhibition devised for the MNAC, Cristina Ataíde sends us into that kind of 'atmosphere,' effectively surrendering us to those levels of intimacy. Carlos Martí Arís defined this type of sensation as 'eloquent silences,' giving that title to a book in which he speaks of creators who made measurement a fundamental condition of their work, from Borges' invitation to lose ourselves on the intricate paths of his labyrinth, to the silence of the cinema of Yasuhiro Ozu, where it becomes resounding and eloquent, allowing us to contemplate a part of the world that is about to vanish. In one chapter of the book, he talks about the eclipse of language, an act that would consist of inserting a filter or a veil to prevent the language dazzling us in a way that impedes us from seeing other lights. Cristina Ataíde also calls upon the action of language, sometimes literally and sometimes, like in the MNAC, working with nature and colour as a kind of pre-verbal language. Because Cristina Ataíde believes that what is most interesting is not found on the surface, but in that kind of tactile gaze that she seeks out. Hence the radical importance of colour, which allows us to see the movement and its climates. Here, red is like writing that spills. For that reason, as spectators, we end up being inhabited by colour in these works, on the boundary of perception and the gaze. Everything moves in colour and the landscape, natural or represented, transforms into a dispossession, in a gesture of subtle respect for matter that, as happens in the world in general, we mistreat and which is running out of possibilities.

In Cristina Ataíde's work, we recognise an inclination for that which is eroding, becoming abyssal and fissured. And also for that which breaks. At times, even the exhibition space itself, which opens to welcome, inside it, a stone that is dimly lit, as though it were a tokonoma:<sup>1</sup> the light appears and withdraws, in a kind of praise of shadow that conveys the tone of the writing of Junichiro Tanizaki. What is proposed has nothing to do with a limitation, but with an intermediate space that we must cross, even if only with the gaze. This game, like the work made with beeswax and glazed stones on the opposite wall, gives meaning to an obsessive idea of the artist: embodying the void, an expression that became the title of one of her most recent exhibitions. It also gives rise to a process of displacement relating to the transformation of the singularities of the matter and its contexts, reorganising new encounters, redefining its boundaries. Nature moves closer to the human body, like a wound that introduces us to the inside of the matter, whether from the more physical aspect of the sculptures, or from the less tangible point of view of her drawings. It thus shapes a mode of warmth, as though we were entering the veins of nature, as an action of movement, but not of destruction, in which the very 'happening' is merely the reformulation of its contexts, of its value as an artistic object.

Cristina Ataíde walks through life in the way that she wants us to walk through her exhibitions. In each movement we are assailed by a mutated image that creates a

---

<sup>1</sup> Tokonama is a decorative opening in a wall, in Japanese homes, in which artworks are displayed.  
Translation note.

sequential perception of the space, producing an expanded view, as though it were a long take of the world she wants to project. It is thus through her passion for the interval, for the intermediate space, for the harmonious transposition of found objects and for the gaze, that forms a mirror of the natural, like the first contact lenses worn by Giuseppe Penone that, in his work *Rovesciare i propri occhi* (1970), reflected the landscape at the same time as impeding the artist's vision. Everything is placed in relation to interruptions that, in turn, work as links. She thus seeks the relationship between vision in motion and the possibilities of visual perception, which acts like a skin. She does this based on sequential transformations in which the distances cannot be measured to situate the time factor in the foreground. We note it in her circular structures or marble discs, placed at slightly different heights, or which hold natural elements identical to others produced with different materials. On the floor, a marble disc is concave and contains water, while another is convex – and we barely notice the difference between them. Those that are hanging from the ceiling appear to be the same, but they are not, because they have been slightly worked, like the huge drawings that were modelled by the wind.

The arrangement of these discs reminds us of another unmistakable characteristic of Cristina Ataíde's work: its performative nature. Because the mark of the body is always present. First, because even when the artist tells us how she introduces to her work materials gathered directly from nature, these are worked in subtle interventions, either simply cleaned or somehow manipulated by the conscious warmth of the artist's hands. This is not an insignificant question, because—I am adamant—it is the transformational condition of the matter that is at stake and it is thus necessary to know it, to grow it, to observe it and rescue it, to understand its carnality and its inner faces.

Because Cristina Ataíde cultivates landscapes within landscapes, as declared in the first work in the exhibition, which is in fact the earliest piece, *Polaridades Solúveis* [Soluble Polarities], from 2016, a piece of lead that can send us to the sky, whilst in reality maintaining the marks of the floor. Because, in many cases, what is heavy is elevated and what is light is shown resting. Her drawings also expand alone, with only the strength of the wind distributing the red pigments. All this leads us to understand a premise: Cristina Ataíde's landscapes always insinuate themselves as though barely sketched, like a Medardo Rosso sculpture. Cristina Ataíde thus favours the experience, the process of discovery of the works that distil into forms that, in turn, are sensations or memories, something like the awareness of breathing. Because in the work of Cristina Ataíde any detail can be a trigger. Hence each gesture being of decisive importance and each work containing what Didi-Huberman calls 'anthropological density.' Because each physical image is accompanied by a mental image, a poetic understanding that provides the framework for this mirror vision. Reality is not invented, it is transformed. This is why we were warned, with great lucidity, by Pier Paolo Pasolini: all it takes is for the angle of our gaze to be diverted by a millimetre for our vision of the world to be completely different. And this is where the truly

exceptional condition of Cristina Ataíde's artistic vision is based, because from the details she invites us to think like nature itself, while we fill up with questions.

All this reminds us that the thing that characterises artists is their capacity to ask questions of the world. Art captures what goes unnoticed by others, develops sharply in what is confusing and allows us to imagine other worlds based on our curiosity. There are few tools like art, which uses cultural knowledge and human experience without disdain for the scientific or instrumental disciplines that help it decipher certainties in periods, like this one, of total uncertainty. That is why Cristina Ataíde asks, ironically, whether earth is still whole, at a time when we have already intervened in everything and everywhere. Hence her immersion in the sensitive, which goes far beyond the unmistakable beauty of her works, managing to be truly and simultaneously transformational and empathetic, in the way that art can be, which is as powerfully poetic a gesture as that of a carnation during a revolution and for which it is enough to know where to place it. Because if we are able to put it in the right place, it can help us better understand our present and anticipate sidetracks for our future.