

# Embodying the void: journey between a doing and its undoing

For the last three decades, Cristina Ataíde's work has been a steadfast exploration of the intersections between drawing, sculpture, installation, photography, video and site-specific intervention. Her production reveals a thirst for experimentation and a fascination with discovery anchored in the experiences of travelling, in searching for different thought systems and in researching the expressive possibilities of matter. Indeed, her works are often associated with the experience of the different places and moments that she intends to apprehend, as well as with the experiencing of a spirituality shared with the objects and entities that she encounters. The exhibition *Embodying the void* features a set of works that span various interlocking periods and media which, however, do not convey a chronological or retrospective gaze. Presented as a web of relations that intersects references which are transversal to the artist's production, the exhibition enunciates the connection between individuals and the environment (reinforcing the dialogue between geography and culture), the nexus between travelling and knowledge (accentuating the link between discovery and identity) and the relationship between spirit and matter (speculating on the varied spectrum of states of existence). Thus, by proposing a gaze on density and dilution, a trajectory is engendered that operates by echo and impulse, as attention evolves from the high and compact to the low and fluid.

The exhibition is announced by the presence of a piece shown in the building's main hall that responds to the scale of the place with a wooden structure covered in red pigment. The wood dialogues with the thin layer of coloured dust, and its body suggests a movement that synthesises the logic imbuing the works.

The works that launch the trajectory across the exhibition rooms consist of sculptures and drawings in which the mountain, and its imaginary, is approached as a

primordial, archetypal, sacred locus. Associated with the density of matter and loftiness, the world of the mountain takes on a special condition that, through the route it dictates and its height, romanticises the dialogue between the human plane and the sphere of the divine.

From the remotest past to the present, the mountain relates to nature as origin and to the firmament as transcendence. Looking back into Greek mythology, it is apparent that Gaia is seen as the personification of Planet Earth accompanied by Uranus, which represents the expanse of Heaven. Moreover, the mountain is the expression of earthly energy, whose generative drive establishes a bond between worlds. This theme has been explored throughout history, across various geographies and cultures, including European romanticism, the aboriginal interpretation of the Australian territory, or the vision of Japanese Shintoism and ancient Mesoamerican cultures, for which geological transformations are associated with the body and the abode of the gods.

The mountains evoked by Cristina Ataíde are inextricable from the notion of the Earth as a foundational refuge and matrix—exemplified in *Mountain House #12* (2018)—but also from the idea of nature as source of life. It is equally important to stress how walking and being in touch with the landscape are seen as engines of physical and spiritual development in communion with the environment. Interestingly, in most cases the artist points to the reading of density that contains the void, or a complementary negative, within itself. A negative that takes the shape of a cave, hole or lake and functions as a counterpoint that upends or concludes the ascent, leading us to an inner sphere or to a world in reverse.

In *Montanha Suspensa* [Suspended Mountain](2012), the artist inscribes the names of mountains she has climbed and lists others that she would like to visit. Here, the written word is overlapped by a series of drawings that record the images of various slopes and the viable trails on their surface; however, elevations in the landscape seem to correspond to chasms in consciousness, thus generating an equilibrium in which travelling or walking are as structurally relevant to the experiencing of place and spirit as they are to the construction of the work. These questions are also explored in the work *Montanha com Lagoa ao Meio #5* [Mountain with Lake in the Middle #5](2020), in which drawing extrapolates the ascent by placing a lake at its centre. In this work, the written word moves across different times, and away from the will to reinforce and list, to set an ancestral landscape against a series of terms that mark the present moment.

In the series *Todas as Montanhas* [All the Mountains] (2008–2020), the relationship between positive and negative remains bound to the interdependence of matter and spirit and acquires multiple readings. While in some cases the mountain appears as an inverted body, set above and below a reference horizon, in others the negative is merely shadow, outline and absence. The arrangement of these elements in space, across the floor and various walls, expands the transition moment (emphasised in all of them) and reinforces the thought on the notion of double.

Along the same line of reasoning, works like *Surge* (1994) and *Snapper* (1994) examine the density of physicality. Pointing to the ideas of thickness and furrow, these works accentuate the dialogue with the void and shadow, amplifying the complementarity of matter and its absence. We seem to be in the presence of hybrid objects (between a body and an interlocking device), whose existence insinuates and resounds in other works across the following rooms.

In *Todas as Montanhas do Mundo* [All the Mountains in the World] (2008–2020), Cristina Ataíde evokes the surface and base contour of a mountain, but also of a lake, focusing her attention around an imaginary topography that unfolds vertically in space. By using red (or

blood-red) pigment, the artist summons the presence of the body and the intensity that animates it, as well as the notions of channel and circulation. As it reinforces the movement enunciated in the surrounding works, the idea of void no longer exists only as the shape of an absence, but is also asserted as a condition to receive and channel the spirit, the blood or the sap that animates an entity.

Lao-Tze, the reputed author of the *Tao Te Ching*, says that the emptiness of the pot is what makes its very existence possible; the absence contained in it holds and shapes the liquid, which gives the pot its purpose. The void evoked by Cristina Ataíde is also a vehicle to contain, to put into circulation and to transform matter. One such example is the tree, a key reference for the understanding of her works, as well as for the expression of a whole world of veins, channels and circulations, which dictate the exterior as the consequence of an internal nature.

Like in the case of the mountain, the tree is seen as an element of connection and transcendence across innumerable cultures, as well as the manifestation of a cycle of life and fertility. As it reaches into different worlds, the tree illuminates birth, growth and ageing, both through its spatial existence between the earth (into which its roots plunge) and the sky (where its canopy expands), and through its temporal existence between the cycle of its deciduous leaves and the maturation of its fruits, which ripen and eventually rot.

In Mircea Eliade's view, the tree is an image of the Cosmos, a cosmic theophany, the Centre of the World and the pillar of the Universe. There are multiple, diverse examples of cultures in which the figure of the tree expresses the evolution or development of a connection to knowledge and to the sacred: the Nordic Yggdrasil, the Sephirothic Tree in Jewish Kabbalah, the Tree of Life in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also the Ashvattha in Hindu culture, the Kiskanu in Sumerian culture, or the symbolism of the sycamore in Egyptian culture. In all these instances, the tree is a symbol of the universe as a breath of life and fecundity that embodies the movement of a vital energy.

For Cristina Ataíde, the idea evoked by the tree is also linked to the manifestation of an energy that flows inside its channels to promote a state of growth or expansion. Seeking for an understanding of the tree as object and process of a certain development, the artist looks into the expression acquired by matter as the result of Anima, whose Latin root points to the spiritual principle or divine power capable of breathing life into all material things.

In these works, the artist focuses on an excerpt, manipulates the perception of scale and examines the relationship between part and whole in all its multiple dimensions. The series Ficus (2004), for instance, enunciates the relationship between the human body and the tree trunk, emphasising the relationship between the void and the notion of circulation; and the series Angelim Ferro (2020) is also an investigation of the connections between the exterior and the interior of matter. In both cases, density loses its compact aspect to become multi-layered. In Angelim Ferro, the artist fixes and reorganises fragments of tree bark to try to recreate a new body. The same notion of stratification reverberates in the series Frágil [Fragile] (2020), in which a set of paper sheets are covered in different sedimentations of pigment. Here, the vibration of light is perceived at the back and front of the support, and materiality acquires a new degree of subtlety conveyed by something which is no longer entirely physical.

Continuing along her process of element-dematerialisation, Cristina Ataíde also presents a set of works based on a privileged relationship with water and light. In the third room, the artist has conceived an installation made of two videos projected on different sides of the same screen, thus deepening the reading of the surface and the idea of layer, which are now revealed as permeable. The images merge, the colours suffer alteration, and the entanglement of the various strata that form the body of Rio Negro, Amazónia (2020) is accentuated.

Water also has a strong presence—both allusive and direct—in various of the artist's works. The water evoked by Cristina Ataíde is that which shapes channels, rivers and seas, as it incorporates the strength of movement and current, but also the water that expresses the reflection and animation of the surface as it returns the external world. One could say the latter registers the nature of events in an internal plane and mirrors the world that surrounds it. Analogously, by alluding to the presence of the spirit and the body, the images refer to individual action and contemplation to reveal an existence that is always fluid and impermanent. While water is something that carries and reflects, it is also the metaphor of a process of cleansing and dissolution; a vehicle for the fading of things, the erasure of the ego and the reconstruction of being. Indeed, water plays a fundamental role in baptism and spiritual awakening. The condition of a transient existence finds correspondence in the apprehension of a moving image. Therefore, the videos in this exhibition celebrate the delicate nature of perception as they intersect blurs and images whose chromatic vibration employs the room where the work is featured as a place of transition.

This aspect is continued in the installation (Im)permanências [(Im)permanences] (2003), whose midsize wooden boat occupies a crucial place in this exhibition. The boat is an element that moves on water and simultaneously points to the transformation of the spirit. Hovering above the floor without touching it, the work reinforces the notion of route, in the relationship between humankind and the environment, but particularly in the navigation between two different worlds. Moreover, the formal affinity of this structure with the human body, both in terms of shape and colour, reinforces the notion of inner journey.

In various cultures, the crossing of the waters is associated with rites of passage or transformation, as well as with birth, death and the continuous transit, or cycling between the two states. Thus, crossing the water marks

an inner dislocation, a journey from one shore to the other, or from the source to the sea, that calls for transition and overcoming.

For Cristina Ataíde, the importance of the journey has a double meaning. It is anchored not only in external dislocation, which allows her to discover different places and ways of viewing the world, but also in an inner movement that questions the nature of being and the transmutation of identity. (Im)permanências operates on perception by manipulating the boat's body and position and reviewing their inherent scale, colour and gravity, as well as the expressivity of the light and shadow that make it stand out.

The fifth and final room features a set of large-scale photographic images that capture the reflection of the world mirrored on the surface of the moving water. Photography problematizes the capturing of the instant and the nature of something that is vague and in process of dislocation as it manifests in the transience of forms. The plasticity of the images emerges from the light, the colour and the illusory outlines of the figures, as well as from the relationship with the written word, which lists multiple states of existence, as indicated by the transcriptions "Dust of my body" / "My body in dust, "in Auto-retrato [Self-portrait] #5 and #6 (2006).

The reduction of the body to its reflection, to dust and to the word is anchored in the dilution of matter. While dust is the reduction of the physical body to the smallest particles that can be touched, light is the element that allows for the manifestation and perception of its existence. Light appears as the subtlest vibration in constructing the expression of an identity. It should be noted that the most intense affirmation of matter emerges through the highest degree of subtlety. The existence of things is thus revealed or hidden by the expression of light, as it bathes or sculpts, as it smooths out or dramatises.

Cristina Ataíde's works could be said to develop a connection between spirit and matter, celebrating the

relationship between the individual and the environment, anchored in the notion of journey as external and internal transformation. Moreover, the exhibition deepens the intersection of different periods in her work and the relationship with various media, materials and types of intervention. However, all of this is only activated when the works themselves awaken us to an intuitive synchronicity of perception in which experience is an act of attention, albeit not fixed, delayed or crystallised.

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