

# The unifying drawing

Cristina Ataíde's extensive drawing work has been exhibited for nearly three decades. Although she is a sculptor by education, drawing remains at the core of her work as a research method, thus establishing a useful relationship with other media such as photography, video art and installation art.

This exhibition includes some of her recent work in drawing, sculpture, video art, installation art and listings. It takes up several areas both inside and outside Casa da Cerca and was designed as a cross between languages that brings back the debate on the limits of drawing.

Her drawings (the main theme in this essay) are showcased in two rooms, each with its own way of recording and analysing the real: one room exhibits her "Skin" drawings, exercises in what we may call fragment-taking of the memory of the place, whereas the main room opens up to a large panoramic view of a huge (twenty-metre long) drawing, representing a set of mountains.

Let us start with the first room. Apart from the merely technical side of the creation of a multiplicity of textures, the use of frottage in Cristina's body of work refers back to an exercise in memory. The memory of the journey, bearing witness to the world's body, a fragment of the place: it is a double view-taking (a double of photography; an instant shot that encompasses, besides light, the matter's own memory, in the sheer scale that fills the sheet of paper) – the choice of the object to be "captured" and the "focus" on drawing's compositional, tactile end result.

Surfaces, as well as the skin of the world, are captured according to several matrixes. The starting point can be a tree trunk or a stone. In these cases, as Cristina Ataíde says in the interview that is also part of this catalogue, drawing demands strong physical commitment. There are lighter tones to the way her works record the skin of the world, as the drawings in her *Durante o Rio* [Along the River] or *Depois do Rio* [After the River] (2005) series, taken from the surface of the Ganges and therefore drawn along the river's body (and everything it carries) and worked on at a later stage (as in the *Depois do Rio* series). Nevertheless, this is an "epidermal" record.

Her intention to capture the skin of places (their nature and appearance alike) also means a way to apprehend time (and the ways it manifests itself in bodies), and is one of the most important dimensions in Cristina Ataíde's work. It runs across all her body of work, and is also present in her evocation of non-places on videos (as, in this exhibition, in the "Aerportos" [Airports] projections, points of passage, a mere crossing of lines in transit).

As far as drawing is concerned, we may say the mountains are also made of "skin", albeit using a very different technique from that of frottage.

First of all, despite their apparently mimetic register, what we have here is a pure exercise in re-presentation. Although these mountains seem to repeat, and refer to (as clearly underlined by the presence of lists) a specific landscape reference, they actually do not depict any existing mountain. Every slope shadow, every land depression, every peak, every outline of a massif is merely an aesthetical exercise, a fictional recovery of aesthetical experiences and the memory of the place.

A memory of footsteps and the feelings they bring up – an affective memory. Drawn in red when the artist's body has already compared to the body of the mountain, kept in graphite in all other cases: in the act of drawing the fragmented lines that compose it serve the logic of the drawing itself in the pursuit of a true image that may bring back the feelings that were experienced when facing the immense mass of the real. Which is why these drawings, with their mountain-like outlines are really not about landscape accidents (in the sense that they may describe them as in a scientific drawing), rather than about real feelings.

What matters here is not only the analytical outline that “re-composes” natural features in the composition, but mainly drawing seen as another world (simulacrum?, verisimilitude?) or, if you may, as staging or recreation. Scale is instrumental to similitude: the crushing feeling it guarantees refers immediately back to one’s feeling of smallness before a mountain. From a technical point of view, again, it is the line that is magnified here, thickening geographies and topographies, charting austere, harsh regions – the territory of the sublime (as Kant named it), as well as of self-overcoming (as Nietzsche would put it).

The mountain that takes up the main gallery in this colossal drawing has been the core theme of Cristina Ataíde’s body of work in the past few years. She has moved from land art (the basis for her ecological awareness) towards a literal (yet poetical, metaphorical, landscape-inspired) expression of the wrinkles time and tectonic accidents have inscribed on the earth’s surface.

Play is also an important part in this point of view. On the one hand, the representation of the mountain as a drawing tends to be perfect. On the other hand, the sculpture that represents it takes on a miniature side; like a sketch, it reduces itself within a minute scale that takes back its dramatic quality and reduces it to an object that can be held in your hands. It is the opposite of drawing (its medium is more fragile, yet more overwhelming in scale, which goes physically beyond you) the bronze sculpture (its matter being more robust, yet easier to work on as far as size is concerned) becomes the other side of the same exercise of capturing the look and our place in the world.

Along the same surprising, shape-capturing logic, the ridge on the floor of the Salão Nobre [Main Hall] is made of a fragile, perishable material. Tracing paper, hand-moulded on another, harder paper (which was removed afterwards so that nothing might interfere with the transparency of the work), repeats luminically and poetically the same thing the earth’s body operates under the tension from tectonic plates. Its folds are like those of the skin of the world – made by accidents of nature and the flow of time. Their creation/erosion binomial refers back to our own ageing process as well, and the sculptor’s work of time on every body.

Pure drawing, pure sculpture, unifying element: the aesthetics aside, this is probably the piece that most clearly shows how hard it is to establish the boundaries between drawing and sculpture. Pure drawing and pure sculpture, but pure gesture as well: this ridge made of light gives us a look from above, a bird’s eye view, a kind of divine point of view (given the scale of representation). It draws us back to the frailness of the world – and thus, tragically, to our own frailness. The shadows of the massif are highlighted in red – the same unifying red of the lists that, like ribbons of drawings, envelop the wooden sticks showcased in the Chapel, the same red that envelops the trees in the garden, the same red from the mountains Cristina Ataíde has already climbed, the same red that outlines some skins of her exercise in frottage in the first room, the same red that closes the cycle in the memory of a river, in the igneous shadow that doubles the boat hung at the Galeria do Pátio.

With a career spanning nearly three decades (even though this is not a retrospective exhibition), Cristina Ataíde’s work main programme lines can be found here. Drawing remains at the core, a research space par excellence, together with all legitimate ways to take it: either by recovering objects that were found and subsequently transformed (which is also a meeting point for sculpture and ready made), in the indeterminacy of the limits between disciplines (drawing, sculpture, installation art?), between the line of drawing and the line of the word, between the presence of the object and the wish for life. Being clearly aware that everything is perishable.

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