

Dust from the journeys

"Travelling, you realise that differences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, as distances, a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents."

Italo Calvino

Being a pilgrim is part of human condition. Not as the idea of a worldwide traveller, but as a symbol of our life, which is a transitory passage, as we think of it as a path, paved with wishes and hopes, disappointments and frustrations, comings and goings. Even if we consider our daily life, we spend most of our time in transit between places.

Arthur Schopenhauer once said every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world. Few people do the opposite. He also said the artist lets us see the world through his eyes. He lets us open up our look's horizon beyond that which our body can reach towards the unknown.

The idea of a path or a journey may be the key to read Cristina Ataíde's (Viseu, 1951) body of work. Many of her works arise from her many trips, but mainly from her inquisitive, curious attitude towards everything she sees. Her work is not only on the places she has been to rather than on the relationships she establishes between them and between her body and each place – as if those places became extensions of her body. The body, the vehicle that goes through and experiences the places, is therefore taken on as the centralising element in her production. Her sculptures, photographs, drawings or videos come from her bodily experience of a specific reality, and are staged in order to summon the spectator's (physical and spiritual) body. What seems to impress Cristina Ataíde is, as Paulo Pires do Vale said on the work of another artist, "the expression of life to be: the ceaseless movement and impermanence that enables everything to remain the same. Life, always old, always new – and always concealed. A free game, both in terms of process and of action."

The exhibition starts with an installation at the chapel, De-sejar [Wishing]: Cristina Ataíde placed a set of wooden sticks about 3 metres high next to the wall, tied with red ribbons. Ribbons of wishes, dreams, promises. The room sets the tone for the exhibition: pilgrimage. The spectator is invited to make a physical journey into Casa da Cerca, and a mental journey into the works on display, which both evoke and stimulate this symbolical wandering.

(Im)permanência IV, two boats that ran aground in the small exhibition room, suspended, with a shadow/trace of red pigment, carry on the concept of journey that began with the wooden sticks. You can only see part of the boats coming into and out of the walls, as if they were already departing. The idea of a shadow or a trace is concomitant with that of the journey. You leave a trace of your passage wherever you may go. This tiny dust left behind is the unstable stuff memories are made of. Red dust, which also evokes the blood that runs through our veins and keeps us alive and continuously punctuates the exhibition, as it appears in several other works.

Following the material association to the human body, to Cristina Ataíde's body: the skin of the places she visits is carried to the rooms where the exhibition is held using tracing drawings, an ancient technique in which a spot is drawn on a textured surface using graphite and subsequently drawn on a piece of paper. Some are small, others are large: out of context, i.e., away from the place they depict, other ways of reading them are made possible. Their sexual dimension becomes highlighted as well, especially in the case of the larger pieces. Also worth mentioning is a small piece of wood enveloped in lead, as if the artist had applied a second skin to it. The relationship between the real and imagination, between what is done in situ and what is brought to the studio is recurring in Cristina Ataíde's work.

The first drawings share the room with the first lists that are showcased. Ataíde has used listings to create portrait-like figures. Most of them can be seen as self-portraits, as these descriptions are either related to her body or to the way she experiences the world, the first one being a set of possible constructions for body concepts.

The mountain is another recurring theme in Cristina Ataíde's work and is widely showcased in this exhibition. There is no better way to materialise the idea of 'life to be'. Ataíde is fascinated by mountains: the physical experience of being there, as well as the metaphysical experience they provide. She is captivated by the rarefied (yet purer) air. She is dazzled by the skin of the mountain. She is hypnotised by the contrast between the scale of her body and the body of the mountain. The mountain stimulates the concept of movement as well – that of someone who, faced with a mountain's extraordinary mass and weight, is invited to walk along its paths, its veins.

Also on display is M #9, a small bronze sculpture that evokes both the mountain and its opposite (as in an iceberg, what you see is only part of reality), as well as a long listing of all the mountains in the world. This forms a line that goes through the room, setting the look's horizon – the starting point for many pieces in the exhibition.

One of the main pieces in this exhibition is a huge drawing of a ridge: an imaginary set of mountains that puts together several real mountains. Its counterpart is a ridge made of tracing paper covered in red dust that takes up the whole space in another room. The size of both works (which are sculptures rather than drawings) make the spectator physically negotiate space. They make him/her trace a route, set a course. Despite their lightness and simplicity, these works hide, on the one hand, the magnificence and the weight of that which they depict and, on the other hand, force the exhibition space. As in other works by Cristina Ataíde, these works do not show specific places and are not views from her journeys: they are mental projections of new ways to see the world. They are not about specific destinations (although they are listed by the artist): they are about their experience of being there. It is the metaphorical dimension enabled by her journeys that Ataíde seems to wish to evoke. Are these "journeys to relive your past" as Kublai Khan asked Marco Polo in Italo Calvino's "Invisible Cities", or to find a future?

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