

Some questions on the road

Q. How do you start a project? Is there a usual process or does it change from case to case?

A. It depends on whether I am working on my own or for a commission. If it is a commission made specifically for a particular space, such as a gallery or a cultural centre... Place, space, the issue of place means a lot to me. Before I start working I get to know what is happening in the place, what surrounds it. However, the project is done as part of my body of work and the issues I'm working on at that particular time. These are integrated in, and connected to the new project.

Q. Is there always a site specific side?

A. Yes, there is, in those cases. I can relate to site specific/installation art. It's an important component of my work. With site specific I can change the existing relationship within a space and make it dialogue differently, integrate or repel the spectators, and modify them.

Q. Is your creative process (in drawing, sculpture or photography) conceptual or intuitive in the beginning? Do you always start by defining a programme or do you start to work at once?

A. There's this basic idea – sometimes it's very remote or sketchy, or just a feeling. That idea becomes a concept and evolves until it is clearly defined. Suddenly, there's a click and I realise the way I can put the concept into practice. Its shape evolves and changes in the process. Other ideas are added (or the initial idea is worked on), and all that is accessory is wiped out. Concept is very important to my work. Nevertheless, I am also in touch with my intuitive side, which is more present in drawing and photography. When I get to a new place, I usually "go down". I forget everything I know and draw from the place or my feelings at that moment, without any self-criticism. I do it as an exercise and I find it very productive: you must forget what you've learnt so that what you do becomes clearer, more transparent.

Q. How do you choose your media? How do you determine the material you are going to use?

A. That's part of my work process. I develop the base concept and choose the material that is the most effective for the piece. I have not selected any specific material to use: I use almost every kind of materials. I like the way they surprise me and to see how they adapt themselves to the premises I have established. I like to explore them and test their ultimate possibilities. Their plasticity is fundamental. These days, my concern is to produce objects with as minimum raw material and waste as I can. That's why I use sketch paper in my sculptures. Is it a sculpture? Is it a drawing?

Q. Let's talk about drawing. What's in it that is different from, say, photography?

A. The bodily part of it (which can be a bit violent sometimes), the tactile relationship with the materials and the medium. My "skin" drawings, for instance, are made on large stone blocks, by applying frottage onto them. The relationship between the body and the action of drawing is a very strong one. It demands huge strength and energy. I like that. I like translating that energy, that dynamism, that effort onto paper. Paper itself is transformed: it takes on the shape of the place where it is worked on; it is moulded. There's almost an interpenetration of the material I am working on (stone, a tree or anything else), the paper and me. We almost merge. This is my aim in some drawing series. Let me give you another example: when I place the pigment on paper, I become merely a mediator that lets colour drop – it is the wind that carries it. I usually say I do absolutely nothing: it is the wind that draws. The reverse happens in those cases: letting the elements draw happen is almost a complete self-effacement. I frequently use photography to record my interventions on the landscape. I draw on the landscape. My "percursores no mundo" ["paths throughout the world"] project consists of drawings made of pigment and water everywhere I go. The work is made of photographs of those drawings.

Q. About sculpture: would you say drawing is still the most important thing to you, or is sculpture a totally independent, different body?

A. Sculpture is an independent body, even though everything is connected. There is always a unifying concept. The way I envelop tree trunks, for instance, the way I bring them together and create a skin on top of them, is related to “skin” drawings. I never show my sculpture’s preparatory drawings. They are my thought put to paper: the way I understand whether they may, or may not, function. They are working drawings. My autonomous drawings are based on a concept that is akin to that of sculptures.

Q. Do your sculptures reflect your drawings’ first thoughts?

A. Yes, they usually do. I work according to series. Those series evolve and ask questions. Sculpture comes as a need to translate it into space. When I start to work on three dimensions, specific problems come up, and these are solved along the way.

Q. Do you always think of your works beforehand?

A. I do. I don’t feel a need to create volumes just for the sake of construction. As in drawing, there’s always a conceptual line. I may use the same concept in sculpture, drawing or photography (and video art, too), because it analyses the same set of concerns in different ways – it is part of the choice of medium. Each medium has a specific field that is worked on, causing healthy and necessary contaminations.

Q. How do you define (how do you decide) the media you work on: drawing, photography, sculpture, installation art?

A. I fundamentally feel I’m a sculptor. I function as a sculptor. Nevertheless, place is very important to me: where I am, everything that surrounds me – that’s where site specific comes from. Sometimes only things that are created specifically for that place make sense. Ultimately, it is place that defines the medium I’m going to use. Even though it is a complementary discipline, drawing has become an addiction. I start to miss it when I don’t draw for a long time. Drawing is a very immediate thing: it is in close relationship with my body. I might say it is cathartic. I use all my body when I am working: outside, frequently, using nature itself, rather than on nature (but on my body’s relationship with nature instead). It is the fact that I am outside (together with the rain, the wind, shadows, water, and all the movement), the relationship between paper and those elements and me,

that has created many of my drawing series. Photography is almost always (though not every time) a record of my interventions on landscape. It is another way to draw. This is one the series I do systematically: to intervene wherever I go. I travel a lot (at least I try to), so recording those places on which I intervene on photograph is a way to bring something from them with me. I do video too, by fastening the camera to my body and carrying it with me. My voyages, either across the landscape (“Nevoeiro quente” [“Hot fog”]) or non-places, like “Aeroportos” [Airports].

Q. You also do a lot of ready made. Sometimes your intervention seems to be minimal, yet it changes the original object altogether. How did you become interested in objects that weren’t yours? How did you recognise those were desirable objects? How do you transform them?

A. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, when I was with Madein, Alenquer, I had a long commute from Lisbon every day. On the road, I used to meet lorries carrying all kinds of objects – extremely interesting objects. I realised all shapes had already been invented. Everything was already there; there was no need to invent new shapes – no need to make new shapes. I started to find those shapes everywhere, and I tried to take possession of them, to show them. Hence ready made. I’ve never used completely “raw” ready made: there is always a modification. The first ones I used were objects from Madein that were lying there, scattered. I changed the material and the scale. My second exhibition showcased the very objects I had found: I made only a few changes to them. I kept colour and simplified shape by removing all that was accessory, noise. I eliminated the small, uninteresting things. Then I began to create my own language. I looked for objects that mattered to my intervention at the time.

Q. Let’s move to colour. What is the cornerstone of your work: drawing or colour?

A. Drawing came before colour. I used only white for a long time, in my early “Fonte” [“Fountain”] drawings, which I took on as such – not as preliminary studies for sculptures or drawings of sculptures. I’d use different shades of white, with wordplay and volume over them. They were still very close to sculpture. Then came black and grey. Only later did I start using colour, mainly red (when I took on colour in sculpture as well).

Q. Why do you use colour, incision and matter in drawing? You started using matter, then added colour and incision. Why is there this more bodily side of drawing?

A. I'm always aware of my sculptor side. That's why volume is very important to me. I can draw with volume and move away from the usual canons. Anyway, there are no canons anymore. I'm interested in moving drawing away from bidimensionality towards a third dimension, by incorporating a possible body to it. This has to do with matter. To work with matter, mould it, modify it, put it on paper, almost as if you pick up a piece of paper and transform it into something else – something you can call a sculpture or a drawing.

Q. Why is red the dominant colour in your work?

A. Red is a passionate, provocative colour. It is the colour of life. I've always been fond of working with opposites, contrasts. They have become a regular feature of my work. Red has it in it. You can feel hate and love and express them using red. When you're mad, you're red; if you're shy, you blush. Red is a very important colour to many civilisations. In India, for instance, red means feminine energy. In China it is related to happiness and beauty. It is a unifying, matrix-like colour. I started using it because it showed up on a ready made I was working on for the "Oposições" ["Oppositions"] exhibition. I wondered whether I should change it or not: whether I should paint it black, grey or white, which were the colours I usually used. I thought it was time for me to incorporate red: dark red, like feminine energy, bodily energy – from the libido, from the heart. That was the first time I used it.

Q. Let me ask you something else: why did you start using letters? I mean, you frequently insert a caption – in ex-voto paintings, for instance. On other occasions, words are there, if only to be erased (as in *Silêncio?* [Silence]) or on lists. Where does your relationship with words come from?

A. From poetry, basically. Actually, there was a poem in the background in one of my early drawing series, even though you couldn't really see it. Maybe it's not there so much now, but in the first phase of my work I used to do pieces and then erase them or overlap them. There was this sort of layer that repelled them or made them more mysterious. It didn't show the whole piece. The poetical side was (it still is) very important. Words are a very powerful way to communicate indeed. I'm very fond of writing, although I'm not a writer (nor do I pretend to be one). Words are very immediate: hence the need to incorporate them in my work.

Q. What about lists? When did you start doing them, and why?

A. Lists are a way for me to take possession of things, to memorise them, to incorporate them. My first list was for a work I still haven't done (but hope to do one day) called "Mortes desnecessárias" ["Pointless deaths"]. I started it at the time of the carnages in Luanda. I was preparing a work with several artists, among which Fernando Calhau (who, unfortunately, is no longer among us) for the Pantheon. I was going to use that list of deaths that occur, but shouldn't, needn't occur. One idea was to get connected with police departments in several countries, and they would feed me information on those deaths: murders, accidents, catastrophes, all those things that happen everyday. I still do it, although in rather more prosaic way: I listen to the news or copy from the newspapers. Unfortunately, pointless deaths happen all the time. That was the first of many lists I systematically make. One of them, "O meu corpo em pó" ["My body in dust"], is my self-portrait. I replace the word body for all the words that may encompass my (current or future) concept of myself. Ultimately, we are never fully aware of ourselves. Searching for those words (the only condition I set was not to look them up on a dictionary: these words come to me through reading, conversations or thought) somewhat makes me more aware of myself. My food list, for instance (I make a note of everything I eat): I thought, perhaps too naively, that I would eat less if I became aware of everything I eat. Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't. Lists are a way for me to become aware of a specific reality and make it happen. What you write becomes an action.

Q. In the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned commissions. How do you deal with them? Do you actually like them or do you feel constricted in any way?

A. I usually like the kind of challenges that come with a commission. To transform a commission I may not be that keen on into an interesting, able project: that is the big challenge – to find solutions that may please both parties.

Q. Your stroke has changed: you used to draw much faster than you do now – at least I think so. There's a descriptive, accurate side to it now (I'm thinking about mountains, for instance). What is its significance in your path as an artist? Has the way you see drawing changed, or have you adapted gesture to a more restrained stroke, towards a workshop-like seriousness? There's an almost mimetic outline in your mountains. Before, there was a phase in which it seemed more expressive. Now it seems more analytical. What led you to it?

A. I haven't changed the way I see drawing: I have adapted it to a different set of conditions. The body was very important in my earlier drawings. They were not about gestures, yet they translated into paper my relationship as a being with that which surrounded me, with the place. I usually draw on the outside, using nature's elements. These ones, reproducing mountains, show an existing nature: in order to portray it, I had to draw more accurately as a way to bring the mountain's extremely powerful masses in my drawing and into the gallery. It's a different kind of ready made. I don't care whether the mountain is accurate or not: I'm interested in the mass I create with that particular drawing, the energy that flows from it, the comparison that is made and relates to you. I've been to Yangshuo, China, which is surrounded by the Carsic peaks: they spring sky-high from the ground, almost vertically. I found them deeply disturbing. These compact volumes enveloped me. That's why these drawings are so close to reality: they're a poor attempt at recreating it, at coming close to those masses full of energy. There's also the size issue. These drawings are so big they almost make me feel I'm getting into them. This is how I keep my physical relationship with them. I draw for hours and hours: I become virtually hypnotised, in a sort of trance. When you're surrounded by drawings which are 5, 7, 20 metres high, you become part of them. As in the Chinese legend, in which the painter enters his own drawing and vanishes...

Q. By the way: how do you decide the scale of your works? You can see it clearly in your drawings: in the case of mountains, for instance, the idea comes up into the composition. How do you usually decide it?

A. *That's an interesting question.* It's about the relationship between the theme and our need to perceive it. Some drawings from my "Todas as montanhas do mundo" ["All the mountains in the world"] series are very big, whereas my sculptures are very small. What I'm really interested in is

precisely the comparison between both sizes: understanding that size is totally relative – it's in the way you perceive it. Like Alice, the way you relate to things at a particular time can change you.

Q. About your work on the human body (in general) and especially with your own body (as an agent of the creation of drawing) and the body of the world (trees, the ground, rivers, mountains...): how did it come up? What led you to that relationship? How did you come to that soulful, almost pantheistic, relationship with the world?

A. I use the body as a metaphor for life. The important thing is people, bodies – drifting bodies, as someone once wrote about my work. I deal with those bodies: I think about them, and work on (and with) them. So, I find these metaphors of the river, the mountain, the trees, circulation, to work on the relationships between bodies. The way we relate to each other, the way we feel inside, deal with each other, understand each other...

Q. The relationship, care (taking care) issue was already very clear in your drawings of dragon trees as trees that are hurt, as beings like us. It went on with trees that are tucked, enveloped in red ribbons. These are convalescing bodies... By the way: when did your poetic, formal relationship with trees, especially, begin?

A. It happened after my "Anatomia do sentimento" ["Anatomy of feeling"] exhibition, from a drawing by Diderot and d'Alembert showing the human circulation diagram, which reminds you of a tree. The sculptures I made at the time, Mesas de Observação [Observation Tables], had small ramifications of the human circulation that looked like tree branches. From there I moved on to my work on trees (the tree of life...) and their synergies, because, if you hug a tree, it will send its energy to you. The vibration you get is very interesting.

Q. You've had some perishable projects and works along your path as an artist. Again, I can recall Silêncio? [Silence?], in which the words of women who had been interviewed were drawn with chalk on the floor. Naturally, the spectators' steps would erase the sentences. How do you deal with the ephemeral, with impermanence – with that which fades away?

A. I deal with it very well. It is the act of doing that matters. When a work disappears, it is as if it cleansed itself. The void means a lot to me. You can only fill it in if you let it go down first. As they disappear, works go down as well. And that provides space to build another piece. What matters is the concept carried by the work. That concept is something that keeps flowing. The work (or your life) must flow in a natural, true way. That's why the ephemeral is revitalising.

Q. To sum up: how do you think time in your work?

A. Time is always present, constantly flowing, moving in space and changing everything, changing space. It is this constant change that I somehow wish to understand and capture. It is these permanent modifications that interest me, as I witness that passage, that renovation.

Q. How do you see death, then?

A. It is an interesting companion. What I fundamentally try to do during my time here is to learn things that may prepare me for death. It is a sure thing, so you walk towards it. The better we get prepared (the better you face that reality) the smoother it will be. To me, death is such a natural thing that... it can come anytime it wishes.

Q. Let's go back to what's left: sometimes there are fragments, leftovers from installations. What do you do to them?

A. Sometimes I recover them, as in Destroços [Wrecks], for instance, made from ex-voto paintings, men made of wax stuffed with plaster to add resistance. As the sun half-destroyed them, they couldn't be used. So I broke them. The pieces that remained after their destruction were extraordinary: they were a metonymy of a body and all that comes with it. So I decided to recover them. They were no longer an installation: they had become sculptures. The object had been completely reconverted. There are times when, after the installation (depending on the material), my pieces either vanish altogether or can be reinstalled somewhere else after I store them. By then, they have become something different, though.

Q. Just out of curiosity: what are your truly favourite references? The ones that made you become an artist and led you in a specific direction, i.e., the ones that have founded your personal path.

A. There are two very important artists to me. One of them is Anish Kapoor, with whom I have had the chance to work two or three times. It was a real privilege to get to know him. We got along very well. I understood what he wanted to produce quite easily and I tried to provide him the best working conditions. It was very interesting to watch him create his pieces, drawing them on the floor because there were no large walls available (he usually draws on walls when he's thinking about his pieces) or on large pieces of paper. It was very exciting working with him. My trips to India and my studies on Indian culture brought my work closer to his. Another very important artist to me is Louise Bourgeois: all her work is very stimulating, especially because of the intelligence and insight she showed in her writing, her authenticity and mordacity... Of course, there are many more references, but these are my anchor artists.

Q. When is a work finished for you? When do you decide that's it?

A. That is the artist's major power: to decide his work is finished. I used stone for a long time. I don't do it so much anymore. One of the wonderful things about stone (apart from the healthy struggle it puts up), is that when you decide it's done, it's done. That is totally different from clay or any other instable material such as wax: although I may say a piece is done, the sun or a sudden increase in temperature may decide that isn't the final shape. I don't know when I decide a piece is done. I really can't say. I think you feel it. With drawings, I usually hang them on the wall for one, two or three weeks: if I feel the problems have been solved, if a drawing still lively and challenging on the wall, then it's done. If something doesn't fit in or if I'm not comfortable with it, it's not done, and you either keep on doing it or destroy it.

Q. One last question: do you reject a lot, do you throw away a lot, or do things usually go well?

A. I used to have a really hard time accepting my works when I started to work. Better said, I used to reject everything virtually everything. It was hard for me to accept that what I was planning, thinking, was right – that it was all right, that I should do it. But then I understood I had to do it all the other way round. I had to do the pieces because I felt the urge, the need to do them. It didn't really matter whether they functioned or not. I started doing my pieces trying to avoid any self-criticism, just for action's sake. Nowadays, I actually don't think I reject many pieces. When they don't function, I either transform them or put them aside. Sometimes, after a while, their body becomes denser: it's as if they had matured. This happens mainly to drawings: if I do not like them, I keep them anyway. When I rediscover them, I sometimes think "it actually works; I kind of like it." As with everything, there are many nuances. Anyway, I don't reject a lot.

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