

Título
Data
Publicação

Efrain Almeida: The Flight of the Hand
2001
Efrain Almeida. Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea;
Editora Xunta de Galicia, 2001.

Autor
Artista

Alexandre Melo
Efrain Almeida

efrain almeida: the flight of the hand

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IN THE LAST DECADE, BRAZIL HAS BECOME ONE OF THE STRONGEST EMERGING REFERENCES IN the world art scene. This means that today it is not possible, anywhere in the world, to try to organise an important exhibition or an exhibition which aims to represent the present-day international art scene without paying special attention to the situation in Brazil or including contemporary Brazilian artists. This is the expression of a creative vitality and richness exemplified by a whole new generation of artists in which Efrain Almeida is included.

The artistic and cultural situation in Brazil has special and unique characteristics on a world-wide scale. Above all, we have a historical specificity which can be translated into exceptional cultural expressions, of which the Carnival and Brazilian music, with their different elements, are the best-known examples in international terms and as far as an extensive public is concerned. They are cultural forms in which a deep popular link is merged with a high degree of aesthetic development and refinement, generating popular culture forms with a sensual authenticity and a spiritual aura which is all too rare in present-day popular culture forms native to other parts.

In the specific case of plastic arts, the situation is richer still and more complex. The arrival of Brazilian artists onto the contemporary art scene is not a recent phenomenon. Anyone who analyses the history of art in Brazil throughout the 20th Century will soon understand that for some time now Brazil and Brazilian artists have been in permanent, up-to-date and illustrated dialogue with the successive international artistic trends and initiatives. The visibility and international awareness of those Brazilian trends has been insufficient because of the ethnocentric slants characteristic of an exclusively Euro-North American vision of artistic evolution.

Today, it is clear that, for example, insofar as the artistic vanguards of the sixties are concerned, personalities and works such as those of Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark or Lygia Pape are, with an important and specific contribution, a fully integral part of international artistic dialogue. An active presence which stretches into the following generations, with the growing international recognition of works by the likes of Cildo Meireles or Tunga, Ernesto Neto or Vik Muniz, among many others, fortunately ever more numerous.

One of the most notable characteristics of the Brazilian presence on the international art scene is the capacity of its most important artists to harmoniously and productively articulate the problems which define the international art atmosphere with the inheritances and trademarks specific to Brazilian culture. Let us not forget that Brazil today, from a cultural point of view, is one of the few world superpowers, thanks to the richness, diversity and originality of its creators.

Efrain Almeida's work reveals, with a model acuteness, this capacity to articulate between a specific cultural inheritance and the most pressing preoccupations of our day. In this sense, what is most decisive about Efrain's sculptures and what makes them distinctive and original within the extremely rich Brazilian art scene as it stands today is the ability to go beyond what

Page 97
O coelho da vigília, 1997
The Vigil Rabbit
Cedar wood, oil
32 x 20 x 15 cm
Ricard Akagawa Collection,
São Paulo, Brasil

Page 103
Untitled, 1995
Cedar wood, blood
11,5 x 6 x 3 cm
9,5 x 5 x 3,5 cm
Museu de Arte Moderna
da Bahia Collection,
Salvador de Bahia, Brasil

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could be a mere adaptation of traditions or local reference points and manage to give his art an intense dramatic and personal charge.

Efrain's work is a noteworthy example of an articulation between *erudite art* and *popular art* which, without trying to make one yield to the other and rejecting this correlation manages to affirm itself in the end and in a completely creative way as *contemporary art*.

In Efrain Almeida's work, the influence of the popular craftwork characteristic of the region where he was born, the *sertão* of O Ceará, in the north-west of Brazil, can be clearly perceived. An important amount of his sculptures are made of wood (cedar) sculpted by hand. The nature of his work, hand-sculpted in the traditional way, gives it an exceptional material and tactile sensitivity – an ecological sensitivity, we could say – which makes these sculptures objects which are at once simple and sophisticated, powerful and vulnerable. We find in them the echo of a child's hand-crafted toy model, but also of popular crafting of religious images – deep-rooted in Brazil. The direct mark of the artist's hand has, in this case, possibilities of meaning which go well beyond evoking and updating traditional craftwork. It is the expression of a tangible sensuality, of a discrete intimacy and of a kind of benign solitude, which are especially characteristic of the sculptor's work. The traditional dimension of these pieces of work, together with their scale – a small scale, the scale of objects which fit in one's hands – give them an anti-heroic statute which is to some extent responsible for the specific efficiency of their contribution to the field of imagination within the framework of contemporary sculpture.

Compared with the dominating tendency of some of the most outstanding names in present-day sculpture (Hirst or Koons would be the most obvious examples), here it is not a case of creating something greater, more spectacular, more hyper-realistic, more hyper-technological, more overwhelming, but to make it smaller, more delicate, more idiosyncratic, more precarious and more vulnerable, kinder. It is the anti-spectacular, which is also a political position important enough to be underlined. It is a question of making sculptures closer to the hand and to the heart. To make sculptures with one's heart in one's hand.

Sculptural expression is here the exercising of an acute sense of delicateness. Efrain works with suggestions, insinuations, possibilities of meaning; never obvious or redundant. His work suggests the possibility of the emergence or manifestation of a feeling – love, pleasure, suffering, pain, communion with nature, fear of death – but which is never imposed as something clearly evident or as a topic for debate. The smallness of his pieces do not prevent him, and as such also reveal his sculptural capacity, from considering each one of his pieces of work or exhibitions as a proposal to globally occupy a space given over to such a capacity and to totally involve the spectator who comes to see it. It is always a question of a plan to occupy space in which a notable spatial intelligence is revealed. In spite of the small size of the sculp-

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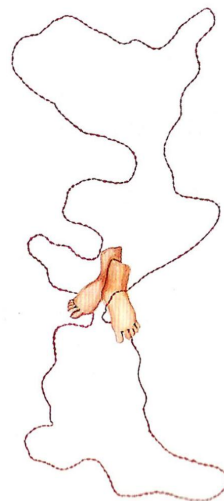
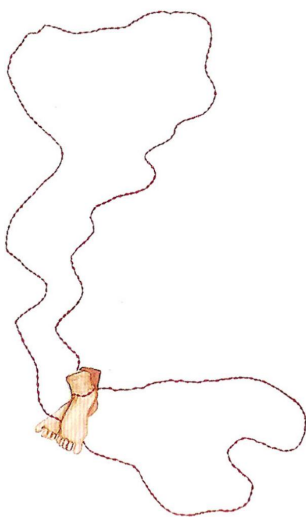
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tures displayed, the way in which they are placed produces an effective and dramatic effect of spatial involvement.

In the exhibition held in the year 2000 in the Canvas gallery in Oporto, two pairs of hands placed on two perpendicular walls are joined by bugle thread which come out of the palms of the hands like streaks of blood oozing from a wound or from a stigma and spilling onto the floor.

In the exhibition in the Camarga Vilaça gallery in Sao Paolo, in the same year, the mise en scène is based on the symmetrical relationship between the works exhibited on two opposite walls. On each wall are two small hummingbirds, captured with their wings open, as if in full flight. Long, thin red bugle threads hang from their feet, reaching the floor and continue on to the middle of the gallery. These threads unite each of the pairs of birds while at the same time tracing the red outline of two drawings which almost touch each other. These threads are what transforms each pair of birds into a real pair: side by side, joined by a streak of blood or a motive for happiness. The simple drawing outlined on the floor manages to mobilise the space of the entire gallery, involving the spectator and leading his gaze and his step. The stains the lines draw are like the shadows of a flight that the birds, stuck to the wall, cannot take, but in this way what they do is suggest. Or like the boundaries of the banks of two rivers which, on the gallery floor, could be both an evocation of nature as well as that of a lake of pure emotions. In a piece also on show in Canvas, *Árvore com estigmas* (*Tree with Stigmas*),



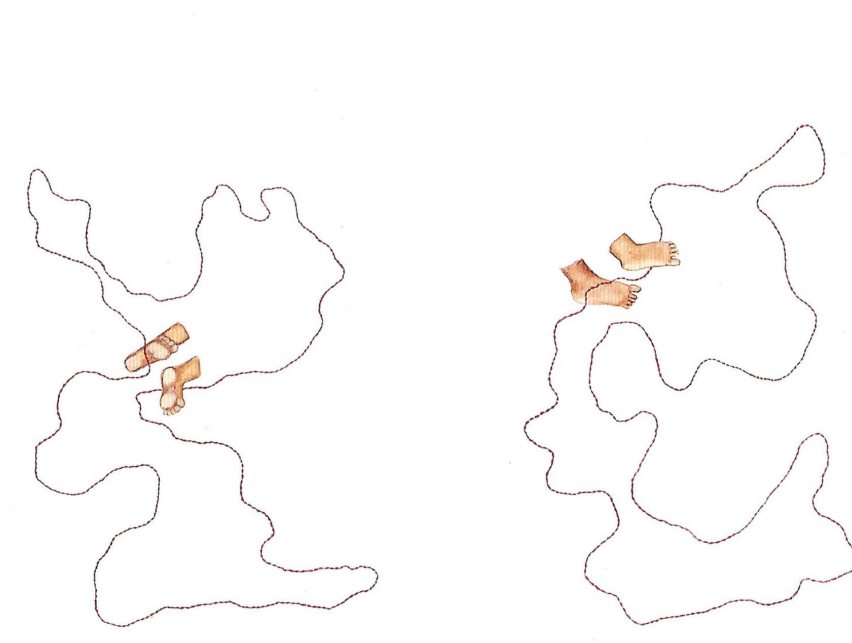
Pés com estigmas, 2001
Feet with Stigmas
Watercolour on paper
32 x 24 cm
Courtesy Galeria
Camarga Vilaça

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made up of 23 small tree trunks, is the way in which the various elements are placed on the wall, like in a drawing, which ends up generating the same kind of integral occupation of space, creating its own rhythm of interpretation which mobilises, inspires and guides the observer's attention. The same thing happens with *Marcas* (*Marks*, 1997), with 21 elements, or *Beija-flores* (*Hummingbirds*, 1999), exhibited in the James Harris Gallery in Seattle and made up of an infinity of small birds. The three sculptures which completed the abovementioned São Paulo exhibition, displayed on the wall between the two pairs of birds, are a good example of the main points of reference and concerns which feed the sculptor's work. Two of the sculptures were small human figures, the bodies of which are intertwined with tree trunks. In one, the tree trunk extends, like a drawing or a tattoo, onto the back of the figure. In another, two heads are joined by an oval branch, in the shape of a crown of thorns. The faces of the figures, like in other pieces by the sculptor, can be interpreted as self-portraits.

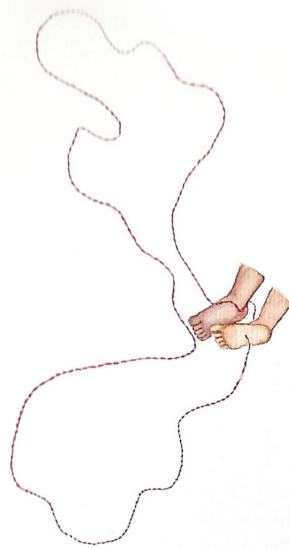
The dimension of self-representation, which emerges as yet another possibility for interpreting Efrain's work, can be developed in terms of an evocation of childhood, that is to say, of the conservation of a childhood memory of himself which would be associated with early play-time exercises in self-representation. But it is equally possible, in a more dramatic interpretation, to associate some of the examples of self-representation with an autobiographical manifestation of emotional experiences, not always exempt from resentment or a certain level

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of sacrifice. In our opinion, however, it is the possible self-representation and the game of speculations, identifications and non-identifications which, for the sculptor or for the viewer, provide yet another mode of metamorphic process which makes the figures oscillate between the human, animal and vegetable world, as is common in popular tales and children's tales.

The direct link with nature, presupposed by the material chosen and the way in which it is worked, reaches its climax in the representation of a physical fusion between human body and tree, flesh and wood. The specifically human, animal mark of life and perhaps concentrated in the small marks of colour which at times are a sign of the eyes or the lips. The red colour of the bugle thread takes us back once more to the representation of blood.

The tree-men also carry messages from the Catholic religion: the wood on the cross onto which Christ's body was nailed; the trunk of Saint Sebastian's torment; the wood's nakedness, the marks left by the wounds, the stigmas. See, for example, *São Sebastião (Saint Sebastian, 1997)*, an incision on a tree trunk.

A universe of religious images which come close to figures of sexual imagery. But also here, within the possibilities of a sexual connotation in some of the works, what emerges is not the evidence of the marks of sexuality but rather the suggestion of a physical sensuality in which pure sentimental vibration is as important as a material, physical beat.