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Efrain's Offering  
2001  
*Efrain Almeida*. Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea;  
Editora Xunta de Galicia, 2001.

**Autor**  
**Artista**

Adolfo Montejo Navas  
Efrain Almeida

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# efrain's offering

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IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN SCULPTURE, DOMINATED BY THE CONSTRUCTIVIST evolution of the *dreamy geometry* of neo-concretism, the later sensorial experiences and the ensuing material-conceptual malleability, the appearance of Efrain Almeida, who seems to create his own time and lineage, is a surprise. In fact we are hard-pressed to find any close artistic predecessors, with the exception of his semi-proximity to an artist as marginal as Farnese de Andrade.

Like his colleague from the Northeast of Brazil, the painter, Emmanuel Nassar, Efrain Almeida is out of synch with the one-dimensional erudite order of the arts, embracing a universe full of popular images. This has also led to the reorganisation of a past dilemma, like the discussion of the higher and lower forms of art in some simplistic interpretations, as if the avant-garde artists and Art Brut had never existed.

The fact that his work taps into a certain religious and popular statuary rooted in the religious festivals of the *sertão* in his native land, Ceará, is an underlying source which cannot be ignored, but should not be mythicised. In fact, Efrain Almeida runs like the devil from this stiff image that some have tried to label him with, as the son of artisans, converting his artistic biography into a closed circle. For, along with his undeniable roots, may be added – or rather linked – other matters of the most contemporary art which are of great concern to the artist. And this is where it can be inferred that he belongs to a generation of artists including the likes of Ernesto Neto, the late Leonilson and Sandra Cinto, to name a few who work with the body and memory in harmony with Efrain Almeida. Both the body, – what is tangible – and memory – the intangible – are the two fundamental expressions that the iconography of the sculptor hinges upon. And through them, some of the characteristics of his work, at times on opposite ends, are allowed to be clearly expressed.

The retrieval of the body – its importance – which has to do with a kind of return to figuration, is part of the need for introspection and artistic autobiography, that is felt starting in the nineties. The body as a subject for reflection will be an avenue of aesthetic research explored by a number of different modern day artists (Robert Gober, Cindy Sherman and Eulàlia Vallodera, for instance). This is manifested in the work of Efrain Almeida by the enormous number of images of the body he uses, found in the very foundation of his work: the drawings of his hands and feet which are repeated throughout his work and the anthropomorphisation of the elements of nature or the incarnation of animals into personal metamorphoses. Through both, he feels the need to increase this representation (hands, feet, birds, figures, trees, branches, houses, pitchers...) as a *continuum* of the world which never loses its intimate and personal accent. As if the artist's autobiography in wood were present in all the elements, many of his works may be interpreted as self-portraits (from the men who turn into cobras, fish, or goats to

Page 115  
*Gotas*, 1997  
*Drops*  
Cedar wood,  
tulle, velvet  
30 x 15 x 13 cm  
27 x 15 x 13 cm  
Courtesy Galeria  
Camargo Vilaça

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the watercolour series where his face appears in multiple images on the branches of trees.) This is something that the Brazilian artist and theorist Ricardo Basbaum<sup>1</sup> has called the de-formation of identity through artwork.

Left far behind, however, is the classic idea of the body as a votive offering, in a strictly religious sense, but not his merit in representing the whole by means of the parts, something also typical of the surrealists. There is also a certain harmony with the popular imagery of religion, which places faith and belief on an everyday horizon, yet at the same time infused with magic. (Pain close to miracles and wounds close to reality).

If the body, most of the time in naked form, beckons to the original state of sculpture, along with the memory of the artist, a double image is conveyed – the one that is inferred from the popular religious imagery, as cited, and the world of childhood. The latter is highlighted by the fact that the *postminimal* work of Efrain Almeida is a type of sculpture that looks like an object, owing to its manageable and utilitarian size, always on a human scale, closely resembling a toy (without falling into the explicit definition of some of the works of Torres-García, like the small sculptures of Balkenhol which do not fall into that definition). On the other hand, apart from being a classical recurrence, as is well known, the metamorphoses also belong to the world of the fable, the genre, par excellence, of children. Thus, people who turn into other things are

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also echoed in the reworked Miracles of the Apostle St. James in *História* (*History*, 2000), as well as highlighted in *A casa que virou árvore* (*The House which Turned into a Tree*, 2000), as a return to the origin, which is the metalinguistic expression used in his sculptural aesthetics.

Just as there is a way, full of meaning, that leads to these metamorphoses, including the childhood experiences of the artist, there is another road, that leads to fragmentation as a morphological and expressive resource or even as a spiritual justification: These images of the body may also evoke a certain longing to recover the soul. Formally speaking and from the beginning, the artist has worked with fragments and pieces of wood to achieve unmistakably fractured results. In hands, feet, figures, birds and sculptured branches, *the whole is there in absentia*<sup>2</sup>, as Omar Calabrese wrote in his etymology of the fragment as a neo-baroque trait.

And it is on this re-baptised style where the contemporary icons of Efrain Almeida can be inscribed, where the words stigmas or souls are not only part of the title, but also of the conceptual identity of the pieces. His sculpture does not avoid pain – nor does it avoid the perplexity printed on the static faces – mixed with a certain sensuality, similar to those in baroque art. (There are churches in Salvador de Bahia, where the wounds are made out of velvet and the tears, out of rubies). Nor does he elude a sense of dramaticism, which distances him from the original message of minimalism.



*Peregrino*, 2001  
*Pilgrim*  
Watercolour on paper  
32 x 24 cm  
Courtesy Galeria  
Camargo Vilaça

*Autorretrato com vieiras*, 2001  
*Self-portrait with Shells*  
Watercolour on paper  
32 x 24 cm  
Courtesy Galeria  
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In spite of the blood, the colours, the tears and the wounds denoting a religious beauty in its most symbolic sense, the sculpture of Efrain Almeida never ceases to conjure up a marked aesthetic connotation "a rough preparation of the original imagery" (Ana Teresa Jardim Reynaud), a new aesthetic symbolisation, giving new meanings to the signs. Religion, as a theme is outside the great majority of art in our times, no longer does it rule over our experience, but it does hold an undeniable transcendental dimension, as defined by Mircea Eliade, or the meaning that our Salvador Pániker applied to the term "re-ligación" (re-union) (Religion as Minimal Art<sup>2</sup>), a personal quest for transcendence. All of Efrain Almeida's work is an artistic and spiritual *re-ligare*, entailing the aesthetic achievement of an imaginal substratum that keeps his powers alive. If his work enters into this area "influenced by the sensitivity in the spiritual part of man" according to what Mário de Andrade once said (regarding, however, the lack of canonical religious art during the early twenties in Brazil), it is also because the artist from Ceará pays tribute to his times by raising artistic questions such as installation-spaces of the works, the fragmented narrative of their presentation, as well as the creative nature of the concentrated pieces.

The value of the sculpture is enhanced by its dimensions, this small size format which highlights an almost lost power of concentration, where the dimensions have been created to be seen by the hands, if you will. For the tiny sculptures of Efrain Almeida create, at the same time,

*Capela, 1999*  
Chapel  
Cedar wood  
26 x 34 x 36 cm  
Courtesy Galeria  
Camargo Vilaça

*Untitled, 1997*  
Cedar wood, beads  
20 x 60 x 9 cm  
Courtesy Galeria  
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both a visual and sensorial proximity. The skin of the wood is the same colour as our skin. This is the chief material he uses in his sculptural compositions, with the occasional appearance of velvet and a sort of glass rosary, with their symbolic colours red/wine/blood. If we look closely at the sculptural work of the artist, it is possible to see how the material is woven, the way in which its features (knots, forms, grains) are taken and incorporated into an exercise of dialogue and negotiation that imitates an artistic ritual. (A good example of this is the series of miracles of the 4 *altarpieces* where the figures have been plucked from the grain of the wood, creating waves of reverberating material on the board as they follow the very pattern of the material).

Efrain Almeida has reached the current stage in his work by means of the following stylistic process: He first painted on woods that lacked volume, where only the grain appeared. After working on the flat surface, he began to create complete figures, moving on to make sculptures of surrealistic hands, holding objects, creating a fluctuation and a separation of the object from the wall. One might say that since he ventured into the configuration of volumes, he introduced the characteristic presence of the wall in his work – transforming each piece into a combination of sculpture and installation – as if half of the work were inside. Now, as can be seen in several of the pieces in the exhibition, we come across complete figures and fragments at the same time: human images and images of nature together, comprising a fragmented narrative that has no beginning, no middle and no end, because the motifs tend to be circular. (The exhibition presents the three selected subjects: *miracles, sins and souls* all mixed together, just like in the landscape of life.)

The fact that his works require special attention to the spaces where they are found, is also part of both the characteristic of the base as well as of the mixed nature of the sculpture-installation. These sculptures require a vertical support – the wall to which they are attached, but in some way, it is also the air. On seeing the sculptures in three dimensions, they take on a frontal aspect as well, a two-dimensional image with its incrustation in the wall. All the pieces appear to emerge from the silence that all walls hold, to arise from the whiteness of the wall, to break out like an apparition, like fragments of a body or like an underlying magma, in another place there is a hint of the elliptical in the works of Efrain. A sculpture that is in continuous suspension, with no support, since as it juts out of the wall, it is presented vertically and not by the horizontal plane of the ground. (One of the outstanding pieces of the show, in the room with the column, is the installation of six feet. Blood spills from them to form a pool on the floor, and the sculptures open up to a greater sense of imaginative sensation between the content and what is revealed).

It is particularly curious to note the affinity that the artist feels for Galicia, as exemplified by his series of *miracles, sins and souls*, which was created expressly for this exhibition at the CGAC. Partly because of the harmony between previous works such as *Castigos (Punishments)*, sculptures like the little lambs, with a banner and *Agnus Dei* which appear to be Galician and the ones

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recently completed. It should not come as a surprise that there is an entire network of references and signs: a relief of the souls in the magnificent group of the three suspended houses in the *Casa das Ánimas*; (*House of Souls*), echoing the voluptuousness of the woman with serpent depicted in the Pórtico da Gloria; the figure of the shipwrecked man who emerges from the waters full of seashells, like in the first miracle of St. James, in *Home con vieiras* (*Man with Shells*); or the legend of the Apostle cutting off heads, appearing in the drawings/watercolours of the artist duplicated in the self-portraits with branches.

Also interesting is the way in which the pieces connect, at varying heights and different spaces, creating an individual structural ensemble. (Belonging to another framework of forms, however, is the inventory of references that the artist avails himself of in dance, architecture and music, like the tears in the song by Gilberto Gil, "Maracatú atómico", or in literature, in the metabolising novel of *Macunaima*, formalising another substrate of images.)

In this artistic-technological world, where it is hard not to resort to the video or the computerised programming of images, this long night that beckons from the wood of Efrain Almeida forces us to reposition our image in the representation and the power afforded it. (just as Francisco Leiro and Stephan Balkenhol do in other sculptural universes, without falling into naturalist echoes.)

If his work is not *light* and does not promise the usual landscapes to the soul, it is because it requires a silent and attentive gaze, more reconciled with the dimensions of our enigmatic condition. Now especially, that all of our secularisation may end up with man as the object for technoscience.

Owing to its serial condition and anti-monumental size, as well as its spiritual idiosyncrasy, his *postminimal* figurative sculpture is an important contribution in the world of contemporary sculpture. Two hands secure a blue tear, a house, an empty glass: as his childhood intuition had revealed, Efrain Almeida, has discovered in the early popular, religious images of the Northeast of Brazil, that the offering was not only aimed at religious statutes, but also at human and religious ones. He was of a broader faith, whence irradiate his works of art, the meaning of his contemporary offering.

- 1 "(...) as if it were in the artist's interest to be pre-biographic, to establish the foundations of his self through his work, to forge an identity outside his own self, for the community." Ricardo Basbaum, "Formação de identidades", in *Revista Rio Artes*, 18, Rio de Janeiro, 1995, p. 15
- 2 Omar Calabrese, *La era neobarroca*, Cátedra, Madrid, 1994, p. 89
- 3 Salvador Pániker, *Ensayos retroprogresivos*, Kairós, Barcelona, 1987, p. 61