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Redeveloping Images: an interview with Efrain Almeida
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Cecilia Pereira
Efrain Almeida

an interview with efrain almeida
**redeveloping
images**

Cecilia Pereira



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Cecilia Pereira: Brazilian art in the eighties was described as the feverish fit of a group tired of turning out *serious art*, that hermetic and conceptual art produced in the seventies. How was it that you, having been shaped during the euphoria of painting in the eighties, chose sculpture? Having said that, your work, which is not easy to classify, together with your roots in the North-east of Brazil, lead some critics to conclude that you were self-taught.

Efrain Almeida: Yes, and yet my formation is quite classical. First of all I studied at the Parque Lage School of Visual Arts, where one of my teachers was Beatriz Milhazes. Later, I went to class at the Rio de Janeiro Museum of Modern Art. I studied painting, sculpture, engraving and, at the end of the 80s, I was assistant to Hilton Berredo, a member of the Geração 80 who was well-known for producing work on the borderline between painting and sculpture. It was at that time that I made up my mind to work with sculptures, more concretely, sculptures in wood, which was a constant feature in my earlier paintings and which, as of that moment, took on a leading role in my development, both formally and conceptually.

Pereira: Which movements within contemporary Brazilian art were of most interest to you?

Almeida: Some were of particular interest to me. Tropicalism, for example, which mixed popular references by using the concept of fusion between the two types of art, on the borderline between popular art and cultured art, the appropriationism of popular icons and the use of the material which is different in popular art. I was also interested in Oswald de Andrade (from the 1922 Modern Art week), Hélio Oiticica, the Nova Objetividade, because they worked with pop icons from popular culture – not with the idea of American appropriationism – but bringing a different type of imagery, a different type of iconography.

Pereira: The influence of the traditional craftwork of north-eastern Brazil, of Ceará, where you grew up, can be clearly perceived in your works, which are not, however, mere votive offerings or popular Brazilian images. I think that your works contain *reworked* elements of a contemporary nature, based on the transformation of their meaning and form. They are reworked Catholic images impregnated with the pantheist component typical of Ceará, of popular beliefs or personal stories into which you place new content. Your works, perverse to an extent, evoke the harmony of things which are popular and erudite, instinctive and calculated, simple and sophisticated. I'd like you to expand on this if you could.

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 Casa das Almas, 2001 (detail)
 House of the Souls
 Cedar wood
 40 x 22 x 24 cm
 Courtesy Galeria
 Camargo Vilaça

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Almeida: In my work, I search for a parallelism between biographical issues – my own history and my relationship with popular imagery – and the fact that I am a contemporary artist who is deeply concerned about matters which relate to space – the way in which you can work with space, the way in which the works are placed – as well as with formal issues, coming closer to formulas which are minimalist, or not.

I work with a sense of re-reading of images which form a part of my repertoire, of my experiences with those images. I wouldn't repeat votive offerings because it wouldn't make any sense. I don't believe in religion. Yes, there is a formal relationship with votive offerings, but its original meaning doesn't concern me, I'm interested in presenting images within a context which relates them to issues near and specific to sculpture and also to issues linked to the concept of place. In truth, religion only interests me in a conceptual way, especially the ideas of punishment and grace. Through my sculptures I try to create new situations which are re-readings of these ideas and which take on new connotations.

Pereira: Your works share present-day concerns about issues regarding identity, the representation of the body...

Almeida: Yes, there is a recurrence to the idea of the self-portrait in my works. When I want to represent parts of the body I always use my own body as a reference. You could say that I do self-portraits, not classical ones in the academic sense but that I project my idea of the body and questions such as sexuality, eroticism, linked to this theme. Moreover, I believe that the question of the body is very important in general for people and specifically for artists and it is in my work too, as much as memory.

Pereira: In almost everything that has been written about your work the influence of the profession of your parents is mentioned, making it seem as if your choice of materials (wood and fabrics) is premeditated rather than fortuitous.

Almeida: In truth, my parents' house wasn't a normal household. It was like a mixture between a home and a carpenter's workshop, full of sewing machines, which is why I have always lived with different types of fabrics and wood. These materials formed a part of my environment ever since I was a child. When I was young I used to play with small cuttings. I often think they chose me, not vice versa. Having said that, although for a time I didn't know exactly why I had chosen wood, it dawned on me later that I possessed some fundamental qualities

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that allowed me to take on what I liked most. The colour of wood has a close relationship with the colour of the skin and that helped me work within a certain ambiguity, which I reinforced by using fragments or parts of the body in order to give them a certain mystery, and to make them ambiguous. This idea can be seen in the works in which the hands are offering something, and at the same time as they are offering they are also retaining, in a semi-ambiguous gesture.

But fabric also started to become more important. Fabric allowed me to build pieces out of nothing and use sewing as the structure of the sculptured object. I search for the structural relationship between the internal and the external parts of the pieces, in such a way that when the spectator approaches them or moves away from them a different type of relationship is established.

And this is where the importance of the scale of the works comes into play, as it obliges the spectator to come even closer still, to make more intimate contact with the works, a kind of complicity between them being established. The closer he comes, the more the works are revealed to him. That's why I'm interested in working with a minimum number of images, very subtle,



Milagre (homem), 1999
Miracle (man)
Cedar wood
52 x 22 x 58 cm
Courtesy Galeria
Camargo Vilaça

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demanding a close-up visual and sensorial look if the works are to be perceived in their entirety.

Pereira: In spite, though, of the fact that this intimist scale invites the complicity of the spectator and urges him to take a closer look, your works propose a global concern with the space they occupy.

Almeida: It's just as important for me to choose an image as it is to study the space in which the exhibition is to take place and create architectural situations. The way in which I place the works within the space available is fundamental because space is not only a passive place in which to put a piece of work but plays an active and essential role in the existence of the work as well. I have never conceived a piece of work as an individual piece but as a piece which is placed within a space, at a certain height, with a certain perspective, from a certain distance, observing the relationship it established with the piece of work beside it... space is an active participant in the end result. Despite the fact I know each one of my works is independent from the others and could be put in a different place. But I need the works to interrelate to each other, to complement each other.

São Francisco, 2001
Saint Francis
Watercolour on paper
32 x 24 cm
Courtesy Galeria
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Peregrino (sacolinhas), 2001
Pilgrim (Bags)
Watercolour on paper
32 x 24 cm
Courtesy Galeria
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Pereira: Your works are always very pretty at first glance, they have a huge poetic charge, however an observer who goes to take a closer look will discover wounds, tattoos, mutations... They are works tinged with a contained pain, a type of sensual dramatic quality.

Almeida: The presence of wounds or sores is a constant feature in my work. You can't normally see them from a certain distance away, from a certain perspective. The work seems delicate, light, but when you move closer... you discover something that makes you feel uncomfortable. My works do not have the same aggressiveness as a Baselitz, for example, or any of the German expressionists where it is used much more emphatically, but certainly they are harsh. I think a certain delicateness is necessary, a more poetic standing, while not making them less painful. They might be small wounds, but they are painful too.

Pereira: Almost always the result of painful metamorphoses, the houses become trees, the people animals... there is a continuous sense of sadness, of memory, of unfulfilled desire...

Almeida: The idea of sadness, melancholy, is very much a constant feature in my work. It is very closely related to my history, my roots. Because, quite honestly, things are hard, living conditions were never easy for me, so that's why sometimes it emerges consciously but at other times I have to say that I have no control over certain melancholic atmospheres.

Pereira: A product, perhaps, of certain events which occurred during your childhood, like in *Marcas (Marks)*.

Almeida: *Marcas* is made up of 21 pieces of work which come from the same model, made with transparent tulle and velvet and which, because of the difference in weight, helps structure the work. It appears to be a group of patterns of small dresses which are all the same, but when you move in closer they become individualised. It represents children who die in childhood. Ever since I was a child I have felt the idea of death closely, when my friends died and I went to their funerals. This is a work which is closely related to the idea of death, the idea of losing childhood friends, which is why the body is present yet missing at the same time. The idea of the body present and/or missing is a constant feature in my work. The hands which come out of the wall seem to indicate that the body is behind it. If you look at it from a certain height, although the hands have been amputated, the spectator imagines an entire body.

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Pereira: Of the works you have prepared for the CGAC, the *casas das ánimas* (houses of the souls) are perhaps those which possess the clearest formal reference of earlier works. What was your impression of the Igrexa das Ánimas the first time you came to Santiago?

Almeida: The first time I came to Santiago de Compostela was in 1998, which was when I held my first individual exhibition in the Canvas Gallery, in Oporto. I wanted to see the CGAC and was dying to see the Cathedral. While walking around the historical part of Santiago I passed by the front of a church and saw the Ánimas in relief. Something really strange came over me, the image pervaded me in such way I felt like it was holding me prisoner and I started remembering images from my childhood. The flames on the tympanum were quite ambiguous, as they had lost their polychromy and didn't quite preserve the image of the flames. This ambiguity together with the idea of purgatory, that you have to save your soul, is an idea which recurs and persecutes you ever since you are a child. The image of hell as Catholicism would have it, that if you don't behave properly... it's an image which is closely linked to all my earlier work, with the unconscious itself. I think it's a very powerful image, a synthesis of everything that frightens us.

So, when I was invited to exhibit my work in the CGAC, the first thing I wanted to do on reaching Santiago was to discover that church again, because the image had become more and more powerful and all I wanted to do was to see it again and work on it. I had my doubts as to how to represent it. Until I thought that it would be perfect to transform it into a house with the tympanum placed strategically, as it was a series on which I had been working for some time. That way I could reinforce such an ambiguous image which only intrigued me more when I found out that there had been a fire in the church. That was really exciting for me, thinking about the flames, the fire, the souls in purgatory and the house on fire, so I began thinking about it all and decided to make a house of souls. I loved playing with the idea of the relief... so I put a relief onto the work with that image, which would fit into the context of the exhibition perfectly.

Pereira: Were you also inspired by the miracles of the Apostle...?

Almeida: In that the tales surrounding St. James the Apostle and his miracles also make for strong images. I discovered a representation of the first miracle and found it interesting. I had previously worked on a series where a man became

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a snake, or a fish or a goat and found the image of the man rescued with scallop shells extremely plastic and had, conceptually, a direct relationship with the idea of transformation. At the same time, I felt like toying with the idea of the scallop shells embedded in the body which have the same characteristics as the shoots, that possibility to interrelate the images was really interesting to me.

Pereira: But this isn't the only series that you take up again for the CGAC exhibition. The haversacks carried by pilgrims add a new twist to the *bolsas de guardar deseos* (bags for storing desires) series.

Almeida: I felt the need to represent objects and ideas and began to work with the empty bags with the idea in mind that they were perfect for storing desires. I thought of bags which people would look at and think, "what have they got inside?" or "why are they empty?" The truth is, they are not empty but full of desires, wishes. They store things that are immaterial. I did the same thing with the Santiago haversacks. They are bags which are always open for storing these ideas. I wanted the scallop shells to appear in the subtlest of ways. That you wouldn't see the symbol at first glance, only by coming closer would you see them there, half-hidden, insisting on the idea that proximity brings things into relief.

Pereira: You also show a certain appropriationism by relating the iconography of Santiago to some of Giotto's images, such as the work representing the feet with stigmas which you are going to install in the room with the column.

Almeida: As I explained earlier, I'm very interested in popular iconography and I also like medieval painting. I love Giotto and truly enjoyed working on the *Kiss of Judas* which is an image in which both Judas and Jesus are dealt with very similarly. I was intrigued by the ambiguity of the kiss between the traitor and Christ. Religion is full of these ambiguous images. When I was studying Giotto I discovered an image in which St. Francis receives the stigmas of Christ represented by red lines which unite the stigmas of them both.

These themes are also present in popular iconography. In Salvador de Bahia there is a church with a very powerful image; Christ with wounds made out of rubies and blood made out of velvet. This is not the only example. There are more churches in Brazil with representations of the transfer of Christ's stigmas using red elements. From these images, I began to develop a series of works with wounds which link one hand to another using bugle thread. I

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presented one of them in the Canvas Gallery in Oporto and am now representing another more ambitious one here in the CGAC.

I also discovered an image of St. Francis planting a tree which symbolised his reaching the city of Santiago and St. James the Apostle watering the tree. St. Francis plants and St. James cares for. I was already interested in doing a piece of work with wounds and this is the result of my re-reading. Because on top of this the space to be occupied in the CGAC is difficult architecturally speaking, I mean, there's a column in the middle, and that's what motivated me to placing the works in such a way. Having seen the interesting image of St. Francis planting the tree, I thought that it could be useful to me in developing all those issues.

Casa construída, 1999
Built House
Cedar wood
25 x 21 x 22 cm
Comtesy Galeria
Camargo Vilaça

