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Author Marie Darrieussecq
Artist João Maria Gusmão + Pedro Paiva

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MONOGRAPH

A response by Marie Darrieussecq to the filmic meditations of **João Maria Gusmão** and **Pedro Paiva** which refer to, in no particular order: Plato, Isaac Newton and Alfred Jarry, turtles and chimpanzees, Zen masters, voodoo witches, astrologers and astrophysicists



Gusmão and Paiva *Tortoise and Parrot*, 2011, C-type print

For a very short period of time – only a few years, really – the Portuguese were masters of the world. They sailed away on their ships, looking straight ahead, with their noses to the wind. Proud and upright, they conquered and ravaged, destroyed, killed, raped, pillaged and hardly had time to stop and say: ‘We are the masters of the world.’ And then – and they still do not know how – they lost everything.

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These Portuguese men had brightly coloured clothes, funny hats and pointed swords, and looked like giant, colourful birds – cassowaries. After their hour of glory, the Portuguese produced Fernando Pessoa, the *saudade* (the untranslatable word that alludes to a kind of profound longing) and two serious, delirious artists, João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva, who like to quote Propertius, the elegiac poet who died in 15bce: *Non horam possum durare* (I do not last even for one instant).

Gusmão and Paiva are the sons of a nation dazed by its past and incapable of living in the present without asking oceanic questions about identity, loss and origins. It is too rarely mentioned that the Portuguese make humanity more intelligent; without them it would have struggled to evolve beyond the chimpanzee. The problem is, however, that most of the time humanity pokes fun at their questioning. Nonetheless, Gusmão and Paiva are Portuguese artists who travel well, a fact sufficiently rare to merit comment. (One final joke before ending this tidal wave of generalities about Portugal and the Portuguese. When I was in Lisbon in 1998, the city was an enormous unfinished building site. A Portuguese friend said: 'Do you know how this city will celebrate the year 2000? By inaugurating the Universal Exhibition of 1998.')

Gusmão and Paiva look at the world as if it were the first time – this, for me, is a definition of art. They constructed their 2011 exhibition 'Alien Theory', at Le Plateau in Paris, around a group of short, pseudo-scientific films. They meandered via Plato to Isaac Newton, from the turtle to the chimpanzee, H.G. Wells to Alfred Jarry, via the Zen masters and voodoo witches, astrologers and astrophysicists. They seem to be asking: 'How is it possible to make sense of the world without knowing anything about it? What would the blind person see if they were able to see for the first time?' Our two poets examine these serious–infantile questions by frying three eggs in three frying pans or, rather, three superimposed images of eggs whose white filaments and trembling albumen are like the threads of a galaxy or even life itself in the process of being born. 'Go cook an egg' is a French expression that the British, who are perhaps less culinary, would simply translate as 'Mind your own business'. Gusmão and Paiva show us their cooking but don't tell us the recipe; instead they supply us with writings and reflections drawn from Eastern, Greek, Latin and African writers, rationalists and pataphysicians, amongst others. But let's go on.

A Chinese aphorism popular in France observes: 'When the wise man points to the moon, the idiot looks at the tip of the finger.' I have often asked myself what this means. For my part, I think that the tip of a finger is very interesting. Gusmão and Paiva are extremely good at filming fingers; for them, the human hand is as interesting as the moon, since it can scratch an ear or draw in the sand or use a tool or make a sign to a fellow human being. When human beings finally stood up it freed our hands to pluck fruit from trees, which we sometimes give to others. Gusmão and Paiva, for their part, have made them into polyhedra and allowed them rise up into the air.

I am married to an astrophysicist; this is neither simple nor complicated. We are, I think, a fairly typical bourgeois heterosexual couple. On a starry night, my astrophysicist husband is as

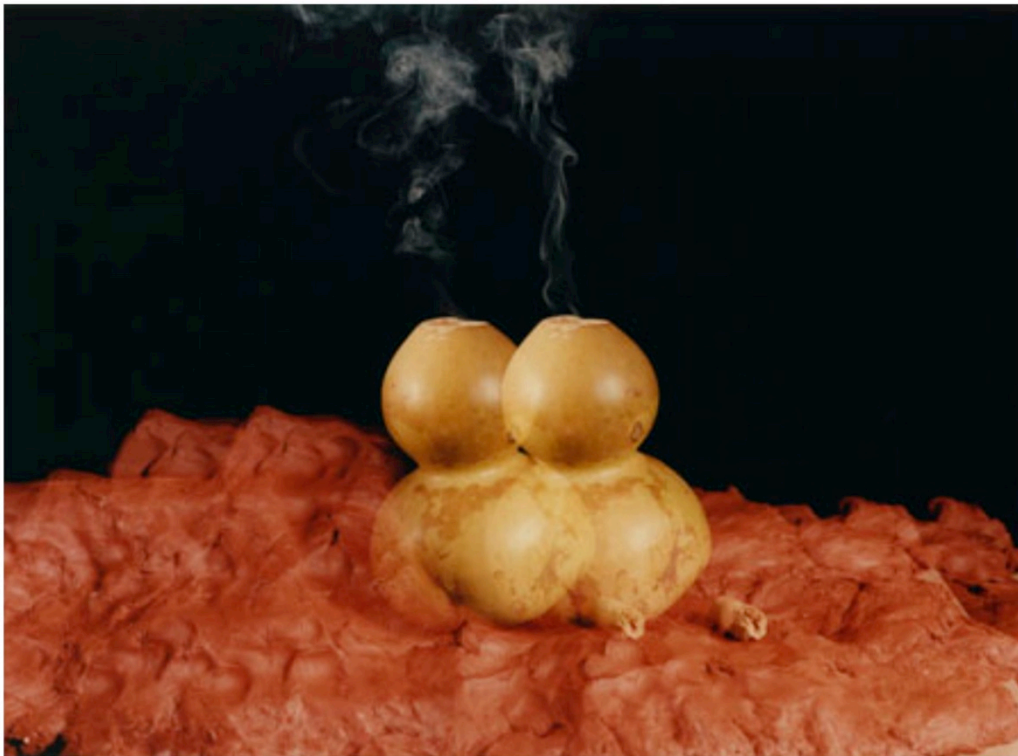
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incapable as anyone of naming, even in his attempts to seduce me, the names of stars or galaxies. He often tells me that he is not an astrologer or a planetologist. On the other hand, he is capable of telling me that we are at the extreme edge of the Milky Way, which itself is no more than a fairly small galaxy in the middle of other galaxies which are themselves rather far away from the really important galaxies. I have for a long time harboured a complex about my provincial origins; the very idea of the periphery (suburbs, surroundings, etc.) plunges me into depression. So imagine what it is like when your husband tells you that not only is the Milky Way a minor galaxy but, moreover, that Planet Earth is only a miniscule suburban element of it. What we see of the Milky Way is just part of a disc because we are at its edge: the only visual access we have in the camera obscura of our life on earth.

The Portuguese understood very well what it meant to be at the edge of the world; at the edge of an ocean of indifferent waves. One of my favourite films by Gusmão and Paiva is *Expérience sur les effluves* (Experience on the Vapours, 2009), which shows miniscule human silhouettes at the side of an anonymous lake. They are throwing stones into the water: the reflection is both up and down. Suddenly, the waves (the effluvia) disturb the image and make it disappear. The reflection is taken for reality and it's a reality that is impossible, or, at least, magnificently poetic and metaphorical.

In a prose poem I once wrote entitled 'Précisions sur les vagues' (Precisions on the Waves, 1999), I had fun proposing a false scientific description of all the different types of waves in the world. Despite its exaggerations and its irony, the poem has often been read as a real scientific study, and even as a manual for surfers – and why not? Any attempt to apply words to a physical reality is a metaphor. Any writing is an effort to close the gap between material and language, an attempt to map the wave of words onto the real. In the same way, the 'scientific experiences' filmed by Gusmão and Paiva don't reveal less demonstrable truths than our efforts to understand and be astonished by the world. They also remind us that the world does not speak for itself.

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The Spirit of the Gourd, 2011, C-type print

With Gusmão and Paiva it is not so much about the relativity of knowledge as the relativity of the world itself, which might not even be the one we know – it might be something else altogether. Why just one sun, rather than two or three? My husband (still the same one) told me how, during his research into meteorites in the South Pole, he experienced a fairly frequent optical illusion: five suns arranged in the form of a cross, surrounded by a luminous circle. This phenomenon is called 'Perry's Arch' and it happens when it is so cold that light reflects in the ice crystals suspended in the air, thereby refracting the image of the sun. As a result of the cold, sound is distorted too. We hear cries, bells; our brain decodes the shift in sound waves as best it can. We project out intimate or collective fears onto the real and invent phantoms.

Gusmão and Paiva are inspired by René Daumal, a French poet and novelist who died in 1944 and who liked to modify his perceptions of reality in order to reach another level of knowledge: he poisoned himself with carbon tetrachloride so as to explore the wild seam between sleep and death. It's a tradition amongst French poets from Charles Baudelaire to Henri Michaux to ingest chemicals – from hashish to mescaline – in order to test the limits of our five senses. Which leads me to another national generalization, this time by the great science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick, who noted in the preface to *Excessive Maze* (1978): 'The French envisage the most improbable possibilities of each situation, which no doubt explains my popularity in their country. Take a certain number of probabilities and the French, like me, will choose the most dreaded.'

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As a child, I myself was addicted to ether: time and space, under its effects, bends and retreats along unmarked curves. When I was 12, I listened to The Beatles' 1967 song, 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band', while under its influence: every phrase was superimposed on every other phrase and created a new harmony. The trees (I experimented outside, because of the smell) leaned towards me in a friendly way and the sky was shaped like a miniscule bubble of air, which wrapped around me and then got bigger. When I came round, my watch told me that I had only been out for a quarter of an hour but I knew I had experienced several hours of subjective, transient time. My view of the world was definitely enriched and transformed by this experience.

The physics of Gusmão and Paiva's work is enriched by humour, which functions for them like a chemical component. It is not sufficient to say 'pataphysical' or 'Alfred Jarry' to explain their strange understanding of the natural world. For them, the derisory contradicts the peremptory; the comic disconnects discourse from becoming an 'ism'. Their threads are ostensibly visible; their thick ropes move the rocks of the desert; their deliberately rustic rigging makes the monkey soup water boil; their slow motion and 'rewinds' appear to be as old as the history of the cinema. The 16 or 35mm film and the almost deafening noise of the projector all converge to remind us that we are in the presence of images, or, in other words, of simple versions of the real. Seeing their work – with all of its contradictions and absence of homogenous discourse – radically alters the way we read TV news images or advertising or political slogans; it alters our 'normal' understanding of a unified reality.

Gusmão and Paiva are two artists who take up very little space on this planet; physically, of course, they won't endure and their means of reproduction is uncertain. Nonetheless, they offer us a chance to open our minds, eyes and ears, and they make clear that art can describe the world as accurately as science.

Marie Darrieussecq

is a French writer. Born in the Basque Country in 1969, she lives in Paris, France. She has written a dozen novels, including *Truismes* (Pig Tales, 1996), which was translated into more than 40 languages. Her most recent book is *Clèves* (2011).