

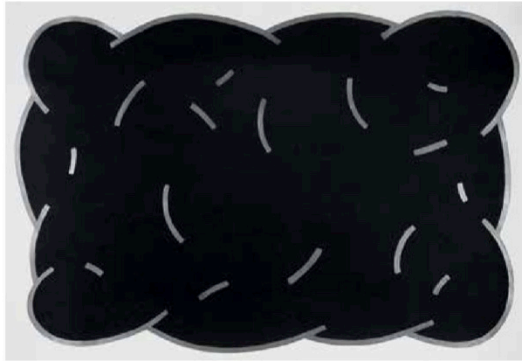
Title Drawings
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Author Jacopo Crivelli Visconti
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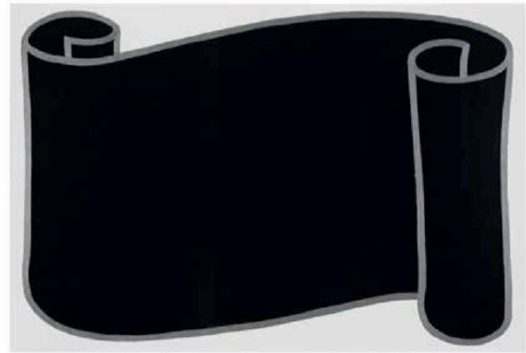
IRAN DO ESPÍRITO SANTO / DRAWINGS

JACOPO CRIVELLI VISCONTI

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6 Longo / Long, 1985



7 Etéreo / Etherial, 1985

A small series of black and white photographs documents the process used by Iran do Espírito Santo to construct an installation, in 1983, for a class given by Nelson Leirner in the Visual Arts graduate course at the Armando Álvares Penteado Foundation in São Paulo. After painting a tiled floor with whitewash the artist added on top of the new covering a set of wire sculptures the size and shape of which can be likened to stylized chairs reduced to their basic elements (image 1). These photos probably constitute the only register of a work which, despite being executed during a phase of experimentation and learning, precisely pointed out to basic aspects of the artist's work which can be seen even today.

In first place, the sculptures *are* and *are not* chairs. Or, in other words, they allow for spectators to identify them as being familiar everyday objects, while at the same time recognizing their lack of functionality. In this sense, they anticipate the strategy adopted by the artist in some of his better-known three-dimensional pieces, such as the stainless steel cans or marble globes. Despite its fragility and precariousness, the installation thus addressed philosophical issues fundamental to Iran's work, namely, the distinction between the *idea*, in the sense of abstract forms, eternal and pure, and the *object* as seen in the everyday world, with its imperfections and limitations. In this manner, "the artist explores the Platonic relationship between a real object, its ideal form and its position in space, while the perceptual recognition of the incongruence between matter and form enables him to affirm the archetype, the idea, as the first level of the cognitive process."¹ From a processional point of view, the chairs introduce one of the artist's favorite *modi operandi*: the repetition of a form, either identical or with small variations, in search of an industrial-like serialization. And, in that concerning formal aspects, the photographic registers suggest analogies and correspondences with a number of previous works, principally those which will be dealt with in this book, namely, those realized on paper or those which, in a general manner, can be considered to be drawings. The wire lines become veritable pencil lines on paper, and the white rectangle which Iran carefully extended underneath is not unlike an enormous piece of drawing paper.

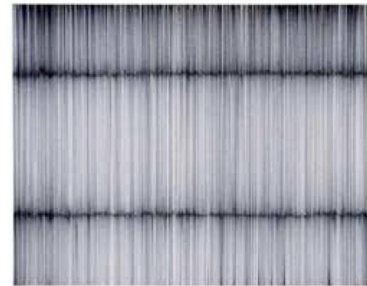
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Different than what might be logical to assume, Iran's drawings do not necessarily antecede his installations and sculptures, which seem to find their origin in them. In some cases — and that which we are here analyzing is without a doubt one of the first examples —, it would be possible to affirm, if only as a provocation, quite the contrary: that which the artist constructs in the world, on a large scale, is the project or the rough draft of what he plans to realize (or has already realized, *ante litteram*) on paper.² On the other hand, one can see that most of the work on paper is indifferent to the existence of a three-dimensional counterpoint. Some of the work realized in the 1980s are, in this sense, considerably straightforward: drawings such as *Etéreo* (Etherial, 1985, image 7) or the triptych *Gatos pardos* (Gray Cats, 1987), for example, despite being figurative or even "mimetic" in the way they insinuate, reproduce or emulate a brick wall, a roll of paper or wood grains, are well resolved in their bi-dimensionality on paper. It is important to emphasize how these drawings reveal particular interests of Iran, like, for example, the choice of a rather precise color pallet³ and a subtle conceptual and ironic slant as announced in the titles.

If the Pop Art, practically cartoon-like, aesthetics of those works is coherent with a certain type of paintings being produced and exhibited with major feedback at the time,⁴ it wouldn't be wrong to affirm that the capacity to fuse distinct or even contrary influences — in this case, pop and conceptual art — is an issue lying at the heart of his poetics. According to Paulo Herkenhoff, "the historical genesis of Iran do Espírito Santo's work shows that the artist created a singular territory between the fields of Concretism, Minimalism, Neoconcretism and Pop Art, without ever taking his eye off the Conceptualism of the sixties and seventies."⁵ To be more specific, this unique territory is situated between the concretism of Geraldo de Barros — painter from the Ruptura Group and photographer-inventor of the *Fotoformas* —; the minimalism of Dan Flavin and Donald Judd — emphasizing, on one hand, the epistemological qualities of light, and on the other, the mystery of everyday objects coupled with the inexhaustible fascination of precise finishing —; the neo-concretism of books as seen in the *Livro-obra* (Artwork Book, 1983) by Lygia Clark and the *Livro do tempo* (The Book of Time, 1961-65) by Lygia Pape — which reveal the power contained in practically imperceptible permutations and vibrations —; and Pop Art (or maybe post-pop art, if it exists) by Jeff Koons with his shiny rabbits and dogs, always true to themselves, despite changes in material and scale. This last aspect, apparently secondary in Iran's work is, in reality, pivotal in the conception of most of his work on paper. In some cases, such as *Still* (1987), which shows a rabbit jumping between two parenthesis, the possibility of infinite reproductions, on different scales, is the determining aspect,⁶ but the play on scale is also fundamental in series such as that of the curtains (*CRTN*, images 3 and 8) — the largest ever produced by the artist —, or those that replicate wood grains, which reach back to his oldest pieces, such as *Gatos pardos*, up to his most recent, realized in black and white on paper or directly on the wall of the exhibition room. In respect to this last series, it is important to mention how both emphasize the unique individuality of each drawing, seeing as how no two curtains hang exactly the same, nor are there two identical grains of wood,⁷ as well as revealing the importance of the works' almost handcrafted workmanship, a characteristic that could be considered as being specific, in the artists' *corpus*, of works on paper. If compared to the aseptic perfection that characterizes most of his three-dimensional pieces — frequently conceived as being potentially multipliable and always identical —, this singularity might seem contradictory, but in a way it does nothing but replicate, in another sphere, the distinction, previously indicated, between the abstract idea and the concrete object.

In this sense, *Conteúdos úteis* (Useful Contents, image 4), a small series from 1989 comprised of five almost technical drawings, which reproduce, in black pencil on a graphite background, bottles of benzene, oil, vinegar, brake fluid and beer that the artist had at home, is quite revealing in the contrasts between the painstakingly handcrafted background and the precise execution of that which is represented in the foreground. The choice of a container as the works' subject inaugurates a recurrent theme, considering the quantity of boxes and cans Iran has produced up till now. Seen from this angle, the series' title is rather revealing: by referring to the *content* in respect to a series which actually depicts the *container*, Iran suggests, on one hand,



8 CRTN — XLIII / 2005

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that the heart of the work⁸ lies not in that which we see, but in something situated beyond its visible, exterior aspect, and on the other, that the *utility*, that is, the value of that which is being reproduced, resides exclusively in that which it contains. In other words, at the same time the artist dedicates considerable time to meticulously reproduce these bottles and boxes, he also affirms to be aware of just how irrelevant these items are as autonomous objects. Far from being a mere accessory, this irrelevance, or *in-utility* of the flasks, is that which defines the work, even in its genesis. For many years Iran worked as an architectural draftsman and later as an illustrator, and in this sense the decision of drawing something *useless* responded to the desire to create an escape valve, freeing himself from the need of a commercial or practical outcome. Besides this, dedicating long hours of work towards the methodical and almost automatic reproduction of a declaredly useless object allows us to directly relate his work to that which Paulo Herkenhoff defines, in the quoted excerpt, "Conceptualism in 1960/1970", such as Bruce Nauman's solitary, repetitive and monotonous activities in his atelier, including playing one sole note on his violin while walking about, or dancing on the perimeter of a square drawn on the floor, widely considered among his most influential work. These videos, significantly and tautologically entitled *Playing a Note on the Violin while I Walk Around the Studio* (1967-68) and *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square* (1967-68), show activities which appear to strictly follow John Cage's instructions inspired by Zen philosophy ("if something bothers you for 1 minute, do it for 2, if it bothers you for 2, do it for 4, if it bothers you for 4, do it for 8...") and synthesizes in an exemplary manner the contrast sought after by these practices, between the large amount of time and effort expended on them, and an almost intangible result, essential and *useless*. Beyond the evident differences, much of Iran's work, specifically some of his larger series produced on paper, follow a similar strategy. The curtains in his *CRTN* series, for example, are a result of the juxtaposition, repeated exhaustively, of vertical lines drawn on paper with a magic marker,⁹ and the books seen in his *SPRD* series, or the drawings of glasses produced at the same time (2012), despite being quite different from a formal point of view, were born from an analogous process: the exhaustive repetition of the same line, in this case with the aid of a template. In a way, the series which best allows us to situate Iran's work in a conceptual sphere is that which (coherently) bears the most tautological title, *Batatas* (Potatoes, image 9), ten small drawings of an array of potatoes, reproduced as faithfully as possible. Silent portraits, unexplainably and totally *useless*...

Together with a few drawings of clothing, produced in the 1990s as well, and few later ones, *Batatas* is almost the only example of a classic naturalist drawing, which endeavors to reproduce the object represented in a hyper-realistic manner on paper, and not in a technical or schematic manner as usually seen in the artist's production. From his viewpoint, the fundamental objective in conceiving this series is the same as that which previously motivated him to undertake others, namely, to explore through drawing the way in which, despite the potatoes, as a group, being immediately recognized as a general entity, they individually maintain a unique character. It is evident that the starting point here is closely related to the series of drawings such as the curtains or wood grains. On one hand, by relating drawings which are formally very different, Iran ratifies the conceptual character found in the essence of his production, but there also seems to be another possible interpretation, in a way contrary to this. Beside their formal differences, that which allows us to consider similar such distinct works of art as *Batatas*, *A.U.* (2002-05), *CRTN*, or the innumerable variations on the theme of folds,¹⁰ is their being authentic exercises, their experimental vocation.

Considering just how all of Iran's work, and not only that on paper, is controlled and planned, to propose that part of his fascination resides in a theoretic experimental character might seem contradictory, but we have already seen that one of his more peculiar characteristics is the capacity to fuse apparently incompatible tendencies and references. And it is evident that his works on paper are, in their majority, conceived as series because they are the variations (almost always small ones) which define the meaning of the whole. It is impossible, in this sense, to isolate one sole drawing among the many realized in early 2000, which reveal cardboard boxes left open in different ways: the heart of the work lies in the relation between the various "moments" of a hypothetical film of which each drawing is a photogram. Understanding



9. Sem título [Batata 4] / Untitled [Potato 4], 1991-92

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the series as a whole we can see that the real meaning of Iran's work lies beyond visibility. It resides in the mental exercise in which the work was originated, and not (only) in its formal qualities.

The watercolor series *Pilha* (Pile, images 5 and 10) perfectly synthesizes these considerations. Painted while traveling in Rome,¹¹ they clearly reveal the influence of the city's architecture, with its colors and its almost tangible layering of history, that is, of time, like the one which solidifies and settles in the color that fixes, on paper, the remembrance of water. And what makes this work fascinating is the way in which the artist, while explicating his references, seems interested, foremost, in the elementary game of placing one block on top another, with precarious balance, building *piles* that seem destined to come toppling down one moment to the next. The idea of accidents can already be seen in the carefully "broken" plating seen in the *A.U.*¹² series and perhaps it is necessary to wind up this text pointing out how, in Iran do Espírito Santo's work, time seems to follow a logic all of its own. In the same way that the drawings, and not the project, seem to constitute the culmination of an object, a drawing conceived years ago could be the consequence of something he still hasn't undertaken. And this is the reason why, if the sequence of reproductions of the drawings is substantially chronological, this text was conceived in accordance with freer associations, and despite this, perhaps is no less true to that which these drawings in fact reveal.

1 Colombo, Paolo. *Iran do Espírito Santo — Museo Nazionale Delle Arti Del XXI Secolo (MAXXI)*. Rome, Milan: Electa, 2006, p. 58.

2 It is worthwhile, in this sense, to compare the images at the Faap installation with recent drawings which represent only a line and its shadow.

3 Besides white, black and gray/silver, which are the most characteristic, blue and red, appearing in *Gatos pardos*, are a few of the colors which can be seen more or less recurrently in Iran do Espírito Santo's work on paper.

4 One should recall, for example, the work being done by artists such as Leonilson, Leda Catunda and Sergio Romagnolo at the time.

5 Herkenhoff, Paulo. "Iran do Espírito Santo — Two Scenes [Excerpts]". In: Mesquita, Ivo [ed.]. *Uma visão geral*. São Paulo: Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 2007, p. 69.

6 It is no coincidence that this work was used on the cover of the book *Iran do Espírito Santo* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2000), edited by Felipe Chaimovich, who in the introduction (p. 9) describes him thusly: "Iran conceives [the rabbit] as a logotype: the drawing should be able to be reproduced, amplified or reduced, within a spectrum with commercially codified dimensions. The rabbit inhabits a wide variety of supports, in accordance to the technical nature inherent in logos: T-shirts, engravings, magazines, etc."

7 Significantly, in one of the conversations which preceded this text, Iran compared wood grains to fingerprints.

8 *Work* is to be understood here in its more ample sense, i.e., the collection of the pieces produced by the artist, and not merely the series of drawings being examined here.

9 It is interesting to note, when analyzing the way in which exhaustively repeating one act is pivotal in his work, that Iran decided to work on this series after realizing that the faltering pen line, as the ink became scarce in the pen, was more interesting than the homogeneous line produced when the pen was full.

10 I think here, among others, of *Dobras* (Folds), from 2004, *Efemérides* (Ephemeris), from 2008, and *Twists*, produced between the years of 2009 and 2013.

11 Iran's drawings are, in their majority, realized during his trips, far from the daily obligations of his atelier.

12 In reality, as explained by the artist himself in a conversation with the author, "the plates are not broken, they are cut, in accordance with an imaginary drawing of a fictitious accident. What I intended with that was to work with the idea of chance seen in counterpoint to control."



10 *Pilha XV / Pile XV*, 2014