

The Pleasure of Finding a Hidden Well: Nuno Ramos' Brujas [Witches]

By Diego Matos

Artist and Matter

On the face of it, *Brujas* [Witches] (2021) by Nuno Ramos (São Paulo, 1960) describes one of the artist's working rituals. The understanding of materiality and given forms builds a path towards comprehension. Identified as monotypes, each one of these drawings was born out of Ramos' daily work at his studio. Produced horizontally, on a large table, the works are made of two sheets of paper joined together on their narrower sides, creating vertical pieces that highlight the frontal character of portraiture. Additionally, in each one of the outlined *Brujas*, the suggestion of facial features qualifies a path towards figuration. At first glance, we see in this series of works a formal affiliation with other series of drawings produced by the artist in the last few years, such as *Antígona* [Antigone] (2018), *Blue Note* (2020) and *I Am* (2020).

If Ramos' practice has been known for the magnitude and the large-scale explosion of his giant sculptures and installations or vastly mobilizing actions, now it is the two-dimensional expressions made possible by his arm's reach that determine the limit and the size of the action on paper. The monotypes are made on the reverse of the chosen support, engendering possible instances of mirroring and disorientation. The excess of material takes the paper to its limit. It overflows, saturates and loses its ability to retain. Placed vertically, the drawings offer us impermanent outcomes. There is loss, but there is saturation; there is sedimentation, but there is vanishing. Therefore, making is a continuous process that allows the transference of intentions and matter, as well as an incessant entropic gesture.

Departing from the void, the different materials used – charcoal, in its solid or powdered form, powder pigment, powder graphite, oil paint – are spilled on paper, handled by work tools, poured in excess and sometimes extracted, until a figure is consolidated. In fact, the artist employs multiple techniques and tools, establishing no hierarchy between them, working intensely in the available space on and over the table. The monotype printing language is identified by the (often partial) marks made by fabric and lace patterns used in many of these pieces. Once again, it is a suggestion that gains force.

Impregnation, Word and Composition

The artist has established a movement of entry and a movement of exit: perhaps an escape to the inside and an escape to the outside. Those who observe the work for a long period of time are coopted by this movement. The perception of amorphous features is conjured in multiple ways. As such, we see things at a distance and up close, in the traces or in the pigment, in the vibrant or dark colors, in the suggested landscapes or bodies. Is it a witch or a cloud? Are these the remains of an explosion or the emergence of a phenomenon? Is it – after all – a portrait under way or a deconstructed landscape? One can choose a way amongst the several outlines, densities and colors that are being presented.

At second glance, we see that it is in the micro-landscape of each one of the *Brujas* that we also find letters and words, which appear with more or less intensity and clarity in the several proposed portraits. A closer look captures the linguistic signs offered by the written expressions that represent the witch in its classical literature version. Rotating between the darker, lighter or more colorful portraits, Ramos uses three references: "Antica strega" from Dante's *Purgatory*; "Hag's seed" from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

and “Walpurgis” from the passage titled “Walpurgis Night” in Goethe’s *Faust*. These three references, in three different languages, are written and enmeshed in the works. The first two are printed as monotypes, which means the words are seen back to front. They are revealed in their reverse. In turn, the German word “Walpurgis” is printed in the right orientation with adhesive tape that, once removed, marks the words in the direction of reading. They are more evident in the gloomiest works, suffused with charcoal powder.

In the artist’s own words, there is a continuous effort to call or evoke the figure of the witch. By quickly looking up similar words in a dictionary, the witch, *bruja* (Spanish) or *bruxa* (Portuguese), that Nuno Ramos evokes is, in fact, a wise character, somewhat enlightened, whose unknown powers seem to be necessary in our somber but real present. It is as if – ironically – by making use of popular imagery we were calling for something absurd in order to ultimately reveal or lift the darkness of the present. As it is widely known, the word *bruja* originates from Latin, from the Italian verb *bruciare*, which means to burn, to blaze, to flare. It is, after all, a symbol of transformation. In view of this, each composition with materials, tools, words and manual efforts constitutes this evocative process, which is configured in the 27 works selected for this exhibition.

Evocation, Revelation and Brazil

In one way or another, the series presented here frames the artist’s encounter with the absurd, or with some element from the realm of the obscure or the vertiginous, which seems to gain clarity and strength when we look carefully at the drawings. In the same way that Ramos once turned the traditional notion of samba into lyricism, in the group of songs that feature in the album *Sambas do Absurdo* [Sambas of the Absurd] (2017) – composed by Rodrigo Campos with lyrics by Nuno Ramos himself – now the artist is evoking in his daily drawings the almost desperate search for a call to the unknown, bringing to our current strange, hostile and uncertain times another transformative power, but more explicit and perhaps of an aesthetic-political nature.

In a sense, we are talking about something the artist wrote in the lyrics of “Samba do Absurdo 6”, when he narrates a desire to discover a truth that it is still hiding, a libidinous desire for “the last pip in the fruit/a breast, the fucking pleasure/of encountering a hidden well”. It is fair to say that the song is a response that reappears analogically in the gestures contained in these drawings. Juçara Marçal’s voice, Rodrigo Campos’ guitar, and Gui Amabis’ arrangements and beats give life to Ramos’ words.

If we go back a few years in the artist’s career, a work from 2002 seems to anticipate some of the current ideas. In the film *Luz Negra (Para Nelson 1)* [Black Light (To Nelson 1)], conceived in collaboration with the artist Eduardo Climachauska, Ramos presents loudspeakers being buried in a big open space with the sun at its zenith. Whilst the speakers are being covered, and thus becoming invisible, the song *Juízo Final* [Final Judgement], composed and sung by Nelson Cavaquinho, gains strength before being muffled by the soil, against a backdrop of a blue sky and the blinding sun. Once again, the movements of escaping inside and escaping outside are present. However, if the feeling evoked by the song is muffled, the current works literally get closer to the song: to have eyes to see the end of evil; to believe that the sun will shine again; and that love will be eternal once more.

If we look at the larger works produced by the artist in partnership, such as the performative acts in the episodes of the ongoing project *A extinção é para sempre* [Extinction is Forever] (2021), we find events linked to the present, to the passage of time now: they have agency, they deal with temporary uncertainties, they bring together symbols and references that seem to gestate an impulse towards change. Nonetheless,

in turn, Ramos' Brujas emulate two different times: the artist's processual time and the time of those who look vertically at the exhibition plane. At the same time, they suggest changeable images depending on the light, the condition of the on-looker, the exhibition context, and many other variables.

In both cases, Ramos makes me think of a term employed by Hélio Oiticica in *Brasil Diarréia* [Diarrhea Brazil] (1970), when talking of a typically Brazilian disease: "convi-conivência" (an expression that merges the ideas of living together and connivance). The disease seems to have gained new forms in Brazil today. To act against this disease is a contingency problem in the field of art, which in some situations is required to adopt a certain ethical-political stance. In a county where the pandemic is running rampant, in an environment of intolerance and sectarianism, exacerbated by the current government's ineptitude, the domain of art can adopt a place of ambivalence, without absolute values, anchored in the present and acting as a driver for change.

It is my understanding that the artist is giving us a driving force of representation, countering the state of apathy we face with the never-ending dismantling of society that we have witnessed in Brazil in the last four years at least. With regard to current social-political violence, if in *A extinção é para sempre* there are direct, objective symbolic relations within the works, *Brujas* is the materialization of the artist's everyday existence, an almost archeological, investigative and reflexive practice. I see Nuno Ramos' new works as a possible action in the construction of multiple points of view against the ruin and inertia that plague us today.