

Wanda Pimentel: Path in Black and White

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In 2012, when I interviewed Wanda Pimentel,¹ the artist insisted on telling me a precious childhood memory. As a child, she had great difficulty eating, which led to her mother finding an unexpected solution: she led her four-year-old daughter to take her meals next to an anthill, making up long stories about the ants' lives. In her mother's imagination, the ants lived a life much like the humans', though on a minute scale. In their rooms, little beds were lined up. Their closets held tiny clothes, tiny bows, tiny coats. They ate on tiny plates with tiny silverware and cups. Absorbed in these stories, and most of all in questions of scale and proportion, the child finished her meal.

For the *Black and White Animals* series, now on view, the memory of this aspect of her childhood proves particularly interesting. We see an ant on the reverse side of one of the works, hidden from direct view. In its veiled shelter "behind" the paper, the free-floating ant seems to hold the key to the artist's attraction to this fantasy world, at once exuberant and delicate. The ant's body, which is usually shown in monochrome, striped or streaked at most, is converted into a vehicle for fabulous lineation. Through the repetition of straight, angular, parallel and crisscrossing lines, crosshatches and arabesques, the ant becomes curiously monumental. The hind and forelegs are splayed as if the body's weight were too great. On only one of its sides, three other tiny legs appear. A single pincer and two eyes complete the simultaneously familiar and strange insect.

The lone ant points toward a realm that fuses reality and fable, establishing an almost immediate dialog with the artist's girlhood recollection. Of course, we should resist the temptation to find in these early works the origin of the poetic means of her future oeuvre, but there is a seminal quality in them that demands comprehension.

The *Animals* series was made over a period when Wanda attended Ivan Serpa's classes at the Escolinha de Artes do Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM) do Rio de Janeiro, between 1965 and 1967. At the school, Serpa developed a particular teaching method, much appreciated by the artists who took his classes, such as Aluísio Carvão, Farnese de Andrade, Cybele Varela and Paulo Herkenhoff. Of these classes, the artist especially recalls the Friday meetings, in which students presented their week's work, and the professor pointed out qualities to develop and problems to address. The severity of his critiques was offset by his friendly tone and his incentives toward individual liberty.

Wanda Pimentel was also struck by Serpa's austere and extremely professional behavior, which taught her not only critical rigor but also the need for technical precision. Her artistic practice was always tense, wrapped up in the highest requirements and the most rigorous discipline. She faced

¹ The interview served as the basis for my text *Wanda Pimentel's Own Corner*, featured in *Wanda Pimentel*, Rio de Janeiro: Silvia Roesler Edições de Arte, 2012

the technical difficulty of rendering her ideas with sincerity and depth. Cautious and patient execution became a poetic hallmark of her drawings and paintings from the outset.

The *Animals* series presents these marks of rigor and sincerity. These are clearly not representations of animals in their natural environment. The use of black and white serves to immediately forsake naturalism. There is no difference between what appears to be the lake in which the fish swim, the sky in which the bat flies or the earth where armadillos roam. Formed by the same delicate, delirious graphisms that trace the space around them, the animals appear in time and in their ambiguous (or ambivalent) reality. We discover a second owl in the lower left corner of the drawing or the eyes of a third seal penetrating space from the right. We are unclear on how many snakes are tangled together. We are undecided as to the identity of the kangaroos. It takes a while to recognize the butterfly wing flying along the snail. Not to mention the engravings in which Wanda challenges us, joining parts of various animals to give rise to new species, such as the strange lizard-legged monkey. Or even when she creates impossible creatures whose fabled existences are remade through the spectator's task of recognizing parts and attributing hesitant meanings, generating the most surprising questions: could this be a high-heeled carnival she-goat? Is this an otherworldly camel? Is there an animal here at all?

More tempting than finding inklings of the future pieces' impact in these initial works is to think how, at the same time when Wanda Pimentel drew these creatures and insects, another woman, Wilma Martins, made black and white woodcuts of beetles and spiders. Wilma's insects are angrier and more threatening than Wanda's (1966, China ink on paper). They are usually ready to strike, terse before an impending attack, with slitted eyes, stingers and claws at the ready. Wanda's beetle, on the contrary, crawls toward its den, revealing its rounded body. Made of parallel lines and crosshatchings, the legs seem fragile, and the animal retreats, allowing itself to be lost in the surrounding environment. Its silence carries force, but also melancholy and resignation. If we cannot recognize any proper feminist themes in any of the works, it is worth noticing that both artists quest after a revelation of a creative, erotic and desiring feminine voice.

In Wilma, animals and nature, traced harshly and obsessively, served as the gateway to the magical, erotic realm of her future works, such as *Juizo Final* [Final Judgment], *Limbo* and *Penetração* [Penetration] (all 1966), which, in turn, led into the woodcuts that dealt openly with flesh, blood, sex, vaginas and birth, with all the sound and fury that these themes demand. In Wanda, animals seem to affirm the graphic basis and central position afforded to the line, defining issues in her oeuvre, while simultaneously heralding the thematic and plastic question of "involvement", relationships between creatures, objects and their environments, central to her work.

To Wanda, configuring involvement required the plastic formulation of the relationships of shelter and tension between woman and the world, already present in these seminal works. This is clear in her formal strategy of occupying the whole paper, overcoming the separation between figure and ground. Her monkey, for example, is created through the same arabesques that fill the environment around it, taking its animal force and physical presence from them. If the monkey steals its solidity

from its surroundings, the environment limits its space of existence, conditioning it to stillness and silence. The conscious use of black-and-white contrast is also essential to this developing pictorial formulation. The artist justified the chromatic restriction of the period by stating that she painted in a small room for a single lady. According to her, even the future choice for vinyl paint was given by the same constraints. The use of oil would have seemed difficult in such close quarters. However, Wanda would not have stuck to vinyl or returned so often to black-and-white had these not been significant poetic procedures. In *Animals*, the convulsive lines in black over white paper are the force dominating space and make it a depiction of involvement.

In a subsequent series, *Do Caminho ao Elo Sobre-Humano* [Path to the Superhuman Tie], stripes and geometric forms approach the theme of women's relationship to daily objects more directly. The recourse to black-and-white was maintained, allowing pictorial space a twofold abstract quality. Thus, the theme of *involvement*, which will serve as the title for her next series, explicitly arises. To Wanda, involvement has many meanings: it is as much the act of involving oneself in the outer world, the surrounding environment of this act, active participation in reality, affective or amorous relations with things and a way of encroaching attack maneuver from the edges around things. For all these meanings, involvement requires an experience of recognition: of oneself, of the space occupied, of enveloping things and how to relate with them. In formulating involvement through form, Wanda had to qualify this experience of recognition, for which identifying the object or animal is essential but not enough. Presented in her drawings' concise abstraction, her objects require a special kind of attention from us, a true labor of assimilating not only the represented thing but its meaning and value.

Perhaps this is why the painter took up black-and-white again in the early 1970s, in various pieces from the *Envolvimento* series. At the time, Wanda was experiencing a process of formal concision, opting for the use of quasi-abstract (or unrecognizable) forms with minimal color schemes such as red and black, black and blue or black and white. This simplification, praised by critics at the time, was seen by the artist as hermeticism and a lack of communication with her audience. From this perspective, Wanda seems to have understood that the task of recognition might be hindered and that her poetics might be negatively affected.

The artist, however, does not abandon black-and-white or its equivalent in the pictorial world, greyscale – to which she returns in different moments and works. In the series *Bueiros* [Manholes] – in which she appropriated these urban objects and inserted them in wooden sculptural installations –, the use of black, white and gray appears along with a questioning of the limits of painting itself, and also as a dialog with the streets and sidewalks of the city. A few decades later, in a work from the *Montanhas do Rio* [Mountains of Rio] series (1994), greyscale is used as an instrument for inverting the direction of the gaze. In lieu of presenting the mountains she unveiled from her windows, as in the series' other works, the frame encases table corners, lamps, doors and empty spaces, ensconced corners of walls and flooring. Her gaze turns inward toward the house or toward its indoor reflection on the glass.

This problem of inverted directions turns up in other works that reconfigure black-and-white: the series *Invólucros* [Encasings] (1996 – 1998), in which the artist inverts the direction of involvement, encasing reality. In this series, black is not opposed to white but to silver. Silver lines, straight and sharp, trace the lines of a box and the points that represent nails, creating a dense and cloistered space with few insinuations of openings through their silvery gaps, too dense to allow our eyes to wander, too public to offer any respite.

The recourse to black-and-white reappears in the series *Linhas* [Lines] (early 2000s), in which white lines over a black background depicted ambiguous spaces, somewhat like empty theater stages. The staircase was the central element, even when absent, suggesting in its parallel lines and its straight or diagonal position the objectification of the problem of depth. In the series dubbed *Memórias* [Memories] (2011), white over black lines serve to structure the inside of acrylic boxes in which Wanda stores objects from her life: a pair of scissors, a pin cushion, a ruler, a stuffed animal, a magnifying glass and more. Black-and-white serves to formalize memories that are both personal and common. Both expressive and inexpressive.

Let us not forget the new version of the *Animals* series (carried out between 1988 and 2004), in which black-and-white drawings were combined with materials such as fabric, tulle, polystyrene and wood in an attempt to configure the mechanical and informational universe of animals. The gridded structure orders the movement of insects, scorpions, bats and octopi, among others.

Comparing the Scorpions from both *Animals* series, we can see the path that the artist took in returning to the subject. In 1966, two scorpions struggling in a deadly, dancing struggle are presented at the center of a space formed by sinuous, obsessive lines, repeating on the arachnids' bodies and creating a relationship of vital continuity between figure and ground. The 2004 scorpions, on the other hand, move mechanically over three meters of paper, marked by vertical lines in regular intervals. The work is divided into five parts, signaled by a more defined vertical line, evoking technical drafts. The geometric order, the regular increase in the number of scorpions on each part, their ordering in rows and their identical representation, like a stamp, combine with the black-and-white to reveal a machinic, serial order.

In the *Animals* from her youth, the artist combines the waving, obsessive line, whose autonomous movement was born from a spatial structure and drawn on the object, with the memory of her gesture, even if the tumult of abstract arabesques made precise identification of these gestures' order and direction impossible. Everything happens at once: gesture, line, space, figure. There are thinner, more delicate lines that weave complex networks. There are more agile, thicker lines that introduce a swift, restless rhythm. There are crosshatches and parallel lines, the repetition of which forms decorative patterns for bodies and spaces. There are lines that expand and transform into black areas, in marked opposition to the linear exactness. Feverish lines attract the spectator to the animals' universe, but they refuse to let us wander about in it. We roam the artist's traces, we search for an opening between the black and the white, only to understand that that space does not belong to us.

Wanda draws us into the animals' universe only to release us back into the world and to the dilemma of our involvement with it. Perhaps the fact of drawing animals bears this further meaning: we feel like "others" there; our own humanity becomes strange, revealing the paradox that rules our relationship with nature. The strangeness of her ant makes us experience our own foreign quality in the world we inhabit. Later, in order to formally support the relationship of alterity between humanity and the environment, Pimentel opts for a uniform application of color, stripped of a gestural register that records the memory of artistic labor through saturation and density, keeping the line, however, as a basic principle for outlining colored areas and containing movements of water and smoke.

The path of black-and-white in the artist's oeuvre goes to show how decisive the presence of the line is in the formulation of her poetics of involvement, appearing as a presence and force in her first *Animals* series. For Wanda Pimentel, involvement is always tied to affective or amorous bonds resulting from a careful, attentive look at the world, to detail, to the structure and dynamics of things and beings, from which spring the sinuous and straight lines that subdivide internal spaces and create ample fields of color. But this is also linked to a certain distancing, a refusal of representation that elicits perception without judgment, a higher sort of resignation and surrender. Thus her peculiar interest in animals, objects, and parts of female bodies; as if involvement with that which is usually unremarkable or silent were the origin of a delicate comprehension of life as the observation of its fragments and instants.