

The naked man

There was an intrinsic ambiguity to it. His synapses were fluid; neurons and meanings moved freely, unbound by limiting discourses. Things were simply what they were. His work said so much, seemingly without effort. Efrain was not locked in struggle; he was in flow.

At first glance, gentle adjectives such as *delicate* or *sensitive* may come to mind. But to look more closely is to look more deeply, and discover a forceful, painful, and at times quietly perverse body of work. Perhaps most striking is the realization that Efrain Almeida's work does not yield itself easily. It resists what initially seems explicit. While it engages with the languages of both the modern and the contemporary canon, it is never defined by them.

Early in his practice, from the mid-1980s through the late 1990s, wood was hand-carved in a deliberately rough, economical rendering of figures, both animate and inanimate: faces, hands, cushions, branches. The process recalls marquetry, prompting a reflection on this living tradition and on the idea of an image embedded within a solid surface. The works evoke the simple act of carving into the trunk of a tree with a pocketknife, without grand ambition. The only aspiration of such an anonymous incision is to endure in the wood, and it is through this analogy that the precise formal ambition of Efrain's work emerges. Here lies the fundamental conceptual premise of his practice: to leave a lasting imprint on the collective imagination in the manner of those unassuming marks on trees; to draw upon the forms offered by his own natural environment in order to shape and project universal, timeless questions; to maintain an appearance of simplicity while containing profound existential complexity.

Small men with languid bodies and faintly uncanny gazes. Goats, a duck, a swan, moths, butterflies, and birds in mid-flight imbued with a distinctly human melancholy. The features of a face carved into a block of *umburana*. Rounded fragments of the body—hands holding houses, heads, crowns of thorns, tears. From the very beginning there were also sewn textiles, a practice that would unfold over the years: garments for bodies of air, little dresses, caps, bags—bodies materialized only through the suggestion of their silhouettes, their boundaries, their symbolic charge. The choice of fabrics such as velvet seems to say, "This is heavy; there is substance here, there is pain." Later, the sewing expands into translucent textiles and weightless organza, yet titles such as *Marcas* [Marks] or *Em volta tudo é cinza* [Everything Around Is Gray] reaffirm the persistent sense of burden.

Over the course of forty years, Efrain's work became increasingly mimetic. Yet even as his imagery grew more lucid, it continued to evoke both interior and atmospheric realities. Efrain understood that the material reality of his representations was inseparable from

deeper meanings, and he released them into the world as such. A solitary moth with opaque wings (the moth, not the butterfly); a nude, tattooed man gazing into the distance; an ugly duckling in the form of a black swan (how beautiful ugliness can be). A bird in its nest, at once protected and vulnerable; another lying dead on the ground, its tiny legs turned upward (did it fall from the nest?). Birds peck at the earth in groups, while others stand conspicuously apart. A dog licks a wall—hungry, yearning, or mischievous, though certainly biblical, recalling the Gospel of Luke, where dogs lick Lazarus's sores. A sheep's fleece acquires volume through the thousands of drill holes that pierce the solid wood. Beyond their evocation of rural memory, these forms and images weave other possible narratives, seeming almost unplanned yet charged with intention. They are simply there, offered over to contemplation and to the narrative imagination of others. Whole, and wholly given.

An installation-based sensibility structured Efrain's way of making. Small sculptures of accessories, bodily fragments and the objects that accompany them multiplied across gallery walls in serial arrangements, unfolding in lines or circles that asserted both scale and volume. Tiny hands carved in wood projected from the wall, bleeding solid and translucent beads that streamed to the floor and spread across a vast expanse. To flow, to spill, to spread—these are fundamental verbs in the formal construction of his work, as in the pair of wooden hands holding white velvet tears that cascade to the ground. Or in the broad circle of carved wooden tears that occupies an entire wall. Or in the charcoal drawing stamping a trail of thorns extending outward across the surface.

Efrain delighted in playing with scale, perspective, and meaning. His sculptures fit in the palm of a hand. When they grow somewhat larger, they remain visual counterparts to their subjects rather than volumetric enlargements. They are the same—or smaller—and the smaller they become, the more monumental they seem. Efrain's work occupies vast spaces with modest forms, carefully placed so that each one commands an expansive field around it. In *Handmade*, presented in São Paulo in 2010, he fearlessly arranged pairs of carved and painted wooden eyes in a single line across a long stretch of wall. In this now iconic installation, space was entirely inhabited by those tiny gazes and by the palpable atmosphere that Efrain so confidently claimed as an integral element of the work itself. Efrain was the real deal.

In an untitled work from 1991, carved wooden arms hold a small wooden lamb suspended from the wall, with red marks staining the backs of the hands, recalling the sacrificial narratives of Isaac and Jacob. In *Roupa (Chaga) [Garment (Wound)]* (1998), small pink velvet shirts are fastened by *umburana* crowns of thorns and pierced by slashes of red velvet—a velvet that bleeds. Wounds, blood, rosaries, crowns of thorns, *ex-votos*, Padre Cícero (and here the importance of Mestre Noza's austere visual language). This constellation of Christian references underscores the biographical dimension of the work while also revealing a kind of fetishistic attraction—an intense fascination, even devotion,

toward religious icons. A basic Freudian reading suggests a libidinal investment, an underlying force that binds together excitement, pleasure, and pain. Seen through the lens of its intrinsic ambiguity, Efrain's work is both Catholic and queer. It is bare yet harbors enigmas; it carries the fervor of communion and of sex, of repression, rupture, and salvation. A naked man still harbors layers that disclose themselves only gradually. His oeuvre shows wholeness, integrity. It demands to be understood holistically, in the sense that the whole is greater—and truer—than the simple sum of its individual parts.

Biography, as working material, forms the foundation of both Efrain's *ethos* and his *pathos*. The landscape and culture of the *sertão* permeate everything. One day he told me, "I'm Northeastern—neither white nor Black. I belong to a race yet to be discovered." Yet beyond the bodies and heads so faithfully rendered in their likeness, the caps, dresses, and trousers project the artist as a child onto his own theater of props: an effort to elevate these ordinary objects into symbols that are at once deeply personal and broadly held, capable of resonating as universal forms.

Efrain lends his body to his work, entirely. His carved features become conduits for psychological meaning. His psyche is reflected in his titles, as in *O Outsider* (*The Outsider*), where a small green organza shirt bears his embroidered likeness in meticulous detail, like a pocket coat-of-arms. He is present, yet he remains a stranger. In another work, a bronze bird rests upon a cube traced in colored lines. At first glance the bird appears ordinary, but the artist tells us it is *O Exótico* [The Exotic]. Efrain offered his work to us openly, suggesting interpretations without feigning or affectation. This frankness—like the frankness of wood itself—is one of the most essential keys to his work. It is deeply intimate, and made of craft.

An atmosphere of solitude persists throughout the work and haunts Efrain's entire practice. As early as *Os Melancólicos* [The Melancholics] (1997), it was already there, quietly announcing itself. In this nakedness, it is impossible to deny the current of religiosity that runs through the work's very core—religiosity perhaps in the sense of *religare*, of reconnecting with others and with nature—yet the solitude it evokes remains inescapable. Sexuality is equally present: not fundamentally queer, though certainly that as well, and always enveloped in an aura of inconformity.

Self-portraits abound, and the work is deeply attuned to questions of contemporary subjectivity. At the 2010 São Paulo Biennial, five sculptures of pot-bellied, bearded, tattooed figures stand upon large, isolated platforms—an archipelago of intimacy. These naked bodies coexist without ever truly being together, suspended in a state of overwhelming solitude and displacement. Three figures stand upright: one looks upward, another fixes its gaze on the horizon, while the third lowers its head, averting its gaze. A fourth sits at the edge of an abyss, its feet dangling over the corner of the platform. The fifth kneels.

Beyond the recurring naked body, another form appears throughout every phase of Efrain's practice: the hummingbird. A bird central to countless myths and enchantments across the ancestral cultures of the Maya, Inca, Aztec, and Guarani peoples, it has long been associated with good fortune, omens, and the healing of negative energies. In the Bible, it is said to have been created on the fifth day and is regarded as a messenger of heaven. In Efrain's work, hummingbirds peck at gallery walls, arranged in lines or swarms, self-possessed in their bodies of bare wood or hand-painted bronze. Whatever the medium, he always depicts the hummingbird doing what it does best: kissing, pecking. There is, here, a formal decision of remarkable sculptural intelligence: using the bird's beak as the point from which the entire weight of the sculpture is suspended on the wall. And so Efrain's hummingbirds remain airborne. Suddenly, the wall becomes something like the threshold Alice crosses after following the rabbit into the tree: what had been the flat white support delimiting the image opens into a free space for flight, sensation, and meanings beyond the bird's many symbolic associations. The hummingbird—the only bird capable of flying in every direction, even backward, and of hovering motionless in midair—becomes Efrain's essential allegory.

This is how Efrain's work inhabits the world: through diminutive forms and ambitious placements, through lucid images entangled with layered meanings. Its visual vocabulary is highly specific, yet remarkably expansive. There is sentiment and affection, but also camp. Sex coexists with the sacred. The work embraces the frugal and the everyday while opening onto the metaphysical. The naked man, in all his inherent ambiguity. With clarity and humility, through a language that appears deceptively accessible—as though everything were self-evident and fully revealed—Efrain Almeida embodies the intimate while projecting the human condition onto an almost cosmic scale.

— Márcia Fortes