

## **BODIES AND TEMPERATURES**

### **The 4 Cardinal Points of the exhibition**

JÚLIO POMAR, RITA FERREIRA AND SARA BICHÃO

SARA ANTÓNIA MATOS

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This catalogue has been published to accompany the exhibition ‘Chama’ [Flame/Call] at the Atelier-Museu Júlio Pomar (15 February – 29 April 2018), with works by Júlio Pomar, Sara Bichão and Rita Ferreira. When I invited these two artists, who are at different points in their careers, to exhibit with Júlio Pomar, what I had in mind was a dimension of art that has received little, or only vague attention. I am referring to a visceral dimension, associated with the release of intuitive energy, sometimes with a scatological element, that is part of making art. It is a dimension that encompasses, in different ways, Louise Bourgeois, Ana Mendieta, Hermann Nitsch, Rebecca Horn and Marina Abramovic, among others. In all these artists, this visceral dimension and scatological element, inherently associated with the body, seem to be linked to a need to give physical form to – and thus overcome – traumas, fixations and psychological resistance (whether real or fictional), or to be related to the representation of initiation rites, beliefs and ritual behaviour.

It is not that the visceral dimension and scatological component are crucial, or even central, to Júlio Pomar’s work, with which the pieces produced by these two artists intersect within the exhibition. If there is an element of purging in Pomar’s work, it is associated with his need to experience everything with the utmost intensity and urgency. And his assemblages, of course, some of which are included in the exhibition, reveal a pleasure in ‘dominating’, or

taming – in converting something leftover or discarded into an object with a new meaning. Something of this nature occurs when traumas are addressed: there is an overcoming, a subjugation, a domination of the factor or event that ‘resists’. It should also be remembered that Pomar embarked on his assemblages at the end of the 1960s (in 1967, to be precise), a period during which the artist was dissatisfied with the pictorial work he was producing.<sup>1</sup> Might the assemblages have helped to unlock the impasse and to lead his work in a new direction? Do they thus have a cathartic quality? Reminiscent, perhaps, of totems or ritualistic objects, and bearing a harshness derived from the crudeness of their organic materials, gathered on the beach and worn by sun and salt, the truth is that Júlio Pomar did not like these pieces to be regarded as shamanic or ritualistic. And yet they convey a raw energy, a visceral, unruly intuition that has broken free from the control of rational logic – aspects that are also present in the work of Rita Ferreira and Sara Bichão.

What must be emphasised when addressing these – visceral, irrational, scatological – themes is of course the involvement of the body in artistic production and in the perception of the space/world. The body is a sea of (potential) desires waiting for an opportunity to manifest themselves and take effect.

Before continuing, it is important to point out that dealing with the body in art is a highly political matter, regardless of how organic the forms that the work takes are, or whether the methods used are traditional or highly technological. Dealing with the body, especially in the way that the artists in this exhibition do – and in the way that Sara Bichão does, in particular – is political because it shows the body in its perishable, carnal, lacerated, sexual, libidinous and dismembered condition. It is political because human beings have bodies, with flesh and with stories, that provide pain and pleasure, that are subject to moralising, discrimination and atrocities of every stripe in order to conform with

<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Pomar and Sara Antónia Matos, ‘Obras destruídas de Júlio Pomar’, in *Void\*: Júlio Pomar*, Vol. III, Cadernos do Atelier-Museu, Documenta and Atelier-Museu Júlio Pomar/EGEAC, Lisbon, 2017, p. 9.

conventions and canons that are often designed to impose uniformity. What is demanded by asserting the body in its diverse carnalities is, above all, the right not to follow the canon, to inhabit another space and another point of view. The theme is political because difference, and the right to be different, should not be concealed, hidden and oppressed; because flesh and pleasure are vital and cultural. To deny them is refuse humans the right to possess bodies and sexuality.

Doing this, representing and displaying the body as these artists do, involves speaking of intimacy, desire, fear, rejection, sex and contamination. On this point I can’t help thinking of the text written by art critic Alexandre Melo in 1993, in which he announced that ‘the Portuguese don’t have bodies’. This paradoxical and possibly disturbing statement stemmed from his verdict that Portuguese art did not discuss sexuality or flesh, something attributed by António Fernando Cascais, a scholar and teacher of Communication Sciences, to a lack of familiarity with the languages needed to express these dimensions.<sup>2</sup>

In this respect, Júlio Pomar can perhaps be seen – in his work from the 1970s onwards – as a precursor and an exception in these areas, in his explicit approach to the body, and to its associated erotic and animalistic senses – something that it is hoped to reveal in 2019 in an exhibition dedicated to this theme at the Atelier-Museu, which will take this perspective as the basis of its approach.

Despite this verdict of the absence of the body and flesh within art, within academia – particularly from the 1990s onwards – ‘a language began to take hold that made it possible to speak about sexuality in an erudite and elaborate fashion, free from traditional categories’. In other words, to speak about sexuality in a non-binary fashion, with no direct reference to gender. Some decades later, that absence appears to have now been overcome, particularly with the emergence of queer studies<sup>3</sup> and of a theoretical framework. That this is so is proved by the

<sup>2</sup> Fernando Cascais, quoted in an article at <https://www.publico.pt/2010/03/17/culturaipilon/noticia/os-portugueses-ja-tem-corpo-e-os-criadores-encontraram-no-252773/amp>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.publico.pt/2010/03/17/culturaipilon/noticia/os-portugueses-ja-tem-corpo-e-os-criadores-encontraram-no-252773/amp>

many different approaches that are now being taken to these themes, notably within the realm of art. In any case, what should be highlighted with respect to the work of the two artists in the exhibition does not concern gender representation but the exhibiting of carnality, which is sometimes open, exposed and wounded (Sara Bichão), at other times a kind of drive, the power of the irrepressible and unruly libido (Rita Ferreira).

Let's return then, to this carnality. Why does the body/flesh carry with it this political dimension in its participation in the formation of meaning and production of space?

First of all: what is a body? In a figurative sense, for the philosopher José Gil in *Metamorfoses do Corpo*,<sup>4</sup> it is a voice or a 'respiring that speaks, [...] it is a breath, it is a permanent mediation between interior and exterior [...], a crossing, [that] contains in itself the very possibility of expression (meaning)'. The human body is thus, so to speak, an 'auto-meaning' (Gil, 1997: 88).

In fact, only the body senses space/the world and experiences its limits. Directly or indirectly, the body and its space are present in art, generating a creative exercise involving the material and the immaterial, a synthesis of presence and absence, shaping and transferring its *pathos* to the work – its pain and its suffering, its desires and sexual impulses, its life and death drives, in other words. These two artists process this exercise, carrying it out as if a flame burnt beneath their skin, as if beneath their works were an incandescent and constantly bubbling magma, bringing to the surface all that they are made of: drives, desire. They use the body and their experience to problematise the world and their position in it, and they reject doctrine and morals to do so. This is exemplified by Rita Ferreira's group of paintings on paper, presented for the first time together, as a mural that extends across the north wall of the upper floor of the Atelier-Museu. These paintings, which project a few centimetres forwards on iron supports, thus gaining density and a three-dimensional body, according to the artist, are produced spontaneously

<sup>4</sup> José Gil, (1997) *Metamorfoses do Corpo*, Relógio D'Água, Coleção Antropos, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Lisbon.



**SARA BICHÃO**  
*I give my best* (from the series *Protection from apathy*), 2017  
 Cotton, latex and sewing thread  
 7,5 × 8 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist



and almost compulsively from ‘lucky objects’ that the artist requested from people she knew. Among other things, she was given combs and sieves, nets, a cake tin, lumps of salt, ropes and threads. They are talismanic objects that the artist decided to use to address beliefs and rituals, representing them freely so that it was impossible to recognise the object that was the starting point, and without any sort of moral judgement about their users or donors. What they do instead is set down sensations and chromatic intensities, adopting an unconstrained approach that seems to submit to the hand, to yield to the artist’s gesture and intuitions, rather than to any formulation or censoring of an intellectual nature.

With respect to this unconstrained action of the body and its intuitions (Rita Ferreira) or to the exhibition of the body and its explicit carnality (Sara Bichão), associated with an absence of shame and morals, I must pause to consider a small work by Sara Bichão, *I give my best* (from the series *Protection from apathy*), from 2017, installed alongside Rita Ferreira’s mural, on the adjoining wall. It is an ‘orange’ in the process of putrefaction; a cotton sphere covered in pink silicone, with a reddened and visibly stitched fissure, a still open wound. Made of silicone, a putrescible material, the piece is eaten away over time, becoming misshapen and decaying over the course of the exhibition. This little spot of ‘live flesh’ forms a counterpoint to Rita Ferreira’s panel, as if interfering with the colours of the paintings, wielding a force of attraction over some and repelling others, causing them to advance and recede, as if the colours were moving within the panel, emitting vibrations amongst themselves. With respect to this small piece that ‘interferes’ with the large mural, I will simply cite Joana Batel: ‘The body withers, drips, bursts, dries, becomes a tomb’.<sup>5</sup> This also means it contains stories and experiences that cannot be transmitted. And this, that work and body can be presented as tombs, could also be said of the work of Rita Ferreira and Júlio Pomar. They are works that contain narratives and, in their making, hide and camouflage the most intimate beliefs. Certainly, Rita Ferreira’s abstract representations, whose forms no longer preserve the outlines of the objects but spill over the edges of the

<sup>5</sup> Joana Batel, Book 7 of the Atelier-Museu Júlio Pomar Education Service, 2018, p. 25.

paper, lead to profound depths and places into which she herself has plunged. In each picture, cavities and pathways seem to open up – teardrops, circles, stains, cracks. Sometimes these are narrow and funnel-like, sometimes wider. They invite us to take a peek and lead us to the other side, to other enigmatic spaces – of evasion? – that we cannot locate. If I had to choose a painting from this panel, I would have to choose a purple one – purple being the colour of someone at the apex of sensuality and perhaps unwittingly projecting this into the artwork.

The domain of touch and the sensory is of course announced at the entrance to the exhibition by two drawings by Júlio Pomar: *Studies (Hands)*, from 1953. In these drawings, previously included in the exhibition ‘Desenhar’ [Drawing], featuring Rui Chafes and Júlio Pomar, the body and its feelings, the desire that ravages it and that makes it tremble, are identified as fundamental domains of art.

Yet why is it that the experience of art cannot be separated from the sensory dimension inherent to the body and its carnality?

First of all, it is important to stress that making art is always related to the body that issues it. In order to experience a space and a world, a body is needed – a body that perceives and develops representations of that world. This process of spatial incarnation/incorporation – of the forming of meaning, in other words – is translated or transposed into the artistic representation, particularly when, like Júlio Pomar, Rita Ferreira and Sara Bichão, artists use their hands. This means that the force, the pressure and the weight of their bodies, their subtleties, their rhythms, their firm intentions, uncontrolled moments and hesitations are in a sense unloaded onto the canvases or materials upon which the work is made. It is no coincidence that Sara Bichão states that materials carry memories and stories and seem to convey what should be done with them – something that many artists imply when they say that the materials take control of them, that a symbiosis is created between body and material in which they become one. This symbiosis, transferred to the representation, makes it possible to see and to feel the pathos experienced by the artist. The material of art, therefore, is formed from

the sense that is experienced by a body and is, more precisely, the representation of this sense. In this respect, asserting the body and its carnality through artistic production, expressing it in its strangeness, its desires and intimate beliefs, but also in its monstrosities, is also working to oppose the closing up of the world, expanding the possibilities of perceiving, experiencing and representing it in its most predictable and in its most unfathomable dimensions.

It has in fact already been some decades since critical theory sought to re-evaluate the role of the body in cognition, seeing it as a completeness (a continuity with discontinuities), receptor and generator. The living body does not tolerate the separation between body/mind, signifier/signified, conscious/unconscious, gender or colour and, in this sense, the body is studied as a primordial element in the production of space, imbuing it with its rhythm, its action, its eroticism and producing diverse forms of representation.

Art makes use of materials, of the body and of elements that are external to it, with or without the intervention of tools, with the aim of producing something visible, audible or tangible, that can thus be received or framed by perception. The metaphorical senses of art are derived from its diverse components, its content of an intellectual and material nature, giving rise to slippages of meaning, which we could call ‘unresolved spaces’,<sup>6</sup> that signal something different, a dissent, drawing out the detail of the experience. A traumatic or memorable experience is regarded as having taken place when the material experienced is incorporated into the flow of general experiences and, simultaneously, when it is distinguished from this flow, through having a singular quality that sets it apart. In other words, there are experiences with an unrepeatable quality, but there are also experiences that are indistinguishable from the ordinary process of life, with respect to the environment that is inhabited. What is it then that makes an experience differentiable?

<sup>6</sup> Sara Antónia Matos, concept explored in her doctoral thesis ‘Da escultura à espacialidade’, FBAUL, 2013.



According to the philosopher Richard Shusterman, a follower of John Dewey, experience must first of all be regarded as becoming constitutive, or incorporated by human beings as a form of knowledge, once there is an awareness that it is singular. This singularity comes from its transformative, problematising nature. For Shusterman, the meaning of experience lies in the discovery of a moment in which moments of greater or distinguishable intensity stand out or are 'swamped'; in which potentially destabilising interruptions and slippages in meaning take place, unleashing transformation. It could be said that this is what these two artists do. They start with their personal experience, projecting it into the representation, thus presenting and constructing new worlds, with different angles, from other points of view and with their own vibrations. This clearly applies to Sara Bichão, whose most recent work, presented at the Atelier-Museu<sup>7</sup> and in the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum's Project Space, resulted from an experience she had in a lake in the crater of an extinct volcano (during a residency in France), when she felt a kind of vertigo, followed by panic, as a result of losing her bearings – solid proof that the body is essential to apprehending and producing space. In fact, space exists because bodies give it axes of orientation and also senses. For the British phenomenologist Paul Rodaway, these senses have two interpretations: that of direction (above/below, right/left, inside/outside, centre/periphery) and that of meaning, leading him to regard the body as also having a geography. The geography of the body has specific places, can be traversed, has a determined extension and depth, with parts that are visible and invisible, public and private. This analogy of the body with a territory makes it possible to explain how the body gives sense to space and to representations; the attributes of the first are transposed to the second or are somehow projected in it. It is as if the human body provided the basis for understanding the space that surrounds it and for all

<sup>7</sup> The 2018 piece *Yokul (da Leonor)*, by Sara Bichão, refers to the exhibition 'Find me, I kill you', which opened at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Modern Collection – Project Space shortly after 'Chama' at the Atelier-Museu, linking the work produced by the artist for these two exhibitions, which partially overlapped in time.



RITA FERREIRA  
*Skin*, 2018

Oil on paper and steel  
86,5 × 61 × 3 cm

Courtesy of Galeria 3+1 Arte Contemporânea



RITA FERREIRA  
 2018  
 Oil on paper and steel  
 80,5 x 61 x 3 cm  
 Courtesy of Galeria 3+1 Arte Contemporânea

representations. For Rodaway, in his book *Sensuous Geographies*,<sup>8</sup> the experience of the senses is the base territory from which it is possible to construct another understanding of geographical coordinates – a place/world with senses, in other words. Thus the writer begins by distinguishing the notion of sensory senses and semantic/metaphorical senses, offering a comprehensive, multisensual view of the role of the body in understanding the world and being involved in it. In this regard, the entire body acquires a powerful role in social, political, historical and geographical experience. This experience is about the rediscovery of an ‘intimate’ geography, a ‘hidden’ geography that begins with the sensory systems and extends to the understanding of reality, valuing the life of the body and the knowledge it produces (Rodaway, 1994: 5). Geography is thus physical and cultural, anchored in prior experience and dependent on sensory capacity, education and cultural conditioning – these being the dimensions that artists engage with through their works, representing the body, flesh, sexuality and the senses attributed to the world through their bodies.

This perspective is also shared by José Gil, whom I have already cited in discussing the body, since the conjunction of those two senses (sensory and semantic/metaphorical) can be identified with what he calls ‘embodied sense’ (Gil, 2001). ‘Embodied’ here should be understood as manifested in flesh – the flesh of the body itself – the basis for an experience that is deeply rooted in the world. In other words, human beings, being endowed with bodies and languages, participate in the production of space/the world, attributing it with sensory and conceptual senses. Yet these senses are not literal, univocal or unequivocal. Senses result from a patchwork of relationships, which may not be explicitly named in verbal discourse, nor be capable of being captured by language. Leaps, failures and discontinuities of meaning continually emerge in artistic representation, increasing and expanding apprehension of the world.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Rodaway, (1994) *Sensuous Geographies – Body, Sense and Place*, Routledge, London & New York.

It can thus be said that the body has a political role in artistic production, revealing the interdependence of and discontinuity between representation and concrete experience – giving rise to slippages in meaning and, above all, to the possibility of inhabiting other unresolved and unstipulated spaces and places. The works of these two artists and of Júlio Pomar, therefore, evolving separately along different journeys, occupy a singular place within the context of representation, particularly with respect to the way that they address the body, its carnality and its eroticism.

Returning to the previously mentioned ambiguity of senses, it should also be said that the exhibition title was jointly discovered, having been proposed by Sara Bichão. On the one hand, the title suggests a heat that seems to characterise the way that the two artists work, as if both were yielding to impulses, an urge or drive that impels them to make work. On the other hand, it contains an appeal – a call (*chamamento* in Portuguese) – that formed the basis of this collaboration, which aimed to allow meanings to slide between the works, without disconnecting them or negating each other. I too succumbed to this call, also seeking, as a curator, to use my body to find the temperature that linked all the works. I kept going back to select works by Júlio Pomar to include in the exhibition, until the temperature I found was not that of a flame but that of the sea. This was the point of confluence not only of Pomar's assemblages, made of materials gathered on the beach, but also the *Beach games* drawings, made in 1962 in Costa da Caparica – delicate, sgraffito drawings, as if made with the wind and with what his eye fell upon as he looked at the sea. Also aquatic in nature are the colours of the canvas *Lining* (2018) by Rita Ferreira, a marine being in *Sea walker* (2017) and *Threat* (2018) by Sara Bichão, both from the *Protection from apathy* series, which occupy the south wall of the upper floor of the Atelier-Museu, and *Seagull* (1983) by Júlio Pomar on the western side. In general, it could, I think, be said that the lightness and coolness of water flows out to the four cardinal points of the exhibition. Another work by Sara Bichão is also notable for such lightness – *Untitled*, from 2018, consisting of a blue light placed on one of the trusses of the museum's roof, perched there like a bird, watching and flying over the exhibition.

I would like to dwell on the question of temperatures and urges a little longer in order to reveal something of the process of work I undertook with the artists during the year and a half leading up to the exhibition. For the first time, the Atelier-Museu invited these two artists to create a body of work specifically for this exhibition. Thus it was an open invitation that was not based on pre-selecting works that had already been produced. This didn't mean that there was any kind of interference in their personal languages, or that the invitation was directed towards a concrete theme. The challenge was open to both of their input and it was also, for this reason, a great risk for them and for the museum.

Naturally the artists who had previously been invited to exhibit with Júlio Pomar also produced new works for the occasion, but these resulted from a process of involvement with the space, which came after Júlio Pomar's works had been selected and the curatorial project defined. In the case of this exhibition, rather than choose the works from the start, I challenged the artists to produce a new body of work to present at the Atelier-Museu, convinced that their works would work well together and that they would establish successful relationships with Pomar's works. It should also be said that, for the Atelier-Museu, it is important that projects developed with artists are relevant to their careers, acting as turning points, that they impact on the course of their work, opening doors within it. In one way or another, I think this has happened. In the case of established artists, by offering new readings of their works in relation to those of Júlio Pomar. In the case of younger artists, by giving them the opportunity to test new works, scales, ways of exhibiting and relationships.

It is also sometimes the case that the invited artists have little experience of working with curators and institutions, and haven't yet had material published about their work (catalogues, books, essays, images) – resources that the Atelier-Museu seeks to provide. Institutional support at the level of production seems to me to be one of the most useful approaches for this generation of artists, since it allows them to envision new approaches to executing pieces. This period allows artists to experiment with producing works on a significant scale, their installation



in a place, in relation to that place and its physical conditions; and to hesitate, fail, go back, make again and, sometimes, to be surprised by new solutions. Without going into details, I can confirm that all these aspects occurred in the exhibition ‘Chama’, either with Rita Ferreira or Sara Bichão, the artists proving themselves worthy of the challenge they had been set.

Rita Ferreira presented a group of more than 50 works on paper, displayed for the first time as a large wall, testing the impact of the group and the relationships of intensity and colour between its parts. Also new is the work on raw canvas that she presents on the lower floor of the space, where it enters into dialogue with the drawings by Júlio Pomar and the pieces in unbleached cloth by Sara Bichão.

Sara Bichão not only constructed almost all of the pieces in the exhibition but also created a work that crosses the space from one end to another. *Glade*, from 2018, evokes the form of an enormous catapult, whose sling (in unbleached cloth) is held by the building’s guardrails on the upper floor, and stretched from there to the ground floor, where it is secured by two 300 kilogram basalt rocks. Installed from east to west, the piece also consists of a disc of concave steel, placed above the windows on the upper floor of the building, that captures and scatters the sunlight around it. Mention must be made too of the work that the artist dedicated to Júlio Pomar: *For JP*, from 2018, a braided rope of unbleached material, knotted around objects from the beach: canes, burnt sticks, stones, and plastic objects. There is also a drawing (a small bird) which the most astute visitors will relate to Pomar’s drawings of seagulls (on tracing paper), displayed high up on the western wall of the museum. Two things can be deduced from the insertion of elements and materials gathered on the beach in Sara Bichão’s work: first that in the construction of her works the artist took into consideration the dialogue she would establish with Júlio Pomar’s assemblages, and second that her work – like that of Júlio Pomar – needs time to be observed, discovered and experienced.

On this note, it seems to me that the works of these two artists are formed of and require different times and require of observation. Sara Bichão’s work appears to be made and to occur between layers, calling upon one to move closer

and then further away, to dive in and out, like Júlio Pomar’s paintings, through which every stratum of meaning is revealed. Rita Ferreira’s work seems to ask us to feel its impact all at once, to confront the composition as a whole, in which each fragment, each portion of colour, exerts its force of attraction. For this reason, I regard Sara Bichão’s work as requiring extended time, while Rita Ferreira’s work invites a rapid attack – something that is probably related to the difference in their ages, and the stages they are at in their careers.

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Following this project, Sara Bichão donated the exhibition’s central piece, *Glade*, to Lisbon City Council’s collection of contemporary art. The commission unanimously agreed to accept the donation and to incorporate it in their collection.

The Atelier-Museu Júlio Pomar is grateful to the artists for the dedication and enthusiasm with which they approached this project, and for making it a unique moment in the history of the museum.