

I have been writing this text gradually, organising my disparate thoughts one-by-one, inspired by the work of artist Sara Bichão and by the freedom with which she approaches art, and life. I've the impression this is actually how Sara works. When I look at her art, amalgams of fragments enriched with stories and memories of random lives, I always wonder where she begins. She has to begin somewhere. Maybe with a strip of fabric, wood from a tree, a plastic glove, to which she starts to add other elements and materials, that are often banal and apparently worthless, in a unique process of aggregation and disintegration. Alone in her studio, whether in Lisbon, at Serralves or anywhere in the world, outdoors or indoors, the artist turns things inside out, cuts and undoes, to then piece together and this is how the different elements that make up her work are then sewn, tied or interwoven to somehow belong to each other, as if they had never had another existence, purpose or function. Sara Bichão's installations and sculptures — and her artistic process — are embedded in a profoundly emotional and intuitive idea of fusion, and assimilation. In the hands of this artist, all is transformed, acquiring new forms and meanings. Each piece hints at a silent narrative in which the materials speak through their textures, be they tactile or visual, their smells, their wear and tear and scars, as well as telltale signs of the artist's handiwork, sharing stories that can only be heard if we succumb to contemplative silence.

I met Sara in 2016. We arranged a meeting at the Portuguese Communications Foundation, in the course of a solo exhibition the artist was having at this institution. I wasn't familiar with her work, and I confess I had no expectations. After a coffee, she took me on a guided tour

of the exhibition. I was impressed by the delicacy, forcefulness and seductive charms of the pieces. In fact, without resorting to parlour tricks or making use of the (often easy) option of technology to get her point across, Sara's pieces have the rare capacity to leave a lasting impression. They get under our skin; envelop us, confront us and stir our emotions. They can unsettle us, which is perhaps why they are so captivating. Almost overpowering. Totally without pretension, deceit or disguise, it is precisely in this scrupulousness that we are radically confronted with the substance of things, an unexpected pursuit of sincerity, the emotions that bring us, the world and objects together.

During my visit, Sara told me stories about some of the elements, whether a piece of material from one of her grandmother's cushions or a piece of wood she had found on the beach. As she was talking, her gestures reenacted the process of creation, each movement of her hands reliving the memory of the creative act and revealing the journey from conception to final outcome. Each gesture was an echo of the process, a dance between mind and material. I felt myself drawn in by the artist's movements and the energy throbbing in each piece. Not long after, I included her work in a group exhibition in Lisbon. Never again did I forget this meeting, and from there it would be almost another ten years before we would meet again at Serralves, when I would invite her to be part of our programme for 2024.

If you talk to Sara or peruse one of her interviews, the same word is constantly turning up: body. The body is the physical structure which allows us to explore and interact with the world. It is the receptacle of the conscience, of our experiences, emotions and memories.

It is the temple of our essence, the place which holds the secrets of each and every life, witness to its substance. Besides this, the body is an object of our desires, not just in the physical and sensual sense, but also as symbol of our aspirations, and cultural values. For Sara Bichão, the body is all this and much more. It is an instrument for artistic expression, the means through which we communicate and manifest its vision; it is the starting point, and one of the main tools in her creative process — whether it be the body which carries intricate miscellanea through nature or crosses the Tagus River on a rowboat, the body which moulds, leaving handprints on the sculptures in clay, or the body as a measuring-stick — many of her works are made with the measurements of her body. Sara is ever-present in her work.

Even so, the artist does not just speak of one body, but bodies in the plural sense, conceptually embracing the idea of an expansive body which includes all bodies in their multiplicity and diversity, which can be understood as metaphors, representations or even derivatives of the elements and actual material fragments used in her artworks. In her practice, the body is scrutinised from a broad perspective which is multifaceted and subject to a variety of interpretations: bodies as shells, bodies turned inside out, eviscerated bodies, ethereal, amorphous, or hybrid bodies, slumped on the ground and pitted with peach stones; anonymous bodies which manipulate, embrace and gesture, as they did at Serralves, on top of an enormous sports mat in a movement at times aggressive and ritualistic, betraying a fragility as much as strength, domination as much as surrender and, ultimately, summoning the bodily presence of the spectator. Her pieces invite us to reflect upon our

own corporeality, a relationship with the world around us, and the way our bodies, in all their forms, states and situations communicate and interact with the space around us; how we relate and inhabit the world.

In Sara Bichão's practice, the drawing stage always comes first. More than simply preliminary sketches, her drawings function as a visual and conceptual extension of her sculpture and artistic sensibility. A meditative exercise that ended up being a constant routine, they mirror the elegiac quality of her sculpture and frequently include fragments of the materials from which it is composed. Nothing is by chance: each material, colour and element is storied and has a reason for being. There is always a purpose that needs revealing. Her works make us reflect upon traditional notions of sculpture, revealing the beauty in the banal with a depth that is manifested in the simplicity of materials, the way she manipulates them and their own interplay, the drawings being no exception.

I've heard it said that the act of drawing is a movement that takes as long as the thought that drives it. It might be a line guided by the body, normally one's hand but not necessarily so. The way Bichão draws strays far from the commonplace. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that Sara herself is far from conventional, nothing is obvious or by chance. Sara draws with pencil, marker or a colour pigment extracted from Muscat grapes grown on the Quinta de Serralves estate. She draws with her hands, with needle and thread, and draws without drawing: on paper, fabric or in empty space. The most ambitious of her drawings are done in space. She also draws when wandering through nature, in the course of her stays and immersions, whether at Serralves or in the

commune on the French island of Ouessant. Each step an invisible stroke mapping the space around her, making an intimate connection between body and the surrounding environment. Walking is drawing, said Enrique Vila-Matas, using the body as a tool to draw. Walking is also a kind of meditation, as is drawing. Sara has ventured out for different reasons, always attentive to the world, to the subtleties and details which many of the rest of us might easily ignore, in search of encounters. Encounters with elements of nature, smells, materials, throwaway objects, obsolete and useless things.

In that year of 2016, it occurred to me that I hadn't come across an artist with such an intuitive gift, and graceful sensibility, for quite some time. A sensitivity towards the things in our midst and that whisper to us daily, that share our world — or could it be that we share theirs? In Sara's practice, all begins in the world and ends in something completely different. Little has changed since then. On the contrary, we notice a more radical leaning into this way of living art and life.

At Serralves, the artist adapted to the museum's unique setting and to the seasonal changes that profoundly affect our lives spent there and our relationship to the surrounding nature. She embraced its unpredictability, getting inspired and allowing the place and its resources to dictate her movements. She visited our warehouses and technical facilities, seeking what she calls the «flesh and bones» of her work. This was how materials culled from other exhibitions or the park itself — a rug of Hugo Canoilas', tubes of Bruce Nauman's, a linoleum belonging to Rui Chafes, but also trademarks of Serralves, such as the pink paint of the Villa and the Museum clay — served as

raw materials for the works included in this exhibition. She took part in a number of different residences in the course of more than a year, in what was a transformative experience for all, which motivated us to go beyond our comfort zone and to seek creative solutions with what we had at hand, rethinking notions of sustainability and an ecology of means — an ever-more essential topic in the running of museums. In any event, it is more than just recycling or reusing resources — what interests the artist is capturing the textuality and the memories contained within each material, revealing a truth that cannot be bought or fashioned. Sara shows us the beauty of things that are often forgotten or discarded. It reminds us that life, all life, is an exercise in adaption — or survival, as she herself so often says.

The discipline and resilience of the artist are an inspiration for all those who work with her. Maybe as such, it is an unconscious ability (or necessity) of survival. Survival in a so often pitiless world for artists subject to the frivolous whims of the market, its trends, agendas, the politics of discourse and practices subject to a «model of singularity». I ended up seeking points of reference, trace elements of where Sara's work could have come from — as if an artist's practice has always to be part of a lineage. As if to understand an artwork we have to know its life story: where it was born, how it was educated, what context its practice was developed, who inspired it, and so on and so forth. Intuitively, I looked to Mexico and Brazil, where the use of simple materials and textiles is a practice common to different generations, but the truth is her work does not belong to the one specific place, as well as not having conceptual, discursive or ideological affiliations. At least not deliberately so.

The beauty of her practice lies in this often: the fact she does not provide definitive and dogmatic answers. She does not (and ought not) need to. To approach her work, it does not require excessive interpretative and rational acuteness. They are poems in space, happenings that involve and affect us, and that jolt us psychically and physically, sometimes to an almost visceral extent, as visceral as her creative process. The artist leaves us space for our own individual interpretation, without dictating meanings or imposing rigid concepts. It is in this indefinable quality, these limbos and moments of uncertainty and ambiguity that we can find the elemental power of her work and its capacity to transform space into a setting for idiosyncratic, and infinite possibilities, which transform each visit into a new series of discoveries, a new encounter, understanding and sense of feeling. Many of her exhibitions usher us towards a vague shadowy state, full of mystery, where we are invited to reflect on the brevity and fragility of human existence, and the transience of objects, materials and nature.

The end of a text which should be the beginning. In one of our first ever conversations, Sara Bichão sent me a photograph of a small piece of paper in which she had written by hand «Rosa-Carne / Terra-Ossos / Azul-Noite / Água-Luz» (Rose-Flesh / Earth-Bones / Blue-Night / Water-Light).

The image inspired me to reflect upon the relationship between these words and the exhibition at Serralves Museum. It didn't come to me immediately, but during the setting-up process, these relationships began to make sense and reveal discreet clues to the understanding of this project — as far as it can (or should) be understood. These associations

of colours and elements are more than simple metaphors, but allegories on duality, on a possible complementariness between life and death, the visible and invisible, tangible and intangible.

The rose symbolises flesh, which represents our human nature; the materiality and at the same time the living part of the body, consisting, like the artist's body of work, of fine layers of tissue — muscular, fatty, connective. The flesh also rots and disintegrates after death and this inevitably reminds us of the complexity of the human condition and the finite nature of life. In turn, the earth makes us think of bone, of structure, the skeleton, the constituents of the human body and the Earth itself, our planet. Just as our bones support the body, so does the Earth sustain life. Earth is the watery planet. The blue planet. The colour blue evokes night; its mystery, vastness and the unknown; a place of refuge and contemplation. Water, rather, which symbolises transformation and purification diverts and filters light. In the words of the artist, "light is form, colour and space. It detects the living, but has existed before and beyond"¹.

— Inês Grosso
Chief-Curator of Serralves Museum

¹ Sara Bichão's exhibition *Lightless* is open to the public in the Contemporary Gallery and sacristy between June and November 2024. This text was subsequently proofread by José Roseira and translated by Colin Gtnks.