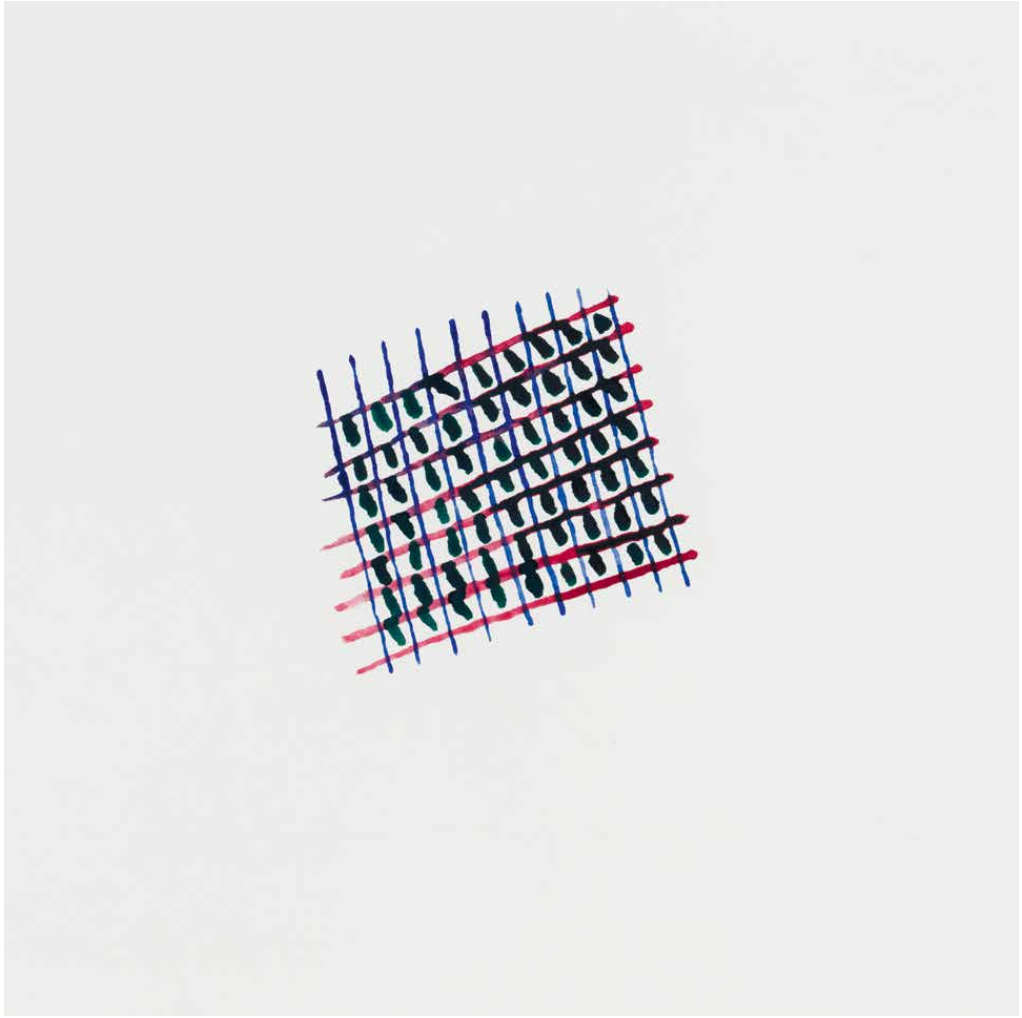

PREVIOUS PAGE *Untitled*, 2019

Figure, arrow, bow and tone

Delfim Sardo

1.

Seeking to characterise his experience in the 1970s with the Achuar Jivaro in the Upper Amazon, Philippe Descola recounts his surprise at the realisation that the fundamental categories we have for understanding and categorising the world (and which he used for his research work) were useless for describing the everyday practices of the community that received him. The classic distinctions of nature and culture, religion and history, and the specificity of technical knowledge were of no use in developing a discourse on an idea of society not structured on the basis of rules followed by humans. His subsequent theorisation of the four typologies that organise his anthropological thinking (animism, totemism, analogism, naturalism) emerged from an inability to convert an experience that required, in itself, another form of power not only to elaborate a discourse, but, more fundamentally, to organise knowledge, insofar as this is a whole set of different epistemes that spanned and surpassed fields that eighteenth-century rationality had delimited. It was a matter of understanding that processes of worldview construction are not just visions of the world, but worlds *per se* that mobilise our perceptions, intuitions and cognitive relationships in a non-propositional way.

This same feeling of strangeness and inadequacy seems to apply to Sara Bichão's practice, in the sense that her works, whether in the field of constructed objects, entities we could call sculptures, or drawings, seem to summon worlds that refer to cognitive, relational and symbolic formations that do not share an epistemology of the art work as it often appears in artistic discourse, i.e. as a formal construction that refers to a history, sustained by a propositionality that is exercised over it and which grounds it from an exterior that coexists with it and attributes meanings to it.

To clarify: the notion that a certain artistic production can be grounded in a discourse that establishes its own ontology is only possible if the lexicon relates to discursive protocols that can be recognised within a certain constellation of notions that have a historicity, such as the terminology of conventional form, political urgency, categorical recognition, or inscription in the typologies operating in a system of valuation with its stylistic patterns.

What happens when the propositional knowledge of artistic discourse seems to be subsumed in another order of urgencies and tensions that only seem to fit not into artistic but psychological typologies, but which nevertheless only find their sensitive possibilities within the context of the artistic?

This seems to be the first question raised by Sara Bichão's work, because the agglomerations of procedures, which range from gathering and collecting, to the agglomeration of elements that cross very specific and precisely "artistic" skills (i.e. that come from a know-how that can be transmitted within artistic systems) with methodologies that belong to the realm of the inscrutably subjective and memorial, collaborative processes with other artists, and an intensity that is very difficult to verbalise – but easily recognisable – seem to place her work in a limbo that is often consigned, certainly for discursive ease, to the field of *art-subsequently-recognisable-as-such-by-analogy* (which has various nomenclatures, from so-called *art brut* to obsessional definitions). This is a field to which her work clearly does not belong, insofar as its formulations play, in a very determined way, with categories that belong to art historiography and which are generated within its system of production of meaning, even if – and especially if – an eschatology of the artistic is poured into them.

fig. 32. *The Moon's Smile*, 2022

2.

Sara Bichão's work processes are often indexed to personal life stories that the artist recounts (or not) and narrates as events or processes she develops in response to certain situations. We might say that all of her work is a response to such events, and that these belong, in their origin, to the realm of that which cannot be converted into discourse, not least because their fictionality is inscrutable. Since we cannot know where the component of effective or affective memory, constructed memory, or fictional narrative begins and ends, the event projects itself onto entities (objects, sculptures or drawings) that belong to the universe of affect, of what affects or transforms. I believe we can understand her permanent recovery of experiential events that have affected her, not as belonging to the realm of trauma, which would turn her prolix and permanent artistic production into a constant anxious recursion, but as an immersion into processes of transformation that depart from her identification of moments that have a metamorphic capacity that is activated whenever they are called upon. By analogy, we can identify this form of creative process with the typology of the rite of passage, a term that designates the process of conversion from one condition (cosmic and social) to another in a given community, established by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in 1909 and later developed theoretically by Victor Turner. Gennep and Turner's theory has a central concept in the idea of the threshold, the condition of something in a process of transformation, on the verge of a new condition. In this sense, Sara Bichão's works are material, objectual, and formal resolutions that are generated in the possibility of maintaining a certain threshold condition, extending their indefinite process of reconfiguration.

fig. 33. View of the exhibition "Disorders – Excerpts from the Antoine de Galbert collection", from March 8 to July 7, 2024, at MAC Lyon

This is why the mnemonic load constantly released by her works is so difficult to convert into discourse: how can you develop a discourse about that which seems to resist reification, even if its condition as image or object is its existential condition? The matter would be simpler if the driving force were a psychological game, a compulsion, or a ritual realisation, but that isn't the case, or not only. Her works are destined to operate within the field of the sensory, being produced by preponderantly aesthetic primacies that mobilise and summon deliberate and mature systems of representation for their enjoyment by others.

This potentiality of something that undergoes a process of reconfiguration and is activated by an event suspended in a condition that does not generate an identity, but a permanent process of identification, a permanent liminality, is the primary condition of the tension that Sara Bichão's works release, like batteries in suspension. One of the references that could be used to better understand this condition of fibrillation would be, for example, Hélio Oiticica's *Bólides*, a typology the artist developed between 1963 and 1979 and which consists of containers whose configuration activates situations summoning references that can be personal, political or poetic, but which always propose a suspended condition.

In Sara Bichão's case, however, the configuration of her objects belongs to a specific category, that of *figures*, characters who inhabit a constellation that constructs, in her specific way of understanding the exhibition, a world of inter-remissions.

The notion of figure appears here in its multiplicity of meanings, either as an anthropomorphic convocation – which is often the case in her work – or in the rhetorical or stylistic sense of referring to a metaphorical or allegorical context, or even in the nautical sense, such as the so-called figureheads. While this anthropomorphic character is not restricted to configurations that refer to the human body, the bodily allusion is systematically present – not only in the morphology of the pieces, but in the way that, behind the sutures that unite different epidermal declinations, interiors coexist that are those of bodies without organs, but which define organisms.

Sometimes, the anthropomorphic character is not invested in the similarity to a specific body, but to prostheses and orthotics that turn it into a symbolic device – they can be shelters, or masks, or backpacks, or suits, for example. Or they can animalise humanoid references, or on the contrary, humanise allusions to animals and plants. The result is the construction of continuums of figures in transit between mobile conditions that have a permanently metamorphic status, which seem to exist in a tensioned arc of changes to come, of events yet to unfold. They are therefore figures captured in a certain state of affairs, which will be neither the last nor the original.

3.

The relationship between these figures is conceived as a theatre of relational possibilities. The production of a certain staging in the presentation of her works, with great care taken in the interrelationships between works and lighting, configures her approach to the exhibition device as a scene. It is in this scene that the various figures find concordance relationships that are sometimes of proximity and empathy, sometimes of dissension and distance.

This type of conception of the exhibition as a space that defines the frame of the work as the exhibition circumstance conceived as a stage or set does not derive from a conception of the exhibition as a presentation, but as a space of representation, a term understood here in its duality: both as figuration and theatricality. The question is: what is being performed, or what is the script of this performance? The answer seems to be twofold. On the one hand, the space plays out a theatrical possibility that brings the exhibition context closer to a performative dimension; on the other, the performativity seems to be the re-enactment of the original moment, be it a personal fiction or a memory, a constructed episode or an allegory. In either case, the theatricality that manifests is in the order of cosmogony, or, as Harald Szeemann would say, in a possibility of an individual mythology.

This term, applied by the Swiss curator to the group of artists who have captured his interest since this notion was formulated during the 1972 Documenta he organised, refers to another formulation, that of the permanently reinvented project of a museum of obsessions. In his typology of obsessions, Szeemann divided them into primary and secondary or reflex forms, which exist within the codified universe of art as symbolic constructions and not as forms of expression. It is these that make up the universe of Individual Mythologies. The term Individual Mythologies is particularly interesting because it is clearly contradictory. Mythologies are collective constructions, operating within symbolic and communal systems of reference. Their juxtaposition with an idea of subjectivisation of mythological possibility refers to the possibility of constructing cosmogonies, which are obviously fictional, but above all idiosyncratic.

It is precisely this typology that seems interesting when trying to understand the cosmogonic constructions that Sara Bichão makes from narratives and figures (which include characters, composite devices that gloss over bodily metaphors, situations of tension between materials, sutures in metaphors of epidermis, shelters and constellations of cosmological reference points), because they do not derive from any expressive compulsion but, on the contrary, are symbolic constructions.

fig. 34. *What Is the Thing, What Is It* (drawings), 2019/20

4.

Sara Bichão's production in drawing is particularly significant because everything seems to originate there: drawing is like a pre-artistic map on which relationships are established, based on the illusion that drawing is an unmediated and primal visual form. On the other hand, however, this illusion is permanently shattered by the formal sophistication of her drawing production which, in itself, declines all possible typologies of approach to plastic construction. Sometimes her drawings are indices of works that will take on three-dimensional form, sometimes they are schemes, structures, notations or works that find their destination in themselves. Sometimes they are small graphic poems that address her themes – metamorphosis, abandonment, mystery, death, shelter, order, that which transcends descriptive possibility, which can be converted into language – or they are formal notations about the resolution of a situation that finds its destiny in the theatricality of presence.

In this sense, echoing what I tried to describe earlier (the inadequacy of propositional thinking to deal with the complexity of her artistic work), the question of the synthetic impossibility of style also poses a difficulty of nomenclature when it comes to her drawing practice. Where does she situate her drawings? What defines or frames her work in drawing, if no apparent continuity seems to guide our gaze even though, for no definable reason, all her drawings, in their heteroclite multiplicity, are easily recognisable as hers? Where, finally, is the aesthetic or formal referential system that enables their recognition? Where is the common ground that allows us to recognise them as coming from the same author?

The answer can only be as inscrutable as what motivates them. They all come from a common strategy (in fact the only term that would fit here) of establishing a remissive map that goes beyond the difference in formal resolution (which could be faces, schemes, maps, animals, plants, animals-as-plants, schemes-as-shelters, signs, engrams, volumes, letters) to become fragments of a mnemonic plot, as could be confirmed in the exhibition "Square Root", held at Appleton [Lisbon] between the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025.

5.

The possible key seems to be a permanent evocation of different versions of intensity. We can imagine her work as a kind of heat time machine (to use the expression Szeemann used to summarise Joseph Beuys' work), insofar as the operation on the energy metaphor is always present, in any of the forms it can take, whether in drawing, sculpture, or in the construction of her exhibitions as symbolic and environmental devices.

We have already alluded to the allegorical and structured-to-detail nature of her exhibitions, but in an attempt to better understand the question of intensity, we need to allude to the use of ambience constructions, united by tones that remain common within a given system of inter-remissions. The nature of these ambiences can be very diverse, both in terms of their relative temperature and the way they relate to the viewer's body. The exhibition held by Sara Bichão in 2020 at Galeria Filomena Soares, "What Is the Thing, What Is It", a set of sculptures that related directly to her body and could be seen as a nominalist exercise on the possibility of recognition, defined a timbre that approached a cold stridency, while the exhibition she held at Serralves, "Lightless" (2024), or the previous one at the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, "Find Me, I Kill You" (2018), were resolved in encounters under the sign of the viewer's possible immersive empathy, in a warm timbre. Even if we are not convinced by the chromatic metaphor, it is clear that, much more than on any possibility of establishing a lexicon of individual meanings for the different works, the diegesis of the exhibition's conception departs from different possible gradations of meaning construction that enable the viewer to recognise the whole network of tonal relationships that the exhibitions create.

Even in the field of exhibition design, Sara Bichão's work does not delve into discursive considerations that transform the experience of the works into propositional possibilities, because the release of a tone (*Stimmung*) overrides any hermeneutic consideration – nothing exists for the sake of something else, nothing is founded on something else; what matters is a relationship that is established as a machine to transport the viewer, like a device that vibrates on a certain spectrum of frequencies.

6.

Everything, therefore, is played out in the intensity of the frequency which, in its oscillation, spreads warm or cold tones, vibrations between figures that make up cosmogonies that are idiosyncratic but anchored in a common point in relation to some experience that the viewer can understand because they have lived through some experience of the same thing: they have either marvelled at or experienced an unfounded fear, or suffered from a distancing, or been amazed at a proximity, or lost their way and found themselves again, like all of us.

Sara Bichão's individual mythologies depart from this unspoken fact, that everything we are shown can also be our story, that all environments have the potential to be empathised with, that all strangeness lies in the familiar, and that the tension of a bow, the power of an arrow, and the irony of what seems to be something other than what we don't know, is the common point between our experience and her proposals. This vibration at risk of affective hyperattunement, and

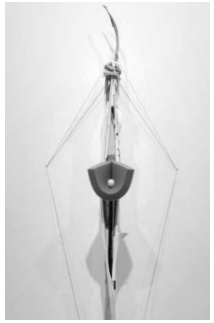

fig. 35. *Cremilde*, 2016

thus of annihilation and erasure, is the point at which her work becomes invested with possibilities of meaning.

Finally, let us return to intensity.

Depth as a concept cannot be confused with its namesake in Cartesian geometry, since depth segregates different densities, rarefactions and intensities. The measure of intensity is the repetition (of gestures, procedures, narratives, fictions, figures and words) that establishes the inhomogeneity of spaces, as well as the urgency of the figures that, in depth, are cut out against a background, in the middle of the page or on the floor of the exhibition space.

It is, I believe, precisely this exercise in intensity, this dive into its repetition, that allows Sara Bichão's work to configure the possibility of a discourse exhausted of its references: neither descriptive (what's the point?), nor magical, nor structural, nor metaphorical, neither strange, nor familiar, neither about nature, nor about culture, nor about trauma, nor about redemption, nor about any comment, least of about oneself.

In her work, the figure, the bow and the expectation, the memory and its engram, seem to remain in tension, often suspended.