Drawing is a net catching fish from different seas

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Cupped hands

I place my trust into Sara Bichão's hands, which I imagine cupped. I'm not the first person to do that. She often receives gifts and collects transitory objects orbiting between use and memory. Theirs is a volatile state, an eroded presence, which the artist's hands care for. Her father's discarded fishing and work shirt, for instance, was wrapped around fragments of a cane, plastic tubes, and dipped in pink acrylic paint – flesh and circulating air – *Breath* (2024). The artist also collected gifted peach pits, woody remnants of the digested fruit, which she proceeded to sew into a humanoid figure made with fabric and other materials, titled *Grave* (2017).

The scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer, enrolled Citizen of the Potawatomi nation, remembers how her father poured the first coffee onto the ground, following the ethos of gifting. In their culture, offerings belong to a philosophy of "reciprocity"[1]. After a cupped hand receives or asks for something, it contracts its fingers around a tool or produce to make food, shelter, figurines, or medicine. These crafted items will go back to the earth, or they will be repaired eventually but they are all, in one way or another, shared with the community, which receives and circulates – gifts are re-gifted. This is what makes a world. And an artist who has amassed about 400 works before reaching the age of 40, is worlding in her own way. "The reason why I do these things is to externalize a revelation, a revelation which was personal."[2]

The artist is referring here to the exhibition, which she seems to redefine in her own terms. Not really a vitrine for exposure or presentation, but a site where she lays down a vision which turns the space into a place.

1 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass, Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*, Penguin Books, 2013, pp. 33-34. The Potawatomi Nation is a federally recognized government of the eponymous Native American people, originally from the Great Plains in the north of the U.S.A.

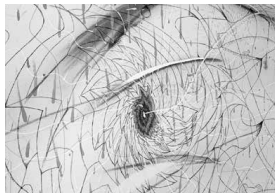
2 Interview for the exhibition "Find Me, I Kill You", 2018 at Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian: https://gulbenkian.pt/cam/en/agenda/sara-bichao-2/ (consulted on 10th March 2025). [Translated by the author]

PREVIOUS PAGE *What Is the Thing, What Is It* (drawings), 2019/20

Marking and making territory

Sara Bichão's exhibitions compose intimate "geographies" where her transient materials seem to have washed off after a skilful and mysterious ceremony. Somewhat feline, she observes the space meticulously. Her attuned senses map and mark corners, light drifts, the connections between walls, floors and ceilings. Her works intercept these atmospheric or architectural meshes. They even create new ones, such as the *Horse's Back* (2019), re-inventing the tension of skywardness through the line, on its own and intersecting with others. They also evoke accidents, risk-taking, and death. One wonders if the exhibition, this externalization, is also a second life. Or an after-life of the materials, their use, the person who used them, and the inevitable point of passage between an animated body – a person, a life lived, an existence in time – and animism.

Her fabric works such as *Sky (NYC, 22)* (2022), are stretched out in several points, tensing the material's extremities and releasing them in between, which makes them look like an animal skin. They bear the same marks that the artist enacts in the space, but here as visible codifications, charting both an inner vision and the real physical properties of a place. *Sky (NYC, 22)* looks indeed like a sky chart, with its beasts and its currents, but also a face with two open slits cut into it. The artist dots, lines, connects, drawing in space and on the fabric; her line is both orthogonal and sinuous, it speaks the language of writing, shelter, recorded movement and trajectories, but also the schematic terminology of organic shapes such as eyes, real and mythological creatures, the bodies and their energies.



figs. 16., 17. *Sky (NYC, 22)*, 2022

The story of a place is a suspended flow

One looks at and through Sara Bichão's works in the space: they're energised by their past lives but also by their new shape and the relation with other works. Not unlike the Swiss artist Reto Pulfer, who has charted states in his *Zustand Urgeflecht*, or *Primal Web State*, she focuses on emotionally suspended flows in a place. Her pieces spell out and receive truncated narratives delivered by titles, by recognisable forms of giant fish skeletons, tents or armatures, faces/masks, objects and figures. Indeed, there is a situation but not really a story: she doesn't provide plot twists or denouements, her words are simultaneously sybiline and literal: "Square Root", at Appleton, talked about rooting and uprooting through drawing, in the underground space of the gallery... shaped like a square. She doesn't "install" or "hang" an ensemble of works (she seems untouched by the rigid ghost of modernism), she displays figurines, charts, skins, bundles, masks, cocoons, peels, limbs, mouths. With, at times, heavy lighting and contrasting dark areas, her exhibitions look like an inverted spacetime: Upper Palaeolithic caves haunted by the Natural History Museum and the archaeological site. Carefully constructed, they triangulate Sara Bichão's internal and external net of connected states, while bringing a form of poetic resistance to the worldliness of the art gallery.

A trace of a trace

The spectral logic of this nomadic display is drawing. But how and what kind of drawing?

The Renaissance was prolific in art theory and history because it developed a notion that art was an external entity that the artist possessed in the mind, and whose divine force was *disegno* (a term that means drawing as a technique but also as mental projection). It produced a literary canon in its own right, readable autonomously according to the historian Robert Williams, who ventures that for the first time in Europe, and particularly Italy, there was a sense that art was the all-encompassing regulator, through creation and representation, of the world[3]. *Disegno* played a curious role in this dynamic, best defined by Federico Zuccaro for whom *disegno* (interchangeable with concept or intention – internal revelatory vision, one might say) is god's imprint in the human mind[4].

Accordingly, physical *disegno* – sketch, pattern, diagram, transfer, frottage, outline – is the trace of the trace of a unified creative and organized spectral vision (god, for believers). Renaissance artists considered *disegno* both the spine and the soul of all artistic languages. It concretises a vision from heaven via the divine spark in the human mind, through earthly materials – stone, pigment, vegetable fibre, crushed exoskeleton...

In Zuccarian fashion, Sara Bichão considers drawing to be the spine of her prolific work – but whoever experiences her work knows that the opposite is more accurate. The spine is the drawing. This was visible in "Square Root", both the exhibition and this publication, which contains an on-going body of works on paper revealing a lexicon of lines and dots marking movement of things and elements, among many other recurring shapes, as well as her pastel preferred colours, with a preponderance of blue and pink (her body in the water?) with some green and yellow (the sun and vegetation?). Her sculptural pieces, nevertheless, prolong (or awake?) these colours and forms: the spine, the ribs, the bones, the fibres, and between them the tissue, the dermis, the epidermis, the subcutaneous spasm of life webbing through matter, is also, or perhaps still, the drawing. As an encounter between surface, pressure, material and motion, drawing is a line that finds a place

3 Robert Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture in Sixteenth Century Italy. From Techne to Metatechne*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 1-23.

4 Federico Zuccaro, *L'idea de' pittori, scultori ed architetti*, 1540-1609: https://archive.org/details/lideadepittoriscOOzucc/page/38/mode/2up (consulted on the 10th of March).

but also a thing that becomes a line. Lines come together to form structures, skeletons, but also shadows and splashes of colour.

The body as cursor

Swimming was one of the first activities where Sara Bichão experienced deftness. Through total engagement in motion and focus, she found something that cohered into some form of elemental meaning, contrary to the school's dissipated routines. The activity was important, but its element, water, was the place of a continuous revelation. She often recalls a strange afternoon involving it, during a residency in Auvergne (France), much later. Needing to "touch water", she decided to swim to the other side of an immense lake tucked in a volcano crater. So, she swam blissfully until her body became bizarrely and perilously uncoordinated. As her head emerged from the water, she found herself at the centre of the volcano, in a vertiginous state, and in an element where her "extremities couldn't grab anything". The body was segmented by the converging energies of the water and the volcano. Her cupped hands tread water, they sew and stretch, they carry and assemble, but in that magnetic pull they became "extremities".

The artist Tania Kovats, for whom water is an essential sculptural element, calls us, humans, "land creatures". Water is not the element where we live, it's a state of impermanence between the earth and the sky. After telling me this story, Sara Bichão became ponderous when I asked her about artists who might have left a mark, although I seem to remember her mentioning Louise Bourgeois, also a maker, as if to throw me a bone. We kept talking, but I sensed that our souls had stayed there in the lake. I found an affinity with her because the vast womb of the ocean, where your whole body must move so as not to die, was also a mesmerizingly indifferent home for me, as a child – and still is. But beyond this unruly sense of belonging, this story of the body's immersion inside one of the circular fire-spitting mouths of the earth suggests a compulsion to map the elemental states of place, connection, and movement, with the body as its cursor (I like the idea of the cursor, awaiting, pulsating, then guided and guiding the text).

Tattooed bones

From a Eurocentric and modern perspective, drawing is the relationship between the world, the retina as an extension of the brain, and the hand. World – eye – mind – hand. It is based on observation which, despite its accuracy and powerful encompassing of all things visible and some invisible, is also a form of distance. Suffice it to

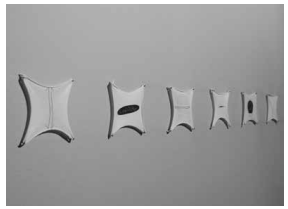


fig. 18. Detail of *August / Agosto*, 2017

fig. 19. *Crawler*, 2018

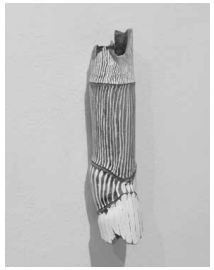


fig. 20. Detail of *Great Solitary*, 2018

look at Albrecht Dürer's famous representation of a draughtsman drawing a reclining woman: a grid and a measuring tool separates the artist and the model, to allow for a homothetic rendering of the framed body and its image forming in the eye and the eye's mind. It doesn't look like receiving a gift from god, but a painstaking and masterful ability to outline and... *be* god. Renaissance theory came very close to Michelangelo's Sixtine Chapel's suggestion of contact being made between us, down on earth, and god, in a superior realm. I like to think that *disegno* operates that kind of contact, which is not physical, but metaphysical.

Conversely, I like to think of Sara Bichão's swimming, collecting, marking as an excavation, an exploration and a passage between inner and outer states and places (perhaps they're the same thing), different times and lived or experienced territories. Drawing, here, is the arterial vestige of moments of connection, marked by thread, toothpicks, and other associative materials. Here, the body is not far off and seen through a grid. It is lived, loved, lost, and found. It is drawn on. It makes me think of the female shaman found in the Dolní Věstonice site, in Czech Republic, under two mammoth shoulder blades, and whose bones bore traces of red ochre. "The body had been painted red before it was laid to rest", concluded Barbara Tedlock[5]. With time, the flesh dissolved and deposited the paint onto the bones.

The sea eats the flesh of things, its salty currents corrode slowly: driftwood, buoys, wetsuits, fishbones, wash up on the shore with a silky texture and impeccably eroded limbs. *Time* (2018) takes me back to the Shaman's bones and to memories of the beach after a storm, with its washed-out yellow hue, like a tattooed bone having collected turmeric dust, the currents of the sea, and the dreams of its swimmers.

Drawing is a net catching fish from different seas

Sara Bichão's matrical drawing doesn't create a duplication of the world such as a figurative technique would. Rather, it creates a net that traverses its spaces and its times. The exhibition "Green Dolphin" (2020, Porta 33, Madeira) was a collection of works around the figure of a phosphorescent fish, about which she also wrote an "origin" story. Playing with the Natural History Museum type of display, "Green Dolphin" set the scene of an underwater milieu. It mimicked a dry re-enactment of the scientific and historic institution. Several works made with recuperated, washed-up materials coming from the womb of the earth, created this displaced atmosphere. A stretched fabric bore the sketch of a human – a swimmer, seemingly – inside the body of a green dolphin – *Map* (2020). On the floor, the external envelope of a hybrid humanoid, *Skin* (2020) and in the air, a skeleton, *Skeleton* (2020), an eerily convincing fish made of plant debris and paper pulp. The show could be experienced both with light and in the dark. The latter version offered to the visitor

5 Barbara Tedlock, *The Woman in the Shaman's Body, Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine*, Bantam Dell, Random House, 2005, p. 1 (Kindle Edition).

the spectacle of a drawing made with phosphorescent paint, contained in the pieces visible in the light, revealing a mysterious fish.

Drawing from water to air, from day to night, from animal to anima, from bone to paper...

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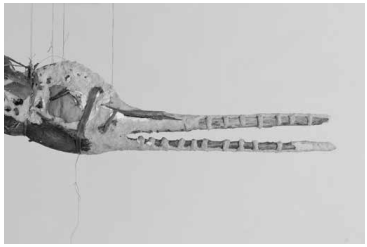

fig. 21. Detail of *Skeleton*, 2020