Nothing human is foreign to me[1]

Luísa Especial

In a room on the top floor of the Lisbon Astronomical Observatory, in front of a circular window, there was once a wooden sculpture whose central body replicated that ocular opening in both shape and size. This piece, with a five-metre wingspan, was made up of several articulated and symmetrical elements. Two arms, or rather two wings, at rest and attached to the centre panel, practically touched the ground. Made just slightly smaller than the window as to allow it to pass through, one could say that this "bird" could take flight at any moment and escape through the opening located in the pediment of the building's main façade. It seemed that the true breadth of the work encompassed the entire visible horizon from this elevated point of observation.

As Sara Bichão's *Galak-x* (2011) was only shown on this occasion, few were lucky enough to see it.[2] Looking ahead, we see that it bears several features that synthesise and anticipate important aspects of her artistic practice. Firstly its status as an inert object containing a poetic suggestion of transformation, with an expectation of movement, as if it were in a state of potency. We might mention other works in which this expectant condition also occurs. *She Has Nothing to Say, She Has Everything to Say* (2017) is a sculpture that takes on different configurations depending on the context in which it is presented. Conceived jointly with Manon Harrois, with whom the artist has collaborated on each new performative iteration, the work has even achieved the capacity to draw the walls of the exhibition space. Its mutability is immediately apparent in its title: a contrast between two modes, one static, the other variable. In *Knives Don't Bite* (2020), the viewer is placed in a situation of latent tension: the threat of coming into contact with the blades of knives imply the potential for accident, most likely lethal, as in the case of the guillotine. And finally, *Flight* (2024), which we can associated with *Galak-x*, and in which we are confronted with a light object in full flight, offering the illusion of a momentary pause, frozen in suspension. Its ends, made up of two curved fishing rods, draw two lines in the air; the piece is supported by thread and rope, forming other structural lines that dissolve in space. As in *Galak-x*, the aggregation of elements forms a composite body, endowed with organicity. In the universe of the artist's production, we often recognise parts of the whole, identify the constituent materials and perhaps the form. However, the final configuration of her works escapes the visual lexicon available to us, and we find ourselves in a limbo between (re)cognition and ignorance.

Another aspect to highlight is the surface of *Galak-x*: a graphite drawing has been inscribed in precise, intersecting lines on the layer of white paint that covers the object. In this specific context, the drawing conveys the illusion of celestial cartography or of a scientific instrument for orientation, made up of new meridians and parallels.

This "sensitive geometry" crosses all the media used by the artist in various modulations, materialising in lines, webs, grids and systems that distil an organic, sometimes sequential logic through the repetition of elements in rhythmic, cumulative compositions. We should not ignore the fact that sequentiality is intrinsic to the human body: recall how vertebrae are numbered in the field of medicine; it is also an inherent characteristic of nature, manifested, for example, in the veins of a leaf or in a wave following after another, never the same as that which precedes it. Unsurprisingly, a metric drive is also evident in the installation of Sara Bichão's works in the exhibition space, determining the number of elements and their location. But it should be noted that these measurements and calculations are governed by the symbolic rather than mathematical imperatives. Poetic force, sweetness and restlessness work as counterpoints to the implacable rigour that could be installed there. In *The Mouth of Truth* (2021), for example, we detect an imbalance in the centre of the piece, leading us inevitably to think of those imperfect symmetries that characterise us, such as a deviated nasal septum or misaligned teeth.

The colour tones that stand out most in her drawings from this period are yellow, pink, green and blue. Colour seems to establish its own symbolic and affective codes here. On other occasions, marked chromatic polarisations extend to the exhibition space, carrying temperature and atmosphere through blues and reds, extremes that cohabit as light and shadow.

The series of drawings *Lightless* (2024), presented in the eponymous exhibition at the Museu de Serralves, was shown in the chapel separately from the works on display inside the museum. Although visibly related, it should be emphasised that Sara Bichão's drawings do not usually have a projectual purpose. The drawings are not seldom done as sketches or models for sculpture; it therefore constitutes a parallel route, where we find other openings and drifts.

On the other hand, certain drawings made on paper or fabric seem to aim for three-dimensionality. This is the case with *My Sun Cries* (2015), a series of eight drawings on linen and cotton fabric which seem to seek to stand apart from the background and leap out of the two-dimensional plane.

One of the most frequent images in her body of work is the "mandorla", the almond shape. A prominent motif in the history of art, especially in religious paintings, it involved representations of Christ or the Virgin, conveying an association with the transcendent. Since *Open Gates* (2010), this image, in different declinations, at times suggests eyes and at other the contours of the female sex. Carnality and viscerality are central dimensions in Sara Bichão's practice, treated with an enormous degree of sophistication and refinement, especially in her most recent works.

* * *

I have been following Sara Bichão's artistic production since 2011, when she was about to leave for her first artistic residency in New York after completing her Master's degree. A little later, in her studio in São Vicente de Fora, Lisbon, where she worked for a few years, I was able to witness the omnipresence and voracity of drawing in her body of work at the time. Her metamorphic capacity was already noticeable, constant in the profusion of small notebooks and loose sheets that bore indecipherable signs, atmospheres, hybrid or fragmentary beings, words of fruitful polysemy.

At the same time, the artist was interested in the reconfiguration of everyday materials, once discarded, to which new possibilities of existence were given, interrupting the course to which they had been destined. Using a vast multiplicity of materials, at some point these works underwent meticulous pictorial intervention, like intimate writing, notes or tattoos that inscribed them on a common ground, identifiable as her own. The artist oscillated freely between small and large works, between the fine motor skills of the hand and the use of energy and the scale of the body. For the viewer, the familiarity of the materials was contrasted with the surprise of their aggregation and functional deviation.

Since at least 2010, the artist has drawn assiduously in small and medium format notebooks on a daily basis.

1 From the Latin phrase "Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto", Terence, *Heautontimoroumenos*, v. 77.

2 *Galak-x* was part of the exhibition "Tempos de Vista – O Espaço em Paralaxe" in 2011. The title of this work refers to *Galak*, white chocolate from *Nestlé*, presented in small round tablets, commercialised in the 1990s.

The motifs usually appear in the centre, leaving the rest of the sheet empty. This centre, like a cellular nucleus, is often agglutinating, possessing a convergent force of attraction. This centripetal force shares some similarities with certain works by Luísa Correia Pereira (Lisbon, 1945-2009), especially *Aranha na Rede* (1973), and *Atracção* (n.d.). Other works of intense symbolism and allusions to natural elements, such as *Chuva* (n.d.), *Lua/Sol em Rosa: dois horizontes* (1975), *Des carrés avec une forêt au centre* (1972), for example, intersect the creative universes of these artists punctually but intensely (it should be noted that Sara Bichão only recently discovered Correia Pereira's work).

Towards the end of her time as a student at the Lisbon School of Fine Arts, Sara Bichão used a variety of supports, either built or found, such as wooden doors. The signs inscribed there in fine lines floated, stood out or submerged depending on the layers of paint. An umbrella, arrows, fruit, stairs that led nowhere. Most of the motifs drawn there did not correspond to the representation of any known objects or shapes. Shortly afterwards, the drawing and painting appeared on circular, triangular or modular cement blocks; precise, converging lines coexisted with elements of the natural order.

For her Master's thesis, Sara Bichão chose three tutelary references: Matthew Barney, Agnes Martin and David Lynch. From the combination of these powerful and distinctive founding universes of creation we can sense the breadth of horizons captured by her attention and, consequently, the latitude of her practice. This initial triangulation resonates with possible echoes in later works, legacies processed through the creation of a very personal matrix: Barney's anatomical allusions, often sexualised, the *mise-en-scène* of alternative mythologies; in another register, Lynch's ambiences of strangeness; the geometric inclination mentioned above nods to the legacy of Agnes Martin, especially her paintings and drawings of delicate lines and grid compositions.

Broadening the points of reference, the artist's interest in Georgia O'Keeffe's painting stands out, particularly her fusion of floral motifs and the female anatomy, in enlarged perspectives, with a pronounced use of colour, against the backdrop of the arid asceticism of desert landscapes. Ana Mendieta's position reverberates intensely in Bichão's body of work – also in a literal sense: "My art is grounded on the belief in one universal energy which runs through all being and matter, all space and time."[3] The use of her own body as a trace (*Silueta* series, 1973-1980), the mobilisation of organic materials such as earth or sand as artistic raw materials are other points of convergence between the works of the two artists, naturally with very different points of arrival.

Finally, the greatest affinity can be found in Richard Tuttle and his use of humble materials, marked by fragility, which, through their combination, achieve another level of beauty and poetry. Common aspects include the intimacy of scale, the use of line and the unusual overlapping of elements. We note the close kinship between Tuttle's *Notebook* from 2010 and Sara Bichão's drawings from the same period. The same can be said of the familiarity between Tuttle's series *13 Angels for Jack (6)* (2018) and Sara Bichão's series, *No matter what it is, when it cracks makes clack* (2020). Both artists explore coinciding media: drawing, sculpture, painting and writing poetry.

I'm sure it's no coincidence that the aforementioned intersections occur with artists from generations before hers. In fact, we can go back further: during her residency in Paris, Sara Bichão's attention was drawn to the eyes of the masks from traditional societies on display at the Musée de Quai Branly. Timelessness and universality are therefore, hallmarks of her work, which could occur anywhere in the world, at any time.

3 Unpublished writings by Ana Mendieta, typed, undated, belonging to the Ana Mendieta Estate Collection Archives, Galerie Lelong, New York.

* * *

We've taken a panoramic tour of some of the foundations and reverberations that Sara Bichão's work has given rise to. Finally, we'll describe the programme for "Square Root", a project anchored in research, materialised in an exhibition, a publication and public events in both Portugal and France. The artist's work has been hosted in France on several occasions, both in residencies and exhibitions, in various cities across the country. The choice of a trilingual edition is intended not only to reach a wider audience but also to repay and cement the curiosity that her work has earned there.

We intend to bring together Sara Bichão's initial production, which until now is little known, in order to detect persistence or, to use the project's framework, *rootedness*. By bringing together, both in the exhibition space and in this publication, works that, to a large extent, had not yet been shown, let alone side by side, we sought to open up this source to new readings. To fulfil the first objective, we mapped and inventoried around four hundred works made between 2009 and 2024. We then selected around seventy works from two dozen public and private, national and international collections, covering a fifteen-year time span, in order to develop an exhibition dialogue.[4] Among so many possible directions, various axes emerged: an animistic side, of emotion, fantasy, energy, temperature, the poetic, the oneiric and the lyrical, with a markedly analytical, controlled, schematic and geometric way of thinking; antinomies, observed in the desire for elevation, contrasting with the gravity experienced by the body and also resulting from the tension generated by the poles of colour. Verticality, another constant, is reinforced by the image of the root itself. "Square Root" makes it possible to elucidate how the repetition, over time, of certain vital forms in the drawing found a sculptural echo several years later, like deep, subterranean infiltrations.

The material unearthed was entrusted to three authors, Noëlig Le Roux, Joana P. R. Neves and Delfim Sardo, to whom we gave carte blanche as to the themes they wished to address. The resulting set of hitherto unpublished texts offers a plurality of points of view, a manifestation of Sara Bichão's intriguing and prolific output, proving her inexhaustible capacity for friction.

Finally, the challenge was put to Rui Chafes, a peer of the artist with whom a creative understanding of mutual admiration has developed, to include a text by him in the book. Chafes once wrote: "Big, strong trees have big, deep roots; small, weak trees have small, shallow roots."[5] In the magical epilogue, we can find traces left throughout the book, like synapses or revelations, which reflect both the depth and the robustness of Sara Bichão's oeuvre.

At the end of this journey, we take off and dissolve on the horizon.

4 The exhibition "Square Root" was presented at Appleton in Lisbon between December 2024 and January 2025. It included works from Fundação Carmona e Costa Collection, ECO Collection – Coimbra, Fundação EDP Art Collection, Joaquim Ferro Collection, Fran Kaufman Collection, LCC Collection, Norlinda and José Lima Collection, M.A.R. Collection, Carlos Bessa Pereira Collection, Figueiredo Ribeiro Collection – Abrantes, José Costa Rodrigues Collection, Galería silvestre, Galeria Filomena Soares and other private collections.

5 Rui Chafes, *Entre o Céu e a Terra*, Lisbon: Sistema Solar, 2012, p. 58.