

## Pedro A.H. Paixão: The place of thinkable things

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An approach to drawing in Portugal in recent years must not overlook Pedro A.H. Paixão's (Lobito, Angola, 1971) contribution to it. This artist has elected drawing as a place for visual and conceptual research in articulation with media such as film, video, and painting, as well as with a critical reading of the history and theories which, since the 13th/14th century, have constructed it as a disciplinary field. Known for their monochrome (scarlet, and more recently turquoise and oleander pink) intensity, his drawings activate gestures that make something appear, acquire meaning, and relate to other gestures and things. For Paixão, drawing is a valuable means for the emergence of a thought which enquires into the Western tradition of images—one able to produce “de-significations” and “re-significations” of collective and personal memories, and to put forward new or forgotten perspectives on experience and the perception of it.

**Catarina Rosendo [CR]** Drawing plays the leading role in your work, but, in addition to painting and drawing at Ar.Co, Lisbon, you have also studied film and video at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). What sort of relationship do you establish between drawing and the films, videos, and slideshows that also constitute your body of work?

**Pedro A.H. Paixão [PAHP]** At Ar.Co and SAIC, between 1995 and 1999, I'd already started exploring the practice of drawing through other media. I clashed with the school in such a way that I was left with some reservations as to the conventional idea of drawing. I started filming myself while drawing—pencil in one hand, camera in the other—trying to integrate a sort of delay and memory into what I was seeing through the viewfinder. These works were probably inspired by Dan Graham's time-delayed closed-circuit video performances, and they allowed me not only to interrupt and expand the continuity inherent in the act of drawing, but also to later revisit the peculiar contemplative time comprised in drawing. In another video work, from 1995, titled *À espera do que penso* [Waiting for what I think], I screened a drawing sequence with specific exposure times. Although such form resembled a slideshow, I also explored other aspects of drawing linked to one's inner faculties and perception as well.



**Pedro A.H. Paixão** *The Beak of the Oleander*, 2018, Lápis de cor sobre papel/  
Colored pencil on paper, 30,5 x 22,4 cm. Cortesia do artista/Courtesy the artist

I believe these works, created in a school context still, were of use to me to find out which mechanisms and means were at my disposal, and transversally to figure out what drawing really was about—and cinema as well, both through video. I've always thought cinema is a place in the dark where people go to listen to some whispered secret, and my idea of drawing was guided by this, as a propitiatory site. Video, in vogue since the 1970s, though in renewed form at the time, was the ideal medium, and has hitherto enabled me to explore that idea. Jean-Luc Godard's *Scenarios* and *Histoires* contributed to it too, as well as having worked, while I studied at SAIC, in one of the largest extant video art archives, the Video Data Bank.

As the years went by, I started realising that drawing differed from the common idea of working “on paper” or from the concept of “line” as museology and art historiography sees it. I realised drawing was the “transparency” of signs, a place adjacent to things that granted them a certain availability. Mainly, it enabled them to be (re)imagined and (re)considered. Bruce Nauman, for instance, after exhibiting a sculpture, would draw it again, thus breaking with the idea of preparatory study. Above all, I realised that drawing is a sort of permanent “coexistence” [*convívio*] with things, a type of thought that develops graphically.

I believe, as such, that the relationship I discern among the different media you've mentioned lies in the fact that they all foster, in their own way, the emergence of the place of coexistence that is drawing, a dimension adjacent to our existence which enables us to contemplate the latter.

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**CR** A curious thing, this need of yours for the camera's mediation in order to arrive at the intimacy of the gesture and at the meaning of drawing. I'd like you to talk a bit about the way you draw—on a drawing board, almost vertically, as if you were painting—and about how relevant it is to your work. One can tell there's a lot of time, a lot of attention contained within your drawings. How do you relate the time of your making to the subjects you address?

**PAHP** Until about seven years ago, I used to draw horizontally, with the paper on a table at which I also studied. Later, perhaps to improve my posture, I started working upon a slanted surface, similar to these large book supports. Only then would I start using an almost vertical drawing board. This allowed me to comprehend the relationship between the scale of the paper sheet and the place where we move. While, up until then, I'd worked with small, almost miniature sizes, this relationship with space both enabled me to move away from the paper sheet and to visualise it as I worked, permitting it to become a continuity of the surrounding space and scale.

Walter Benjamin observed a difference between painting and drawing: he said the level of drawing is horizontal, and that of painting is vertical. Even if we think of ceiling paintings or of Jackson Pollock, who laid canvases on the floor to work on them, for Benjamin painting would eventually end up on a wall, while drawings, which should supposedly be preserved inside folders or drawers, were to be examined on a table. But these, for me, are irrelevant questions, similar to those that may exist between the "line" and the "stain" or in chiaroscuro: they are attempts to define the art of drawing. As I see it, drawing dispenses with art; however, it can develop with it, and, in my case, that's what happened. Currently, even if using drawing materials (of drawing as art), I work within the tradition of painting and cinema, albeit aware that my vocation is only that of drawing (and not of drawing as art). It is upon the latter that my making is founded.

So, if my drawings seem to contain a lot of time, a lot of attention, that may be because they have nothing to do with the arts, but rather with a peculiar form of coexistence that is established with something and its place. And as wait is one of the indispensable elements of such coexistence, strategies to foster it are developed. The backgrounds of my drawings may take weeks or months to finish, which allows me to oscillate between figurative events and the contemplation of the mystery that moves the whole; an oscillation which, in its delay, also settles the questions related to the general composition. Painting which bring them together—are only two of the arts I use in order to deal with such broad temporality, which may contain years, decades, or, come to think of it, millennia. That's because, even when we're isolated, we're never working alone. We inherit or work with what can be done, with projects that predate us, but also with what we find to be missing or undeveloped.

**CR** Is the distinction between "drawing" and "art of drawing" related to the practice of drawing and its "theoric," to use a word of yours? In your interview with Cristina Robalo, published by Documenta, she talks about your drawing's engenderment of "a passage from one language to another: from making to thinking."

You've mentioned how drawing produces a sort of "transparency of signs," as if it played some role in the process of signification of things. Does your research into the history and theory of drawing aid you in approaching the practice (even if not yours in particular) of drawing?

**PAHP** The use of the phrase "theoric of drawing" comes from Italian sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti. It allowed him to argue that the artist is not only some work's executor but also he who conceives and decides on it as owner of both the idea and the project. To him and his contemporaries, it was important to assert it was a process obtained through study, the intellect, and the acquisition and practice of some science—a sense still hostage to the medieval Scholastic institutions that separated the *artes liberalis* from the *artes mechanicae*. However, the fact that Ghiberti had created the east door of the Baptistery of San Giovanni, Florence, based on a personal project of his, and that he was later recognised for it, was a huge achievement that gave rise to a cult—that of artists, as Giorgio Vasari's *Lives* attests to—that lasts to this day.

The sense of theory I refer to and adopt is earlier and of another nature, as it's inseparable from the practice of drawing. It's less connected to the "arts." Perhaps it has to do with what Cennino Cennini said, half a century before Ghiberti, when he stated that he who practises drawing becomes capable of plenty of drawing inside his head. It has mainly to do with a description we find in Dante Alighieri's *Vita Nuova*, as he recalls, in 1291, that, while thinking of his deceased beloved, he'd draw an angel on a writing tablet. Perhaps few realise that *theorein* means, in Greek, an intensified form of "seeing" (*horein*), as well as "sight" (*théa*) and "goddess" (*theá*). In modern languages, the word which is semantically closer to the Greek meaning is "to visit" (from Latin *video*, "I see"), since *theorein*, etymologically, corresponded to taking part in a religious festival, consulting an oracle, entertaining oneself—through "visions"—with some deity, or even watching a play. *Theorós*, for Aeschylus, was the spectator. As I said earlier, when I think of drawing, I always think of a visit to some place in the dark, where we are visited by an intensified vision or contemplate a whispered secret. It's about figuring out what sort of propitiatory site this is—that of drawing—whether it be a glade or a cave, a gallery or a cinema, a defensive or house wall, a blank sheet of paper, a writing tablet, some artist's studio, or our inner world.

When you mention Cristina Robalo's reading of "the passage from one language to another," from making to thinking—I actually don't believe there's a transition from one to the other, but rather that making and thinking are inseparable. Perhaps it is in this sense that it's important to understand exactly what is meant by "transparency" of signs, because the most important signification processes in it are those that "de-signify." Drawing is not a way of acquiring knowledge through observation and graphemes, but rather the place that renders things drawable, possible, thinkable in each graphic gesture. By definition, not only is transparency the means that allows things to be seen, it is above all that which enables them to stop being seen and us to wonder about them. In the absence of light, colour is called darkness. Darkness is the name given to colours-to-be, containing all that's possible. Indeed, drawing is colourless, acquiring colour only when associated with something else—a



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and us to wonder about them. In the absence of light, colour is called darkness. Darkness is the name given to colours-to-be, containing all that's possible. Indeed, drawing is colourless, acquiring colour only when associated with something else—a painting or a film—that is revealed by light. In it, there's a war of (dis)coloration of the world: all is called into question.

So, for me, drawing is not an art. We only speak of drawing as an art when we speak of a technique or a set of rules transmissible through generations, based on a rhetoric or on a strict framework of precepts and norms founded upon a historicity of their own. Museology has organised around this. The "art" of drawing arose between the 14th and 15th centuries, reaching its peak when drawings became accepted as artworks. When modern historiography sought to understand the huge legacy of studies and unfinished works, especially by Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, it coined the term "unfinished" (*non finito*) in order to legitimise the type of artwork—by definition, a finished work—that drawing had become.

The idea of drawing I work with is beyond this narrative. For me, drawing can't be defined as a medium, or as a material, technical, or logical support, nor can it become an artwork, even if it tends toward or resists it. It is a timeless thing, one beyond history, the arts, or the techniques. You don't learn or acquire it; you coexist with it. It comes and goes without prior notice. It is the place where things become graphically possible and thinkable, but also unstable. All of us can draw with art, as is obvious to anyone who visits the rock engravings in the Côa Valley or some museum's drawing and prints department, but also without it, as is the case of someone who draws "SOS" in the sand of some desert island or makes some diagram. Above all, there's drawing in childhood, relieved of technique. Drawing has always been and will always be, no matter the ability or the materials. It's always at hand, immediate and economical, making (un)reality possible.

**CR** To me, the idea of transparency as "de-signification" suggests some notions related to projective clarity, as it removes complexity not exactly from the thing in itself but rather from our perception of it. It appears to resemble tactile vision, and it reminds me of a quote of yours: "I kept drawing, breathing." How did this materialise in works such as the ones you presented in Brussels in 2018? One of them shows Luc Tuymans and Kerry James Marshall behind a fence staring at us, viewers. These are two artists who work with processes of re-signification of collective memories, albeit without losing sight of the latter's subjective and individual foundations.

**PAHP** Among other things, my studies through the twists and turns of historiography enabled me to separate history from the past. While history tends to close, the past is always open, right here in all its indeterminacy; it is another realm of the possible. It opens out both to expectation, to such futures/pasts, and to what it could have been. My experience of coexisting with drawing is identical to that which, contrary to what we might expect, turns history into an indeterminate realm of the past; it produces a sort of backward movement. In drawing, we're allowed to go back, to hesitate over what has already been determined—as if the prefix *de* in

*desenho* [drawing] were a privative, not a provenance. In it, a "de-signification" takes place—one, however, that doesn't lose sight of the form of the sign nor of what happened. As it removes determinacy, drawing is able to restore anything to the realm of the possible.

I don't think Luc Tuymans or Kerry James Marshall walk this path. Their works move, as you've rightly said, in the terrain of "re-signification." It is like they keep on producing history, within the tradition of representation, while presenting



**Pedro A.H. Paixão** Two Painters in a Transit Camp (Luc Tuymans and Kerry James Marshall), 2017, Lápis de cor sobre papel/Colored pencil on paper, 59,4 x 42 cm. Cortesia do artista/Courtesy the artist

I don't think Luc Tuymans or Kerry James Marshall walk this path. Their works move, as you've rightly said, in the terrain of "re-signification." It is like they keep on producing history, within the tradition of representation, while presenting again what happened under new criteria of signification—a bit like *nouvelle histoire* did. The history of painting, as regards the representation of hegemony, is crucial to both, as well as the history of the West, in all its complexity and nuance. Marshall focuses on reviewing the tradition of European painting through the Harlem Renaissance and the consecutive revolutionary movements based upon the concept of "blackness," bringing to the forefront what was previously absent or marginal. Tuymans, on the other hand, focuses not only on reviewing the hierarchy of presence, between totality and detail, but also on making central the perspective of the margins, while presenting them again. Theirs are meticulous bodies of work, effecting a perceptive or visual shift and reconfiguring the whole within a new historical and conceptual framework—processes which comprise a movement that is different from mine.

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In my drawing of them, the fence draws upon not only the classical painting grid but also refugee camps. We don't know who the prisoners are: are they Marshall and Tuymans, or is it us? The fact is that someone has cut the net open: there's a passage. For decades now, I've been opening newspapers and seeing images of people in temporary settlements, most of whom of unknown legal status. All of a sudden, common citizens become illegal migrants, *sans papiers*. In 2017, I decided to start a project about Africa in Lampedusa, because I thought this island and its migrant crisis symbolised the onset of a regression, perhaps because that's where the Porta d'Europa is located. There, I often wondered if any of those people in transit were artists. Deep down I think this drawing is dedicated to Osip Mandelstam, a poet whom I admire and who starved and froze to death in a concentration camp, far away from home. This drawing allows us to imagine what it'd look like if the news showed Tuymans or Marshall inside the fence when they mention the camps... But we ought to keep in mind that, in this drawing, there's a cut in the fence that screams for openness. In the Homeric Age, the verb *graphein* meant precisely this, "to open a cut" on the surface, "to cut" and "to wound" with a spear, or "to carve" with a stylus, as *The Iliad* attests to.

**CR** In these works for *Tabou*, at the Irene Laub Gallery, in Brussels, and in the latest ones for *Aurora*, at Galeria 111, in Lisbon, you approach your personal memories within the context of an enquiry into recent colonial reparation and restitution processes...

**PAHP** Partly so, yes. In *La lupara*—the name of the gun used by the mafia—we see a contemplative mixed-race lady sitting on a colonial-style chair with a sawed-off shotgun on her lap. Her shirt buttons have been ripped out. A serpent she is unfazed by moves over her body. "Rhea Sylvia," the name of the mother of the founders of Rome, is tattooed on her fingers, and "Larentia," who raised the former, is carved in the gun. This drawing was born of the only photograph I still have of my great-grandmother, who was mixed-race and Angolan. This image, which is part of an as-yet untold past, a taboo subject within my family, led me to enquire into the debates of the time on colonisation, resistance, and nationalist struggle in Africa. I became aware of the complexity, in the Portuguese context, of the period between the Berlin Conference (1884–1885) and the establishment of the Estado Novo (1933), which coincided with my great-grandfather's deployment to Angola and with the foundation of his mixed farming company in the Cuanza Sul Province. Until 2017, my reading of the transatlantic slave trade, overseas "achievements," and revolutionary struggles that led to the independence of African colonies was subject to history textbooks and many other publications. Yet, as I came upon unstudied documents and perspectives absent from official history in family and public archives, I started digging deeper and realising how open that past still was.

However, in my recent works, I've been trying to disencumber the viewer from judgement and guilt—not really to relieve them of their responsibility or critical awareness, but rather to provide them with the foyer we all carry within

before we express ourselves. There's an intimacy with things which, even if sacred, doesn't belong to the sphere of the law and obligations. Within the viewer, it unfolds a contemplative dimension in which the past is still open, indeterminate, and in which images arise, without pointing fingers nor opening tribunals, with all the dilemmas and mysteries they carry along, making us think about what could have happened and what, by comparison, may happen again.

**CR** In 2017, you brought into your drawings a turquoise blue colour which, despite almost being the chromatic opposite of the red you'd used for so long, manages to take on a surprising, similar level of intensity. Is this an effect of the monochrome, in addition to this time dilation? And why did you decide to start using it in Lampedusa?

**PAHP** For me, colour opens us out into a particular atmosphere, and in my case each monochrome group is somewhat of a single drawing. They are like a film, differing from one another, where each work corresponds to a scene, albeit without a time sequence linking them together. The drawings in red, which, in reality, are in scarlet, allowed me to establish a sort of laboratory within a single colour. Unlike the black-and-white of photography and cinema, which strangely seems like a continuity of reality, a dramatic, archaic, or gloomy dimension of it, the monochrome has a different psychic influence on one's perception of reality, according to the colour used. I remember an Iraqi political prisoner's account about Uday Hussein, Saddam's sadistic son, who'd allegedly tortured regime detractors by locking them in an entirely red room for days, trying to drive them mad. After a decade of working with this colour, I can say I sort of understand that.

When I decided to go to Lampedusa to start a project on the Belgian Congo—because I was initiating a working relationship with Brussels—I realised scarlet would be the least appropriate colour to reflect upon a continent that had been devastated by violence and was captive to such iconography. Tired of scarlet myself, I felt turquoise blue was the colour which brought me peace, as it opened my work out into an oneiric dimension that favoured a review of certain aspects of my childhood related to family, personal memories, but also to collective ones. Contrary to scarlet, in which the figures arose from the background, with turquoise they started emerging from the light of the white of the paper. At the same time, graphite drawings materialised which, like the black-and-white of film noir, had absorbed the most tormented aspects and enabled me to work with lightness on the monochrome groups, each of them already surrounded by some specific sensible atmosphere.

However, there's no chromatic programme. These groups arise without prior notice, as is the case of that which includes *La lupara*, drawn in the pink hue of the oleander flower, an ornamental, toxic shrub. One day, I was on the terrace of the house where I usually spend part of the summer, and I took notice of the intensity of it. I needed to buy turquoise pencils, and I decided to add a box of that colour to the order. Thus materialised the first drawing, an octopus (inspired by one that I'd seen a couple of days earlier in the island's reefs) upon whose beak that same flower blooms.