

An Impure Measure

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This exhibition by Jose Croft can be understood as an essay in two volumes: two intersecting working spaces that continuously race toward each other, and correlate within the unit of time unified by the amplitude of the artist's work. Their two-dimensional and three-dimensional materialization engulfs the viewer in a continuous corporeal movement, caused by the encounter with drawing, sculpture, prints, books or the materialization of the image as matter and memory of the artist's action. The simple objects that compose the lexicon we use to acknowledge the world, such as the simplest of geometric shapes, the square, the circle, or the line, are subjected to a methodological transfiguration that frees them from an apparent abstraction and delivers each one of us into an initiatory condition.

We know that Croft's formal and material lexicon is reduced to a bare minimum, but we are also aware that the modality integrated and explained by his work—both *as* a procedure and as a decision—gives it an amplitude that allows it to be rediscovered as the documentation of his poetics and of the experience of the material elements incorporated in each new piece. This concept of documentation, and, consequently, of memory, is linked to the human activity that happens under the principle of uncertainty, of doing and undoing, as stages of a voyage where the author's intuitive consciousness is concentrated in the process and not only *in* its results. Jose Pedro Croft has also built, throughout his work, an additional lexicon, even more austere, visible in the images reproduced in catalogues and monographs that document his work, in which we are confronted with images depicting the procedures through which he assembles his sculptures. These images signal and record his efforts, the etched copper, the trace of a line, or the beam that, seemingly unstable, forever awaits the return of the body that, in its transit, mobilizes the information carved into the matter. I often recall—very clearly—how, in an interview about his retrospective exhibition at the Centro Cultural de Belem, the artist once referred to this fleshless facet of his work process: "And this facet of impurity, that's what my work is about: on the drawings you can often see fingerprints, the mark of hands and fingers, all that is life."¹

Paying close attention to his body of work, we can observe that in different areas of his artistic production there is a coincidence of signals and recorded actions that result from the act of doing something, of working. The finger marks and fingerprints, the vestiges and marks of body parts, such as handprints, appear as incisions denouncing the manual work that models the pieces, first made in plaster and then cast in bronze, into his drawings and prints, in the juxtaposition of appropriated objects, which are removed from the memory of their daily uses without ever really abandoning it. These are moments of his practice that, instead of being left on their supporting structure by some involuntary action, are combined and integrated in the

¹ Oscar Faria, "Jose Pedro Croft — A educacdo do escultor", *Mil Folhas* (supplement), *Petblico*, Lisbon, May 4, 2002.

piece as active instruments, in the sense that they reify their presence as a living body that unfolds into some other corporeality that is only redeemed by the artwork, completing its existence.

Almost always the same, the procedure will yield different results in what concerns the finished work, taking into account that the author uses a variety of tools closely associated with manufacture, even when they disappear under the cover (or skin) of artifacts of industrial origin. The marks of the tools often remain visible, becoming texture, shade, light or caesura, decisively defining the author's relation with time and with our inscription in his work as transient participants.

In one of the two moments of this exhibition, which I believe to be structured as an essay, Croft constructs a dialogue that reveals an understanding and awareness of the exhibition space, reminding us of his familiarity to architecture, to the dwelling, to scale and proportion as conditions of the presence of the body. However, and in the galleries of the Fundacao Carmona e Costa, drawing and printmaking are of particular importance; they are two fields that correlate in their technical procedures, in the act of inscribing, in the spatial composition revealed by each piece, and, simultaneously, in the way they build the space of the two rooms where they are shown.

Drawing is an extension of Jose Pedro Croft's way of seeing; it cuts across all his work as if the artist's thought could be perceived in the act of the hand that draws the line, the same hand that defines the plane, and the same that etches the copper plate. The same hand that successively condenses the space between the lines, thinking and searching for relations of depth, for deviations from a geometric order; one that retains some pliancy and is therefore robust in its resistance to virtuosity, ceding its place to another order of precision, in which the rule incorporates the unfinished and its apparent disparity. A place where each layer is the answer to a decision, to a certain atmospheric temperature, a variation in luminosity, or to an image captured in some past journey and kept as archive. From this point of view, Croft's work is, first and foremost, a container of contradictions, in the sense that the shapes and materials establish unusual intersections and correspondences that grow progressively denser, revealing themselves as if they were always waiting for the first moment we lay our eyes on them. A perpetual first moment.

Croft's printmaking process went through successive transformations, both in terms of scale and in the application of color, often as dense as if it were a thick three-dimensional plane. However, this process is continued with the use of mechanical actions, such as a rotating tip that deposits an extra layer over the copper plate. This is not adding matter to matter, but to add by a process of removal, etching, repeating the same action until it becomes so close to the first that it already resembles another.

The *mezzotint* is a precise printmaking process that allows us to obtain black halftones, which will be visible in the final print as a contrasted image, and revealing the white—whose density is a measure of time. Jose Pedro Croft applies this technique in his prints. This technique is also reflected in his drawings: in the overlapping lines, in the fine meshes weaved over paper sheets where other prints or unfinished drawings still resist, waiting. It is this way of doing things that seems contradictory in his work, it is not automatic, or the employ of a virtuous and controlled action, but a tension between his thought and the *how to use*, regulated by the reintroduction of means and techniques based on a constant inquiry, always proposing questions without caring for an answer.

This is enough for us to understand the paradox we are confronted with as we face his work. Simple shapes, but articulated in complex solutions, close to an idea of essay, made dense by the simultaneity of

doubts and problems proposed by their construction in an almost unlimited experimental spectrum. This idea of essay—as a model that represents a projective relation with the real object—is present in the author's works with a double meaning, i.e., at the same time and in the same space the model is potentially another object, one that will be reinterpreted and discovered as an artistic object.

It is a work in the limits of spatiality in which the paper sheet, the copper plate, the print, or the sculptural construction produce splits or contractions that affect the spectators—as if a space within the space they occupy—using intersections, cuts, or changing our notions of weight and equilibrium. Quoting Teresa Blanch: "The experience of interior and exterior, of weight or lightness, of what's closed or open, of receiving or ejecting, is continuously intertwined in a contradictory labyrinth of frictions that transform the spectators into active participants, who must orient themselves precisely in the intersection zones" (Blanch, 1999)². On the one hand, this tension between different levels of spatial perception becomes evident, and, on the other hand, a journey of successive convergences and divergences in which drawing and printmaking discover each other in a correspondence where the plane assumes yet another quality as mediator of the visual: the screen. Dating from 1996, the drawing³ reproduced in page 185 is one of the examples where the construction of the visual field on a two-dimensional surface comes close to the relations explored by Croft in his sculpture, as the juxtaposition of layers of paint on the state proof—the black and gray rectangles—build an hierarchy based on what is visible on the first plane/screen and what is beyond it.

There is a juxtaposition between the image/medium (printmaking) and the subsequent intervention, almost automatic, of a transparency that, without cancelling the first print, recovers the three-dimensionality of space. This effect bears some resemblance to the use of perspective in drawing, but without resorting to a solution that would create an allusion to three-dimensional space, as it happens with the *trompe-l'oeil*. This means that the matrix regulating how the artist deals with the spatial questions that his work implies in the two-dimensionality of the medium does not materialize in the application of a vanishing point that contributes to building a sense of perspective. Instead, it is based on the exploration of the phenomenological capacities that the screen (as a referent) can activate, like a membrane that perceptually reconnects the different pictorial layers, which (in the case of drawing) form an image with depth of field.

However, the screen is not only used as a device: it also reflects an awareness of the capacity of light (as the primeval matter) to counter the linearity of space, doubling, fragmenting, or condensing it. Croft had been working on this materiality long before he started using reflective surfaces, assuming all the changes revealed by its relation with volume, independently of the technique that he uses in his work. In the essay 'Tres puntos no alineados'⁴ (Three Unaligned Points), published in the catalogue of an exhibition of the artist's work in A Coruna, Spain, David Barro writes: "Somehow, it is as if Croft decided to draw landscapes in real spaces, understanding landscape as all that revolves around the individual without being part of it; a brittle and uncertain territory produced by a light that reveals the fragility of the image and its transient character."

It is from this point of view (not limited to his sculpture) that the series of prints shown in this exhibition—produced for an artist's book and based on Miguel de Cervantes' *The Labors of Persiles and*

² Teresa Blanch, *Irritacões da realidade* in "José Pedro Croft", Funchal, Galeria Porta 33, 1999.

³ "Untitled", 1996, gouache on state proof print, 147x108 cm.

⁴ David Barro, "Tres puntos no alineados — José Pedro Croft", A Coruna, Ayuntamiento de A Coruña. Cultura Artedardo, 2013, p.29.

Sigismunda—acquires special importance. The book combines prints with a selection of fragments from the original text. If the selection of the fragments is the result of how the artist read the text by Cervantes, the production and selection of the prints was based on the capture of images which were part of Croft's daily life. This series (pages 136-141) consists of two kinds of prints: the ones produced in the studio, using copper matrices and etching techniques, images where color and rhythm bring us into a sensory dimension that may translate experiences and tensions from the reading of the text; and the second, photoengraved images printed in black, some avowedly figurative.

This attitude configures a very specific self-referential condition, as the author does not suggest an autobiographical representation, but instead represents himself in his work using impressions of his experience.

This kind of action is revealed in the processes he applies and in the ethical stance he adopts toward the world around him, evidencing a great attention to the details of human experience, but also to the spaces and places that constitute themselves as fictions when photographed. It is as if the artist was in a permanent process of a landscape and scenographic exploration, a *repérage* that has as its only objective the constitution of a meta-archive sedimented by the artist's gaze and in continuous construction, but purposely lacking any classification system and photographic intentionality. Jose Pedro Croft systematically photographs landscapes, his finished and unfinished pieces, artifacts, constructions, interior views or details of objects that express a singular concern with the organization of shapes, and their meaning as the potency of what they represent. From these images he retains their structure; what it represents in that particular space and cultural context.

The sculptor is interested in the anthropological root of photographed object; it is an object in a specific context, but it is also recognized as a document and an archetypal memory the author uses to produce a transformation. However, Croft does not produce photos having the artistic practice of photography in mind. He does not claim that discipline and condition to his work or images. Instead, he focuses his attention on what those elements represent as part of a shared experience, part of his journey through the world, a place of memory.

In the halls of the East Tower of the Cordoaria Nacional we find another chapter of this essay as an exhibition. The two chapters have no precedence over each other, and are nonsequential. That's why this second moment materializes the correspondence between both parts of the show, as we perceive a way of seeing space that is also a reflexive gaze on his own work. The three-dimensional, sculpture, and a singular corpus of drawings and prints are articulated as the gallery space is re-contextualized as they are activated through relations of scale and body-to-body interactions between the different pieces. As I have mentioned before, various modes of thinking the sculptural process place the spectator in the position of an initiate, and the monument—as the negation of itself—becomes present as the space is traversed.

Drawing is made present again as lineation and cut, rediscovering in space the need to find its limits, between the floor and the ceiling. These are works that reveal a precise execution, although at first glimpse they may seem to be loose, overlapping paper sheets, drawn with materials such as graphite, enamel paint, and gouache. These structures develop in planned sequences of fine lines, but react when applied to the wall, and a fine shadowy mesh is revealed by the ample plane of light. Here, the sculpture is precedent, recovering

a constructivist knowledge that cannot be accepted as an influence, but as the acknowledgment of the indelible spatial relations in the history of the artistic work.

In the ground floor, "Sem titulo" (Untitled), a sculpture⁵ in galvanized iron, mirrored glass, and enamel paint, dating from 2011 (pages 76-79), at first glance may lead us into a more vernacular interpretation of the object: a shelf where a memory of the quotidian still resides. However, and in its totality, this sculpture reveals a scale and fragmentation that generate a strong tension in space: it is seven meters wide and four meters high. This piece integrates different scales (a sculptural process that Croft has been studying and developing throughout his career): planes defined by translucent colors, transparent and mirrored, revealing a spatial contraction and distention inside the sculpture, and responding to the exhibition space. Across the sculpture, we can observe rhythms, and although they may seem to be repeated, they differ from each other as they are inscribed in inclined and vertical planes, in overlays. It is as if the sculpture was a fold slanted on itself, creating divergences between open and closed, inside and out, contradicting its own parallelepiped form in a resonance box possessed by a motion-generating energy.

It is interesting to observe the sculpture "Sem titulo" (Untitled), bronze, 2001 (pages 38-39), that receives the spectator in the first floor. It is a piece that uses the gallery floor as a referential, and where we can recognize several types of marks on the bronze's patina: the hands that left the imprint of their work on the initial clay, but also a seriality which is silenced by the amalgamation of elements worked as if they were a magmatic, unique form. A shapeless body made complete, as if it were unfinished, by the two asymmetrical elements attached to its extremes. Contrary to what happened with the previous sculpture, here our body has to bend in order to read the inscriptions in the matter, which is revealed as a premonition of death, in a close relation to the idea of an immense energy, one that cannot be recognized within formal limits, between beginning and end.

The path created by this exhibition convokes this contradictory character of Croft's body of work, as its last room can also be its first. A set of twelve large-scale prints, using black paint, displaces the center of the room, altering the viewers' gaze and establishing a dialogue with a sculpture installed on the gallery floor. As long as the spectator's gaze and body are present, this dialogue is unending. As we already know, the exhibition is an ephemeral device, but to Jose Pedro Croft it is also a moment to experience the other, in the same way we experience death as the other. It is felt in the death of the other, because it is impossible for us to comprehend this radical moment in human experience. I recall an excerpt from a lesson by Emmanuel Lévinas⁶, "Friday, November 7, 1976", where, in the context of his investigation on time and its duration, and of death as the patience of time, he states: "At first it seems to us that all that we can say or think about death and dying, and their inevitability, comes to us secondhand. We know it by hearsay or by empirical knowledge. All that we know comes to us from the language that names death and dying, the language that utters propositions: common words, proverbial, poetic, or religious ones." All comes to us from language, from the presentification of what is not present, from the absence that signals and defines the place of (each) other.

⁵ This sculpture, first shown in the exhibition *Marcapies e Territorios*, in 2011, established another kind of relation with the space of the third room of the Galerías do Chiado 8. It was presented as an almost kaleidoscopic obstacle in the gallery space, as the spectators didn't have enough distance to frame it in their visual field.

⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas, *On Death and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 8.

The correspondence between these two pieces confronts us with the possibility of establishing a relation between two manifestations of the same presence. Between the symmetrical arrangement of the prints—containing asymmetries within itself—and the marble sheets, almost as thin as paper but as dense as a recumbent statue, evoking a human scale and prolonged longitudinally over the gallery's floor. Sometimes overlapping, suggesting an austere sculptural language, minimalist in its form and serial character (Carl Andre was always in mind as I shared the experience of accompanying Croft's work), but organic and commemorative as the stone heaps⁷ in the sculptures he made in the 1980's, or the re-contextualization of space operated by a reflective surface on a heap of stones placed on a particular chair; *that* particular chair.

Interpreting this exhibition of Jose Pedro Croft's work as an essay, I believe to have come close to the structural lines of his artistic work. In the end, it is only a sketch of the journey book we will always have to rewrite in order to recognize the impure, living face that his work inscribes in our ephemeral condition.

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⁷ The stone heaps would later return to his work in his galvanized iron and glass sculptures (glasses staked as fragments of daily life), as we can see in the catalogue: David Barro, "Tres puntos no alineados — Jose Pedro Croft", A Coruña, Ayuntamiento de A Coruña. Cultura Artedardo, 2013, p. 28.