

Setting the world on fire

(Text published in the exhibition catalogue *Fogo posto / Arson*, Fundação Carmona e Costa, 2016)

It is not a state of matter. It is not that space of combustion and liberation of energy every parcel of extension and mass appears to preserve within itself. It is, to speak with precision, an element. A principle that runs through all bodies and resonates in all past, present and future lives. Fire is the most remote, hostile and dangerous of all the elements that compose the cosmos. It is also, certainly, the most contradictory, the one in which the whole metaphysical edifice seems destined to collapse. It is not by chance that it is the foundation on which all ancient mythologies erected the possibility of thinking the fragility and end of the whole universe. An element should lend solidity, structure or, at least, movement and extension to the things it embodies: this is what air, water and earth do. Fire lends life and visibility to things, but forces them to live on the brink of non-being, teetering between imminent destruction and the inseparability of identity itself. As if becoming visible and dying were the same thing, as if opening itself to the world were the same as burning its own substance. As if the form – that which allows things to shine for what they are, and thus stand out from the world's opacity – were the beginning of every end. Fire is this physical contradiction, the force that now gives form, now destroys all things, the universal breathing that keeps the cosmos from being identical to itself. It is only because everything takes a part in fire that life exists in the universe. And it is only because everything is about to burn that matter is a tireless laboratory of form and movement.

And yet, nothing can feed solely on fire. Nothing can be done besides resisting it, fighting it, mixing it with something else. Fire itself seems to need something else to live: the moment it abandons its mixed condition with other elements, it appears to devour itself, disappearing into non-being. Its purity is only possible out of the Earth. That is precisely the reason why it was the object, over centuries, of a long and enduring remotion. It was denied substance, reality or form; only its qualities were preserved – its halo, the breath that blows over all that surrounds it: light, colors, heat. The drawing of Pedro A.H. Paixão (PAHP) is from the outset a reaction to this oblivion. Fire not only exists, is real, but it is also that which must be seen, the sole and true object of attention, study and love. Everything else is just an excuse, a veil, an alibi. Window-dressing.

To make fire the focus and privileged object of drawing implies more than reformulating and revolutionizing the graphic and aesthetic tradition this art form has carried into the present day. It means, first and foremost, to transform and break with the epistemology that has separated art from science, drawing from the visual arts and, most importantly, knowledge from making.

Fire cannot be the object of representation: to draw fire means to make fire the essence of drawing and to make drawing this element's profoundest life. To draw will then imply dominating and managing the contradictory force that allows things to stand out from the rest of the world, while simultaneously mingling themselves with it again.

Conversely, the fire that animates the cosmos is nothing more than the life of the universal drawing, of that movement whereby everything lives, becoming cognoscible and real. PAHP's drawing is the most radical attempt to give back to drawing not only the aesthetic centrality it lost centuries ago but also, and especially, the status of a cosmic cognitive means we are no longer able to recognize in it.

.

Fire is not just an element. It is a celestial body, and a very special one: the one that reposes at the center of everything. The oblivion of fire coincided with the most obstinate refusal to welcome the revolution that, five centuries ago, a treatise by a Polish naturalist had helped trigger. "It resides in the midst of everything. Who, in fact, could have situated it in another place or in a better position from which it could illuminate everything with a simple gesture? They called it the lamp of the world, its mind, or even its rector. Trismegistus called it a visible god, Sophocles the all-seeing. As if sitting on a royal throne, the Sun reigns over the family of bodies that turn around it. [...] The Earth is fertilized and conceived by the Sun via an annual parturition." Few words have been more read and commented upon than these. However, reading, commentary and listening have never been so futile as they are regarding these same words. Our numerous celebrations, conversion statements and general

IRÈNE LAUB

GALLERY

awareness of human and social sciences, together with the average person's philosophy and the arts, have never relinquished the geocentric faith.

We persist in thinking the Earth as the final limit of our existence: to be in the world means to be on Earth, to measure all that is and all that happens in accordance with the forms and figures of the planet on which we stand. The Earth is the definitive metric space: the science of place and space is still called geometry, the measurement of the Earth. PAHP's drawing confronts the precision of the heliometric universe with geometric abstraction: that which makes the Sun the center, the object and the measure unit of everything that exists, the matter of all forms. The "heliometric" revolution his works seek to set off through drawing is no less radical than the one of Copernicus. For the latter, what was at stake was more than simply declaring the centrality of the Sun. To place the heavens in the center of everything meant acknowledging the astral nature of the Earth, tearing down the boundaries that separated the human universe from the celestial one. In visual terms, this meant denying the existence of an opposition between matter and light, body and form, colour and drawing. PAHP discovered a cosmological foundation that helped him fight against and ultimately free himself from the abstractionist impulse that has defined modernity in art and kept us from recognizing fire as the essence of all forms, thus keeping us from understanding that to draw fire with fire is the exact opposite of both formlessness and of the geometric restoration carried out by minimalism. Drawing is no longer a tracing of contours, and it does not coincide with the line: drawing is the being of forms and colour, their mass, their body, the blood and breath of form. In his drawings, it is impossible to tell line and patch, colour and outline, clear shape and background from one another. However, that indistinction is not the end of vision: on the contrary, it is vision's metabolism, its innermost breathing.

Likewise, for Copernicus understanding that the Earth is not the immobile center of the universe implied an universalization of movement: everything becomes and is only in the midst of, and thanks to, its own movement. For PAHP, the heliocentric revolution coincides with the universalization of drawing: everything exists and everything is solely thanks to drawing, through it, in it. Drawing is no longer the art of representation: it is the nature of things, the force that animates them and thus allows their generation. In his drawings, everything evokes this kind of radical naturalization of the graphic language: figures emerge out of traces or dots, while spheres or round shapes are the seeds out of which the forms of the universe emerge and through which they are generated. Drawing is the universal genetics of the cosmos, and the image is not the result of the drawing, but its life. In this sense, the radicalization of the drawing, which is found at the universal root of things and forms, means denying that there is an opposition between the finite and the non-finite, a rough drawing and a finished work, a sketch and a masterwork. Everything lives through the pencil-tip.

Emanuele Coccia