

Temporary exhibition
Floor -1

Rui Sanches
Mirror

10/10/2019–12/01/2020

Curated by Sara Antónia Matos

Above ground

Sara Antónia Matos

The survey exhibition of Rui Sanches' drawings at Museu Coleção Berardo, on display to the public from 10 October 2019 to 12 January 2020, is part of a broader programme: *Rui Sanches: Mirror*, which also takes place almost simultaneously at Torreão Nascente da Cordoaria Nacional, curated there by Delfim Sardo. Encompassing four decades of predominantly two-dimensional work, the part that is shown at Museu Coleção Berardo focuses on the artist's drawing, and is displayed without exception on the wall, above ground level—in contrast to his sculpture, for which the ground has always been fruitful terrain. As such, this text, whose title adopts the literal expression "Above ground," will not look at Rui Sanches' sculptural production, the part of his work exhibited at Torreão Nascente da Cordoaria Nacional.

This drawing survey presents series of recent works in which the artist combines supports, media, and techniques: drawing on paper, photography, and wall constructions in a range of materials. This plurality of approaches allows us to see how the artist moves between them without drawing becoming subsidiary to sculpture, or vice versa. Putting into play multiple references, namely from art history,

this set of works reveals a philosophy that comes off the plane to invade the space, and that simultaneously, in an inverse movement, returns to the surface of the paper, as if tearing up its two-dimensionality, perforating it and creating depth.

The intention was not to adopt a retrospective or chronological approach to his work in drawing. We sought to highlight motifs and aspects that reappear at different times, and to give preference to lesser known, perhaps even unseen groups of works, like the series *Mar* (2015) and *Reflexo na Água* (2014). These series fit perfectly with the overarching title, chosen by Delfim Sardo, for the two parts of the exhibition *Mirror* for two reasons: firstly, because these series of drawings involve a kind of "mirror mechanism" in their creation; secondly, because they show that, for this artist, paper functions as a porous, permeable support, at times as if it were liquid, offering hints of reflection and giving the sensation that it is possible to cross through it. In these series, the author bases his drawing on photography, using lines and graphic marks in half the work to mirror what appears in the other half, which consists of a photographic image. In *Mar*, the images printed on the support are photographs of aquiferous areas taken by the author in the South of Portugal, while in *Reflexo na Água* the images refer to the artist's studio—angles and aspects of the space with work in progress and tools in view. In both series, the lines of the drawings reproduce the master structure of each photographic image and the objects in them, offering mirror visions, with varying levels of simplicity and faithfulness to the image. Thus, they reiterate that drawing, and probably all art, is part of an exercise of comprehension of reality.

This "mirror mechanism" is not unrelated to a procedure adopted by the artist a long time ago with the series of four diptychs that he produced to accompany the publication of poems by Joaquim Manuel Magalhães in a shared artist's book. Produced in the context of Europalia, this book from 1991, entitled *Stolen*, whose originals are on display for the first time in this exhibition, shows the drawings on the reverse of the pages of photography, as if stealing the representation that appears on the previous page, instead of showing them side by side. Similar to the aforementioned series,



Untitled, 2000. Oil on paper. Coleção Raúl Roque.

the drawings present reality apprehended in a graphic way, thus bringing about a synthesis between the three-dimensional and two-dimensional space. It is always about understanding the "transit" between the plane and what surrounds it—like in the series *Os Espaços em Volta* (2017)—the penetrability of the surface of paper, the liquidity between the body and the space, the organicity of geometries. This also becomes apparent in the more recent series from this exhibition, *G. O.* (2018), on display for the first time. In this group of works, the plan of a house, of a geometric body, is pierced by marks of an organic nature—at times standing out from them, at others absorbed by patches and layers of fluid, subdued marks.

This process combining rigid and fluid inscriptions leads us to deduce that the two kinds of marks involved in the production of the drawing by the artist—geometric and organic—are different, although they are part of an equally specialised work that one moment gives primacy to precision

and rigour and the next favours the automatic and even spontaneous gesture, allowing for the use of the drawing material's deviation.

Indeed, various artists have said that a substantial part of the act of drawing resides in controlling, and surrendering to, the gestures of inscription, restriction, and release of the hand. So much so, that often, before putting the lead of the pencil to paper or marking the latter with paint from the paintbrush, the arm practises the gesture, from side to side, with varying speed and intensity, hovering a short distance above the page, ready to begin the incision. It is almost a dress rehearsal in which the paper is the "mirror" of the artist's body, an invisible, intimate dance with a blank surface of which nothing is seen except the "end result": in other words, what is recorded on the paper. This rehearsal—in which the artist and support appear to become one, one body, one material—as Henri Matisse observed, is part of the corporal apprehension of the space of the drawing, the edges of the paper



Untitled, 1999, from the series *Os Espaços em Volta*. Indian ink, acrylic, and enamel. Artist's collection.

sheet, and of the integration of form on this surface.

In this process of controlled and voluntarily uncontrolled work, which results in materialisations of different natures and intensities (experienced by the body of the artist), the sculptural wall constructions that feature in this exhibition also stand out, combining organic masses and "rigid"—or rather geometric—volumes. Small architectures of right angles, with corners, seem to emerge from dense masses, recalling the movement of bones underneath the muscles of the human body, as in several drawings.

In particular, the drawings from 2000 seem to represent "cuts" of sculptures, revealing once again the permeability of the materials by the body, by space. These seem to come from a project for a sculpture—none in particular, but any sculpture that would correspond to the drawing. There is, therefore, the sensation that the drawing precedes the sculpture; however, strangely, deceptively, we are never able to identify correlations between the two, because in fact none of the drawings are preparatory sketches of a sculpture, previous projects, or subsidiaries of it. Thus, Rui Sanches' two-dimensional work generates discomfort in the spectator, who is led to establish connecting links between dimensions, to relate languages and disciplines, without, however, finding direct correlations. As such, there is no anchorage for the drawing in the domain of sculpture: the state of the drawing is always aerial, spatial, off the ground, permeable. The two languages are autonomous, but relatable—which is not in any way a contradiction. While drawing and sculpture are, according to the artist,¹ different ways of thinking about the same problems, some drawings evoke plywood cut-outs, suggestive of how many of the three-dimensional pieces are made: sheets of wood laid over one another, layer upon layer, each with its unique shape, until a form is created.

But what are the matters that the artist thinks about through sculpture and drawing? While the questions posed by artists through their works

also change and undergo deviations from time to time, series to series, and even work to work, perhaps it is possible to assert that Rui Sanches' search seems to be based on what escapes between the sheets of paper and plywood, on that which is somewhere between the material and immaterial, the tangible and the impalpable. This intangibility corresponds to what the philosopher Hans Belting refers to as the "true image," which, according to him, does not exist.² In other words, it is impossible to capture the "fundamental question" in a single work, because it resides among all the images or works produced.

Could Rui Sanches' relationship with religiosity be shaped by this impossibility to capture an image? This religiosity emerges in various series throughout his career, namely in the works

² Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).



Untitled, 2005. Indian ink and enamel on paper. Coleção Charbel Saad.

¹ Rui Sanches, *Janela, Espelho, Mapa... — A obra de arte e o mundo, reflexão sobre o projecto artístico individual* (Lisbon: Documenta, 2017).

of sculpture and drawing from the end of the 1980s, like *Santa Ágata*, *Santa Luzia*, and *São João Baptista*, and in the drawings from 2009, like *Gratia Plena*, without the artist making any reference to it.

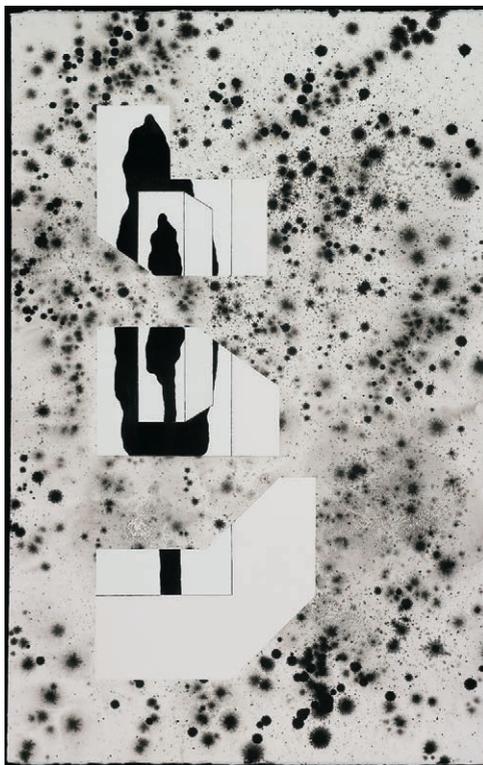
Each drawing captures moments or states, not so much about the figure or objects, but rather about their liquid qualities, the movements and vibrations that precede form. In Rui Sanches' work, drawing seems to come off the sheet of paper, overflowing its margins, moving beyond it, as if extending through space. Thus, under certain circumstances, the spectator can cross through the drawing: without a firm base (references of scale, perspectives) on which to put their feet, they can move closer or distance themselves from it, going through the window that opens onto the other side or staying on this side and seeing it from a distance.

In several drawings—indeed, in many of the series over the years—diluted patches of Indian ink reappear on the surface of the paper, recalling a kind of background on which the inscription of the line describes contours, forms, and edges. These organic patches remind us of fungi. For example, in *Dúvida de Sombra* (1996), they spread across the paper like stains, existing also in the knots and sheets of wood: a kind of fluid—sap and blood—that alludes to the human body. The trickles of ink found in so many of the artist's drawings, especially more recent ones, recall spilt blood, transforming his whole work in drawing into a kind of matter that is not just liquid but also carnal, intense, wounded.

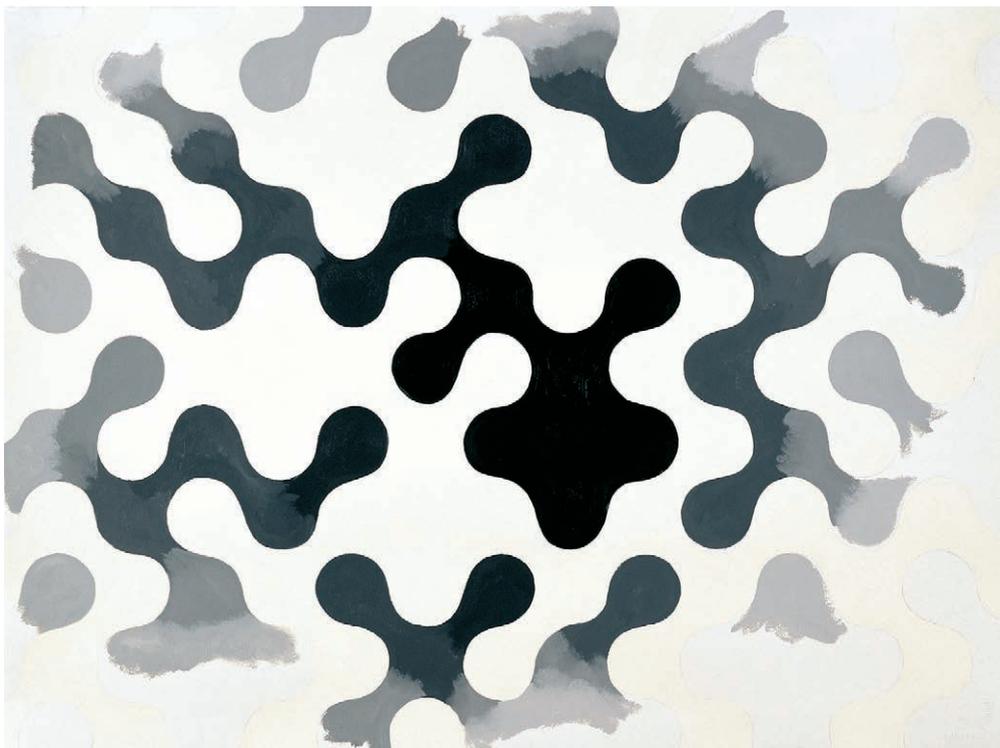
We could say that his drawing has almost acquired the quality of an energetic equation, thus testing the spectator's resistance to its immateriality, its impotence, its near-nothingness. Perhaps it is such evidence—not in itself insignificant—that the artist, with his work, seeks to inscribe at this point in the history of art, which he considers to be a ruin, a wreck, or a crisis of insurmountable aridity.

Godard would ask: what can art do? Raise expectations; continuously formulate questions, even without any answers; construct images of survival, even when these are mirrors of injury

and termination, of that ruin and that aridity—in sum, situate thought above ground.



Untitled, 2005. Indian ink, acrylic, and enamel on paper. Coleção Fundação Carmona e Costa.



Cover: *Untitled*, 1999, from the series *Os Espaços em Volta*. Indian ink, acrylic, and enamel. Artist's collection.
Back: *Untitled*, 1999. Oil on paper. Coleção Fundação Luso-Americana para o Desenvolvimento.

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Exhibition catalogue

A DOCUMENTA and Fundação Carmona e Costa production, the catalogue *Rui Sanches: Mirror* features a comprehensive photographic record of the artist's work, as well as curatorial texts by Sara Antónia Matos and Delfim Sardo

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