

CARLOS NORONHA FEIO
banhados pela luz brilhante do pôr do sol
bathed by the bright light of the sunset
13.11.15 – 16.01.16

Oscar Wilde said that all art is simultaneously symbol and surface, that those who dare to go below the surface, do it at their own risk. I have always agreed with him, but today the question is more complex. We spend our days interacting with devices that ask us to continuously interact with its skin: that we are invited to touch, rub, explore, so that we can relate with everything on top of the surface of this skin / this guide, in other words the content and messages that daily overwhelm our lives.

I found it impossible not to think about Wilde, and the devices that presently guide and shape our daily lives, when I saw this last series of works by Carlos Noronha Feio. The main core of the exhibition is composed by a series of paintings in which the artist starts by printing the canvas with photographs taken from of a book or, probably, I should say, a manual, a guide; aimed at educating American military personnel on the habits of the population of the Pacific Ocean with which they supposedly had to interact during and right after the Second World War. These photographs range from the more classical representations of the anthropological / educational type, in which we see scenes taken from village life, moments of sustenance and ritual; and others in which we see groups engaging in marches or military activities. This is, obviously, a book written from a western point of view, in light of the context in which it was made and thought for. Each one of the selected images covers the canvas and becomes the basis on which the artist paints *a posteriori*. First applying a white veiling that let's the background photograph arise but that also allows at the same time the ability to read independently the colourful signs that are juxtaposed and composed in the last phase of labouring. There are strokes and patches of paint, some geometric and precise, others more organic, made with joyful and often primary colours. Many of these pictorial signs are lines or bars, sometimes they remind us of wooden poles, elongated and folded in different shapes. In some cases they seem to dissolve or animate themselves in swirls with delicate and elegant flowery patterns. As with the backgrounds and geometrical shapes, each sign seems to be infected or deteriorating in a mostly informal dimension, *sfumata*, made of air, of smoke or water vapour. But nothing is left to chance, on the contrary, the pictorial composition is always of great perfection and total equilibrium, controlled, deliberately elegant. On one hand it reminds us of a certain type of abstraction derived from surrealism, Miró for instance, on the other hand (probably because of the way it reminds us of bellic iconography) we can think of Malevich's suprematism compositions.

There are two, therefore, surfaces of dialogue, intertwined by a subtle veiling of white pictorial fog, nor transparent or covered but opaque and porous.

The base layer is composed of a subject that today cannot but allude to questions relating to post-colonial issues, to the history of all the Western world and, therefore, also of Portugal, to the eternal question of our relationship with everything that the Western world is not. But at an artistic and iconographic level, it's impossible not to think that the one artist that has probably launched the concept of the Far East, in respect to modernity and pictorial practice, was Gauguin. An artist that, not by chance, was able to take art outside the territory of Impressionism and into the fields of symbolism and the barbaric, magical and primitive dimensions, which resulted, amongst others, in Surrealism. And since these first encounters with a "pacific" dimension occurred, this primitive, but not "african" world, in some aspects even farther away and "other", has pushed art further into an epidermic dimension, deliberately superficial, made of the juxtapositions of several flat layers. As if the contact with a skin different from our own, has taken us to change the perception of the pictorial skin itself.

But the real problem is that our relationship with the Far East and with the whole area of the Pacific has changed completely after the nuclear explosions that ended the Second World War.

In case they were ever seen as such, in that moment, those places were no longer regarded as a forgotten fragment of heaven on earth. From then on, the same concept of skin and epidermis became, in the majority of cases, a symptomatic surface in which each sign could be only a sign of disease and degeneration. I have always on my mind the images of the film *Hiroshima mon amour*, with its reflexions on the gaze and the inability to see some things: the skin of the two lovers that touch each other, in the images, continuously interrupted by images of hospitals, diseased, destruction

These signs that populate and emerge in Carlos's pictorial surfaces, also live in an ambiguous movement that makes its meaning slide from a formal decorative dimension to the cutaneous degenerations, burns and incisions on the skin which are clearly endowed with political, linguistic and human images. The idea of formal decorum itself accompanies the whole of modernity as a symbolic element of the decadence and degeneration of the ailing West and its art, as if it was a useless implant applied to the essence of art. These elements "supported" in an orderly way on the surface of the canvases end up becoming instruments that modify and operate in the underlying photograph's own skin. Exactly like in our own electronic devices, where we know that a fourth glass wall exists between us and the content, and it is on that fourth wall, that we continuously and sensually touch and rub, that we can find the tools to transport the content. Tools that leave an imprint over this pictorial white dust deposited in the photographs, in the same way as in *Rayographs*: the objects become imprinted in the sensitive film after light blasts through them, and in which lines could be scars or the *3 Standard Stoppages*, that from sign are transmuted into a cut of a scalpel.

These "informal tools" created by the artist, are collected in drawings on a very solid and rough paper. These are a kind of chart, a catalogue or dictionary, that seem to have been appropriated by the artist to compose the paintings. Like the ornament, the same concept of tool becomes an implant, which applied to the human body is capable of becoming a source of perversion and fetish. As someone experienced with encounters between the Occident and Orient, of strange lights and strange suns, teaches us: James Graham Ballard. Finally the idea of tool or technique itself as an extension of the human being, is nothing but the ornament of our lives, aimed at adding non-essential things to an essence that is not made certain by a few years gained through medicine, of a certain number of visited countries or of information obtained more rapidly through a broad band. It is then that we are able to make the technologic implant come back to the sphere of the human in the moment that it goes back to being an object of desire *per se*, source of perversion, space of pornography (pure therefore sacred) and not a mere tool to obtain secondary results.

Antonio Grulli, August 2015