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Eclipse

Claire de Santa Coloma

16.11.24 – 11.01.25

Inauguração | Opening 16.11.24, 15h – 18h

The ancient *Wunderkammer*, forerunners of the modern museum collection, offered in the confined space of a room a reflection of the world known at the time, distilled into its most wondrous elements. The collection of *mirabilia* was divided into *naturalia* and *artificialia*—wonders created by nature on the one hand, and those created by man on the other: works of art and craftsmanship, the result of the close collaboration of hand & intellect.

When faced with Claire de Santa Coloma's wood sculptures, one is hesitant about which category to place them under. The volumes have organic, biomorphic shapes, their surface as smooth as driftwoods or polished stone, and lead one to think that they were delivered as they are by nature.

These forms and textures are actually the result of a long and skillful handwork carried out under the sign of *contrainte*: the artist does not add anything to the initial block of wood—untreated logs that the artist finds or receives—but acts by subtraction. By removing material, by sanding it down, by accommodating the forms that the block of wood itself suggests with its knots, the accidentalities of its conformation, the artist accepts and exalts its imperfections, which contribute to the final appearance. The work does not pre-exist in the artist's mind but, *natura naturans*, takes shape at the very moment it is carved by the artist's hands. Adjectives are kept to a minimum, just as essential is the *modus operandi*, that allows the artist great mobility: with her tools, she can work anywhere, employing local wood.

Akin to this mobility is the "lightness" embodied by the sculptures, although they required considerable physical effort in their execution. "To carve a piece of wood, you do not hit it once, you have to hit it at least three or four times; it takes up a lot of energy,"¹ said the artist in a recent interview. The final piece, with its naturalness, erases this muscular effort. One could say that Claire de Santa Coloma's practice manifests the concept of *sprezzatura*, dear to Italian Renaissance art, dissimulating such effort in the expression of grace.

Lightness, (daring) beauty, mobility, as well as variations on the theme, are conveyed by the eleven sculptures that make up the suspended and mobile constellation *Beach*, made of native woods from Argentina. Their aerodynamic shapes seem to encapsulate that ungraspable quality of her work, which swings between different realms. The ambiguous appearance of the sculptures recalls the form of seeds, grains, internal organs or the darting body of a fish on the one hand, and on the other Hans Bellmer's dismembered dolls, Marcel Duchamp's erotic objects, or Alberto Giacometti's "Disagreeable Objects"—namely, *naturalia* and *artificialia*.

In another interview, Claire de Santa Coloma explained this key aspect of her practice: "I remove as little material as possible, the minimum necessary for the object to look like a sculpture."² But what does a sculpture look like?

It is precisely in this boundary between object and sculpture, between natural element and work of art, that the pivotal point of the artist's practice can be found. To "make a sculpture that looks like a sculpture", the artist told in another conversation, "I wanted to reference an iconic shape from the history of sculpture. I am very interested in this idea of a

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common imagination of what a sculpture looks like. I was not that familiar with Brancusi's work at that time (2012), but it came to my mind as a recognizable form."³

It is no coincidence that the artist refers to Constantin Brancusi, who learned sculpture when, as a child, he exhumed from the Bistrita riverbed large white stones smoothed by the currents, with their perfect, unreachable shapes. "The sculpture is nothing but water" recites a famous aphorism of his.

Also coming to mind is the episode involving one of Brancusi's iconic bronze sculptures from his *Bird in Space* series. Without wings or feathers, that thin, soaring piece of polished bronze was not recognized as a work of art by U.S. customs officials in 1926, who imposed duty on the artist for importing manufactured metal objects.

Claire de Santa Coloma's work invites reflection on what defines a sculpture as such, which is not an absolute value, but a dynamic one that changes over time, and depending on the context in which it is presented.

Eclipse, the title of the exhibition, rather than the optical-astronomical phenomenon itself is significant for the artist as a moment of encounter between two entities, that fleeting moment when the two elements seem to touch at one point. The image of this instant, which has materialized in the artist's output in several works composed of two touching parts, metaphorically may represent the moment of convergence of these two dimensions—nature and art, matter and artwork, artwork and object—and the difficulty of grasping the exact moment when one is no longer the other.

The exhibited sculptures and their display, carefully conceived by the artist, also explore the boundary between works of art and the objects we live with, including furniture, in their relationship to the environment in which they are placed and in the mutuality with the human body that uses them. The smooth, sinuous silhouette of *Rest* seem to invite visitors to sit down. With their familiar look, they transform the exhibition gallery into a domestic landscape, while at the same time raising a misunderstanding about the possibility of using them instead of just looking at them as sculptures. A feeling of comfort and discomfort at once.

With her sculptures, Claire de Santa Coloma aspires to awaken an innate instinct, a "tactile" desire in the viewer. And somehow, the moment they are exhibited, they seem to connect the body that shaped them to the body that touched them.

In the show, the two "wooden seats" – *Rest* and *Pebble* are presented on the floor of the ground floor, while the mobile is suspended from the ceiling of the lower floor: the works converge in a platonic point of contact, as if attracted by a kind of magnetism.

The "wooden seats" are in front of *Untitled (Touch)*; *Untitled (Eclipse)*; *Untitled (One)* and *Untitled (Flower)*, four works on paper, inviting their contemplation.

Essentiality is the guiding principle also of the cut-out series, which the artist has been working on since 2010: sheets of paper on which she intervenes with a Japanese cutter, carving the fibers with cuts inflicted with small, precise gestures. The symmetric form of the subjects—a leaf, a vagina, two spheres—emphasizes the concave and convex shapes that emerge on the paper depending on how the light strikes the different angles of the cuts. The intricate and precious texture acquires plasticity and volume, revealing a sculptural approach to paper as well. Similar to sculptures, which are often

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made in the round, these works are also created from multiple angles, by rotating the sheet, while the gesture is repeated over time, in a physical/meditative practice akin to a mandala.

The artist's approach to the material is never frontal. As with sculpture, it was guided by the history embedded in the wood, the artist treats paper as a surface that responds, she stimulates its reaction, its way of vibrating in relation to light.

"The origin of my cut-outs is somehow related to the origin of my very first sculptures, where I was trying to express that ephemeral moment that we find in nature, that we cannot really grasp"—Claire de Santa Coloma explained— "I was paying attention to the changes of light and projected shadows that we experience in an unconscious but continuous way. I was trying to speak about that fleetingness, about something that was not permanent. The cut-outs explore the subtle movements of daylight."⁴

In a 1943 text entitled *La forma nell'arte e nella natura* [Form in Art and Nature], Giorgio de Chirico confided his thoughts about form, which is the result of the transformation produced by movement: "In great works of art form is evident and unreal at the same time. One could almost say that form does not belong to this world due to the extent with which it blends with the surrounding atmosphere. This fusion takes the hardness away from the shape things have in reality. The words "harsh reality" undoubtedly have their origin in the hardness of the shapes that surround us. To be able to express form as separate from the atmosphere it is fused with (a fusion that gives it mysteriousness and unreality), has required a progressive and constant effort of intelligence by artists who have had to acquire the necessary mastery to carry out such a task. Form is the expression of universal evolution not only in art but also in nature."⁵

For the metaphysical artist, there is no division between the subject that thinks and acts, and the object that undergoes the action, but unity according to a natural ethics; there is no formless matter and formed matter, as matter is already form passing into form. With her gouge and cutter, Claire de Santa Coloma tries to dig out the fluid marrow of reality.

Sara de Chiara, 11.2024

Notes:

¹ Claire de Santa Coloma in conversation with Teresa Karst in the catalogue *Works*, 2023, p. 9.

² *Composição Eterna*, Entrevista a Claire de Santa Coloma by Maria Beatriz Marquilha in *Contemporânea*, Ed. 11/2017. Available online: <https://contemporanea.pt/edicoes/11-2017/entrevista-claire-de-santa-coloma>

³ Claire de Santa Coloma in conversation with Teresa Karst in the catalogue *Works*, 2023, p. 11.

⁴ Claire de Santa Coloma in conversation with Teresa Karst in the catalogue *Works*, 2023, p. 13.

⁵ Giorgio de Chirico, *La forma nell'arte e nella natura*, in *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 1943, p. 274; republished signed "Isabella Far" in *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, 2001.

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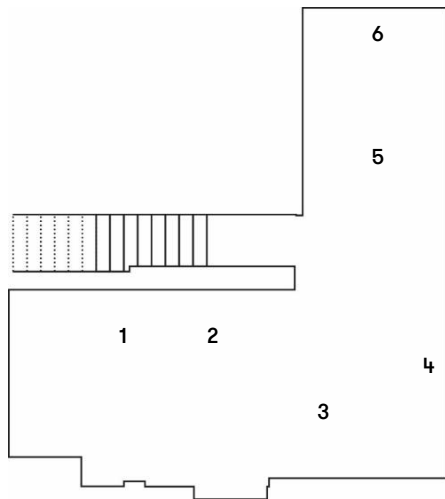
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GALERIA | GALLERY 1



1. *Untitled (Touch)*, 2024
Cut-out paper, 125 x 125 cm

2. *Untitled (Eclipse)*, 2024
Cut-out paper, 125 x 125 cm

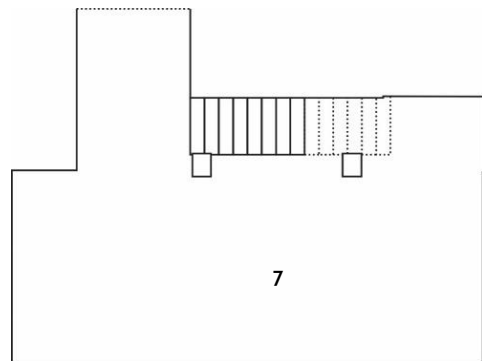
3. *Rest*, 2024
Oak, 54 x 93 x 56 cm

4. *Sem título (One) | Untitled (One)*, 2024
Cut-out paper, 160,5 x 125 cm

5. *Pebble*, 2024
Oak, 43 x 86 x 52 cm

6. *Untitled (Flower)*, 2024
Cut-out paper, 125 x 125 cm

GALERIA | GALLERY 2



7. *Beach*, 2024
Ñandubai, acacia, ash tree, brea, dammara australis,
graphite powder, Variable dimensions