

A CONVERSATION WITH PEDRO CABRITA REIS ADRIAN SEARLE

Pedro Cabrita Reis: Well, the thing is I never had any doubt about what I wanted to be. It was never a case of choices – vet, doctor, engineer, architect, liar. It just happens that I've always known it. I wanted to be an artist.

Adrian Searle: And your influences?

PCR: Many different ones. Art magazines were not around in Portugal in the 70s. Maybe a few old books with reproductions and no money to travel. After the revolution in '74, I met Bravo, who was one of the better-educated artists in the country. Most of the comprehension of art I've got back in those days came from the conversations we had. He died, but I still remember all the fun talking about Beuys, Nauman, Barnett Newman, and so on. At the same time, I was also looking at Greco, Tiziano, or Caravaggio but all that drinking together with Bravo usually ended up with Brancusi, Duchamp, Picabia and so on.

AS: But you still make self-portraits.

PCR: I do, even if I like to think about them as sculptures "strictu sensu". They can be divided into images of myself as blind, and all the others. Closed eyes usually don't make great self-portraits, do they? Maybe we should call it just "shadows".

AS: They look like death masks; as though you were depicting yourself as a dead man.

PCR: We die. Every moment, one moment after the other, one gets closer and closer. But when I look at a death mask there is always this almost perfect moment of suspension. Of complete revelation. I remember Beethoven in his tiny little home in Bonn. It is a moment when we are no longer able to be aware of ourselves, but at the same time it is like possessing the truth. Then, everything becomes absolutely serene. The serenity of those masks comes from that moment of suspension. You and the mask become one.

AS: Most of your work is without figures. But there are places and signs of life everywhere: habitations, windows, doorways, wells. Intimations of daily life and everyday ritual acts, including, of course, other people's art.

PCR: Well... I am a gatherer of memories, mostly.

AS: Yours or other people's?

PCR: Good question. Mine eventually, because everything I work with becomes my experience. It comes to me through memories, sounds, lost things, shadows. I am a gatherer of mysteries, signs of passage... It is like if you are in a hurricane, which is sucking up all the shit: houses, roofs, cars. And when the wind stops it deposits all this stuff and goes off somewhere else, leaving behind what looks like a chaotic archaeological site... which we will reconstruct and shape again and again. Why worry about who made this or that or whom does that belongs to? My work has to do with things being unique to one person. It's about how to remain or what will remain. Survival? Order after chaos? Trying to make sense? A deep, profound desire to maintain one's self-alive, perhaps.

AS: Looking back at your early work – early drawings, snapshots of paintings, all of which you have gathered as a sort of electronic memory on a CD-ROM – all the way through, right from the start, there are houses, plans, maps. Idyllic childhood homes. You are describing staircases, courtyards, little shadowy corners where a child might play. Presumably you only noticed this preoccupation in retrospect, you had no conscious project when you began?

PCR: It's very strange and almost dark when one goes back to gather his own work together, reanimating archives, opening all those folders and going back and forth, year after year, show after show, realizing that after all, despite of the many fragmented and broken mirrors existing there, there's always underlying, one, just one simple consolidated idea, just as if the whole body of work is nothing but a certain and obsessive way of looking.

AS: Whatever you did, whatever influences you had, everything you have done are about boundaries and human places, places of occupation.

PCR: That is something one only realizes afterwards. In such fringes of memory, one might call it almost a no-one's land. Looking at some of the earliest paintings of mine, they might as well be understood like "aerial views" of some of the plaster sculptures I've made a few years later. Take the round and square wells, connected by a system of channels, for example. I guess you can say that everything I have done is about territory. It is all houses and how they define a geography of the territory. It is all about constructing, and how to perceive a place of its own, thru the act of measuring. A palm of a hand or a look at the horizon, either both defines the same place or draws the same boundary.

AS: What kind of house did you grow up in?

PCR: In an old and rather sad residential part of town. The apartment was a corridor, with rooms to each side, like a system of cells clustered around a main vein.

AS: Why do you think this kind of subject matter has become such a preoccupation? One can trace this focus on architecture through so many artists' work of the past half century.

PCR: Because nature has disappeared as a reference. We have lost it within ourselves to such a point that we came to the moment where the exercise of architecture is the only form that makes the world comprehensible. After all, architecture is more about defining territories than actually building houses. Being an artist, what I do evolves around architecture as a mental discipline or an exercise of reality, since it's impossible even to look at a tree without considering it as a part of an elevation that includes my shadow, the line of the horizon, the space between both and the drawing of the steps or of the walk in between those points. And then again here we are talking about space, which is again architecture, which leads us both to the loss of Nature and – why not? – to the fall of God. It has always been, as it were, against the trees. The world is meaningless unless you define it through a drawing. We have to shape the form of the world.

AS: It is difficult to think of this without feelings of loss and sadness, about

nature and our place within it.

PCR: I would say that melancholia is the word we are missing here. Melancholia considered as the condition of being deprived of an external image of the self. Having lost the comfortable reassurance of being part of Nature, we are only left with the perception of the self. And this knowledge implies the drawing of a territory, shall I say an exercise of architecture, an assumption of a self that builds a sense of place. Shaping a form of a wall, opening doors and windows in it, is how one can deal with the landscape which is difficult to be perceived if not through the intersection of a line with another line. Those two create a space where the projection of our shadow is the measuring tool. Or, if you prefer, the reference of a finally regained unity.

AS: I understand your work as not about revolutionary gestures and schism, but about continuities.

PCR: The loss of nature is a wound, still, or forever, to be closed. To be healed. Only artists can do it; in a manner, I suppose, very desperate. I'm not interested in the ephemeral brilliance of those moments of rupture. Instead, I'm further more interested or implied in a gesture of re-building. I'm more interested in the act of doing. Putting things together, establishing a place of memory as an ability to construct. Memory as opposite to nostalgia. I would like my work to be referred to as an inner space of silence, introspection, serenity. Most of all it's about the inevitable quest for beauty, as a form of absolute intelligence.

AS: Beauty?

PCR: Beauty is perhaps an old fashioned word or concept, but I still take it as a moment where self-awareness encounters the realization in one's mind of an image of the world. Understood in such a way, beauty is to be taken as an ultimate form of pure intelligence. In a more elliptical language, it could be the difference between desire and knowledge. What you want and what you have. Its achievement, the juxtaposition of these two levels, would eventually mean the absence of art, who knows?

AS: An art that does away with itself? Returning beauty to the everyday?

PCR: Why not? Everyday is one of the most complex forms of eternity, and Adrian, I'm completely convinced about eternity. Not such a contemporary issue these days, I agree, but that's another thing. Like waking up in the morning and realizing it's a day less in your life.

AS: How does this relate to your poverty of means as an artist, your use of commonplace materials and objects?

PCR: Maybe because that will be the way to celebrate this extreme imponderability of days which are slowly vanishing. Sometimes I feel an interdiction, like if I'm forbidden to use more than what is strictly necessary. Art is also about making, doing, building with the minimum gesture.

AS: Forbidden? You sound like a puritanical modernist.

PCR: There is neither much time nor much space left. We should be able to use the

minimum, to concentrate energy and intelligence, to make a drawing without lifting the pencil from the paper. We have to be absolutely intense. To go back to beauty, I would say it's all a matter of putting one thing together with another thing in an accurate manner, where intelligence is embodied in the very act itself. Beginning with the simplest, smallest gesture, beginning with the things that are to hand, but carrying a vision.

AS: You once said to me – I quote – ‘My work is not about the materials, the plasterboard, breezeblocks and so on.’

PCR: It's about becoming a monk.

AS: You, Pedro, a monk?

PCR: It's an image. In the sense that you can imagine a monk building a garden in the desert. Knowing exactly where to put the trees. Or maybe not. No, perhaps not a monk after all. Better said, a visionary, someone who knows where the water comes from just by looking through the shadow of a stone in the sand. That's what an artist is. Someone who knows by looking through.

AS: I have seen you not knowing how to finish a show and inventing a piece right at the last moment, just before the opening – at Serralves in 1999 you went out and found an abandoned flagpole and dragged it into the gallery.

PCR: I'm never disturbed by having people around me when I work. I'm listening to myself saying "I don't know how to finish this...this table. What's missing?" And maybe someone says "A towel, a napkin". So, I ask, "Have you got one?" "No," they reply, "But I have a shirt." "Let's use the shirt then. Give me your shirt."

AS: The shirt off your back! There is a big difference between your approach to objects and things, and your approach to painting. A painter has lots of choices, an endless supply of colours and brand-names, but they already have associations with art. They are art materials. How does your approach migrate from one medium to another?

PCR: I just want pure colour, pure space. I want my paintings to be absolutely empty of meaning. This is not new anyway!

AS: It is impossible. We have all seen too many paintings.

PCR: When I am painting I can't possibly remember any other paintings. I am in a place of emptiness. Pure colour, one gesture, the two things together in one single act. A territory of complete radical absence. A pure self. Maybe this is just unachievable. The radical absence I told you about is like when I'm painting I know that that particular painting is the only one that ever existed or will exist. Everything is then forgotten, everything.

AS: That, surely, is the painter's tragedy. He cannot forget.

PCR: When I work as a sculptor. I say a stone and I mean it as a house, I say a glass of water, I name it as an oak tree, I say a beam of light, I name it as a body. That's metaphor... But as a painter I go on painting and saying at the same time: this is not a house, neither an oak tree, nor a body. Painting is. It just is.

AS: But is it ever possible to pick up a tube of Cadmium Red and not think of Barnett Newman?

PCR: The actual question should be how to make a painting without him. Last summer it occurred to me doing some of my paintings and naming them after some of Newman's. You know, like 'Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue'... and so on. A very stupid thing to do, I must confess. The very simple assumption that painting is not about images, still seems very difficult to explain. A painter should be able to paint with his eyes closed, don't you think?

AS: You want each painting to be seen for itself, but it is always one amongst its fellows. You rarely show them singly. With the sculptures, there is often a sense of openness and change, of forms not being fixed. One of the most engaging aspects of your work is that it allows you to feel involved, that everything is in flux – without the relationships being arbitrary. There is a sense that one is inside the work, rather than looking at it.

PCR: No, I would like there to be no possibility of change whatsoever. When I work I am not aware of the audience. My work is not aware of the audience either.

AS: Does that include you yourself, as a member of your own audience?

PCR: Well, I think I'm the most privileged member of my audience because I'm the only one. I see it happening before, during and after. When it's finished, it's gone. Some others will take it somewhere else. Now and then it happens that some of it passes by in my life once again.

AS: In your sculptures from the mid-1980s there were sometimes forms like wrapped-up figures. There is a sense in which you are getting rid of people in your sculptures, while maintaining a sense of human presences and absences. In your recent sculptural installations there is an apparition of an absent worker, who has built, worked, destroyed and moved on. In an installation in Maastricht you left a nail stuck in the wall, just at the right height, somewhere for him to hang his coat. I found this little detail very poignant.

PCR: I'm always interested in poetry. And there's still the possibility that, after all, my works might be inhabited. You just have to think about the "absence" in them. Like if somebody passed by, like if somebody just left the lights on and went away. Like if somebody forgot to close the door. Or an unfinished glass of water, on the table. And if we are speaking here about tables let me tell you that around mine, for wine and food, I rather prefer poets for company.

AS: Who's afraid of poetry?

PCR: Most of the artists I know are. For myself, this is a closed matter, a discussion for others. Poetry is far more important for me than art theory. I take it as a supreme form of language, the most condensed, the most conceptual, if you prefer, the one which tends most to a desire of perfection. You see, language in a Velázquez is irrelevant, I don't see kings riding horses in canvas. I see brushstrokes, I see colour, I'm aware of the space, I see an artist's vision as opposite to all those big

explanations like containers full of words unable to achieve the accurate clarity of poetry. It comes before literature, philosophy, criticism. Nothing to do with any mental hierarchy. It's just what it is. I like to read philosophical texts once in a while but I always take it as if it is a visionary writing, like a good religious text can be. It can also be beautiful sometimes but poetry goes beyond all that.

AS: Basic, profound things.

PCR: An artist is an intellectual who thinks with his eyes. A tree can be a figure but also a house.

AS: One of the overwhelming impressions you give, as a man, is as one who takes pleasure in life. In the poetry of simple things.

PCR: I prefer to live a very down-to-earth life. Enjoying ordinary things, not looking down on people. I like the 'Breughel' look of society, this humanly rough 'Breughelian' aspect behind the shiny McDonald's facade. Everywhere a sense of loneliness and there is no way to run away from it even being an artist. Somehow and using common words I have always been able to discuss art with the guy who works in the restaurant, even if more often it happens that I can't talk about art with a colleague of mine who I'm having dinner with.

AS: You have said the real enemy is fear and stupidity.

PCR: When I look at all those artworks shaping our existence since ages, it's also about moments of despair, woven together with belief, shaping our existence, giving us back testimony of ourselves but always playing high, one step ahead. How do you teach someone to play tennis? Do you indulge them by playing badly, to give confidence to your pupil? Or should you be absolutely ruthless and play to win, so that your opponent can learn the best from you? There's a bit of cruelty in all this but that's part of the game. Art was never meant to be nice, it just has to be unique. To enlarge intelligence, and not indulge. I'm not interested in illustrating feelings, anxieties, or little moments of happiness. I bring silence with me into my work. I just want to give people a way for them to listen better to their "sounds" arising from their own "silence". Maybe I could do better. Maybe I could be more "socially engaged" as an artist like many others these days. But if you look seriously the difference between Cimabue and Reinhardt is not that big, is it? We are more or less the same as we were before, maybe just a little step ahead. And none of these two is waving a flag, is it? Small mindless ends in militantism.

AS: Is it still possible to be an idealist? You sound like one when you talk about your work.

PCR: We can't be anything else but idealists. The mere fact of writing tomorrow's schedule is still an ultimate, desperate, form of utopia. Then at night, when you try to fall asleep, all that darkness that fear of a no tomorrow comes back again. And to escape it either you go for another last drink, or you tune on your TV porno channel, could as well be National Geographic, or you just sit again at the kitchen table and think again about what you have to do tomorrow. Whatever you do, fear is always there.

AS: Does this anxiety feed the work?

PCR: It doesn't feed. It's there, all the time. Has been there before anything else. There's this strange thing I have to tell you about and that keeps coming to me again and again. It's a daydream, a recurrent image: I see myself in all those places I know from everyday life, they're still sunny, you can still feel a breeze but they are completely empty, like suspended in time, as if everyone has died a long, long time ago, and there I am, absolutely alone, feeling completely deaf in a world with no sound, standing still in the middle of the street. I have always thought an artwork could be something like this. Something completely silent, near to nothing, putting the viewer in a permanent gaze. A fragmented perception, where the viewer thinks he recognizes what he sees but he is unable to determine, with precision, the contours of what he recognizes. Leaving him with the feeling that "I think I know this...".

AS: There's a tendency in some quarters, even amongst artists, to view being an artist as a career like any other. And to make art as a kind of adjunct to the career. As entertainment. Or that making things and making money were the same.

PCR: It comes with the trendiness package. That's not a problem of mine. It's just about self-indulgence, and being tuned or monitored by the opinion makers in the market. In art history, shit like that has always been there. Comes together with the hype. The thing now is that the whole package comes wrapped with the global strategy of the neo liberal capitalism and its wet dream of a society of demented, never ending happiness. It's just the glossy fashion world plus some nasty greasy ketchup spots dropping from the burgers they all eat together. There is always a thin line which makes the difference and has to be acknowledged. I want to put energy and mystery back into common everyday life normal things and give them back to people. Like it or not the actual word for that is aura. A rather inconvenient word I've been told. But, just look again at Fragonard's "The Swing". It's all about that magnificent, immense instant while the slipper flies through the air, and the time it takes us to imagine every single possible detail about the figure swinging. It's an experience of displacement between an image and a vision. It's a very devious painting. It's about aura.

AS: Well, that's Rococo for you. You could see Jeff Koons as a modern Rococo artist.

PCR: Rococo was mainly an attempt to teach Catholicism to children, and there, there's nothing hiding. There is nothing to discover, just like in pornography. Personally, I prefer to find hidden things, not having them *à la carte*. No mail orders or catering. In life, or in art. I tend to go to restaurants, and engage with the chef talking about what I'd like to eat.

AS: What is the relationship between going to restaurants and pleasure, and, come to that, to pornography, and art?

PCR: It is like this: I wake up and say to myself 'today looks like a very good day to work'. I really want to go to the studio but I have to feed myself before I get there. So I walk the streets. I feel very receptive. Everything comes to me. I take all. I take sounds like I take words. I take clouds. I smell things and I take-in the gradations of light. I take the distractions of the pavement. I fill myself up with all this, I feed on it, then I go to the studio. I hardly ever eat when I am hungry. Eating is not about feeding. Eating is about pleasure. To do an artwork I have to be fed, but while I'm

doing it I'm eating.

AS: I remember going to your studio once, and we were delayed on our way there. In fact, we were delayed for two days. But at this point, just as we passed a little cafe, the owner was just at that moment laying out a dish of cooked pig's feet in the cafe window. At this moment a silent question proposed itself – I saw it in your eye – Do we go to the studio or do we investigate this dish of pig's feet?

PCR: It was clear that we were not ready yet to go the studio. That was the question. I just take physical pleasure as a reference both in my life and in my work. I walk around town and I can translate a fragment of a phrase overheard between two girls on the sidewalk into a work of mine. I just grab at a snatch of conversation, but it achieves the grandeur of a declaration – the sound of the words, the context as they're walking by, the smell that they leave behind them, me looking ahead at the next thing – I take all this as a mental sketch book and use it to work with as well as I use all that disparate stuff laying in my studio floor. Gathering those images, those memories, those sounds, those things again, and again, and again...

AS: Having to perform again and again? For yourself and for the others – your audience, the curators, the critics, for people like me?

PCR: Absolutely. That is life, after all. That's the shadow of the others we keep looking through.

AS: Maybe artists are just better witnesses. A politician doesn't witness an age – he feels like he's enacting it.

PCR: Artists shape the world. Not as individuals, but in what we do. A politician with any political philosophy or anyone enacting an exercise of power is always lacking perspective. They just have an agenda. Artists just have time.

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- A conversation with Pedro Cabrita Reis.
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