

ON PAINTINGS AND HOUSES

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PEDRO CABRITA REIS AND DAVID BATCHELOR

David Batchelor: You've been away from your studio for a few weeks. When you get back, what do you do? How do you get started again?

Pedro Cabrita Reis: Whenever I return, after being away, I feel this is an empty and sad place to come back to. There's a lot of dust, and the works seem to be left alone. But anyway, the studio isn't a place where I spent a lot of my time. There are periods when work is intense, 10 or 15 hours a day, but sometimes I prefer to stay home and write and do small drawings on my notepads, projects of possible works. Some other times I'm just away in workshops around Lisbon having my pieces done. The studio is a place where I bring into matter things that somehow started to exist before, things I have seen in my random walks around the city, or after reading a few lines in old books still surviving on my bookshelves, or images I've seen in movies or television. But, before the studio becomes such a place, I still have to wait for all that to come together, and wait also for a strange, physical desire to finally come back here again, to this place and just start doing it.

DB: For the sake of argument, let's say you make paintings and sculptures – in theory at least, although I don't think there's any need to differentiate them in practice in the studio. But you've said that the starting point has always been painting.

PCR: Till the late eighties, I was mostly doing paintings. I didn't start doing sculptures and installations until the early nineties. Those earlier paintings were very thick in the sense that they had a lot of paint on, and sometimes even had things glued onto them. Toward the end, I was not even using brushes any more, just a pair a pair of rubber gloves and I would stick my hands into the paint cans and draw and paint directly from the cans, making each canvas a very heavy object. I used to work on several paintings at a time, having a few canvasses scattered around the room and working on them simultaneously, learning from one canvas to the other, until each one of them was pushing toward the same resolution as the others around it. I felt I was dealing more and more with space and a certain kind of physicality, which required something more three-dimensional than just paint on canvas. So this began to bring up questions of installation. I needed more space. By the end of the eighties, I said to myself, 'I don't need paint cans or brushes or canvas, what I really need is a nice couple of hammers and some nails and some screws.'

DB: You were working in Lisbon at the end of the eighties – not at that time a city strongly identified with contemporary art. What were you informed by?

PCR: My first trip out of the country was to London in 1973, and since in those days there was not enough money around for traveling I didn't leave for the second time until 1983, when I went to New York. There I saw a lot of shows, and almost every museum. Looking at Minimalists in museums

and at Schnabel and German Expressionism in galleries, melting all those things in my mind, not really knowing where all that would bring me.

DB: What else was going on in Portugal at the time?

PCR: It was the height of Neo-Expressionism – everybody was painting, making things allegedly involving political issues, but very much around a representational level of activity.

DB: None of which I associate with your work...

PCR: Well, I also had my very brief figurative period around 84, in fact just the time of one solo show in Lisbon. Then, the second half of the eighties was to me a time for dark abstract paintings. I did a lot of that. In the very beginning of the nineties I started to create a new and more personal vocabulary deeply related to all the territory around the concept of “house” – tables, walls, doors, staircases, objects, fragments of architecture. I started building in plaster, using for the first time standard industrial materials, just the same materials builders used in construction. It was a plain and very simple plaster plates reinforced with *juta* that they used for ceilings in poor houses. I think they don’t do them anymore. From the dark abstract paintings to the white, plaster objects.

DB: A lot of artists from our generation painted as students and then stumbled out of painting, as if the frame of painting couldn’t contain what they wanted to do – without knowing what it was they did want to do particularly – and that clearly describes something about your work. There is painting in it, and painting informs it, but it’s not painting.

PCR: You are perhaps right but I’m a painter. Maybe they aren’t just paintings. But they are definitely about painting. Being still a painter and doing sculptures as well. I would not be so sure that what I do it’s not painting. Looking back again at works I’ve done, looking at works I do, comparing them, seeing them as moments of the same stream thru all these years, analyzing the way they are built, the way they reveal themselves to us, I still see a lot of painting in that. No, I’m a painter and that is clear, and I will always be one. Some things you just can’t run away from, they are what you really are.

DB: Actually, just looking round your studio I can see more painting than anything else.

PCR: Most of the three-dimensional objects I’ve done, and specially the wall-based ones, are just what they are, but the perception we have of them is built upon and comes to us as only a painting could. In fact, I think I am a painter whom like others did, or do, extended painting to other levels, by doing sculptures, installations, appropriating space. When I use glass or neon tubes, plaster, wood or steel or poured paint, it’s still about the vocabulary of painting. The materials I use, like glass for example, imply formal and conceptual qualities of transparency, opacity, light, verticality, dealing with, and incorporating in the way they are used, the lexicon of the classical approach to painting and I want it to be understood as that.

DB: Isn't it a phenomenal thing that something as simple as a plane of glass can bring together all of that...

PCR: I mean, we are all really tired of hearing this cliché about the death of painting every five years but, as artists, we are not supposed to worry about it – it's not a studio problem, it's their little market problem. Like others, what I do are things which I see as parts of a larger puzzle, and these things, eventually, will form a glossary allowing us both, even if in different manners, to understand what we do and how we see things. That is what art is about. Again, take for instance one of my paintings on glass or behind glass. When you look at one of those I would like you to see it as presentation, but never as representation; you can see the light in it, coming from it, reflected on it, generated by it. You can see yourself mirrored or the background behind you, you can see yourself or others moving, and you can be even more demanding and just go through the mirrored reflection of the surface and you get into the colour itself. You can see all this but still, you wouldn't say it's about representation. There are no funny stories or cute little cartoon paintings in there. Just pure colour.

DB: So while we're on the subject of painting, there are two series of works I'd like to talk about: the *Cabinet d'Amateurs* and the *Catalogues*. You've done a number of versions since the late '90s. I love these works, partly because they correspond to things that I think about a lot. Tell me about them.

PCR: I like to work in very concentrated and focused series of pieces or works. Years ago, after a period more focused on installation and sculpture I decided I should really confront my desire to re-analyse the possibilities of painting and my own relation to it. I thought then that I would have to establish an inner crossroads, a kind of mental working platform, which would allow simultaneously to concentrate and to open in different directions. So in those years – about the turn of the '90s – I started doing a series of works that I wanted to be repetitive and with no kind of great heroic touch of the brushstroke, just the colour on the surface, being glass most of the times that surface. But I didn't want to become tied to a kind of wasteland of mere monochromatism. I wanted to push the idea itself to exhaustion, and see how far it could go.

So I started two lines of work; the *Catalogue*, and the *Cabinet d'Amateurs*. Both were meant to be painting installation. The *Catalogues*, either on glass, wood or aluminum – had many different individual forms and shapes but all of them had the same colour, and the same brushstroke. The elements were placed on shelves on the wall.

The *Cabinets* were different in the sense that they are always the same form or shape, but painted in different colours. I have made two *Cabinets*: one in Oporto, and one in Stockholm. In Stockholm I wanted doors and so I went with the curator and assistants to a demolition warehouse – one of those companies that make money by salvaging parts from houses to be demolished. It was a huge place, organized like hell, it was terrifying how pristine and clean it was. Sweden. I spotted a bunch of office doors made of wood and glass and I said, this is great; so I bought a lot of them and then we painted these doors in different sections of colours, in front and behind the glass and this was a *Cabinet*.

The support doesn't matter. Can be ordered or just found. I still want to do some of these.

DB: One of the features of both sets of work is that they are wall-based, was this a deliberate homage to painting?

PCR: A deliberate intention on, about and because of painting, which is what they are. Both the *Cabinets* and the *Catalogues* hang like paintings on walls. Some have been painted over found materials, like found doors from offices, others on pre-ordered forms and materials. Curiously enough, the *Catalogues*, which are the monochromatic, have always been painted and constructed on glass, and so far they have always been painted on the front of the glass.

DB: Which makes them opaque and absorbent.

PCR: Absolutely, but in the case of the *Cabinet d'Amateur* it totally changes because I painted those on top of *and* behind the glass, allowing you to establish a dual physical and optical relationship to these works. In top of the glass you can see both the brushstroke and the physicality of the paint, but at the same time looking through the glass you can experience light and colour generated by the paint just behind the glass.

DB: That sounds like a minor difference, but there's an entire world in that; to view something on top of a surface when it's opaque and absorbent; then to view a world with a mirror in front of it generates an entirely different set of associations.

PCR: Here we are again back to presentation and representation. What you reconstruct in permanence is your own awareness through the spiritual and physical appropriation of a painting. That's what Franz Hals brings to you with the delicacy and the beauty of his white brushstrokes or Greco with his dramatic mass of transparent darkness even when he uses green.

DB: But you also talk about Minimalism – you've got Dan Flavin and Donald Judd who are both using contemporary materials, who are both in a way destroying images, because of the sheer brilliance of light and reflection and transparent colour, using materials like Plexiglas or...

PCR: Flavin was a poet of great intensity and Judd a very accurate philosopher and they both had this deep, profound silent quality in their work .

DB: Don't you think fluorescent light is a kind of nightmare for painters?

PCR: Perhaps the ultimate obsession for a painter is trying to find light through colour. And fluorescent it's such beautiful light. It's almost pure light. But in the end, I don't look at those tubes as light; for me it's just matter. They are as heavy and dark and as dense as the bricks or the steel you see in my works. Light is matter not illumination.

DB: And you often paint over the fluorescent tubes?

PCR: I used to do that when I wanted those tubes to be deprived of their luminous quality. But then, there came a moment when I understood that it

has nothing to do with the object itself, but in fact how you relate it to the other materials in the same piece.

DB: When I first saw work where you had painted over the lights I thought it was funny, but it also seemed rather romantic and melancholic.

PCR: You are right. I wanted to bring into the work melancholy as an inner quality and those tubes and the light they generate down to a level of decaying, of dirt, and passage of time. Then I realized the neon tube already has, as an object, a quality of melancholy embedded in it. It didn't need anything added to it. They carry already enough sadness, it belongs to lost alleys, suburban places, factories where people are exploited, a history of exploitation and oblivion.

DB: All that and it's still beautiful.

PCR: And a beauty coming from its cold, mute presence and that's what I finally wanted.

DB: Maybe we need to talk about materials, because you don't just paint, your works, which refer to painting are also about accumulating stuff from the city.

PCR: I have been collecting stuff for many years from street containers, that relates to the house with a big "H" – I wouldn't collect a vase with a flower in, I would collect things that would be remotely associated with the idea of house. It could be the fragment of a chair or a piece of furniture, but they have one thing in common, they bring us to the universe of the house, either as architecture which is very ideological, or as domesticity, which is the politics of the day-by-day.

DB: I associate your work with the house, and the features of a house, and I associate your work with buildings, but I don't associate it with architecture. Architecture these days (at least in London where I come from) seems to be about grand design.

PCR: When people refer to my work, that word has been always a two-edged blade. 'Architecture' is not the word it needs to be used, but it seems there is no other. So, when architecture is mentioned, I would love that word to be understood related to the act of building. I'm more inclined to construction, I like the word better, it comes straight from the hands of those who construct. Is far more comprehensive

DB: And that's not how I understand architecture; architecture is in the design, the planning and structures that are beyond mere buildings. Your work deals with the contingency of building, which is to appropriate and absorb materials to make volumes and spaces.

PCR: I agree. The act of building is to be understood as a synonym for the presence of humanity. As an artist what I'm interested in is not about nature. It's about the fact that we are able to elaborate a projection of our awareness, creating a territory that is constructed. The beauty and the intensity of a wall speak more about us than the grandeur, so to speak, of a seascape or a mountain.

DB: It seems to me that you delight in the contingency of building in spaces.

PCR: Absolutely, contingency is the appropriate word here. Embracing all possible options issued of something that comes out of the profound, intense need to establish a place of being. Being able to create a particular place, which we will nominate as house more than home. It seems to me, that in your language, in English 'home' has to do with a particular kind of mental self-protection, reducing and closing while 'house' is a more open and physical instance, a materialization of the self. "House" would imply in my vocabulary a deeper meaning than "home", it's more precise regarding the creation of a model from where to understand your position in the world.

DB: When I saw your show at Camden Art Centre in London earlier this year, someone suggested that the works you made there were southern european, in that they were building-like forms, but they were also open, you could move from inside to outside without interruption, whereas in northern Europe we just shut people out, we close the doors.

PCR: I do not recognize my work under that and I'm certainly not proposing any local or anecdotal "architecture". I'm proposing a quintessential human activity as a metaphorical process, and that is building, and building is the same everywhere, it's putting things together and on the top of each other to create a territory. In Camden the steel girders, before anything else, were drawings in the air, possibilities of lines that would eventually construct a space. I was very happy with those works because there was almost no narrative whatsoever. They only indulged in one or two subtle and ephemeral moments, a table, a window or a door. They were just rather dry references to a possibility of architecture, but most of all they were models for the inevitability of construction. And very primordial.

DB: They were skeletal, whereas the building you made for the Giardini in Venice was enclosed, there was air conditioning, there were a million florescent lights, it was painted a really repellent orange, and there was that wonderful aluminum foil cladding on the outside.

PCR: With that particular piece, 'Absent Names', I was interested in creating a place, a closed and cold space, and being inside it one would be completely surrounded by light. Not the kind of special effects light, just an intense experience able to induce you to one of those moments when you fade into silence. Actually, David, I always thought of this construction as a chapel.

DB: A profoundly secular chapel?

PCR: Sometimes you are confronted with situations, places or just things that overwhelm you and you became silent not by fear or any other dramatic transformation in the way how you perceive things. It's just something coming from within yourself and your mind is pushed to an intellectual and emotional edge. It could as well be a house, the ocean or a painting. Everything inside you seems to gain an extreme sharpness and clarity like if you've had absolute comprehension for a moment...

DB: We're getting a bit spiritual now...

PCR: I know. Excuse me, but this profoundly secular chapel started to gain form in my mind years ago in Venice while sitting down at the Schiavoni school looking at the Carpaccios there. Moments like this keep coming back in my life when I want to rebuild or remake particular things I've seen. So, when I was invited by Bonani to present a project for the Giardini I felt the time had come to go and sit there again, in that little tiny room and start looking at it with my eyes closed. Approximately the same dimensions and the rest followed naturally, no Carpaccios but an extreme orange and that light all around you coming from the walls. A place separated from the outside by a little entrance. Perhaps serenity was the closest resemblance to the chapel.

DB: Excuse me the secular materialist: it was literally illuminated and it was literally cool and calm because you had installed air conditioning.

PCR: Well, at the same time I also wanted it to be a place where serenity would incorporate a certain tension. The nervous sound of the air conditioners, the too cold temperature, the almost screaming orange. You got in through a very small entrance and you get all this sudden impact, the light, the cold, and the noise and the colour and after all that, you came across a certain isolation.

DB: That was an awful orange, I have to say.

PCR: I like it and I use it very often. Is bright, powerful, intense in its opacity. Comes out any surface you put it. Moves like no other color does. It was absolutely impossible not to use it in Venice, because it is already there underneath every thing, in the air itself, the tones of the light, the reflections under the water, the skin of the city, and at the same time it can be totally opposite as a color standing for an undeniable heavyweight industrial vocation.

DB: I keep looking across the corridor in your studio at one of your paintings there, but there's also half a car next to it, and the car looks great.

PCR: Yes, the car looks great but the thing is that right now it tells me there is no such thing as abstraction. I keep looking at the car and at the paintings we see here, monochromatic, abstract as they say, and I know that if sometime in the future I would make a very unlikely yellow painting, that yellow car there and all the times I've looked at it, parked there, inside the studio, will have something to do with that painting. After all, there is no abstract art. I abhor illustration and narrativity in art, but even those great paintings Reinhardt did are about something eventually. Maybe about a perfect moment...

DB: But I think we Anglo-Saxons recognize that you can't have the perfect moment, all you have is the contingency.

PCR: Yes, so how do you deal with the work you have done?

DB: Each work fails you and that is why you make another one. But there's never the perfect moment – I don't think I have any need for that perfect moment, we just carry on.

People have described what you make as between painting and sculpture – I don't think that's quite right, I think you make things between paintings and buildings – it's clearly more to do with the built environment, it's not architecture, but it's about living. There really is a profound sense it's not concerned with ideals about living, it's about how you inhabit a space. Talking of which, how are you going to inhabit the space that is Haunch of Venison? Is there another *Cabinet d'Amateur* in the pipeline?

PCR: I might make one for my show in London. For the moment I'm still wandering around, enjoying these magnificent last summer days. Soon I'll close myself in the studio. Here, I'll indulge myself doing whatever I want and feel it is important for my work and for me. I'll do paintings because I like painting and I'm a painter, and I'll do sculptures because I like sculpture and I'm a sculptor. And this is not a statement, it's just how things are, and how I am. No problem, I love to hang out for drinks with all sorts of people. Even other artists.

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- *Pedro Cabrita Reis in conversation: on paintings and houses..*

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