

Favorite Places: Works by Pedro Cabrita Reis

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A group of recent works by Pedro Cabrita Reis bears the auspicious title *Favorite Places*. The artist often makes use of titles laced with innuendo and even literary titles, but perhaps the concept of place is in fact a suitable metaphor to describe his work. Place, places, favorite places—places that one finds or which one builds, which one visits or just goes around.

Place as opposed to object, but also as opposed to a building, the place where the pictures are preserved, the place reflected in painting, a place for a temporary or a lasting stay. If one keeps this concept in mind while walking through an exhibition of Cabrita Reis's works, it might help explain what one sees. We want to set off on this walk and touch upon some of his works as well as the historical context from which they have emerged.

Cabrita Reis comes from a country whose culture—whether by choice or by force—long stood at the outer edge of Europe's field of influence and was far removed from America as well, although the gaze across the Atlantic is focused on it. Yet Cabrita Reis grew up under the influence of the American art of the mid-twentieth century just as his contemporaries did. His romantic concept of the painterly, which suits his disposition, was sharpened by the objectification of the painting that he encountered in the works of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg, and Brice Marden. At the same time, in the Italian art of the nineteen-sixties, he encountered an incisive revolt against the object nature of the work, the shift toward an instable, theatrical pictorial language. What had characterized the art of the previous generation—the immediate, mute presence of things on the one hand and the improvised handling of materials and emphatic rhetoric on the other—formed Cabrita Reis's contradictory reference points, and his work responds to them in a sophisticated fashion. Unlike other artists who found themselves in the same situation, Cabrita Reis made it clear from the very beginning that he did not aspire to pursue formalist exercises or quote established positions. A postmodern approach, the mere exposition or instrumentalization of recent art history, was completely foreign to Cabrita Reis's intentions. As an artist, he had to take the position that the past was far removed, unapproachable. He constructs and does not reconstruct, and so he nonchalantly chooses from what is available and is most advantageous for his

pictorial notions. He shapes abandoned painterly and sculptural remnants of history into an open-ended tableau, the sketch-like character of which eludes any rigid fixation to a theoretical totalization. According to Stéphane Mallarmé a work of art is the poetic reconstruction of the world from its debris and from that of art history—done on the work's own terms.

Therefore, if the figure of the monochrome regularly appears in Cabrita Reis's oeuvre, even occupying it almost obsessively, it is hardly ever as a singular final object in which the work is focused. *Cabinet d'amateur #1* as well as *Archives Series #1 (Black)* are typical multipart works that avail themselves of this figure, using it as a component of a spatial contrivance. Instead of being hung parallel to the wall, the painted glass panes in *Cabinet* are therefore positioned on shelves as if they were only going to temporarily furnish the space.

In *Lisbon Gates*, the painted panes of glass lean against found door casings that in turn are positioned in front of a wall, with the result that the painting's nomadic character as well as its human dimensions within the space are further underscored: the notion of the picture as an open window to another world is replaced by an ambiguous situation in which it stands as an occlusive, mirroring fascinating object in front of the passageway. Cabrita Reis creates a place in this way—a cabinet, an archive, a multidoored room—and does not put the essence of painting to the test. In doing so, he adopts the alignment of homogeneous elements, the reduction of the range of colors down to a manageable number—some of the characteristic features of painting and sculpture that modernism concentrated on and that were reinterpreted in the nineteen-sixties. He adopts them and simultaneously thematizes them by comprehending these categories not literally, but rather as rhetorical positions, not solely in formal terms or as a radical objective, but as ambiguous, provisory, and tentative. His insights that artistic placements and gestures can be understood rhetorically, that the work of art houses reality in a fictitious building, and that the truth of a work therefore rests in its appearance led him to works that poetically and theatrically circumvent the modernist consensus without placing itself in open conflict to it. By slightly varying the heights of the row of the *Cabinet* works, disturbing the regularity of the tiers through the spatial circumstances, and making it impossible to extrapolate a rule for the sequence of colors through the abundance of elements, Cabrita Reis has already carefully distanced himself here from minimalist models without disavowing them. But it is primarily about the reflections in the panes of glass or in the picture surfaces painted with black

enamel paint, which cast back more or less incident light depending on the angle of inclination and make an exact examination of the painting difficult. The site of pure, withdrawn painting is taken over by a painterly occupied place that reflects the viewer's glance back at him. Facing the picture, the viewer finds himself with the artist in a room where the memory of painting lives on. This is true in a different way for the monumental *The White Room (About T. S. Eliot)*. It is a polyptych comprising five pictures of the same size that have been joined together, whereby fabrics in various shades of white are mounted behind glass in deep aluminum frames that are used for mounting glass façades. Seen from up close, the painting still allows the structure of the fabric to be recognized. But from a distance, the viewer sees the room in the sheets of glass—as a window, a mirror, and, at the same time, as an abyss. The perception of the pictures is not determined by the tactility of the surfaces. Rather, the changing circumstances contribute to their presentation, allowing them to be understood as abstract gestures. The dedication to the poet suggests their material and metaphorical dimension—dominantly present and absently illusionary at the same time. These painting spaces are allegories; no completed picture appears in them, but rather painting as a precious tradition and therefore as a reference to future painting.

Pictures as windows and doors and vice versa. These openings define the space, enable access, and make it permeable for its surroundings. This is encapsulated in *Peeping*, an enclosure constructed solely out of doors. As it presents itself to the viewer, it contains a concealed, protected interior that is inaccessible as well as a vast infinite exterior to which the doors could open up. The potential is there and because the object stands somewhat lopsided—one corner is propped on a pillow—it is tilted from the vertical and thus deviates from the strict logic of built architecture. The doors and windows suggest the actions of opening, looking or walking through, and closing—symbolic translations of the approach to the work. They are related in this way to the material assemblages recalling apparatuses that often appeared in Cabrita Reis's work in the nineteen-nineties. They are apparatuses for unknown procedures, without any other function than pure observation. The various wall elements from the small box in *Ascensão*, for example, seem as if they were being fed by a power line or water pipe to ensure that they maintain their calm, invisible operations. In *Os observadores / Atlas Coelestis VI*, on the other hand, rectangular and round sheets of glass are grounded by rubber pipes on pieces of terracotta while plastic connections link the panes of glass to each other. The elements recall scientific test assemblies that fulfilled their mysterious purposes until just a moment ago and then

suddenly came to a halt. The familiarity of the construction correlates with its illegibility. Waiting to be used by the viewer and nevertheless functionless at the moment, these devices are far removed from being a mere metaphor for uselessness because their ambiguity would then be destroyed.

Cabrita Reis rather leads us to the state of uncertainty between a potential meaning that, like the star atlas referred to in the title, is only waiting for the person who will bring it to life and an absolute hermeticism doomed to oblivion—and therefore another allegory of the artwork. Tubes, pipes, and cables not only represent symbolic links to materials, they are also elements of drawing that Cabrita Reis makes use of in this very sense. Painting and the object have been previously named, yet drawing is his true medium, although by no means in a conventional sense. A good example of this is light, which he uses to draw his constructions. Light itself is not a material, but fluorescent tubes indeed are. Cabrita Reis has often worked with them in recent years, as they are easily available commercially and are technically defined components, in essence not unlike stretchers, canvases, or sheets of paper.

Industrial production offers thin tubes in standardized lengths affixed to metal framing that provides a specific scale, not to mention the light they disseminate. The light first appears when the tubes mounted on the constructions have been wired and plugged in, when the drawing, as it were, is complete. It intervenes in the work's appearance more powerfully than any color. The light denotes parts, it draws dividing lines and boundaries, and it opens up horizons, thus acting on the material as well as the symbolic level of the representation.

For Cabrita Reis, it serves to illuminate the visible lines of the construction and to elevate the picture like the coloration of a drawing, in addition to endowing it with new contours. In *The Unnamed Word*, the interlocking construction is tilted over on its side, but the vertical beams tiered in radiant lines form a building or, in a metaphorical sense, a hedge through which the reddish gleam of a backdrop penetrates. In *Favorite Places No. 6*, transparent and opaque surfaces of neutral and painted laminated glass alternate and extend in part beyond the edges into the surrounding space. The pale hues of color on the glass, like those found in Mediterranean countries where sunlight outshines everything, come close to the dull gray aluminum frames and wood slats scarred by traces of use. The delicately nuanced colors are illuminated by the cold light of a fluorescent tube affixed to the interior. A photograph mounted next to it depicting the yawning

open structure of an incomplete building evokes the grid pattern as the paragon of modernist construction; as irony would have it, it concerns an abandoned construction site from the Portuguese pilgrimage destination of Fatima.

Cabrita Reis draws and paints with everyday materials that chance has placed in his hands, and for that reason the course of the work obeys the spontaneity of drawings and not demands for architectonic stability. As the simplest symbols of human construction, posts and lintels correspond to the architectural design character of the work. Yet Cabrita Reis by no means sees himself as an architect. For him, building is a comprehensive metaphor indicative of man-made places, the protection and projection of one's own body. This body simultaneously finds itself in the built place, which is simultaneously a shell and a sequence of pictorial views and anything but the image of abstract spatiality.

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