

The Substance Of Violence

BY AGNALDO FARIAS

2006

Times are weighing down on us. It is probable, even, that at this very moment there is another shoot out in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Just in Rio? It is not even the most violent metropolis of the nation. It is a city however, where violence is at its most incongruous, less fitting than anywhere else, as if it were all an improbable wrong turn in the city celebrated, and rightly so, as the greatest symbol of the verses *abençoado por Deus e bonito por natureza*, or “blessed by God and beautiful by Nature”. When did it go wrong? When did Brazil go sour? A difficult question to answer, and many will point out different factors, events, and conjunctures from the nation’s recent past, as the turning point in the life of this continent that is practically a paradise, inhabited by a people known for being happy and cordial, endowed with an inveterate optimism that may just be primordial. We can blame globalization, the military dictatorship, and the succession of failed economic plans that acted in concert to bring about intolerable social inequality, the corruption that is traceable back to the ends of Colonial Brazil, already denounced back in the 17th century, by Gregório de Matos Guerra, the poet who voiced the definitive epithet for his homeland *Triste Bahia! Ó quão dessemelhante* “Sad Bahia! So unequal”.

The fact is that the atmosphere is still heavy; violence crossing through souls in a variety of ways, some silent, although inexorably suffocating, unsettling any illusion we might have of a safe harbor, starting at its most essential expression: the house. A sensation confirmed by José Bechara’s *Casa* (House) in the Modern Art Museum of Rio de Janeiro, even if it is hardly a literal illustration of our times. Strictly speaking, when dealing with an artist such as José Bechara, one can never quite tell if the violence that his work is imbued with comes from inside or outside. There will always hover over us the suspicion that he might remain the same, whether working somewhere in Switzerland or in any of those nations whose peace and quiet sounds, at least to us, Brazilians, exasperating. Be it as it may, what we are not doing here is insisting on the notion of an expression that is alien to the world. After all, even music itself, an expression that seems disconnected from reality can be the symptom of something unnerving, an irruption of the violence that had been circling us silently until it shatters with blows the thin glass that we suppose protects us. Just listen to Beethoven or Wagner. Just take a look at Rio de Janeiro, whose spiritual opulence vibrates like a choir in a cathedral of heat so thick and humid that it

ripens fruit just as it turns them in to a shapeless mass, rotting, intensely perfumed.

José Bechara's house is a house through and through. It has been created in real scale (1:1), made up of those run of the mill panels of MDF wood, a material that has no personality, put together from the leftovers of other woods, which, on the other hand, is perhaps significant in toning down the house's relation to buildings and urban life, making it more akin to a mental construct, to the boring lay-outs reproduced ad nauseam in the low income housing projects, all in all the same formula that, along with a sun, tree and chimney, windows and doors, we cultivate from childhood in blank sheets of paper. It is a house such as these, ultra familiar, and as we all know, the single item most desired by the Brazilian people whose sharp sense of insecurity would be somewhat placated by such an acquisition, that spits its furniture out. Chairs, tables, stools, beds, mattresses, closets, sofas, armchairs, from among other objects of daily life so warm and friendly-vehemently rejected, brutally thrown out, compressing themselves through the narrowness of doors and windows, like water swirling down a pipe.

Like a crippled explosion, the gush stopped a fraction of a second before the ensuing disaster, and all the while we circle the scene taking it in, some objects already outside, already touching the ground, although still grappling those following. And where are those who live in the house that Bechara shows us? Apparently there is no one. Leading us to conclude that that it was the house itself, taking a life of its own, that spat out, that decided to spit out all its furniture. If the house, the entire house, represents the thorough notion of shelter just as the furniture in it is there to guarantee us comfort and stability, what to think of this situation, of this banished domestic scene, since the house evidently can be of no use to us, this closed up house. We are denied a place to return to. No longer will there be the small domestic rites, the arguments over dinner, the dispute over using the bathroom, inadvertent brushing past each other in the corridors, converging gazes on the television, endless rainy afternoons doing homework at the dinner table, the smell of coffee, scoldings always excessive, the horizontal latching on to nocturnal ports, where dreams keep us afloat. All this and much more, because a house is made of memories, resentments, pleasures, drafts, discovering our bodies and its prohibitions, the sudden shutting of doors, the light refracted into colors by ordinary painted glass decorating the window. Window. Window and door, entryways through which the city reaches us, and when we are lucky, a piece of the horizon, a morsel of the sea. And the

walls stopping us from dispersing, where our bodies steady themselves.

One way or another, the poetic path taken by Bechara has always, even if obliquely, included violence. In a larger sense, of course, but certainly in its essence capable of unleashing energy of this intensity, as well as the discreet movements, the silent collisions that occur in the more subtle dimensions of matter. In this sense, one should note that it is a path that has been taken almost entirely through painting, and that has only recently, in the last three years, opened itself up to photography, installations and apparently, to whatever else there may be in store. These subtle tropes emerged from the beginning, the artist adopting an abstract language that would however surpass its materials, almost always tarps used on trucks. He is interested in the rigid fabric that changes from the yellowish brown that exits the factory and grows faint, under the effect of the sun, the rain and the wind, until it grays out.

There is a somewhat elusive kinship between José Bechara's conception of painting, as the chance result of nature's elements or any other agent, and paintings by Alberto Burri and Yves Klein. In a famous attempt at bridging the gulf that separates life and art, a topic that attracted renewed interest in the post war period, Burri, whose approach has been credited at least partially to his experience as a prisoner, used run down scraps of ordinary materials such as jute, bits and pieces that were torn or full of holes, swapping the traditional principles of painting for an emphasis in the rudimentary character of the materials. As to Klein, his canvas left out in the night air, on the trunk of his car, to be painted by the rain, or the blue canvas composed of circular drawings made by paintbrushes meticulously tied to a clothesline hung over it.

José Bechara's method however, distinguishes itself from the two artists mentioned above because he superimposes both actions. Firstly, he only buys from truck drivers tarps for his canvases that have been sufficiently worn out, and practically used up.

The negotiations include stretching the tarpaulins out on the ground and Bechara's careful investigation of the marks left behind by the elements of nature and the arduous routine the materials are submitted to. Under the artist's scrutiny the holes, scratches, excoriations, in sum, the fatigue of a material that has been mercilessly submitted to sunshine, wind and rain, that has contracted in the cold and expanded in the heat, that is crisscrossed with ropes that compress it from the outside, lacerating it to the point of tearing it, tight ropes that press on it, molding it to the bundled volumes, compact and regular, rocking the merchandize being transported. Volumes that strain the tarps on all sides, through breaks, accelerations, climbs, descents, sharp turns, oscillations throwing it to and fro, making it into a elastic and resistant

skin, like a placenta that, at the end of every trip, will be emptied out to be yet again filled up.

Once this phase is over, the next step consists in taking the tarpaulins inside the work area. Rooted in the history of art, and frequently identified as spaces akin to intimate and secluded drawing rooms, the term atelier turns out inadequate for designating a space that sometimes, due to larger sized works, can have industrial dimensions, apart from the fact that it contains relatively hazardous chemicals: used in the controlled precipitation of the oxidizing process that the artist carries out. His work method includes arranging layers of varying thickness of carbon steel wool of the same sort used at home for cleaning pots and pans or for rubbing wax out of wood floors, on top of square cut outs of tarpaulin. After this, using no paint or paintbrushes, the artist then wets the different layers in order to hasten the oxidizing process, a process that would take place regardless, due to the ambient heat and humidity. The violence of the duo water and air is such that one can practically witness its progressive assault on the steel wool, macerating it, dissolving it, transforming it so that it acts as an abrasive agent, eventually injuring the underlying tarpaulin. The capillary entanglement of iron's slow metamorphosis into stone like blocks of dark browns, that are fibrous and easily broken up, that will come undone in dust, in stains, in nodules that will destroy the tarpaulin's make up irreversibly, or at least its surface layers. The tarp's memory of its protective service now joins the memory of the pulverized material, material that once lay sheltered below, inside the ground.

Nevertheless, José Bechara's pictorial method is not exhausted in this process. On widening his ambit of control over the process, he determines prior to initiating the oxidizing, long strips of adhesive tape across the surface of the tarps, creating lines of varying thickness, parallel or perpendicular amongst themselves, that create distinct planes across the canvas. It is a geometry made out of methodical gestures, exact measurements, of marked rhythm in nothing reminiscent of the natural process of oxidizing. The removal of these strips of tape once the "charring" is over, which the artist may determine as more or less intense here or there, in this or that strip, the canvases, combined in diptychs and triptychs show areas- planes and strips- that are clearly distinct, contrasting with the remains of the physical chemical process. Some of them are charged with very bright browns, like an area that has been fully activated or a bundle of energy. What can the artist accomplish against nature's time, the action of the elements, and the effort and persistence of the tarp versus both? Painting, the artist tells us, to the contrary of those who would believe in sanctuaries, does not take place on top of an immaculate white background such as the textile for painting that is sold in the

market for art materials. If art is the result of action over a surface, then the truck tarps, like Marcel Duchamp's classic Paris Sky will be equally so. But, like Paris Sky or Burri's jute bags or Klein's deep blues, José Bechara's tarps is art because he has decided so. Pointing out the convergence of his gesture with nature's actions, he has intensified an active principle that is also based on destruction and the inevitable erosion of things.

Thus, instead of constructive intervention, the artist proposes another that is its diametrical opposite. Instead of rediscovering or reconstituting his materials, he allows for its natural trajectory toward death, following along the process. But his intervention does not end at this point. If it is true that tudo caminha para o silencio, or all is fated to silence, in the same manner that all that exists is subject to the law of gravity, if it is a fact that from Bechara's paintings we are enveloped by the sense of the tragic, there remains for us the positivity, the courage expressed in the attempt to organize, even if from hardly eloquent gestures, that nevertheless carry meaning, a structure as regular and monotonous as a field awaiting cultivation, and possibly, just as fertile. Simultaneously damaging the material and choosing the areas he wishes to save from harm, stretching over it protective strips, tapes that once removed, will reveal old scars. These planes and strips, having been momentarily isolated will still withstand a little more, establishing a musical counterpoint to the most corroded sectors, like the sound that stays alive because of the sound that follows it. However, before we delve further still, past the boundaries of José Bechara's paintings to look for the motives that brought him to the current phase in which he practices other forms of expression, one must, in my view, take into account that for the artist, the possibility of carrying on his work as a painter will necessarily imply in recognition, that it is present everywhere, in everything, all the time. Long before and long after his interception of a piece of any odd thing that will impel him into his work place, to face it. According to Bechara painting takes place on the surface of things, on faces, on stones, on buildings, the sky, in the detail one glimpses of a fruit before and after it is bitten, on the skins of animals, like the cattle growing freely in the countryside interacting with bugs and animals and the fences that scar them until the time comes that they must go to the slaughterhouse where they will be put down with a dry blow precisely aimed at the back of their heads.

That was what I gathered from the artist's showroom at the São Paulo's 25th Biennial when he accepted my invitation to be part of the Brazilian delegation then under my responsibility, and whose back wall was covered by a great gray painting, a rectangular polyptych composed of 20 gray canvases. These were covered with dark stains

that seemed to project themselves out of the canvas from afar, and which seen close up revealed themselves to be raw cow hides, whose fur had been shaved exhibiting the indelible marks of their existence: scars produced by bugs, barbed wires, red hot irons, as well as their wrinkled and dried up scrotums pinned up, cocoons, the animal's source of life desiccated and extinguished. A painting or what? While raising this question, the room summarizing his trajectory up until then, brought together works such as four large scale pieces that used the oxidizing process combined with geometric strips, and such as a large comforter, covered in rust, whose trademark repetitive bulges extended themselves along the wall in the shape of a precisely drawn plot of white lines. The contrast between both of its parts, its rusted side with the immaculate and precise drawing that extended itself along the white wall, created an area of conflict that was irreconcilable, as if the sores and crusts, clear indices of the sense of time and destruction warned the matters of the soul of its inevitable and fatal action.

Even if its impossible to state with certainty what led José Bechara to work at this paroxysmal scale of violence, even because the motives behind an artist's actions can rarely be accounted for by objective criteria, the visit to the slaughterhouses at the time he was preparing the work for the Biennial of São Paulo, a work that now belongs to the collection of the Lisbon Culturgest seems to have turned out a crucial experience. At the time, the artist confided in me that the indifference of the slaughterhouse professionals, even on realizing the females just put down were pregnant.

Its possible thus, to see a homology between this compassionless cruelty and the bucolic passiveness of the agreeable wooden chalets at the village Faxinal das Artes, a small settlement in the mountains in the interior of the State of Paraná, host to a residency program that brought together 100 artists from all over the nation during the month of May in 2002. A fortnight spent in the midst of the multicolored chalets, perched in regular lines along a rolling slope. The Botanical gardens to one side, lakes, greenery, cold air, good food and open appetites. A scenario perhaps too placid, disturbingly tranquil for someone who, like José Bechara, as if his energetic nature were not sufficient, added to his ultra-urban roots, was also challenged by the need to prepare his show at the São Paulo Biennial. So it was there, as shown in the photographic sequence made in loco, that the artist had this idea, that even what little we have for our peace of mind, a shell, our final stronghold, our home, even that, is a body that suffers spasms, assaulted by disturbing instincts whose effects are of a dimension we cannot precisely evaluate.

Aginaldo Farias is a "Professor Doctor" at the Architecture and

Urbanism School of São Paulo University. He is also an art critic and independent curator. Agnaldo Farias is curator of the Tomie Ohtake Institute of São Paulo, and was the curator of the Brazilian participation at the 25th Biennial of Art of São Paulo. He was the general curator of Rio de Janeiro's Modern Art Museum (1998 / 2000) and curator of Temporary Exhibitions of the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (1990 / 1992).