

Firefly Flashes

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Firefly flashes, an adventure in Oz, and the drawings of José Bechara
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Known as a painter and more recently for his installations, José Bechara also draws. Never before however, have his drawings been shown or brought to the public as comprehensively as in this publication, although some of them already had been shown in exhibitions and catalogs. These drawings are little known not only to the general public, but also for those intimate with contemporary art.

A great number of contemporary artists, like Bechara, draw. Even those who have become famous for using unconventional and experimental media, materials, supports and techniques. Drawing began to gain some independence from the media it served in the second half of the 19th century: its quick and synthetic renderings made it useful for studies, the stage in which artists prepared paintings and sculptures, but it also ended by depriving drawings of having its own goals.

In the dynamics of the modern urban industrial world, social transformations and the speed of transportation and communications have meant valuing the instant and instantaneous, systematizing the essential processes of human action, and consequently, experimentation.

All this favored a new place for drawing in art. Considered previously a lesser art with respect to painting and sculpture, drawing's singular qualities have once again regained value because it is so attuned to modernity. Three elements, project, expression and automatism, found in drawing a privileged medium.

This growth of drawing, however, was not limited solely to art. With the entertainment of the masses came new forms of expression for drawing, illustrated magazines, political cartoons, caricatures, comic

strips and posters. As these areas grew, new possibilities emerge, possibilities of invention and expansion, as illustrated for example, in the widespread use of graffiti and tattoos in the last few decades.

Of the various craft techniques we inherited from the past, drawing was therefore, the technique that most easily adapted, overcoming obstacles, updated itself. The fact it requires such elementary tools, that one can draw almost anywhere in a variety of situations and circumstances, its portability and speed, places it at an essential locus in contemporary art: where poetics are sketched, in which ideas are matured and where thoughts and projects are made visual through records that are autonomous and imbued with their own artistic expression, regardless possible future developments. Nor is it an exaggeration to note that drawing also involves a contiguity between gesture and result that brings it to the same level of writing. But that is not to equate it to writing, its rationale and morphology are completely different. It is another medium, irreplaceable, for recording thoughts and sensation.

Drawings are thus, products located at the root of the creative process. They can be seen as an exclusive notation of singular poetic processes, expression of intimate situations, predictors of artworks and projects, while also the appropriate medium for imaginary buildings, whether laboriously or evanescently suggested detailed. Drawing therefore, if we allow ourselves some license to establish the analogy, suggests it is proximate to mediums of immediate technological visual apprehension, such as have been made possible by digital cameras and video.

As to drawing in the arts (both in art theory as well and in the practice and reflections of artists) drawing has also expanded, extending¹ from the surface of paper into real space, to new medias and to the body in action.

Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawing shown for the first time in 1971 in New York's Guggenheim Museum; a few of Dennis Oppenheim's videos, such as A Feedback Situation and Two Stage Transfer Drawing, created in 1971; works by Cildo Meireles, such as La Bruja (shown at the XVI São Paulo 1981 Biennial) and the work Malhas da Liberdade, its first version dates from 1977; as well as a considerable part of Waltércio Caldas's sculptures (O Ar Mais Próximo, from 1991, A Série

Negra from 2005 and Olhos D'água, from 2008, to name a few), are examples of the expansion of drawing².

Today it is difficult to understand drawing if we base ourselves on concepts or repertoires that were used in the past to distinguish it clearly from painting or sculpture. The media overflowed the borders of their conventional supports, expanding their rationale to areas understood, at first, to belong to foreign techniques. In place of clearly marked ancient boundaries, new intersections emerged, overlaying and undoing borders, this happened not for lack of rigor, but as a manifestation of the modus operandi of late capitalism and its foundations on networks. The permanent connection and exchange of practices, ideas and concepts only became possible by stretching, to the point of unraveling, boundaries that in the past distinguished (and separated) different specializations, brought about by specific and easily recognizable areas, whether they belonged to specific trades, professions, the theoretical sciences or technology.

Such background issues can clarify not only the various fronts in which José Bechara's drawings unfold, but also the connection between these drawings and his body of work: paintings produced through oxidizing surfaces of used tarpaulins taken from trucks; the Pelada Series created from white leather of nelore cattle; installations recreating houses that seem to expel furniture from windows and doors, and the recent series, still untitled, made up of spatial drawings or graphic sculptures.

Bechara has become known for paintings that build on the marks left by the passage of time on objects appropriated by him. Bechara initially worked with tarpaulins taken from the backs of trucks that had been worn by daily use, he would offer truck drivers new ones in exchange for the used ones. Bechara would then work on the surfaces marked with the damage produced by daily life, oxidizing them by applying steel wool sponges. Taken from the world of daily use, the supports for his paintings had already been worn out from the accumulated wear and tear before they entered the art world. By deliberately intervening in this field of random engraving, Bechara awards them new qualities in another dimension of time.

A similar process takes place in the paintings created on a very different surface: white leathers taken from nelore cattle, which is why

they belong, according to the artist's own choice of title, to the series, Pelada.

Clearly Bechara chose nelore leather for its chromatic and graphic characteristics. To Bechar's eyes the leather's whiteness shows the unmistakable remains of scars and brandings made with hot irons on the cattle's bodies. This aesthetic sense adds to other spheres of meaning, of symbolic content, or semantic content. The abrasions on the skins are more than random graphic markings; they have also become the marks of a life destined to certain death in the slaughter houses. If the whiteness of the skins is a graphic evidence of life, it also, on the other hand, even if only invisibly, evokes the blood shed before they became immaculate, as they are now. Markers of José Bechara's trajectory, these works already show signs of the poetics recurrent in his work, the crystallization of time and space.

The tarps, patched and stained through everyday use and scars on nelore leathers are signs of the random action of time over surfaces. By interrupting it, by appropriating himself of them, Bechara adds another layer of temporality to the one instilled in the support's previous existence. They are therefore works conceived as condensation, in the work's space, of various periods of time.

Similarly, the artist's installations and graphic sculptures also take on poetic meanings through the spatial condensation of previous events impregnated in them. On the other hand, unlike the paintings, these works do not explore the marks that life produces on supports (as in the case of the truck tarps and the lenore skins) prior to the artist's appropriation.

Bechara's work is the construction of spaces in which unique and fictional irruptions take place (such as, for example, houses expelling furniture through windows and doors). Here too, although in a different manner, the reasons for such events do not belong to the rationale of the works since they are not sequential narratives, they are signs. Their meaning emanates from the tension between such states of flux and crystallization in his work.

The inexorable work of time on objects, assumed by this artist as a fundamental part of his own work process, continues in different pace

after the work of art is finished, even if works of art when compared to objects of daily use may seem eternal. Bechara not only accepts the inevitable wear and tear of objects, but appropriates it as part of his own work.

All these poetic operations are permeated by his drawings. They have their own goals and specific demands, but remain permanently connected. The drawings can emerge as notes for projects, for other works, as exercises and unbounded reveries, or they can become intersections with painting and sculpture.

If we disregard taxonomic concerns, it is possible to group Bechara's drawings provisionally in five sets: *Cadernos Rápidos*, free style drawings, project designs, spatial drawings (or graphic sculptures) and finally, the drawings that belong to the Air Series.

In *Cadernos Rápidos* Bechara submitted eighty Japanese paper sheets programmed oxidizing for a period of one hundred and twenty days, much like the tarp paintings.

The title would seem contradictory, in light of the time frame of oxidation. But in the case of *Rápidos* speed does not refer to the time elapsed while they were impregnated with rust. Speed relates to simultaneity. Eighty sheets of paper began and finished their transformation in a single period of time, without interruption.

Shown for the first time in 1999, at the Paço Imperial, Rio de Janeiro, the work took up two walls at an angle to each other, in which the sheets of paper placed side by side, and from the ground to the ceiling of the exhibition room, created an oscillating panel that oscillated with the movement of the air that was pushed about by the visitors in the room.

The oxidation was programmed to stain, thoroughly, the surfaces of *Cadernos Rápidos'* sheets of paper in various tonalities of rust. Therefore they are not technically drawings, since the tonal spread of the support, on the one hand, and the use of the sheets of paper, on the other, place them at the intersection of these two techniques.

There are another set of drawings, created regularly since 1987, that remain at the margins of issues that characterize the body of Bechara's work. They are free style drawings that show no overt commitment other than joy in medium, but which nevertheless, according to the artist himself, bring about flashes or snapshots that, like the flashes of fireflies, ignite ideas for new works. Bechara had never given these drawings an important role in his poetic constellation, the drawings are almost always still lives of minimal elements, lightly sketched in ink and at times, light washes of watercolor.

The figurative elements in these drawings, vases, fruits, are not characteristic of his work. It goes beyond the traditional use of techniques that have been consecrated in painting – the canvas, brushes, and paints – and more recently sculpture, because his poetic strategy is not associated to valuing the job and exercise of artisans. In addition, the drawings' figurative content and flow of gesture seem foreign to those of us who know José Bechara's work.

Located at the margins of the more recognizable aspects of his production, these works are now being shown for the first time. They can be understood as an Other in his work, an alternative that was until now invisible in relation to the projects being developed. A way to forget and escape habitual artistic practice, while it certainly has contributed to formulating issues present in his work.

In the opposite direction, but also marginal to the core of his works, are the project drawings. They do not properly constitute a series, since their role is the jotting down of ideas and thoughts, part of the gestation process that do not always lead to a work's execution.

This spatial geometric organization – an organization that is historically associated to reason and to the project, opposed to expression and chance - is also characteristic of other series produced by Bechara. But quite unlike what it may seem, such organization is not the result of a prior detailed project, even if some of these drawings contain notes on size and even color and materials. These drawings therefore, are not even independent works, nor are they projects in the habitual sense, that show a detailed and precise prefiguring of the final work.

The deliberate incompleteness of these projects are the foundations, then, of processes, not results: the action of time in space, paintings oxidizing on tarps and the Cadernos Rápidos, open installations and the graphic sculptures, for example, are signs of works produced based on ideas in which chance is vital poetic component.

In 2002 there was a decisive turning point in José Bechara's work. It began at the Faxinal das Artes, an event held at the city of Faxinal in the interior of Paraná state. Bechara was one of one hundred artists invited from all over the country who, along with close to 40 people from other areas, set up camp, living an entire fortnight dedicated to the back and forth of ideas and development of experiences. The group resided in houses that had had once belonged to teachers in Paraná state.

Bechara had been invited to paint, but time passed and as he reached the end of his stay, he found he had not been able to come up with even a thread of a proposal. As he put it himself, he was then taken by an idea that changed the course of his work.

As he looked out of the window of his house, he noticed it framed the night sky, but he did not see it as landscape – that is, not as the familiar metaphor created by Renaissance painters, the painting as a window – but as emptiness. The words came to him and he wrote them down: fill in the emptiness. He took the table in front of him and fit it through the window, then took other pieces of furniture and began to fill in the remaining windows and doors, suggesting that they were being ejected outside. New possibilities of poetic invention opened up, located at the ambiguous intersection between sculpture, installation and later, drawing.

Bechara was interested at first in the notion of producing sculptures through addition not subtraction. Sculpture built through appropriation and assemblage – opening up hybrid paths by appropriating real objects, paths taken both by Marcel Duchamp (ready-made), and by late cubism (Picasso) – and not, as perhaps the term construction could suggest, from propositions derived from early 20th century Russian constructivism, whose fully projected buildings took on a unique structural makeup.

Faxinal is at the origin of Bechara's great installations, made up of life size houses built by the artist (they were in practice parallelepipeds, with no other details than windows and doors) that expel furniture purchased in shops.

The installations unfolded in scaled sculptures produced in the 2005 to 2009 series Open House. Cubic structures with openings like a house. From this series emerged, from 2009 onwards, a three dimensional series that is still untitled (there are four works so far) that can be understood as spacial drawings, since they are formed by cubes composed only by their edges, combined with freely placed miniature installations in the corners of the exhibition area. They project shadows on the walls around them, extending the spacial drawings or graphic sculptures into real space.

Made of a variety of materials – wood, steel, aluminium and acrylics – and in various sizes, these works already point to the future of Bechara's work.

It is however important to note that all his works centering on the House, that began at Faxinal, have a thematic dimension that was absent in his previous work. The House is, certainly, for practically everyone, a place for intimacy, cozyness, confort, security and protection. To bring out this inner world through ejecting furniture is not, thus, an event of purely spatial meaning: whether related to sculpture, installation or graphic media. It is a choice that also enters other fields, that reverberates in a dimension that is also symbolic.

The instability suggested in the contrast between an inner world and the irruption of furniture reappears transformed in the drawings of the Ar Series. Begun at the end of 2008, these drawings depict small houses, of almost childlike traits, stamped on paper with a background that is made of washes that creates an air-like environment. Beyond its unorthodox technique (if we consider that to stamp a drawing is coherent with Bechara's techniques, media and usual procedures) these houses up in turmoil, unstable movement, as if torn away from their original ground, suggest ideas and propose stories.

In an exercise that is above all speculative, with no pretensions to reaching final conclusions, we can, for example, take the drawings of this series as signs of the ceaseless dynamics of time that changes everything, or even, as graphic icons of the tension that pits stability against movement, and perhaps, like the house pulled out by a tornado from tedious life in Kansas, careening towards Oz, the emblem of the promising insecurity that moves adventure.

¹ In this sense, see the article “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, by Rosalind Krauss, (originally published in “The anti-aesthetic: essays of postmodern culture” Washington: Bay Press, 1984) to characterize the new status of sculpture after its dissociation from the rationale of monuments.

² Sol Le Witt’s wall drawings were made directly on large walls based on the systems conceived by the artist, but carried out by third parties. They were shown for the first time in 1971, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

The video *A Feedback Situation* (1971), by Dennis Oppenheim, shows the artist drawing free hand on his son’s back as the boy reproduces his father’s scribbled drawing on the wall in front of him. The order is subsequently reversed. In the video *Two Stage Transfer Drawing* (1971) both father and son draw simultaneously on each other’s backs.

La Bruja by Cildo Meireles (conceived in 1979 and shown at the 16th São Paulo Biennial in 1981) consists of a broom which, instead of bristles, has kilometers of cotton threads that spread across the exhibition floor, making their way towards the building exterior. The works that make up *Malhas da Liberdade* (1976) vary, from a rhizome-like expanse of cotton strings tied to one another and spread on the ground (version 1) to iron lattice structures fitted with sheets of glass.

Waltércio Caldas’ *O Ar Mais Próximo* (1991) is made up of strands of wool of different colors that hang from the ceiling in straight lines and curves. His *Série Negra* (2005) designates a group of works comprised of black tables with metallic structures and strings of wool. Finally, *Olhos d’água* (2008) combines aqua-green metal structures with wool.