

The Eternal Debt of José Bechara

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It is widely known that a significant part of the paintings by José Bechara come from a relationship of exchange. However, I propose we dedicate some paragraphs to the debt the artist acquires when exchanging new tarpaulins with truck drivers for used ones –replete with the marks of time and usage from the transport industry –, which become the territories of his works.

Even if it were possible, this text is uninterested in the economically circumscribed debt of the greater value created from the tarpaulin as an element of the truck and the other version of the same material – the art work – born from being subjected to the artist’s action and being enrolled into the art world; a financial asymmetry produced and relished between two states of a single, albeit transformed, object [1]. Recognizing this debt (which, furthermore, crosses the history of euro-ethnocentric art and can be glimpsed in such distinct appropriation practices as in the ready-mades or imagined objects developed by travelling artists in their routine symbolic traffic) is the sociopolitical starting point from which to briefly consider the methods of its formal realization.

It is José Bechara himself who, as can be gleaned from his interviews, warns us that his work is “always paying attention to accidents”: “something falls, something fails, something else is missing... and this kind of problem is the problem that, in fact, gives you the strength and interest to follow, to make your next piece”. For the artist, although his research can be understood based on the key of “geometric abstraction” (and, more specifically, of a constructive vocabulary), his interest is not in the “affirmation of a world” through a “calculating instrument”. The geometry of his work is, therefore, “imprecise”: “these lines, despite being here, are in a condition of appearing and disappearing. (...) Geometry fails like we fail, it is imperfect like we are imperfect and great amounts of effort are required to make it emerge, to exist. Life is like that”.

In a critique of modern Western rationality where – in fields as contiguous as those of art, science or politics – everything is anxious to separate, organize and identify, José Bechara emphasizes his praise of the accidental due to its unpredictability and, consequently, its capacity to challenge the centralized power of the artist’s “all powerful” hand. In this sense, he states that his work is “an intent in conditions of being affected by accidents”, based on which arises “a mental

adventure to organize the next actions (...) in the direction of arriving at a thing” [2].

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Becoming available to accidents has become, over more than two decades, like a process of experimentation that mainly depends on two, oscillating presences/phenomena: the tarpaulins from trucks and the oxidations that the artist produces on them. From the combination of the tarpaulins’ pocked surfaces and the effects of the copper or iron oxidations strewn over them, what emerge are the lines, color, spatiality and density of his images; organized, interfered and made more or less visible by the gestures of José Bechara.

This materiality – in debt to the tarpaulin’s and oxidation’s plasticity – is, therefore, arrived at through time: from the period during which the tarpaulin is first used to the oxidation that, in Bechara’s words, happen over a process of “induction and waiting” [3]. Instead of being supposedly created by the artist, the distribution of the stains and grey tones that make up the chromatic atmosphere of the images comes from the tarpaulins, much like their orange and green-blue hues arise from the properties of the metals that have been oxidized. The spectrum of colors that, over the years, have become characteristic of Bechara’s production is, fundamentally, a joint creation – inscribed on the space time distributed over the trucks and truck drivers, the rain and sun, the tarpaulin and its cuttings, the weather, the metals, the humidity, the paints, the packing tape, gravity, intentions and accidents, among others – in which it is clear that the agency is not exclusively that of the artist, nor is it restricted to some of the elements implied in the creation of these images, unless dispersed over the non-linear sequence of social, physical, chemical and aesthetic events.

Under the visual and spatial impact of these pieces – whose expanded scale and “standard ages” of color and geometry leap to the eye because they were made in the condition of being the protagonists of the images – there is a slow, silent system of composition that is camouflaged and, at times, invisible, but which, as Bechara admits, reveals the artist’s interest in “form, yes, but as long as the research has a relationship with some human drama”[4]. The aesthetic stridency of his pieces, owing to diverse forces, makes us see how cynical the ambition of self-determination is that ethically and politically sustains the notion of autonomy of form or of the work of art.

The “human drama” or, as Bechara also likes to say, the “existential dimension”[5] of his studies thus resides less in eventual metaphors that the geometry or some other of its characteristics can inspire, but, above all, in an economy of power between the materials and agencies

implied in the creation of the images – a system that, from start to finish, places the artist in the condition of being indebted. Indebted not only because of the originating appropriation of the tarpaulin, but also due to all the “accidents” that are, as he tells us, co-responsible for the work.

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Coming from a Catholic upbringing, it is not rare to hear the artist refer to the supposed asymmetry between human beings and God. In a conversation, Bechara mentioned that he had spent many years intrigued by the condition in which, as heirs of the original sin, we live twisted around this unpayable debt that, in turn, sustains the epistemological gap from which a policy of representation emerges and in which God is the hierarchically, morally and cosmologically distant and higher figure than us. The separation between us and Him and, on the other hand, the missive that we would or should be in His image and likeness, would leave Bechara in philosophical despair, until the moment in which, inverting the poles of the relationship, he convinced himself of the reversibility of this imperative: “well, if we are His image and likeness, He is our image and likeness”[\[6\]](#), he concluded.

Bechara’s interpretation balances the terms relating to one of the foundations of Catholicism by understanding that God is also indebted to us, producing an economy whose complexity makes it unfeasible to know for sure who is the debtor and who is the creditor. Owing to each other the reference (or capital) that makes us human or divine, we are implicated in a territory of undefinable relationships: inseparable, undetermined, insurgent. Made destitute of any autonomy, neither us nor Him – neither the subject nor the form – are, to Bechara, circumscribed in their own terms, the point of view from which the interests of his work arise: “Neither [the] chaotic space [of the tarpaulin’s visuality], nor [the] formalism [of the constructive grid he creates on it] interest me, but what results from this conflict, which is a space created by the simultaneous existence of these two events. It is a balance between these terms”[\[7\]](#).

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The debt, this ancient debt known by capitalism, is also especially familiar to us, ex-colonials (sic), given the fact that its fictionalization invented an economic, political, religious, police, discursive, cognitive, moral, cultural – and aesthetic – system that has subordinated us, ensuring that, through slave labor, we have had to pay the debt attributed to us by an apparatus of power and violence of every magnitude. Transforming us into debtors, the discourse and the economy of debt have elaborated a cynical rationality for the inevitable

fact that, with colonial invasion and expropriation, we became the great creditors of the world – the source of natural, human and symbolic resources; participants and protagonists of a nascent “global economy”.

In this context, thinking in terms of debt is not exactly adhering to its capitalist dimension or proposing an economic reading, but, rather, it underlines the ethical and political interests of its reiterated neutralization while operating our actions and works. Ignoring how much we owe to thusly produce aesthetic narratives in which we figure as a duo of God in his Almighty version – reenacting, with our intentions, gestures and projects, a kind of eternal Big Bang – seems to divert us from the decisive need to educate ourselves in order to create based on the implications of all the forces in the world and not in detriment or denial of them.

José Bechara points to this direction when he dedicates himself to systems of co-creation in which forces as distinct as the artist himself, the tarpaulins and oxidation, in addition to innumerable accidents: “It having worked out is also an accident. Every accident is good. I deal with it; I count on it”^[8]. Dissonant in relation to the purifying parameters (“purity is dishonesty”^[9], he challenges) of a certain approach – normally the constructive, almost always geometric – of form, but at the same time, affiliated to it by historical circumstances and aesthetic choices, the work of Bechara places itself half-way between formalist tradition and the willingness to affect itself with forces coming from other territories.

In some way, it is because they are under the weight of these debts that José Bechara’s forms make, “tremendous efforts to emerge, to exist”. Implicated in a complex and inseparable web of debts and credits between social, physical, chemical and aesthetic phenomena and existences, his images feed back into this singular economy of art, preferring, instead of its habitual desire for ontological manumission, eternal debt.

^[1] “The action is as follows: I take a new, clean tarpaulin free of any markings except for the manufacturer’s brand. It is orange. When I give this tarpaulin to the truck driver, I am handing over an item that he needs and that I do not, in order to obtain that which is no longer of use to him, but is to me, in a different landscape. It is no longer of the roads, it goes to a different place. The work begins at a gas station, at the truck drivers’ co-op”.

José Bechara, from an interview by Glória Ferreira. *Quando a noite encosta na janela*, 2007. Available at: <http://josebechara.com/quando-a-noite-encosta-na-janela/>.

[2] Artist's words, from *José Bechara – Visto de frente é infinito*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMntG0bv-2c>.

[3] Artist's words, from a conversation with the author.

[4] José Bechara, in an interview by Glória Ferreira. *Quando a noite encosta na janela*, 2007. Available at: <http://josebechara.com/quando-a-noite-encosta-na-janela/>.

[5] Artist's words, from a conversation with the author.

[6] Artist's words, from a conversation with the author.

[7] José Bechara, in an interview by Glória Ferreira. *Quando a noite encosta na janela*, 2007. Available at: <http://josebechara.com/quando-a-noite-encosta-na-janela/>.

[8] Artist's words from *José Bechara – Visto de frente é infinito*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMntG0bv-2c>.

[9] Artist's words, from a conversation with the author.