

## **Cláudio Cretti: columns and pendants** **by Rodrigo Naves**

### **I**

I am almost certain that I came to know the artist's work before he did. An issue that, to some critics, is of no importance. But it is to me. Briefly, I am unsure if I saw his works when I was in the selection jury of the Centro Cultural São Paulo, in 1989. Or if it was when participated in the art and history study group, back when it was held in our apartment, on Rua Pelotas, that same year.

The year I came to know them – the artist and his works – 1989, was of great importance to Brazil. It was when the new democratic Constitution, proclaimed the year prior, came into force; when the influence of the Military Coup of 1964 and its antidemocratic laws were partially brought down.

In 1988, Luiza Erundina, of the Workers' Party, was elected as mayor of São Paulo and governed the country's largest city until 1992. The mayor's secretariat was composed of well-known, respected names, such as Paulo Freire, Hélio Bicudo and Paulo Singer. For the Secretary of Culture, Erundina indicated one of the most respected intellectuals in Brail, Marilena Chauí, who was a professor of philosophy at São Paulo University.

Another philosopher, José Américo Motta Pessanha, was invited to head the São Paulo Cultural Center, while Sônia Salzstein, a famous visual arts critic and who later became a professor of the visual arts department at São Paulo University's School of Communication and Arts, was chosen to run the Visual Arts department.

Possibly the first initiative Salzstein proposed was the exhibition project. Artists would present a portfolio of their work, chosen based on discussions and voted on by the members of the jury. Exhibitions of the chosen artists were then held and, during a second stage, they held individual shows. This brief overview of Brazil's visual arts for this period shows how the country's constitution of its contemporary arts counted with institutional support and, above all, highlights how Cláudio Cretti had an important medium – discussions, conversations with colleagues and especially being able to bring the results of his efforts to the public.

### **II**

I have known Cláudio Cretti and his production for 33 years. He is a reliable, tranquil figure. The few times I saw him upset about offensive

comments or lies, his reaction was to forcefully narrow his gaze. Only the blue-green of his irises could still be seen.

His personal steadiness seems mismatched with his fabrications and thoughts. Or so his complex journey through art suggests. The movement in his works tend to transition without the drama of the terrain in his early stages, where he used slivers of billboards agglutinated with paint and glue, to his production in boxed marble and organic forms, linked pipes based on stone, drawings with irregular shapes, and so on.

Cretti is aware of these differences. It was not easy for an artist in his twenties to find his form of expression, his poetry, especially lacking the resources needed to travel and directly experience art in countries whose museums and galleries held the most influential contemporary manifestations.

His first exhibition was held when he was 25. Both the artist and myself thought that his most original production began when he was 47, with the presentation of the smoking pipes – a generic name – shown in 2015, at the “Inhalation” exhibition curated by Tiago Mesquita, at the Marília Razuk Gallery.

These pieces simulate a system of communicating vessels that brings together a series of different pipes using rubber tubes. The simulation comes as much from the smoke, that is absent, as from the discontinuity of these interrupted ducts, at least at one of the ends.

The good-humored aspect of the pieces comes from the impression they give of being a nargileh that would not work. There is no way to inhale smoke, if there is no opening in which to burn the tobacco. In relation to art history, Cláudio Cretti’s production draws parallels with the tradition of celibate machines, a name used by Dadaists and surrealists, although who first coined the term is still up for debate.

The artists close to these two lines dedicated themselves, above all, to going against logic, common sense and utilitarianism. In relation to Cretti’s pipes, the term satirizes smoking and the tobacco industry. Individuals who are celibate are those who decline to procreate, much like a machine that, though it may have aesthetic qualities, will not fulfill its practical purpose.

The process of nature is often compared to communicating vessels. Water evaporating, forming clouds and raining down in an endless process. I think that the way this unfolds based on pipes is neither

peculiar nor bizarre, strange nor inaccessible for the observer's intuition. The first time I saw them – where, as mentioned previously, their unity was interrupted –, I immediately thought of communicating vessels.

The next movement may require greater abstraction. I wonder whether, from a broader point of view, the impossibility of the communicating vessels in Cretti's pieces functioning reveals – beyond just irony – one of the most serious issues faced by the planet: global warming.

I cannot go into an explanation of this process, as much due to my lack of comprehension, as well as due to the limits of a text about art. However, the Wikipedia entry for the topic is very helpful. The warming of the earth by the sun is normally reflected away by the surface of the planet. Some gases, especially carbon dioxide and methane, lead to an increase in global warming and the resulting catastrophes we are seeing now. Other factors are also essential. Deforestation, acid rain, adding to pollution in the seas and many other practices are harmful to thermal balance between the planet and its atmosphere.

I believe that the aesthetic magnitude of this series of works also derives from its capacity to move between a microcosm – the relationship between tobacco, pipes, rubber tubing and smoke – and a macrocosm – global warming – without requiring a conceptual journey that estranges its decidedly sensitive dimension.

### III

The pieces that compose “Columns and pendants”, despite being related to “Inhalation”, offer critics another difficulty. I have experienced these pieces less and they have an intense and wild originality that refuses, as all good art does, to be pacified by the surrounding works that can help one to understand them.

The exhibition includes “Chimeras”, “Columns” and “Pendants”. The “Chimeras” occupy the space on the left of the gallery, while “Columns” and “Pendants” take up the hall on the right of the space, due to their vertical dimensions. The decision to separate them is simply practical. The “Pendants” hang from the ceiling, contrary to the movement of the other pieces. They need high ceilings to be more effective.

The sculptures (“Chimeras”) seem to have no relationship to one another. Initially, this offers an advantage. With the exception of certain materials, everything points to each piece having its own existence. Gradually, we find some common characteristics. A fragile balance,

similar to the relative precariousness of the materials. The remnants of a constructivist formalization: the clarity of the connection of the parts, the difference between the various materials.

Until the disruption of three works, which evoke banal, everyday objects. Two polishers and a sleigh, which remind us of a three-dimensional parody of the lower part of Duchamp's "The Large Glass". Above all, in the figurative or more abstract pieces the ostensive presence of the rudeness of objects so far from industrial products, with their elegant, smooth finish.

Cretti travelled abroad on occasion and even for work, having taught art and helped form many students into acknowledged names. Over our many conversations, he stated that his own artistic education accrued with Brazilian artists, whom he could see up close: Mira Schendel, José Resende, Waltércio Caldas, Tunga and many others. The only international branch that marked him Italian popular art, an important initiative to update contemporary European art, from around the 1960s.

In my opinion, this remark, this relationship, makes total sense. The big difference I see is in the excessive power of the style in almost all these artists, such as Gilberto Zorio, Mario Merz, etc. The only exception may be Jannis Kounellis. Celant, the German critic responsible for grouping together these artists, who already had autonomous work, said that "poor" art (*arte povera*) was characterized by the overcoming of art and life. How could artists who had created these such stylized works, to the point of being able to identify them easily, be able to achieve osmosis between art and life?

It is not my intention to compare the importance of the Italians to Cretti. What is worthwhile noting is that, perhaps due to the difficulty in finding his own form of expression, Cretti arrived at a form of art that puts a veteran critic, who has already written extensively about artists, especially Brazilian ones, in a difficult position. It is highly likely that the relatively little attention paid by collectors and institutions results from the same difficulties faced by this critic. The hardship of pronouncing the aesthetic importance of a production that is still not well understood.

The "Columns" and "Pendants" could direct us to a variety of other, traditional works, from Brancusi to Calder. One of the specific characteristics of Cretti's work is hesitation, the reluctance to affirm either verticality or gravity. The wooden modules would not fall like pearls from a broken necklace, as the spikes that hold them together

ensure they will not bunch together, but do they have the weight to keep the line taut?

Will the columns made of such different materials and objects sustain themselves? Will the overlapping chairs only maintain their balance when set against the wall? Is rising conquering verticality, or questioning it? What relationship do these two movements maintain with space? Is Cretti interested in intervening there?

We may receive the answers to these questions after the fact. And, is that not the case for all true exhibitions?