

Enemy of the landscape

On devine en lisant, on crée; tout part d'une erreur initiale.

Marcel Proust

There is a work by Fernando Marques de Oliveira which includes the phrase "enemy of the landscape". It's a curious affirmation, with an undefined subject, which immediately creates a linguistic tension that contaminates the plasticity of the work. Is the artist opposed to that artistic genre? Or is he providing a commentary on the way that humans have treated the natural settings that they have built? I avoid either option, because I believe it's possible to read the short text as an aphorism or, better still, as a fragment of a verse transcribed from a Greek stele – Archilochus comes to mind, who wrote in the 7th century BC: "... "I know something very important:/ whoever harms me, I will respond with terrible offences."

This exhibition encompasses five decades of work by Fernando Marques de Oliveira - a cultured man, a dandy, a gentleman and an aristocrat. Someone who loves the good things in life, who listens to classical music and jazz, who reads poetry - Cavafy, Ferlinghetti - philosophy - St Augustine - and prose - Paul Bowles. An artist who is Proustian at heart, and has a copy of *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time), in the version translated by Pedro Tamen, on his bedside table.

These characteristics, which define his way of being in life, are evident in his work, even when he tries to use geometric or organic patches of black to conceal certain aspects of the formal composition of his works. Fernando Marques de Oliveira has his own "dark way" of conveying his personal experiences and inspiration, because not everything is light in the creative process, it's sometimes crossed by profound suffering.

The choice of the works for "Eternal Return" was primarily based on two criteria. The first criterion is to try to show works from different periods from the artist's life. His initial references included the years he lived in Brussels in the early 1970s, while studying at the Watermael-Boitsfort Academy, where he met and socialised with the poet Al Berto - and the 1974 Revolution, where he played an important role, alongside Fernando Pernes, Etheline Rosas and Mário Teixeira da Silva, in the creation of the CAC - Contemporary Art Centre, located in the Soares dos Reis National Museum, that hosted almost 100 exhibitions between 1976 and 1980. The second criterion is to present his recent works, where we can detect his desire to endow forms with an organic, bodily dimension. These are the elements that have come to define his oeuvre: the relationship with literature, exploration of patches of colour as a structuring factor of his compositions, the use of elements from architecture and sculpture - the column, the obelisk - in order to update classic approaches to doing things, as well as authorised or unauthorised collaborations with other artists, such as the Brazilian photographer, Wanderson Alves.

The question of the "Eternal Return" - the title that encompasses this exhibition – is inherently linked to the subject of landscape, evoked at the beginning of this text. This theme has a long history. For example I'm fascinated by the way that the German philosopher, Nietzsche, describes his awakening to this philosophical idea in *Ecce Homo* (1908): " "I am now telling the story of Zarathustra. The basic conception of the work, the idea of eternal return, this highest formula of affirmation that can be achieved at all - belongs to August 1881: it is thrown on a sheet of paper with the caption: "6000 feet beyond man and time". That day I walked through the woods by the lake of Silvaplana [in Switzerland]; I stopped at a mighty, pyramidal towered block not far from Surlei. Then this thought came to me."

The idea of the "eternal return" is also developed by Nietzsche in other books, notably in "The Gay Science" (1882), where he wrote: " What, if one day or night a demon were to sneak up on you in your most desolate solitude and say: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live it once more and for countless more times: and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence — even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, a speck of dust!' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus."

I've gone back to Venice on several occasions. About a month ago I checked into the Hotel Danieli. In one of the lounges next to the reception, you can see a frieze of paintings with figures "à la dernière mode", which nevertheless contain old motifs and patterns, such as those appropriated by Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo from Carpaccio's paintings, to use on his capes.

We can associate these works with the social life that Marcel Proust describes in his "Recherche". He visited Venice in 1900 - there is a photograph of him sitting in a chair, on the ground floor balcony of the Hotel Europa/Ca' Giustinian, looking over the landscape, with its many "palazzi" – comprised of wood, brick, marble, stucco and frescoes - its gondolas, the "lagoon", the churches and the colours engendered by the city's proximity to the Adriatic.

In "Proust and Venice" (1989), Peter Collier notes: "At certain junctures in *A la Recherche du temps perdu* a reference to art or to literature crystallises a mood, but in so doing, it often appears to add to the mystery and opacity of the text. In *La Fugitive* Marcel desires a young Venetian glass-seller, and wants to take her home to Paris, as if she were a painting by Titian."

"Quant à ma ruine relative, j'en étais d'autant plus ennuyé que mès curiosités vénitiennes s'étaient concentrées depuis peu sur une jeune marchande de verrerie, à la carnation de fleur qui fournissait aux yeux ravis toute une gamme de tons orangés et donnait me un tel désir de la revoir chaque jour que, sentant que nous quitterions bientôt Venise, ma mère et moi, j'étais résolu à tâcher de lui faire à Paris une situation quelconque qui me permît de ne pas me séparer d'elle. La beauté de ses dix-sept était si noble, si radieuse, que c'était un vrai Titien à acquérir avant s'en aller."¹

An enemy of the landscape, as he could not fail to be, not least because the sea penetrates his house, Fernando Marques de Oliveira lives on a daily basis in the company of the radiant beauty that he is now sharing with us, all of us, in comparative penury but still affected by the enigma of art and the twists and turns of life. He responds to us all with terrible offences. And does so with a style that is all his own, whether it's cancelling a 19th century engraving or placing us in front of an old Venetian mirror, which has aged without decrepitude and stares at us with uncompromising geometric rigour.

Óscar Faria
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¹ As for my comparative penury, it was all the more awkward at the moment inasmuch as my Venetian interests had been concentrated for some little time past on a rosy-cheeked young glass-vendor who offered to the delighted eye a whole range of orange tones and filled me with such a longing to see her again daily that, feeling that my mother and I would soon be leaving Venice, I had made up my mind that I would try to create some sort of position for her in Paris which would save me the distress of parting from her. The beauty of her seventeen summers was so noble, so radiant, that it was like acquiring a genuine Titian before leaving the place