

# Postcolonial Traces in Contemporary Portuguese Painting

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## I. Introduction

Postcolonial studies, which developed in the 1960s, has its origins in essays produced in the United Kingdom about its Commonwealth and which extended to academia in the following decade, thanks to authors like Edward Said (1935-2003). It derives from a specific context, which relativises the ways the West perceived its Other(s), displacing axes and bringing “fringes” and “margins” to public debate.

There is no doubt that colonial pasts continue to be present in postcolonial contexts in a wide variety of forms. Postcolonial Lisbon not only received back its former colonial settlers (pejoratively called “returnees”), but also brought home the real dimension of that other overseas Portugal, mythologized decades before by the *Estado Novo*. The global city of today – which confirmed “Lusophone” citizenship with the creation of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Nations (CPLP) in 1992 – has experienced increasingly rapid change, successive cosmopolitan experiences that have provoked an intercultural and multicultural dialogue that is reflected in artistic rhetoric, especially pictorial.

The experience of empire has meant that numerous artists have moulded the art of the past to influence the present in a fragmented history that has lasted. In recent decades, some of these heirs of the Portuguese imperial experience have reassessed the Portuguese cultural legacy, producing multiple approaches and interpretations that offer a new way of looking at the past, a questioning gaze grounded in the artistic hybrids of the present day. It is the case of the works of Ângela Ferreira, Emília Nadal, Graça Morais, Julião Sarmento, Júlio Resende and Paula Rego, esthetics that summarise (in post-colonial time) the painting produced in the Portuguese colonial context.

## II: Artists

### 2.1. Ângela Ferreira

Ângela Ferreira (1958), a contemporary artist born in Mozambique, has reflected about the colonial and postcolonial experience from a conceptual perspective. Using different formats and materials, the common denominator underpinning her work is the (post)colonial world, as in *Amnesia* (a vídeo from 1997), *Maputo House: An Intimate Portrait* (two vídeos from 1999), *Praia Grande Hotel* (photograph from 2003, which gestures towards the period of decolonisation and the “reception” of the returnees in hotels). Ângela Ferreira’s oeuvre is marked by territorial duality, the result of her biographical trajectories involving multiple trips between Africa (Mozambique and South Africa) and Europe.

Used to seeing the painting and murals of Malangatana in the public space of Lourenço Marques during her childhood and adolescence, Ângela Ferreira familiarized herself with this register, later inscribing it into her own artistic output. As she claimed, “the African side is

paradigmatic in my work; it is its *raison d'être* (...) these are my conceptual roots, my foundations".<sup>1</sup>

And this was the path she trod after finishing her academic training in South Africa at a time when "the country was burning up": it was the 1980s and the regime was in decline using increasingly brutal forms of repression. On the brink of civil war, grappling with an economic crisis, and pressurised by international institutions that were halting investment, the situation was explosive and difficult to control. Considering apartheid to be appalling, Ângela Ferreira joined a group of colleagues in an "intimate process of sharing of ideas, concepts, a kind of common and informal education, which had incredible power, as there is nothing like having something to struggle against to unite us with a special energy."<sup>2</sup>

That grouping led to the formation of a centre with 14 participants, which was invited to paint the inside space (a corridor) of a building in Cape Town: *Community House*. The work was structured around a diagonal line which crossed the wall space made of tools – symbols and signs of the working class – and the overlooked and suffering classes: women, children, old people. On paper, the project grew organically in accordance with the capacities and skills of its participants. Ângela Ferreira was responsible for animating the diagonal line with work objects of the proletariat; and from there, the mural branched off into various scenes, with a black woman in the foreground at the end of the chain of rights in Africa. From amongst the markedly political details of the mural, inscriptions stand out, camouflaged words that reveal more than they hide, such as T-shirts with anti-regime slogans,<sup>3</sup> amongst the characteristic sarongs (*capulanas*) on veiled or distant figures.

Recently Ângela Ferreira decided to look back on her previous career and pick up again that mural left behind in Cape Town over thirty years ago. Reappropriating the collective work, she gave it a new interpretation and context and decided to exhibit it in Portugal and the world. The justification was that in it was inscribed her conceptual and political school. She began by photographing the original mural and projecting the photographs onto the walls of MAAT<sup>4</sup>. Then she repainted the parts that interested her – details, more specifically three fragments. She then invited a group of artists, condensing the result into an exhibition called *Pan African Unity Mural*. An important curiosity is the fact that each time the work is painted, it is erased afterwards. The aim is not to leave any permanent record of the project.

One last detail is the fact that the mural that now emerges in the postcolonial context, while maintaining its political content as part of an assumedly politicised art form, has now

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<sup>1</sup> Interview given to the author in the artist's atelier in Lisbon on 25.7.2019.

<sup>2</sup> Idem.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the mural, one of the figures wears a T-shirt on which we can only see written "dela" (from Mandela) and "der" (from the word "leader"), and also "viva cosatu" ("Long live Cosatu" - COSATU was the federation of the general workers trade unions and was illegal at the time. We should note that in those years, Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) had been transferred from the prison on Robben Island to Pollsmoor in Capetown, reigniting the struggle against apartheid.

<sup>4</sup> Lisbon Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology, Exhibition *Ângela Ferreira. Pan African Unity Mural*, held between 28 June and 8 October 2018. Online at <https://www.maat.pt/pt/exposicoes/angela-ferreira-pan-african-unity-mural> (accessed on 2.4.2020). See catalogue *Ângela Ferreira. Pan African Unity Mural*. Lisbon: MAAT, 2018.

acquired an individual nature, marked by the fact that it bears a signature. (The 1987 original, painted by the self-styled *CAP Muralist Group*, was not signed for obvious reasons.)

## 2.2. Emília Nadal

On the occasion of the Camões celebrations in 1972-73, Emília Nadal (1938), an artist who works with various media, accepted the invitation to do a painting about the *Lusiads*. In order to pay homage to the poem and the poet, academics also planned to award her the Painting Prize for that year (1973).

In that period, the proposal exacerbated the indignation that motivated my watercolours on the subject of wars. Hesitating between accepting or refusing the invitation, I decided eventually to accept as it would give me an opportunity to protest against the use and abuse that was then being made of Camões and the *Lusiads* to ground the overseas orthodoxy and justify the war in Africa. The painting was a staging of signals alluding to Lusitanian myths, reduced to the kind mediocrity of thought that is the enemy of true culture, an inexorable path to the second Alcácer-Quibir. *Canto XI* showed the palm trees of the African coast devoured by napalm (information that was always denied) and the monument destined for Sagres, which was never built. Although many people predicted that the painting would be rejected, I thought that the Academy might be capable of accepting an iconoclastic provocation. The argument that the academicians found to airily resolve the question of the painting and the promise of the prize never occurred to me: fearing that 'a new Luandino Vieira-style case' might lead to the closure of their premises by the PIDE, they alleged that the painting did not correspond to the theme proposed, as there is no eleventh canto in the *Lusiads*! Nice!<sup>5</sup>

Between 1975-77, she produced a series of drawings entitled *Abaixo a Cultura* [Down with Culture] and *Viva a Liberdade* [Long Live Freedom]. At that time of the Cold War, the Ongoing Revolutionary Process [PREC] and intimidatory manoeuvres to impose uniformity of thought and censorship in the arts, a new period of darkness seemed to be augured with the threat of a new dictatorship of an opposite persuasion to the previous one. But this did not come about.

In 1976, Emília Nadal exhibited a drawing entitled *O Ditador* [The Dictator] and a print *O Comando* [The Commando] within the collection *Pena de Morte, Tortura, e Prisão Política* [Death Sentence, Torture and Political Imprisonment] at the National Fine Arts Society, an event which was strangely overlooked by the press.

In 1983, in the exhibition *Trágico-Marítimos* [Sea Tragedies] held at the National Fine Arts Society, Emília Nadal participated with two paintings on canvas (*O Naufrágio da Nau São Bento* [The Wreck of the Ship São Bento] and *As Lágrimas de D. Leonor Sepúlveda* [The Tears of D. Leonor Sepúlveda]) and an installation called *O Novo Capítulo da História Trágico-Marítima* [The New Chapter in the History of Sea Tragedies], a critique of the Fishing Treaty that had been signed between Portugal and Spain and which was very restrictive for Portugal.

In addition to other recurrent iconographies, common to all wars and peacetime threats on the Portuguese and African coasts, Emília Nadal was able to maintain a critical and inventive eye on Portuguese postcolonial society, corroborating what José-Augusto França

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<sup>5</sup> Author's statement, given on 6.8.2019.

wrote about her work in his preface to *Guerre et Paix* ["War and Peace"]: "Painting is a war tool to be used defensively and offensively against the enemy" (França, 2016) paraphrasing Picasso in 1945.

### 2.3. Graça Morais

Between 1988 and 1989, at the invitation of the then ambassador of Portugal in Cape Verde, José Fernandes Fafe, Graça Morais (1948) produced a body of work about the archipelago during an extensive artistic residence there. In a series of works which document her stay on the archipelago, Cape Verde was "a parenthesis" (Ferreira, 2005) which opened and closed there, but which did not leave her indifferent. This was in part because the stay in Cape Verde allowed her to revisit the Africa of her childhood since she had lived for a while in Mozambique. As she herself said, that Africa, where she had arrived by boat, "was amazing" (Morais, 2018).

She lived in Guijá (later Vila Trigo de Morais) in the Limpopo valley, two hundred kilometres from Lourenço Marques, today Maputo. That was where she started to paint, developing an oeuvre which led her to be invited to hold an initial exhibition for the inauguration of the Sines Art Centre in 2005-06. The artistic residence immersed her in a maritime reality which inspired her to create a series of canvasses and to paint a triangular sail of a boat. On a large panel, Graça Morais condensed the renewed adventure of confronting the unknown, combatting it and imprisoning it in the mix of paints, in *Uma história trágico-marítima* [A Maritime Tragedy] in which she highlights a man "drawn on a background of endless blue, telling us that he/it is there, in the undecipherable depths of his eyes (...), which reveal the true history of the [Portuguese] sea" (Ferreira, 2005). It was that same sea that saw the caravels depart and now sees the fishing boats arrive at a quay in a place that some historians believe to have been the birthplace and residence of Vasco da Gama.

### 2.4. Julião Sarmiento

The theme of travel is present in all Julião Sarmiento's work (1948-2021), although not always perceptibly. It evokes a journey of provision, initiated during his stay in a province of the Portuguese empire in 1972: Mozambique. While he was there, he lived in Matola, from where he travelled to Swaziland and South Africa, without socializing with other artists except for Malangatana, who kindly gave him paints and canvasses, encouraging him to paint.

This stay resulted in his first exhibition in collaboration with another artist (in this case Eleonor Cruz) which took place in the Texto Gallery in Lourenço Marques. The force behind this gallery-bookshop was the artist António Quadros (1933-1994), who organised individual, collective and itinerant exhibitions and retrospectives. Although it was not Quadros who invited Julião Sarmiento to exhibit, the event nevertheless went ahead. It was inaugurated on 25th April 1974, when Sarmiento was already back in mainland Portugal. It did not take place on the publicised date but opened later on. The series of paintings was entitled *Quartos*, and showed representations of bedrooms, and also the legs of animals in accordance with the double meaning of the word in Portuguese. A leaflet prepared for the exhibition contained a text by Sílvia Chicó, which reads as follows:

A game that takes place on the level of the signifier: the word “QUARTO” can refer both to a specific architectural space and also to the leg part of the animals represented. These animals, which form part of the traditional African theme, are also part of the poetics of children. An exhibition of hindlegs. Figurative hindlegs, abstract hindlegs. The backgrounds are treated in an abstract-geometrical way, and against them the figures and silhouettes stand out.<sup>6</sup>

The canvasses had titles like *Quarto de Cama* [Bedroom], *Quarto de Relva* [Lawn room], *Quarto de Elefante* [Elephant’s room/hindleg], *Quarto de Leão* [Lion’s room/hindleg] or *Quarto de Leopardo* [Leopard’s room/hindleg] and used a mixture of paints which, later – though still in the 1970s - spread to a group of works with a generic title, *Segredos do Mundo Animal* [Secrets of the Animal World] in which the artist mixed people and animals, considering that people had a certain sense of animality.

In fact, the canvasses exhibited in the Texto Gallery in Lourenço Marques were never returned to the artist, although he has a collection of snapshots of some of them when they were still unfinished. In these, we can see portraits of animals, framed in spaces confined by lines and colours “whose leitmotif was Africa”.<sup>7</sup>

Harking back to these years, and based on an artistic lineage of African inspiration, the exhibition *Leopard in a cage. Projetos Inéditos* [Unpublished Projects] 1969-2018, was organised in the José de Guimarães International Art Centre (CIAJG) in 2018.<sup>8</sup> The title refers to the project *Um Leopardo na S.N.B.A* [A Leopard in the S.N.B.A] proposed in June 1975 to the National Fine Arts Society, and which consisted of releasing a live leopard into the main exhibition room. This project, which was never carried out, featured in the CIAJG exhibition as an artistic object in itself, some forty years after the initial idea.

Also included in the CIAJG exhibition in the 1970s was a group entitled *Um Quarto de* (zebra, girafa etc.) [The Zebra’s/Giraffe’s etc. Room/Hindleg]. Part of the respective animal can be glimpsed in the corner of the pictorial space, with an off-field dominated by bright luxuriant colours. Behind this series was the exhibition in the Texto Gallery in Lourenço Marques in 1974, and the photographs that the artist had taken of the works exhibited. In fact, the unifying theme of this exhibition (“animalia”) was based on impressions made on paper of animal skins, showing the patterns of the zebra, tiger or leopard. There are other ideas from the same decade, the 1970s, such as the project for a postcard – now realised – *Cheetah* – or the photograph of an action in the Lisbon Zoo entitled *Jaula* [Cage] in which Julião Sarmiento placed a tiger in a cage and documented the action from the animal’s point of view.

These interventions recall a piece (also from 1975) composed of three photographs mounted on fibreboard, which show a woman wearing eight fur coats – all of different skins

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<sup>6</sup> Leaflet of the Lourenço Marques exhibition, 1974, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Interview given to Hubert de Haro and Paulo Costa Dias. Online at <https://espiraldotempo.com/2012/05/28/juliao-sarmiento-em-entrevista-exclusiva/> (accessed on 2.4.2020).

<sup>8</sup> Online at <https://contemporanea.pt/edicoes/07-2018/juliao-sarmiento-leopard-cage-projetos-ineditos-1969-2018> (accessed on 2.4.2020).

(*Sem título – Casacos de Pele* [Untitled – Fur Coats]), establishing a performative relationship between the fur, body and image. This piece opened his biggest retrospective, *Noites Brancas* [White Nights] in Serralves in 2012. Nuno Crespo (1975) has written about this exhibition in Porto:

It is imbued with a certain animality - not as artistic theme, but in the way the artist sees the world. It's not only about seeing in animality a good metaphor for the artist's condition, but of recognising through it the direct, original, primitive contact that he establishes with the fundamental experiences of the human being and which make part of the celebration of pleasure, the discovery of the body, of sex, but also of sadness, suffering. This animality is expressed in the irreverence and crudeness that characterise many of his works. A crudeness that is synonymous with inexhaustible brute force. All this is expressed in the words and fixed emotional gaze of the artist as he leads the visit through *White Nights*.<sup>9</sup>

It is also inspired by Africa, as he explains: "My head has completely changed (...) and I would not be the same if I hadn't had that African experience",<sup>10</sup> a place where the earth and the jungle "attach themselves to us".<sup>11</sup>

This does not mean that he has remained tied to the past. On the contrary. He never remains hostage to past time, nor does he look back to lose himself in inconsequential nostalgia; rather he sets his gaze on the future, experiencing the present.<sup>12</sup> This is because the past only interests him as a good memory, which is perhaps why he has not gone back to Mozambique, though he has occasionally returned to Africa including South Africa (such as when he went to participate in the Luanda Triennial in 2010).

We should mention that the work included in the Gulbenkian exhibition, *África, outros Territórios* [Africa, Other Territories] in 2017, *The Swiftness of Skin*, from 1989, is like a very summary figuration which, while not itself having any connection with Africa, inherits from it a certain economy of stroke, which needs only show the primordial, a kind of primitive rip from which the world of man was gradually constructed.

Contrary to what we might suppose, the heterogeneity of languages, media and registers used by Julião Sarmiento are defined from force-lines that converge in singular coherence. This can be seen in the world map hanging on his studio wall, where pins mark the geography of his artistic trajectory: there they are, the points marked on the African continent, corroborating "the special relationship with Africa, from which has resulted an indelible affinity".<sup>13</sup> So indelible were the paintings painted in Mozambique that, despite

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<sup>9</sup> Online at <https://www.publico.pt/2012/11/23/culturaipsilon/noticia/juliao-sarmiento-faz-a-sua-maior-retrospectiva-em-serralves-313278> (accessed on 2.4.2020).

<sup>10</sup> According to an interview given to the author on 16 September 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Idem.

<sup>12</sup> Online at <https://ionline.sapo.pt/artigo/418647/juliao-sarmiento-ser-artista-e-uma-forma-de-vida-nao-e-uma-forma-de-trabalho-?seccao=B.I> (accessed on 2.4.2020).

<sup>13</sup> According to an interview given to the author on 16 September 2019.

having been lost, they maintain their power and force in the multiple imagetic perspectives offered.

## 2.5. Júlio Resende

Any interpretation of Júlio Resende's art has necessarily to take account of the places he visited, as these not only provided him with inspiration for the series that he painted in each country, but also supplied material for later phases of his production. Júlio Resende (1917-2011) was a versatile painter, whose repertoire of forms and colours was enriched by the places he visited, particularly former colonies of the Portuguese empire, such as Brazil, Cape Verde and Goa.

While his paintings of Brazil were executed swiftly and fluently, evoking Delacroix's Moroccan phase (Almeida, 2017), his landscapes of Cape Verde are constructed from a different palette, with the human figures appearing detached from the landscape, which nevertheless contains them.

In Goa, in 1996, Resende fulfilled a series of openly figurative pictorial intentions. We might say that he allowed himself to be seduced by the atmospheres, enveloping in the magic of colour a fluid space in which mostly female figures are inscribed in a movement without end.<sup>14</sup>

In 1997, he returned to Cape Verde after a five-year absence. It is clear from both the catalogue *Um Olhar sobre Cabo Verde* [A Glance at Cape Verde],<sup>15</sup> and the travel notebooks he kept about this journey that he was never indifferent to place. The many drawings and paintings he made on this last journey show a world far from the yoke of colonialism although still with the impressions of a shared Lusophony.

In 1999, he took part in a collective at the Camões Institute in Maputo together with six other artists – Armando Alves, Francisco Laranjo, Manuel Casal Aguiar, Marta Resende, Victor Costa and Zulmiro de Carvalho. However, the exhibition was not his only reason for visiting Mozambique. He was on his way to the Island of Mozambique, where he would observe and prepare works dedicated to it. This eventually resulted in the collective exhibition *Viagem - Ilha de Moçambique* [Voyage – Island of Mozambique]), which he took on international tour in 2004. From that journey, Resende produced a group of works using pastels and mixed techniques, which cultivate a certain diaphanous atmosphere that he had explored in the Cape Verde and Goa series.

## 2.6. Paula Rego

The painting that gave rise to the tapestry *Alcácer-Quibir* by Paula Rego (1935) was originally commissioned for the Hotel Algarve in Praia da Rocha. When the order was cancelled, it remained for years in her houses at Ericeira and Estoril.

The only piece on permanent display in the Paula Rego House of Stories, its theme is of interest as it is inscribed into a North African geography in the midst of the colonial war.

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<sup>14</sup> See Resende. *Goa, l'odeur couleur*. Bruxelles, Cordeiros Galeria, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Centro Cultural Português, Praia, Cape Verde, 1997.

Executed in 1966, the wealth of pictorial references included in the tapestry's narrative reveals a political critique against the war. Indeed, as an artistic experiment, it makes "a political statement, questioning the legitimacy of the colonial occupation as a key factor of Portuguese foreign and economic policy, in the light of humanitarian principles established since 1948 with the Charter of Human Rights". The piece undoubtedly contributed to the demythification of the historical self-narrative of the *Estado Novo* in the colonial war, auguring the consequences of a heavy defeat.

A theme running through other works by Paula Rego is the colonial war which is also present in a 2000 work entitled *Jardim do Interrogador* [The Interrogator's Garden]<sup>16</sup> which also refers to the Portuguese colonial presence in Africa, pointing an accusing finger at the affluent classes of the metropolitan bourgeoisie that closed its eyes to the atrocities committed overseas.

However, her most important work, as regards painting in the postcolonial context, is undoubtedly *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* [The First Mass in Brazil]. Dated 1993, the canvas shifts the focus of the title, questioning the grandeur of a heroic deed by placing a young pregnant woman in the foreground. Paula Rego inverts the scene in Victor Meirelles' (1832-1903) well-known painting<sup>17</sup> of the same name, dating from 1860. If Meirelles' painting was created at the time when Brazil was attempting to put down its own roots and become independent of the Portuguese mother-country by way of matricide,<sup>18</sup> Rego's canvas gives primacy to maternity, turning its back on the bloody past as figured in the Portuguese caravels that can be glimpsed through the window, which is viewed as illusory and patriarchal. Rego's version also suggests a subjective reading in the sense that it may also allude historically "to the rape of slave girls, whose mixed-race progeny was both a testament to violence and a form of demographic capital, which served to increase the master's wealth" (Rosengarten, 2009). A final reading of this work suggests that there is a clear critical awareness, denounced in the colonisation of land and bodies, of the landscape and its people.

With its imagery of ambiguous characters, these three examples by Paula Rego are redolent with recurrent allusions to history and politics, whose key moments lie in the Discoveries and the Salazar dictatorship.

### III. Considerations

When Picasso painted Gertrude Stein in 1905-1906, the model seemed to appreciate the results. "That's not me," she said, to which the artist replied, "But it will be!"

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<sup>16</sup> Saatchi Gallery Collection.

<sup>17</sup> In Meirelles' painting, the Portuguese, having arrived in Brazil, are raising a cross above an altar surrounded by members of Pedro Álvares Cabral's crew and semi-naked natives. This is the character of the "civilising" mission imposed by the Europeans with the blessing of the cross. This work has a powerful ideological charge, glorifying the people that founded the new order that would transform the Indians into slaves. The work was based not only on the description given in Pêro Vaz de Caminha's famous letter (a kind of birth certificate of Brazil) but also on the painting by the French artist Horace Vernet, *Première messe en Kabylie*, of 1855.

<sup>18</sup> It should be pointed out that Meirelles' painting was produced on the eve of Brazilian independence, 1821-1825.

Two decades later, Stein was photographed with the painting behind her, which shows that they were indeed very similar. Although the painting may not appear very revolutionary, the face is composed of the simpler geometric figures that marked the first step towards cubism. What does this story mean? What is the importance of art, what is its great ambition? It anticipates!

It is the artist's anticipatory character which gives art its power and force. It can serve to announce or denounce, or simply to give aesthetic enjoyment, but, above all, it anticipates its own time.

This paradigmatic example reveals part of the power of the work of contemporary art in the sense intended by Giorgio Agamben (Agamben, 2009): in the understanding of a diachronic relationship that the individual establishes with his own time, or rather, the historian manages to be present in one time, while at the same time distancing himself from it, seeing it from the outside. It is this particular fact that enables him to read and understand the work of art with all its involvement and dynamism.

In this sense, and casting a brief glance on an integrated perspective, we might say that the correlation between painting and the colonial context and national political discourse brought together various aesthetic sensibilities, which gave rise to a spiral of different intentions: that of the few artists that bent the bar and plunged into the colonial reality, experiencing it and painting, and those that remained in the metropole, imagining an empire from the quayside.

One truth is unalterable, however: art and politics are two poles of the same reality; an art that is free of all political influence does not exist, simply because the artist is inserted into the surrounding political world and dialogues with it. Even if he does not assume an explicit position, his art will reflect a point of view, transmit an idea, therefore, it has power; thus, artistic creation brings the mark of the era to which it belongs to the political history that it is a part of as well as the dominant mentality. The reactions that it arouses become a vehicle of power, an instrument of propaganda, and even a weapon that governments have used to legitimise and diffuse their empires, reiterating the idea that there is "no act that is really more political than the act of painting" (Seixas, s.d.).

The narrow geography of insular Portugal was aggrandised overseas, largely because the metropole had actually omitted to embark on the journey, and instead crystallised that other world and mythified it from a quay from where it never set sail...

It acquired its imperial consciousness too late – with the Ultimatum – renewed almost seven decades later with the colonial war as new winds brought the defeat of the first and last European empire – an empire which had lasted 500 years and which stretched from the Minho to Timor (its final border), closing a historical cycle.

Nowadays, it has become evident that, as regards artistic creation, the Portuguese colonial empire had few interlocutors, making painting into a soliloquy with few echoes.

Although painting was not rare in the colonial context, it was far from being the norm and attracted little attention from the authorities. The generalised lack of interest – even

chronic apathy on the part of most metropolitan artists – meant that the pictorial output from overseas was crystallised into a journey of many silences, frugal notes and rare cries.

If national painters were unwilling or unable to take advantage of the challenge and opportunity offered by the overseas space, this did not prevent artists from those territories taking the few opportunities available to develop an art that was truly their own. We should not forget that the coloniser and the colonised share a common history, and that there were reciprocal influences in the pictorial discourses of colonialism, though often transversal and/or dissimulated. If nothing else, it should be noted that it was not only the colonised world that was changed by imperialism, but also the colonising societies themselves; thus, a de-Westernised view of history is the primordial condition for advancing contemporary knowledge.

In this sense, and far from a historical outcome, the universe of colonial empires left many questions open to which only the future will provide answers. Perhaps the most urgent is the fact that museums today are seen as institutions of colonial perpetuation. We have only to think of the Louvre or British Museum as holders of the spoils that resulted from pillages carried out in previous centuries in Egypt, Greece, Ethiopia and elsewhere. As various authors have noted, the problem of devolving these works of art to the former colonies of European empires, and the moulds in which such a restitution could be carried out, raises a series of questions as diverse as colonial terminology (today, for example, the notion is refuted that the colonial territories were “discovered” by European powers; instead, we prefer to say that they were “explored” or “exploited”) or the Portuguese controversy about the Museum of the Discoveries in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

All these questions are positioned between Eurocentrism (or Western-centrism) and a global world without a centre of gravity – and multipolarity, to the detriment of a unipolar or bipolar vision. The “era” of the West is at a crossroads, or even at its end, as Eduardo Lourenço predicted in 2000 (Lourenço, 2010). We are at a moment of transition, without a matrix and model culture to guide us against which others could measure or position themselves.

In a certain way, postcolonialism began with the Cold War, when each superpower established various alliances and diplomacies becoming transcontinental empires, two global colossi. Two superlative empires, endowed with a growing sense of international mission. But that bipolar world has come to an end. Closing the circle, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the USSR (1989-91), the September 11 attacks (2001) and the Arab Springs (2010-12), the paradigm shift points to new challenges.

It is, however, essential to emphasise that, in these pages, we have not sought to offer an exhaustive genealogy of artists and their output in the contemporary colonial context, but only enunciate some of them, envisaging one of the many routes of colonial pictorial drawing. We have also not tried to arrive at definitive considerations that are enclosed within themselves but rather to trace some coordinates that permit a new reading of artistic universes in the to-ing and fro-ing of the overseas territories.

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more than ever before, we know that art is ephemeral, even when it lasts, and that it lasts even when it is created with ephemeral purposes: it is the mediatisation of the work of art that remains - that is its essence, transversal to space and time, and for this reason, eternal, because it is always capable of new interpretations and new sensations. This, as Agamben announced, is called the contemporaneity of art and it is about this that it is important to continue to reflect, rescuing canvasses and forgotten histories, and bringing them into the remembrance of a collective identity that is more than the sum of its parts and which reflects about it and beyond it.

It remains for us to stress that Contemporary Colonial Painting was configured from the Solitude of the Metropole to a Horizon of Possibilities, travelling within a unique historical-artistic time frame whose polyphonic nature is only now beginning to be truly revealed, or memory might not only hold glimpses but might also lead to oblivion!

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