

Mystery of the World

*It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.
The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.*

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Dead Language, the PhD thesis of Ana Luiza Dias Batista, consists of a meticulous description of her work up to that moment. Without the pretension of analyzing or criticizing, Ana Luiza prefers to "avoid interpretations and take everything literally"¹, merely describing the works in detail, creating juxtapositions that transpose time and especially the space in which each was conceived and created, shedding light on the *modus operandi* that underlies all of them. This strategy (descriptive rather than analytical) is extremely relevant and consistent with the work in general, if we consider how often her interventions seek to remain on the surface of things, overlapping with the exhibition space in an almost imperceptible way, or mimicking itself programmatically (*Errata*, 2017; *Cortina*, 2015; *Insônia*, 2013; *Fardo*, 2013; *Fotolitos: Desembaçadores*, 2010; *Queimada*, 2009; *Hipódromo*, 2009, are a few that come to mind). Other works are inspired by a notion of scale, and, therefore, presuppose the same process of approximation and almost physical comparison that the thesis, with its paratatic organization, suggests (*Painel*, 2015; *Eva*, 2014; *Molde-Modelo*, 2015; *Abismo*, 2013; *Pulga*, 2013; *H16*, Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, 2013; *Escalímetro*, 2013, among many others as well). These two aspects are often complementary: *Eva*, for example, is inspired by a homonymous 1980s theme park attraction in which visitors could walk inside the body of a gigantic woman and wander around. By reducing the scale of the doll to that of a real woman, Ana operates a change of scale that, despite not flattening the figure, somehow obliterates its three-dimensionality: "it has no interior to reach"². Removing the interior of a Renaissance sculpture could be a conceptually powerful intervention but would not substantially affect its meaning. On the other hand, in the case of *Eva*, the interior course constituted

¹ Ana Luiza Dias Batista, *Língua Morta [Dead Language]*, PhD Thesis, ECA-USP, 2014, p. 15.

² "There is no interior to reach", interview with Art Basel Miami Beach | 2014 Magazine, available on http://anadiasbatista.com/textos/13_interview_ABMB_2014.pdf.

its *raison d'être*: by making it pure exteriority, Ana Luiza sets off a series of reflections and displacements that ultimately constitute the "new" *Eva's* reason for being. It is in this subtle inversion or subversion of appearances and possible interpretations that, to a large extent, her work takes place.

The interventions that make up *Two-Headed Eagle* generally follow similar procedures, guided more precisely by two essential actions: displacing and disguising, complemented by a third that simultaneously represents the opposite of the previous two: highlighting something without changing its place or its function. The clearest example of displacement is in *Pillage*: all of the rugs in the house are piled on top of each other, in the shape of a cross, in the living room of the new wing of the house. At the top of the pile is the rug that already belonged to that spot, as if all the others had come to hide beneath it. The rugs also appeared in the recent solo show at Galeria Marilia Razuk, however, if there the pile layout that's typical of rug stores seemed to allude directly to the commercial dimension of the exhibition, here, the accumulation finds its direct counterpoint in the way that the paintings of the Ivani and Jorge Yunes Collection occupy the entire surface of the walls, without any solution of continuity.

The second action, that of dissimulation, whether it be through the bias of masquerade, mimicry or camouflage, characterizes *The octopus routine* and *Figuration*. For the first, Ana commissioned an artistic swimming choreography inspired by the movements of an octopus, to be performed in the pool of the house. The mandatory figures in official artistic swimming competitions are often based on animals (like carp or flamingo), but the octopus chosen by the artist has the peculiarity of being able to change the color and the opacity of its epidermis to camouflage itself. In *Figuration*, the performers are not human, but animals: two owls trained to remain perfectly still, like the sculptures that surround them. This typology of camouflage, in which the animal takes the form of the surrounding flora and remains immobile, is called *homotype*, whereas *homochromia* is the ability to change colors in order to blend in with the surroundings. In this sense *Homochromia* could very well be the title of a performance whose protagonist is an octopus: this play on the titles and works,

which continues throughout the house, is not accidental, and emphasizes how all the interventions complement each other and respond to each other.

And so, *homochromia* is both the name of a displacement and a camouflage: the art deco portrait of a woman, framed in an acrylic box that concealed the entrance to a service room below the staircase leading to the upper floor, was replaced by a trompe-l'oeil which reproduces, on a 1:1 scale, the same portrait, painted directly on the door and wall. The camouflage is reversed here, since, despite replicating what was there, the function of hiding the door is suspended. A final set of works, as we said before, does not operate dislocations or dissimulations, but draws the visitor's attention to elements of the house or collection. If this already happens with the pool when occupied by the octopus, and with the columns that support the owl-sculptures in *Figuration*, in *Land Surveyor* and *Essential Tremor*, this strategy is even clearer. In the first, a 3x3 meter grid is outlined over the entire garden area of the house and subsequently drawn, in the artist's words, "not by addition but by subtraction. In alternating squares there will be pruning, maintenance, replenishment of grass and plants; in the other squares nothing will be done. The grass will grow, the weeds will not be pulled, the plants will not be pruned." The grid, commonly used in scale representations, will thus appear throughout the exhibition, gradually bringing reality closer to its own representation. *Essential Tremor* surprises visitors with the rattling of objects sitting on some of the window sills of the house, as if their steps made the walls tremble and suddenly awakened the sleeping objects.

In all the interventions we have "seen" up until now, the artist has merely moved elements around or given a new purpose to spaces in the house and collection, apparently interested mainly in the performative character of these interventions. The actual performances (*The octopus routine* and *Figuration*) are characterized by an ambivalence between the human and the animal, with the artificial hovering over both: in the first, the choreography of the swimmers is obviously artificial, inspired by the movements of an animal; in the second, the artificial immobility suggests the absence of the most intimately animal quality, that is, spontaneity.

Even though it is evidently less literal, the other works also allude to or presuppose a kind of performance or choreography, whether it be in the growing grass (*Land Surveyor*), in objects that make noise (*Essential Tremor*), in the rugs that are piled up (*Pillage*) or in the frame that disappears letting the trompe-l'oeil (*Homochromia*) appear. But *Two-Headed Eagle* includes yet another work, the only object that Ana Dias Batista adds to the unabashed collection of objects that already occupy and characterize the house so powerfully. The choice of working almost exclusively with the existing objects was not accidental: the artist herself explains that she defined this strategy because "an eclectic universe, composed of objects from different periods, materials and provenances, neutralizes in advance the potential for strangeness and reflexivity of new objects." In fact, the only object she considered strong enough is not a work of art in the conventional sense, nor does it represent a new image in the context of the house: to make *Trompe-l'oeil*,³ the artist hired a specialist to produce two glass eye prostheses which almost perfectly reproduce the size of the globe and iris, the color, and even the veins, of the eyes of Dona Ivani, the mistress of the house. With this gesture, Ana allows the house – the absolute protagonist, although silent – of *Two-Headed Eagle*, to stop simply being "seen" and to "see" itself, with all the works, objects and people who occupy and visit it, and to question, perhaps, about the mystery of the world, about the visible and the invisible.

jacopo crivelli visconti

³ Evidently, *Trompe-l'oeil* could also be the title of other works in the exhibition...

