

Centro Cultural de Belém. *Arte Moderna Portuguesa no Tempo de Fernando Pessoa 1910-1940*. Lisboa [Lisbon]: Edition Stemmler, 1997.

Memory Holloway

Few images of Fernando Pessoa are so familiar as the painting by Almada Negreiros done in 1954. Pessoa sits at a large table in a café, holding a cigarette. Before him is a sheet of blank paper, a pen, coffee and *Orpheu 2*, the 1915 issue in which the literary Portuguese avant-garde defined itself. It is late afternoon, as the light slakes across the tiles and the table, and the writer looks intently into space, as if he is thinking. The oval wire-rimmed glasses, the habitual fedora, the bow tie and detachable collar, all of which contribute to an immaculate English elegance, are familiar attributes, and recognizable attributes of the artist even when reduced to a few lines. What physical sense we have of Pessoa is constructed by this painting in particular, and by photographs taken by friends that convey little more than the appearance of the author of heteronyms. Tight lipped, with a sidelong glance away from the lens of the camera, Pessoa reveals little of himself to the scrutinizing eye. Predictably, painting tells us far less about the writer than the writer himself.

Yet it is precisely the promise of knowing more about Pessoa, his role in the emergence of the Portuguese literary avant-garde and his relation to the artists and painting of the period that the exhibition *Arte Moderna Portuguesa no Tempo de Fernando Pessoa, 1910-1940*, offers. What the title suggests is that the time and the thirty years covered belong to Pessoa, that the development of modern Portuguese art takes place in his time and it links art and Pessoa by placing them side by side. Of course, it can be argued that this is a convenient means of periodizing painting. Or it could be said that this is a marketing strategy designed to draw a wider audience, specifically those attending the Frankfurt Book Fair where the exhibition was first installed in 1997. The practice of linking artists to a literary movement, a way legitimating art in a culture where literature has been privileged over the visual, has its precedent in Portugal in *A Pintura Maneirista em Portugal: Arte no Tempo de Camões*, in which case Camões features solely as a temporal marker rather than an agent of change as in the case of Pessoa. Even more, there is the link to be made between the two poets, together the canonic giants of Portuguese literature. All of which is to question the purpose of linking art and literature. Was Pessoa brought into the arena of painting in

order to link to the Frankfurt Book Fair? And would this show have been phrased in just this way had it been conceived for Portugal alone, organized not for an international audience, but for a more informed national one?

Even the neat chronological organization of the paintings themselves has the familiar ring of the international development of the European avant-garde. The paintings fell into the categories of Before (the period of a lingering Symbolism); Rupture (1910-1919) (the high point in Europe of Cubist and Futurism experimentation); The Return to Order (1920-29) (the post-war period of conservatism in politics and art, a classicizing about face from earlier experimentation) and Expressionism and Isolation (1930-1940). This last section, which includes Mário Eloy's interiorized psychological self-portraits and urban landscapes of longing and desire, is the most powerful section of the exhibition for several reasons. One is that these works seem less urgently international and more quietly responsive to the specific circumstances of the political and social environment of Portugal, namely the growing authoritarianism that resulted in the Estado Novo. The paintings are troubled and escapist, projected dreams of desire such as the scenes of Lisbon painted by Elle and Botelho in which small, cohesive idyllic worlds are created. Almada is at his best as he seeks to interrogate the boundaries of feminine sensibility and corporeality in his drawings, which abound in distortions and the slight gestural movements. And it is at this moment that Vieira da Silva begins to traverse the borders between restricted, uninhabited and silent interior spaces and the light that permits escape.

What emerges from the catalogue essays is a picture of literary and artistic avant-gardes that ran parallel to one another, with more differences than similarities in the way that each saw the modernist project of building an audience attuned to artistic revolt and to introducing a new visual and verbal language to Portugal. After seeing Cubist paintings by Picasso and others in Paris, Mário de Sá-Carneiro wrote to Pessoa that while he believed in Cubism, he didn't believe in the paintings. He didn't like Amadeo Souza-Cardoso's paintings, which he likened to the "noisy disorder of toys."

It was the visual disjunction, the borderline abstraction, that was disturbing, yet Sá-Carneiro had no hesitation in calling his own poetry "minha obra cubista." He was equally enthusiastic about Futurist poetry - not painting - and promised to send Pessoa a new anthology entitled *I Poeti Futuristi*.

These tensions were more equally apparent in the pages of literary journals where the battles to define how exactly the new art would shape itself.

The journals, which provided one of the main possibilities that artists had of disseminating their work, regularly reproduced the drawings and paintings of artists such as Almada Negreiros among others. Almada was both a writer and an artist and was for this reason of particular interest to Pessoa. But it wasn't his visual practice that interested Pessoa. Although Pessoa doesn't appear to have been particularly interested in painting, he visited an exhibition of caricatures by Almada in 1913. His remarks on the painter give an insight into his artistic preferences and his reasons for attending the exhibition. What mattered for Pessoa was not Almada's beautiful arabesque line or his ability to satirize his sitters. What he admired was the artist's ability to move freely between art and literature, his flexibility, what Pessoa identified as his *poliaptidão*. Pessoa went to Almada's exhibition, argues Fernando Cabral Martins, in one of the catalogue essays, not out of professional or critical curiosity but in order to investigate an artist whose personality he sensed was similar to his own and who would be decisive for the future of the avant-garde. His instincts were right. Almada along with Pessoa and Sá-Carneiro were in the same year to define Portuguese modernism in the pages of *Orpheu*. Almada's enthusiasms for Italian Futurism along with his manifestoes (*A Cena do Ódio*, for example) were critical in bringing Marinetti's ideas to Portugal.

Even so, Pessoa's observations on Almada's drawings weren't exactly positive. "Almada Negreiros," he wrote, "is not a genius - he reveals himself in not revealing himself." Surely this is Pessoa himself, most present - in the heteronyms with their multiple personalities and fragmentation - where he is most absent. Three years later, in a letter to a friend, Pessoa made clear in what high esteem he held the artist, describing him as an "absolute genius, one of the great sensibilities of modern literature." What really counted was writing.

Precisely those tensions that split the avant-garde into literary and visual camps also appear in Pessoa's work. The heteronym Alberto Caeiro, created in March of 1914, insists on seeing as the only way to know the world, ("To think is to be eye-sick"), and as a way of resisting literature ("Today I read nearly two pages"). For Caeiro, sensation and its visual ally is a way of transforming the world into knowledge free of ideology or convention. Caeiro is made in his relation to sight and the way in which he processes the visual world. Yet Álvaro de Campos works in the opposite direction, making sense of the world not through sight but through language. He divides people into

three categories according to their artistic preferences: plebeians, who preferred dance, song, and theatre; the bourgeoisie whose interests lay with painting, sculpture and architecture; and the aristocracy, for whom there existed only one art, that of literature. "All art is a form of literature," he writes in 1936 in *Presença*, "because all art says something." He sees lines, planes, volumes, colors, all the tools of the visual arts as verbal phenomena presented without words, spiritual hieroglyphs that could be decoded. No artistic representation remained indecipherable. Hieroglyphs, like any other text, could be unraveled. Sensacionismo had for Pessoa a particular link to the heteronyms. Álvaro de Campos, in an interview of 1926 remarked that things are our feelings without any objectivity that can be determined, and that he didn't think of himself as having any more reality than other things.

"Things" - paintings, documents, diaries - in exhibitions have a tactility and presence that is rarely experienced by the viewer. Sight, but not touch, is permitted in the museum. But beyond that is the possibility, the longing even, of entering into a period through everyday objects, of gaining sense of what it was like to live in another time. That sense of the tactile, the presence of the past was exactly what was missing from the exhibition as it appeared in Lisbon, so easily remedied with the inclusion of objects that reveal to the viewer something beyond the final polished production of painting and drawing: documents, letters, agendas, drafts of poems, failed drawings from the studio floor, popular magazines of the time, menus from the Brasileira café, and all kinds of other ephemeral printed matter that make up the world out of which the avant-garde fashioned itself would give life to the paintings on the wall. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has recently argued that the claim that "one can learn from history" has lost its persuasive power, and that in its place we need to ask what it is that motivates us to know about the past.

What may drive us toward past realities is the direct experience of everyday worlds. We want to touch, smell, taste those past worlds and the objects that constitute them. And nowhere, he says, is the engagement with the public more direct than in the museum where historical environments are reconfigured: medieval marketplaces, 1950's drugstores and so on. But this is not the case with art museums which still hold to the purist principle that painting can speak directly, with few supplements, to the viewer. In this case, more is better.

In the late seventies the Centre Pompidou put on a series of shows that connected Paris with other centers from 1900 to the 1930's as a way of

demonstrating the exchange between the center and periphery. *Paris-Berlin*, and *Paris-Moscow* were vast exhibitions which included painting along with posters and utilitarian objects, cinema, photographs, agitprop and music. More recently in 1990 in *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, the Museum of Modern Art in New York placed the 'low' art of caricature, graffiti, advertising and comics next to the 'high' art of this century. The effect of these exhibitions produced precisely that kind of concrete sense of the life world that Gumbrecht addresses. *Pessoa and Portuguese Modernist Painting* would have done well to proceed along the same lines.