

Ceramics and sense

“It never pleased me the ornamentals nor the conventional things, for that reason I understood that ceramics that can be placed on a table, like a bibelot, did not interest to me, because it is like a decorative object and not like a sculpture”, tells me Sofia Beça. Her works are not made to shine on a table, nor so, at least, to be on a pedestal. As Antonio Vivas said, this artist “represents the force of the new Portuguese ceramics, more uninhibited, freer, even provoking, but always impressive in murals and facilities”. Sofia Beça loves working on real spaces, has done it in Alcora, has done it in Muel, etc, and her works have, in many cases, an open character, that requests the collaboration of other artists, other means, or the spectator, and even of the elements (the fire, the air...), and usually they incorporate an action. Her works are not fully realized by simply being looked at. Even when they are not destined to a public space, her way to use the exhibition hall is heterodox, because often they go straight to the floor, and it does not seem they are exhibited there, but rather occupy and extend the ground, or the wall. It is a setting up a scene; nothing rhetorical, by the way, but put in a scene. The field work, or specific integration in an architecture is her ideal. As in the classics of the Land the Art, the exhibition in a gallery or arts centre has an exile point. It is the old problem of site/site of Smithson taken to the ceramic world.

Some of the great masters of contemporary ceramics are among Sofia's influences and a very special one, Arcadio Blasco, with whom she maintains a close relationship since 1998 – when they met in Portugal, where he was delivering a course - a relationship that has got something of paternal. As an anxious creator, her influences also come from other scopes, the Art in general, from what (as it happens with Arcadio Blasco) she does not accept to part. An artist like the Briton Andy Goldsworthy, with its poetic interventions in the nature, with natural elements, like stones, or snow balls, or a sculptor as her compatriot Alberto Carneiro are part of her inspiration.

The world of the trees, which is also the Carneiro's world, appears at an explicit time and at elliptical way in her installation “Portuguese Floresta”, a forest who is a nonforest, a forest where only the vestiges or stumps have left. With it, Sofia Beça alludes to the issue of her country's deforestation. The pieces that are part of this forest are of two colors, brown and black, trees destroyed and burned trees. This work serves as example to indicate us the peculiarities of the ceramist's work. The first peculiarity is her interest by the message, the quality of the clay as an instrument. “I do not have any doubt – she assures, when I put my hands in the clay I am transforming the matter into what interests me to transform it in- I want to transmit a message. Although it only has meaning for me.” In the case of Portuguese Floresta the message gets quite explicit, containing a social or ecological denunciation but, first of all, it is a poetic message. That devastated forest is a collective and particular damage, at the same time.

From the arts point of view, the work that I have mentioned, as all her work (or at least the most recent one), does not handle other colors other than the ones that derive from the material base, to which only the action of the furnace is added. An immediate chromatic language, therefore, of direct communication between material and addressee, with the ceramist as a mediator. In this mediation, almost magic, takes part, as a key element, the making and the care of all and each one of the elements of the scene, each ceramic stump, in this example, pieces that usually are interchangeable from a grammar point of view, replaceable elements, something arbitrary in number, but which are one by one elaborated with extreme care, as if they were unique. In Floresta the pieces are not many, but in other works as in “És a minha onda”, they are multiplied. They are now spirals of clay, in a worthy proliferation of polyyps.

Sofia Beça justifies herself: "I could make the same work with molds, but for me, it wouldn't have any enchantment. Each piece, although it seems just as the others, I must do it myself, if not, I have the feeling that it is not mine. And also for that reason I love to use the firewood furnace, because two twin pieces end up distinguishing themselves by the color". To that firewood furnace our ceramist, Karin Somers attributes a "temperamental behavior", that enriches his "undressed pieces with smoke spots and tones of reduction".

The double condition of constructor and manufacturer occurs in this artist. Constructor of reliefs and significant installations. Manufacturer of the pieces with which she constructs them. This is precisely why the reading levels of her works are duplicated. The pieces that, like letters, or notes, integrate them, have their own meaning. In "es a minha onda", are waves that speak of a inconsistent existence, where we go round and round incessantly. And the butterflies of "Borboletear" speak of something similar. She herself talks about the art in those terms of uncertainty and fragility: "And also (I think) that the art - it explains to me is like the butterflies and the people, in fact everything is ephemeral. We think that we will walk in this life for a long time, but we are only passing by. And the art ends up being the same- a little ephemeral". Ephemeral but significant.

As Joaquin Vidal wrote, the elements are "clay letters that work delicately, with patience and love, until they acquire the appearance and the meaning of the old codices' letters". And he adds "nothing lacks meaning or has a random site. The small pieces arrange themselves on their supports based on a lived place and time, grouping themselves, embracing themselves and separating with color or hope." Sofia Beça manufacturer and craftswoman, friend of the ephemeral thing, but also constructor. Because it's left that essential sense that gives us, like staging, the set of the pieces of which we spoke, the text written with those letters, the music written with those notes.

I will conclude with one of her sentences: "it does not worry me that the ceramics loses protagonism -she says, because what interests me it is the message that I try to transmit". It is a ceramics understood as useful of writing, not like an aim in itself. But the text that is written, like all poetic text, is one with the matter with which it is written, with the music of its words, with the ceramics own essence, that is what speaks to us.

Alejandro J. Ratia

Criticize of art

December 2011