

To whom it may concern...

Those interested in learning the identity of the 120 faces Joana Villaverde has painted and organized in a grid of individual pictures are in for a tough recognition game. Some of them may be easily recognizable, due to their divulgation in the cultural media, but in many other instances their recognition is a quite private matter. But these 120 faces do not imply 120 characters. In fact, only 30 people are portrayed here. Their effigies are simply repeated an irregular number of times. The final identification of characters is a task that is always external to the interest of the artistic project, even though it is deeply personal concern of the artist.

To wit: the artist designates, through these faces, personalities that were important in her personal formation – a continuous and contradictory process that is not limited to childhood, adolescence, or to the good things of the past, that probably goes on today, that is not limited to celebrating masters, that may use her own daughters as a reference.

Joana Villaverde uses her work to exteriorize these relationships. Her painting practice is aimed here in naturalizing (rendering it in identifiable terms) and denaturalizing (removing elements – hair, for instance – that would make more easily identifiable) each face.

It is a long, hard work, justifying the existence of 120 paintings for only 30 names. The artist advances tentatively, until reaching fulfillment. If we try to retrace her steps, we will see, that in a way, she does not advance as a painter covers a surface with paint or a sculptor chisels away at a stone block, but rather as a potter molds a lump clay. The definitive picture may appear on first attempt or only after two or three reject stages. However, the final work (the wall of paintings presented here) includes these rejected pictures as apart of a personal dialogue and inner reflection about either her skills at reproducing external reality or each of her sources of inspiration: literature, music, painting, emotions...

The spectator tries not to make any mistakes while retracing the artist's steps (something that can be accomplished the other way round: what is identifiable may have its source in the sphere of the unidentifiable), though that is a task that will never be fully finished, either because of lack of cultural or family data, or because the degree of naturalistic identification the artist finds satisfying may not be found by those who remain in the merely external plane of which we spoke before.

This wall of faces is precisely concerned with staging and exposing her mistakes and emendations as well her triumphs, in the form of a painstaking reproduction of sketchbook leaves, each of them carefully facsimiled in order to give us a kind of a sketch from life, which may seem to us unfinished and certainly not complete, and where, under its strictly visual features, a dense extend of written and/or verbal language is hinted at.

Lisbon, September 2002, João Lima Pinharanda

I want to tell you something about this work I like so much.

A few years ago, without a studio or any kind of organized method, I started making large paintings of people that made me, who helped me build myself. Things went somewhat wrong, and I was not pleased with the result. I quit. I stopped.

In 2000 I got a grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to develop my work, large format canvases in which I wanted to describe nearly everything: feelings, good things, bad things,. I felt lost, either because of their size, or because the technique didn't fit my goals. Perhaps I simply felt that this isn't the way it's done: it's done bit by bit, bit by important little bit of our lives.

I got that while I was resting, painting little pictures of faces. It happened that I recognized in one of them something of my maternal grandmother, a very important person in my life. I felt the need to portray her. I made painting after painting, until I felt I had been faithful to her gaze. I made some eleven pictures of her.

After her came my father, and then everyone else. Their thirty, but could have been eighty. All I knew was they had to be true to life. I followed the simple criterion: if any of these people did not exist, or had not existed, I would be as I am now. I wanted to see all together. I understood I was remaking, now in meaningful way or with different kind of awareness, the work I had began and abandoned a few years ago. I took off their hair because it seemed to me unimportant to the recognition of the gazes of my portrayed. I have included every step of the process, every repetition it took. I believe this work is the portrait of my own construction.

*Brick on brick in a magical drawing.*

*[Tijolo com tijolo num desenho magico]*

Lisbon 2003, Joana Villaverde

