

GULBENKIAN NEWSLETTER ENG.

September 6, 2012 at 10:53am

In what way has your residency in New York been important for your career?

I've never thought about my work in career terms; I think of it more in terms of coherence. It is what I have to give, what I know, and what I must do. My career, such as it is, is attached to that – it's not something separate. My 5 months as artist in residence at Location One has left its mark, especially in the work I'm doing now, and how I engage in it. It has made me grow, and not just a little.

The work you have done so far has subverted scale, consigning it to a space that is suffocating. Could you talk a little about that?

New York, as you know, is a huge city in every respect, including with regard to its artistic and human dimensions. There's a sense of freedom in the very idea of just being, in the works one sees, in the architecture and in what's on offer culturally. My exhibition at the end of my residency was entitled, YOU TOOK FROM ME ALL THE AIR SO I CAN BREATHE (a title stolen from a Brazilian song: (você me tirou todo o ar para que eu pudesse respirar). Perhaps I wanted to say that the city, the experience, gave me the air I needed to think, to create and be happy! My studio, in contrast to the city, was tiny. I made use of this anomaly of scale – living in a huge city, working in a cramped space. I worked on a 3m wide canvas (the entire width of my studio) by 2m high (which was just short of the ceiling). I covered the canvas with a face, an enormous face that seen from where I was able to see it could have been an abstract painting. It could have been a landscape. I played around with it and stuck on the silhouette of a man with his back to us, standing as if contemplating the countryside. A tiny being suffocated by an immense stain - a face, a city?

Does that idea still persist, or are other circumstances currently informing your work?

No, not at all. That's gone (I hope I don't go backwards). My time in New York changed the way I work. Especially with regard to the way I see time. There isn't much time, time flies. I learned not to be afraid. Not to be afraid of wasting material, not to be afraid of using the wrong materials, not to be afraid to tear apart, glue together then tear apart again. Not to be afraid of making mistakes. I had been trying for a long time to get away from what was a recurring theme in my work – my own identity that was almost always present. I was ready and willing to depart from of my own navel. My stay in New York accelerated that process.

Current and future projects...

I'm currently working on an ambitious project, which I think is going to last for a long time. It is about resistance. Being an artist today is an act of defiance. I have never ventured to tackle political questions with my work, and that is not what I want to do, but I can't stop thinking and being of this time. We have reached a turning point, an historic moment in time and we don't where and how it will end.

The world seems upside down to me. At the start of 2012, I held an exhibition which I called DE PERNAS PARA O AR/ UPSIDE DOWN. That was a start. The world is not being built for people; in fact it seems more and more that people are being forgotten. We forget what people really are - beings that dream, that believe, that feel things.

Wanting to be happy, wanting to dream are not seen as a right, but rather as an extravagance it is impossible to achieve. That makes me very scared. And because time is universal, these questions are the same almost the whole world over.

I want to go where things have been upside down for a long time. My research has led me to the Middle East, because I believe that I would leave there a different and, I hope, a better person. I want to know what moves an artist, a creator, from that part of the world. Where do they find the strength, what motivates someone who has lived with conflict from birth. Palestine. Are their concerns the same? They almost certainly are not. And, as always with my work, I try to find one shoot, a single point from which I can translate my concerns to the canvas, the paper, onto wood or whatever - I still don't know.

What was it like, living in New York?

The first two months in New York were dazzling, feverish; I raced throughout the whole city on foot, getting to know every nook and cranny, all the streets and avenues, of every kind - Uptown, Downtown, the East Side and West Side - the differences between people, their social classes and interests from top to bottom, from the East river to the Hudson. Wanting to go everywhere, to be there for everything the city had to offer. After two months, I think you face reality and think to yourself: I can't be everywhere, I'm going to have to make a list of priorities. Despite the size of the vast avenues, the number of people all around and inside the museums, the galleries, the cinemas and theatres, one very quickly feels part of the city.

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