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**Pedro  
Cabrita  
Reis**

*One after  
another,  
a few silent  
steps*

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## “After all, constructing an artwork is still building a dream”

Sabrina van der Ley & Markus Richter

**Painting:** In a conversation with the sociologist Augusto M. Seabra and the architect Eduardo Souto Moura, Pedro Cabrita Reis stated, “I see myself as a painter, in the classic sense of the word. I have been a painter, and . . . it is as a painter that I relate to the world, to that which I do and to my own self. All that I have ever done are paintings, some of them lighter, hung on walls, then heavier ones, set on the ground, and even some that encompass whole spaces.”<sup>1</sup> Anyone who has followed Cabrita’s work in recent years may react with some astonishment to this empathic avowal of painting—given that the artist’s works, seen in solo exhibitions, in large thematic group shows, and at biennials, have mostly consisted of expansive sculptures. This was already the case with *Rio*, a channel-like sculpture placed in front of the Fridericianum at Documenta 9, which brought him to the attention of a larger international public. His Portuguese Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale and the many solo projects created for museums and public art institutions in recent years, at the FRAC Bourgogne in Dijon, Kunsthalle Bern, Camden Arts Centre in London, MACRO in Rome, Kunsthau Graz, or Museo Tamayo in Mexico City, for instance, were dominated by works best described using the term “construction.”

That Cabrita still sees and describes himself as a painter is partly due to his concept of genre, which he extends way beyond the established art historical categories. Cabrita’s notions of painting, sculpture, and drawing will thus be examined more closely here. His avowal of painting, however, is also a reference to his initial years of artistic production, during which paint and canvas still dominated.

In Cabrita’s acrylic paintings of the early nineteen-eighties figurative, expressive forms prevailed. While the figurative elements gradually disappeared, the artist retained the gestural intensity. From the mid-nineteen-eighties on he painted mainly on wood; his characteristic use of doors began at this point, initially as a painting surface. The acrylic paints were augmented by enamel paints, plaster, and fabrics worked into the painting; the works became painterly objects and thus acquired a sculptural quality. In the succeeding years Cabrita disciplined his expressive formal language. From 1985 his panel paintings began to show geometric forms vaguely reminiscent of architectural elements such as walls, cubes, or aqueducts. Cabrita’s palette became darker and pure, unmixed colors were banished, with shades of black and brown dominating. The groups of works *Da ordem e do caos* and *A sombra na água* are paradigmatic for this first phase of geometrically reduced painting, which lasted until 1988. At the end of the nineteen-eighties sculpture replaced painting as the central medium of the artist’s work. While in the following years he continued to produce paintings, mainly small-scale self-portraits, these have an almost private character.

Although at this time the focus of Cabrita’s work was much more on sculpture than on painting, he continued to make pieces that can be understood as panel paintings in the broader sense: painterly wall objects in which paint is replaced by other materials. Typical of this is a work from 1992 with the German title *Über Malerei* (On Painting). Over a

1 — “A Talk in the Countryside, Pedro Cabrita Reis, Augusto M. Seabra, Eduardo Souto Moura,” in *Pedro Cabrita Reis, Coleções Privadas / Private Collections*, exh. cat., Palácio da Galeria, Museu Municipal de Tavira (Tavira, 2008), p. 79.

supporting construction similar to a euro-pallet, a delicate plaster surface has been attached; above this sits a sheet of glass, part opaque, part transparent. This meditation on the nature of the panel painting does entirely without paint but still has all the qualities of painting. Cabrita acknowledges the tradition of painting while at the same time calling it into question. A whole series of wall objects from this period, such as *Os anjos caídos (Uma luz interdita II)*, can be seen equally as sculpture or as painting; they can be painterly sculptures or sculptural paintings, according to one’s perspective. Typical of all these works is the reduction of the painterly spectrum to the local colors of the materials used and thus to an emphatic non-coloration.

It was only at the end of the nineteen-nineties that he created painterly works in which color was again allowed free reign. The *Lisbon Gates*, first exhibited at the 1997 Venice Biennale, mark the transition into a new use of color. Here, too, the connection between painterly and sculptural elements characterizes the work. Four metal doorframes serve as sculptural framing elements; in front of them the artist has placed large glass sheets varying in size. Areas of monochrome painting fill and thus block the doors’ openings, while the panels of glass extend far beyond the doorframes.

The *Lisbon Gates* provide a prototype for the artist’s painterly output right up to his current work. The paintings created since then often use door and window frames as a sculptural framework, with glass or acrylic glass serving as the surface for the actual painting. The artist works with the transparency of the glass, sometimes applying the paint on top of the sheet of glass, sometimes behind it, thus incorporating the partial reflection of the gallery space into his work. The exhibition situation becomes part of the image, as does the viewer; the deliberately established aura of the works—mostly rigid, at times monumental—is thus ruptured.

Only in recent years has Cabrita rehabilitated canvas as a surface to be painted on. With the reduced linearity of the *Linen Series* and the *Grid Paintings*, a two-dimensional pendant to the sculptural *Compounds*, Cabrita returned to his painterly beginnings without relinquishing his expanded notion of painting. At the same time, with the *Cotton Fabric Paintings* and the *Leaning Paintings*, he continued his exploration of new territories between painting and sculpture.

**Drawing:** While in the late nineteen-eighties the human figure vanished first from his painting and shortly afterward from his sculpture, it remained in his drawings, at least in the form of the self-portrait. This can be seen equally in the 1993–94 *Conversation Pieces* and in the series *Os últimos* from 1999. Later the works on paper, such as the series *Naturalia II: Estranhas aves de várias cores* from the year 2000, seem to represent a kind of back door out of the restriction he had placed on himself to produce solely non-representational work. In these pieces the boundaries between drawing and painting are fluid whereas his genuinely linear works mark out the border between drawing and sculpture.

The graphic character of his sculptural works can already be seen in the 1987 *Antwerp Stairs*, a wall object reduced entirely to delineation. This union of sculpture and drawing continued energetically throughout the nineteen-nineties, but only became evident in the wall and floor objects created after the year 2000. The cables and wires, which became important parts of the work, have a graphic quality, as do the open frame constructions in which the sculptures' volumes are reduced entirely to their outlines. Some of these works' titles alone make their affinity to drawing clear, such as *Desenho* from 2003, *Floor Plan on the Wall* from 2008, *I Dreamt Your House Was a Line* from 2003, and *La línea del volcán* from 2009.

In these last two works, the artist expanded his three-dimensional delineations out into the entire space. They constitute spatial drawings in which the delineation is formed entirely by fluorescent lights mounted on a background of strong colors. With the colored design of the walls, Cabrita also incorporates an element of the painterly into the works, although their form is determined by line.

Alongside spatial drawings and linear sculptures Cabrita has also continued to create drawings on paper, such as the 2005 *Building Drawings*. In addition, his creative process is accompanied almost obsessively by a huge amount of sketches and notes that he continues to produce long after the work has been completed. Exactly as in Giorgio Vasari's concept of *Disegno*—through which the renaissance *paragone*, or rivalry, between the arts of painting and sculpture was overcome—drawing forms the basis of Cabrita's work.

**Photography:** Also photography fulfills the function of a sketchbook for the artist. Like his notebook, the camera accompanies him everywhere; he uses it to collect visual findings that could provide stimulation for future works. Right from the beginning of his artistic career, however, Cabrita has also incorporated photographs directly into his work. In the 1981 exhibition *Até ao regresso* photography was part of an ensemble of paintings, sculptural objects, and found objects. From then on photography has appeared sporadically in his work, although always in an interplay with painting, as in *Exultar* (1988), or with sculpture, as in *Favorite Places #6* (2004).

In the group of works *Sleep of Reason*, created from 2002 on in several different series, photography serves as a surface for partially monochrome overpaintings, but still remains a reservoir of images, a visual storehouse whose wealth of forms is reflected in the sculptures of this period.

“Pure” photography, such as the 2001 series *Mes jours, l'un après l'autre*, shot in Lisbon and showing half-open windows and doors, remains an exception, and this series too is closely linked to the sculptures in which light, doors, and windows form recurring elements. The 2008 series *Self-Portrayed in the Studio*—a kind of finger exercise in which the artist's hand presents each of his working materials one after another—is much more playful: I am what I do.

**Sculpture:** The construction and assembling of sculptures from everyday found materials, which to this day characterizes Cabrita's work, already began with the piece *Assembleia muda* from 1980. The early wall pieces are also based on *objets trouvés*. With their totem-like character, they are reminiscent of ethnic artworks. These were followed in 1988 by figurative, symbolically laden sculptural arrangements resembling models for stage sets: an empty stage someone has just left. In *Um quarto dentro da parede* (1989) a tiny chair stands in the corner of a room otherwise entirely empty. *Morituri* (1989) shows the stumps of two feet on a paving slab; *Melancolia* (1989) a cypress or thuja, the *arbor vitae* normally found growing in cemeteries, accompanied by a simple stool, calling to mind gravestone sculptures or memorial plaques. With these earlier sculptures what we see is often not what it seems to be. What appears to be bronze or marble is in fact fiberglass covered with asphalt, or painted wood or glass.

In 1989 a radical change in the formal and material language of Cabrita's work took place. The dark figurative sculpture groups gave way to almost white volumes and walls of wood and plaster. What happened? It seems as if the work made its way through the darkness into the light. From 1990 on, he created poetically titled “houses,” such as *A casa de serenidade*, *A casa dos suaves odores*, and others. They often consist solely of a few raw plasterboard sheets placed together, reminiscent of the whitewashed walls of traditional Portuguese houses. This is not, however, in any sense architecture; space and scale are only hinted at here so that the house is created in front of our inner eyes. These houses are filled with silence and absence. “I bring silence with me into my work. I just want to give people a way for them to listen better to their ‘sounds’ arising from their own ‘silence.’”<sup>2</sup> Equally, in the fountains, cisterns, canals, and aqueducts, also made as of 1990, no murmuring water can be heard. Cabrita focuses on water, the elixir of life, without actually integrating it into the work, as these “waterways” are made of plaster and wood.<sup>3</sup> Only in *A casa do silêncio branco* does a glass jug filled with water become part of the work. In 1993 he began the series *Das Echo der Welt* (The Echo of the World), a significant title, given that it clearly describes how Cabrita sees himself and his work as a soundboard for the world. Soon after this, the artist's gaze wandered to the *Atlas Coelestis*, watching out, reaching for the stars with mirrors, ladders, and steps. Made of wood, glass, rubber tubes, copper pipes, and other building materials, these new works took the place of the plaster sculptures. They look like ancient devices for measuring the world and the heavens used by the renaissance *uomo universale*. These works introduced the preferred materials he was later to use in the late nineteen-nineties and the first decade of the twenty-first century: light—initially in the form of light bulbs, later as fluorescent tubes—as well as glass and metal.

But first of all he continued to build: stairs, doors, windows, and finally whole rooms were the main components of his sculptures from 1995 on, still to be found in his work today. Here, too, we are given only hints at space; the building materials, mostly found objects,

<sup>2</sup> — Adrian Searle, “A Conversation with Pedro Cabrita Reis,” in *Pedro Cabrita Reis* (Ostfildern-Ruit, 2003), p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> — In an interview with Jorge Molder, Cabrita Reis Reidescribes how the contrast between the materials interested him, the “dryness” of plaster as a material and the water, supposedly added to it, yet absent. “An Unfinished Conversation,” in *Fundação/Foundation*, exh. cat., Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (Lisbon, 2006), p. 56.

do not fulfill their intended function. The windows do not provide a view in or out; the doors do not belong to rooms. No buildings have been created here; these are spaces of thought and contemplation. In 1998 he began the series *Dans les villes* and *Blind Cities* some of whose works, due to their economical and precise use of color, could be described as painterly sculptures, while others can simply be designated paintings. Cabrita's cities are not inviting; they consist of rows of painted-over doors, carpets, roughly taped up and tied cardboard sheds, or insulating boards smeared with tar. They are the simplest of enclosures, favelas: nothing more than a roof over one's head, just enough to survive. In 2000, after these inhospitable cities, came gardens: the series *True Gardens*, whose beds and borders were laid out using fluorescent strip lights, flat timber support frames, or low-level brick plinths. The use of light refers back to the theme of water,<sup>4</sup> without which a garden cannot exist. Streams and irrigation systems pass through these gardens in the form of electrical cables flowing together in bundles like the lines of a drawing or spreading out into deltas and estuaries.

During this period Cabrita also created the first of his brick sculptures, often filling the entire space or breaking out of it. *To Ascertain Something*, from the year 2000, robbed the exhibition space of its constituent parts; doors, doorframes, and part of the ceiling were knocked out, placed elsewhere, and in their place a roughly laid brick wall was built at ninety degrees. *D'après Piranesi* is a monstrous brick labyrinth, which would be worthy of the *Carceri*. These spaces are dark and threatening, a violent attack on the surrounding architecture. Even the poetically titled brick walls of 2004's *Les heures oubliées*, partly knocked down again, subdue the gallery space relentlessly. With these works Cabrita leaves no doubt that he, sculptor and painter, intends to win over architecture in the *paragone* of the rival arts.

Since 2003 the sculptures have become more linear; their outlines are defined only by strip lights and metal struts holding glass sheets painted with enamel. Thus, as previously described, they merge into drawing and painting. The 2006 *Compounds* are their diametrical opposite, highly condensed, made of steel, aluminum, or marble. With their regular openings they are reminiscent of the façades of late modernist tower blocks. At the same time, they seem to be slightly off kilter, their floors not placed precisely on top of each other; despite their weight and apparent solidity, these *Compounds* seem to be out of joint. Pedro Cabrita's use of architectural details and fragments, of building elements and materials, implies that he is particularly interested in a dialogue with architecture. His works do not, however, address architecture in the sense of planned urban space; his subject is the housed and the un-housed. "Architecture is far from being a source of inspiration to me. What really challenges me is the endless complexity of the primordial and yet ever-present (eternal?) human act of constructing. Architecture comes much after this founding gesture of humanity."<sup>5</sup> Housing, in its wholly existential sense, has been the central subject of Cabrita's sculptural work since the beginning of the nineteen-nineties, and at

<sup>4</sup> — "The use of light in my work should be seen on a par with my equally keen interest in water." In *ibid*, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> — "'MACRO Attrazioni ipnotiche per l'instabilità = Hypnotic Attractions for Instability.' Interview Conducted by Virginia Tieri," in *Pedro Cabrita Reis*, exh. cat., MACRO—Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma (Milan, 2007), p. 35.

this point his work spills seamlessly over into his life. The houses in which he himself lives and which he designed and fitted out in a congenial partnership with the architect Ricardo Bak Gordon and with his wife, the artist Patrícia Garrido, are the continuation of his artistic work through other means. Typical elements of his sculptures, such as the batteries of open-wired strip lights, fulfill their actual function as lamps yet still assert their character as works of art.

The connection between art and life does not end with housing, however; for Cabrita, the creation of a home necessarily includes the landscape. Over the past few years he has planted over a hundred olive trees on his land in the bare hills behind Tavira; he has dug boreholes for water and systematically cultivated the land. "To plant these olive trees, these fig trees, the carob trees, is part of me in a very deep way,"<sup>6</sup> he said in the interview with Augusto M. Seabra and Eduardo Souto Moura quoted at the beginning of this text. The roots of his art, which can continually be felt and seen in his work—in the landscape, in the mentality of his country, its geography and climate along with its long and varied history—are expressed directly here: "I go along my way through the world like Tarkovsky's Rublev, seeing, listening, feeling, smelling all around me and my art lives off that, even if by the end of the day the result may be an apparently simple monochrome, or a box with a light, or a brick wall."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> — Palácio da Galeria, Museu Municipal de Tavira (see note 1), p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> — *Ibid*, p. 95.

