

Tropical Modern: Symptom and Syncretism in Vicente Grondona's *Vegetable Man*

Black Rococo. By the way they are made, Vicente Grondona's works seem to be examples of bottom-up development: in the sculptures, form follows the physical properties of the material used (charcoal); in the drawings, the strokes build up minimal structures (leaves, branches, folds of vegetation) which become part of increasingly complex figures. Since his early works, Nature has played a special part in this method of working: trees, branches and shrubs appear blessed with a special force, in scenes which preserve clear references to the lush, pastoral vegetation of painters such as Fragonard and other main figures of Rococo and classic French landscape painting.

The reenactment of these cultural coordinates within a universe of precarious materials (graphite, silk and other materials available in bulk in non-specialised shops) involves an effort to unite cultural trends which otherwise would remain separate: the wilful poverty and material constraints experienced by contemporary artists in cities like Buenos Aires contrast with a range of forms that became the signature of the sophistication, elegance and charm associated with French culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In the silk drawings made for *Vegetable Man*, these Late Baroque references are evident in the tall, ribboned hairstyles, the dense ornamentation, bands, arabesques, curls and so on.

The characters that appear in this series take the matter one step further, however. The foliage formed by the lines drawn on the silk create a collection of figures which are at the same time faces and landscapes and which retain the stamp of the ancient men-gods of an unidentified civilisation. These gigantic *visages*, which stare you in the eye have ambiguous tribal ornaments, such as earrings, bracelets and other items of jewellery, all made of twigs, leaves and flowers. Their eyes, deep and bright, are made of fire (like in the *Visage rose*) and water.

The fact that a landscape suddenly reveals itself to us like a spiritual force coming from the earth itself, complete with face, presents us with a type of representation conditioned by animism and magic: two cultural wild cards which connect the visuality of native African American cultures with surrealism, psychedelia and naive art. Late Baroque, characterised by artificiality, thus becomes a form of representation of the visual and subjective power of Nature, at the same time forming a link to a collection of images reflecting key aspects of postcolonialism. If we took this imaginary union between Rococo and the native cultures of the South Atlantic as far as we could, we would see that the point in question is the legacy of a Baroque-style Nature as a specific cultural construct of the Latin American region.

The modern forest. Two materials as different as silk and charcoal do however come together in their practical applications. They allow us to access a world of fantastic creatures which are capable, by virtue of their very nature, to tell us about the many conflicting sources of contemporary culture. Like words subjected to the process of dreaming, these materials take on a history which fills them with meaningful connotations.

Even the title of the charcoal carvings focuses on the material: *L'instance du charbon dans la lettre*. These are sculptures carved in a material which offers no margin for error: charcoal is very fragile, and even the most careful treatment can result in unforeseen breakages. But the adaptation of wood carving (which is a naive technique reclaimed by modernism) to the carving of charcoal is not simply heuristic. It also involves a semantic shift: using a craftsman's technique on a material which fuelled Euro-Atlantic industrial expansion from the eighteenth century onwards.

If the countercultural icons in the drawings symptomatically affect the visual sensitivity of Late Baroque and European landscape painting, by using a material (the silk) which was itself one of the objects of desire of the early world market, the name which is subjected to a symbolic transformation in the charcoal carvings is that of Brâncuși. Synonymous with modernism, Brâncuși was not just one of the first sculptors to feature carving in his work as a substitute for moulding and casting: he was also the father of a particular method of mounting sculptures based on the grouping together of smaller-sized pieces along with the meaningful use of bases.

The geometric figures crudely rendered in pieces of charcoal become a display of humanist knowledge, seen as a collection of goods allowed by European colonial expansion. In the library we see not just books, but also a classical representation of the structure of the atom and a collection of geometrical objects as a set of analytical instruments, embodiments of the rationalist culture which, like all modernity, was possible because of the accumulation of wealth which ensured the availability of labour, metals and resources from Africa and Latin America. The chain of symbols from tree to coal to book to fire involves a kind of metonymy of world history, the result of which is a primitivist version of geometric abstraction. The instantiation of charcoal in the letter, to paraphrase the famous expression of Jacques Lacan, updates the emergence of an inevitably multicultural chorus of voices in the modern project and its symbolic goods. If Lacan saw in the *lettre* the unavoidable occurrence of language in the unconscious, the vain effort involved in creating a perfect sphere in a material such as coal is simply a consequence of this counterfactual syncretism, as is the possibility of an African rococo. From fairly simple elements, Grondona's work pushes us towards quite complex questions by means of a sort of alternate history in which the meeting of traditions, tools and materials is revealed as the possibility underlying a many-cultures modernity. As Grondona's beloved writer Santos López put it (*Journey towards ancestry. We the Wizards. Sketches of Art, Poetry and Witchcraft*), ...so where I live, within the tribe I inhabit, I have no option but to be primitive, magical and modern.

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