

JOSÉ SPANIOL

Until recently, the larger part of José Spaniol's works looked like pre-existing objects: bags, iron frameworks, gates, wattle and daub walls. In some creations, there was not even similarity, only pure coincidence, between work and object: a paper hot-air balloon, artless posters. In other works, an object was modified, but did not part with its everyday features: weighing scales, boxing rings. Between the object's function and the poetic function of the works, an exchange of characteristics was established by which an object had part of its attributes rejected at the same time that new qualities were imparted to it. In *Balão* (Balloon), for example, a key attribute was removed from the object, as the balloon was not to be set aloft. Moreover, its flame was replaced with a low-intensity red lamp. However deprived from its main function, the balloon retained its shape. At nightfall, when daylight no longer illuminated the white paper of which it was made, its shape became increasingly reddened. Instead of the balloon lighting up the sky over a St. John's festival on a cold winter evening, the night kindled the balloon.

The transformation of something useful into an assemblage of aesthetic nature is one manner, though quite a brief one, to apprehend José Spaniol's poetics. In a work of 1985, bags [sem título/untitled, 1985] contain rolls of drawings that will never be rolled out. Thus, the practical function of the bags, i.e., to contain or carry, is transformed, so they now will serve to conceal something that we know is hidden and that will never be brought before your eyes. In the gates or dividing walls of 1988, nothing separates anything, and what comes into play is a sort of memory glimpsed in the uneven grooves of the material of which they are made. Through the artless posters of 1994 [*História do homem*], we are

told a story that is at one time epic, oneiric, and lyrical, but it does not announce anything. Like a Borges short story, these accounts cast us off into the confines of intimacy. There is nothing more improper to communicate it than billboards. *Ringue* (Boxing ring), of 1988, practically feature all the details of a boxing ring. Except here there are no fighters, and the platforms are made of clay. Books, in one case, and stools, on the other, raid the boxing rings, staging bizarre and somewhat nightmarish matches. What is more, we ignore whether these matches are actually under way, or over, or yet about to begin.

Mirante (Lookout), of 1997, is perhaps José Spaniol's most beautiful work. Four wattle and daub high walls arranged into a square layout allow access to the structure's inside through breaches in each of its corners. This construction is roofless, and for this reason the walls have been released from their supporting role. Their only function is to separate space into inside and outside. And the work arouses precisely this opposition between being inside and outside. Seen from the outside, the construction has the solid looks of a cubic mass of clay. Inside the space formed by the four walls, however, one is widely exposed to the open sky – something that the view from the outside does not reveal. Depending on the time of day, a different shadow is cast on inside walls and floor, as if the viewer were inside a sundial-like structure. Yet, given the work's title - *Mirante* (Lookout) - the question remains as to what outlook does it actually offer the viewer? On two of the walls, square holes allow a sight of the outside. However, what we see is no different that what can be seen through the roofless building's narrow entries. Furthermore, unlike an ordinary lookout, this one is built on flat terrain. Like in many works by Klee, José Spaniol's *Mirante* incorporates a geometry that is at the same time lyrical and ironic. There

is nothing to lookout over, after all; what we see is the sky, the sun and its inflections on the clay walls and the perceived distances.

In a recent set of painted ceramic works [*sem título/untitled*, 2000], José Spaniol set aside dealing with existing and recognizable objects. The intention here has nothing to do with discarding intrinsic attributes of certain things, and adding different ones. Yet, one cannot deny the looks of utilitarian objects on these ceramic pieces. Now the artist is no longer concerned with transforming usefulness into aesthetics; his objective is to impart an appearance of usefulness to something meant aesthetic. Thus, Spaniol's poetics is submitted to an inflection that has barely started to yield results. Before these ceramic pieces, one can hardly keep from wondering what they are for. Given their undisclosed function, the viewer's attention turns to the decorative aspects of Spaniol's objects. Ultimately, these secondary and decorative attributes of supposedly useful objects that are at the same time undecidedly useless will be accountable for the aesthetic traits of the works. In other words, it is as if viewers stood before a pretty or ugly vase, unaware of what exactly is a vase, just as they ignore what those ceramic pieces are, despite the colour or shape of one piece being more attractive than others.

The play involving the hidden, and yet insinuating usefulness of certain objects and their formal aspects has been substantially extended in José Spaniol's most recent work. To begin, a set of rods is planted in different types of platforms [*sem título/untitled*, 2002]. Two of these platforms are slabs of white marble with round fittings. There are also four bases shaped as circles or spheres. There is no rule establishing which orifices of which platforms are meant to receive rods.

In turn, rods are built with intercalated cylinders of marble and bronze. Just as there is no rule for the insertion of rods in orifices, the length of the cylinders forming the rods random. Due to the work lacking clear rules of layout and construction, the viewer cannot dwell on its formal aspects for long. Despite this lack of clearly defined rules, here the objects seems to be assigned functions, like with ceramic pieces. Are the rods meant as level gauges? What assumptions determine their allocation to their various places? The work provides no answers. And as long as it does not answer us, we do not stop gazing at it. Marble and bronze are the classical materials used in sculpture. Why are they intercalated here? There is no answer for this question, either. Looking and questioning become intertwined. And, as long as this situation lasts, the work – between beautiful and ironical instances – might be the one to incessantly peek at us, who knows.

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