INSIDE AND OUT OF PAINTING

Paulo Pasta

Translated by Ana Carolina Azevedo

ABSTRACT: In this essay, the painter Paulo Pasta seeks to tell a story from within his own work; that is, from the forms he used as motivation of his painting, the author points to the main questions that made his experience. A relation mediated by the making, in which he seeks precisely to build a reflexive distance between the project and the real experience of painting.

KEYWORDS: painting, experience, color, form.

Sometimes I see it and then paint it. Sometimes I paint it and then see it. Both are impure situations, and I prefer neither.

Jasper Johns

To me, painting was as far as I can remember a self-discovery. I have no other connection of intimacy to any other language as I have with painting. To find it was to find vocation. That made even more clear in the crucial moment of professional choices: I've always said I can have been through many crisis, but not through that one. I understand today the level of ideality existing in my condition, and I think that such ideality is an important aspect to understand my work.

I've promised myself to follow this path as pathway towards fitting in the world. This way, painting has always been a very inherent activity in my own life. Today, I see that it seems to want to convey, in an equally very close, dosed and abstract manner, my own story. With that, I mean as well that my work has never had a projective meaning. It can be born within an idea, a wish, but what I seek for is precisely to avoid that this wish comes too soon in the project; maybe painting, to me, is the building of this distance between desire and project. Seems to me that painting had to tell by itself the slow transformation of lived contents, in an indirect and condensed way. That would be its manner of imitating,

in an abstract form, the contingencies of life. I say "in an abstract form" because I think that the forms I choose to paint look very much alike the real schemes. And it is in this slow updating and maturation of such systems or sign that sense is made.

I like to think that a given painting would be ready when added to it all my stages, when condensed all my sensations. Only then I can recognize myself in it, only then it would gain a kind of ideality and suspension. For that motive as well it is perhaps a little slow: in a sense, it is day after day and paint over paint. And, if my themes and my subjects are of long duration, repeating and unfolding themselves, it would precisely be because only thus it would effectively become mine and deeply recognized by me.

But, as I was saying, it all started pretty soon. To see paintings is to me equivalent to the pleasure of painting. And it was looking to paintings, the reproductions of the works of masters of universal painting, that strengthened my taste. The pictorial surface was always the element that seemed to join my sensation to the world. This feature plus color were the elements that gave foundation to my taste and confidence to go on with my choice.

In the beginning, I used themes common to painting of gender. Sceneries and still nature, in this specific order. I indiscriminately liked Cézanne, Van Gogh and Monet. But I think it was from Cézanne's lesson that the comprehension came to me of what would come to be the differences between seeing and painting: the discovery of a true pictorial construction.

Also moved by its example, and not only willing to portray a local landscape, that I moved on to a series of drawings themed with sugar cane plantation. In this moment, I was thinking that I would have to build a solid basis in drawing only to then experiment with paints. (By that time I would suffer, without any knowledge of it, a common contingency to a great part of modern Brazilian painters which has its origins in the program and teachings of Paris' school of fine arts, where many of our artists studied and graduated). But these were colored drawings. They did not make use of just line or outline. They already pointed to the needs of a construction mediated by colors and pictorial values.

In this period, I had already put my eyes on Matisse's paintings and I thought I just had to do something like that. I can also say that this painter has always been present as a role model during the whole process of me as a painter, with a little bit of variation of the aspects of his influence, according to the time period. I could also affirm that, if I think my possibilities of expression by color to be supported in his example, it was also through this example that I could attest my difficulties in using them alive or contrasting.

I use to think that the admired Matisse's painting would be, for me, an ideal or something like it, and that it would be in the difference and distance that I establish towards it that it would be better revealed who I am.

When I began using paints, the natural choice would have to be oil, be it because of its history and tradition or its expressive power; but the technique I chose to do a series of paintings after the referred drawings was gouache. I was looking for a matted, water-born paint that didn't have the occasional artificial aspect of acrylic paint. (A water-born paint would also make the passage of drawing to painting seem more natural.)

During a whole year I did paintings with gouache over paper. These works already brought with them the marks of yet another great influence: Italian metaphysical painting. The aspect of stopped time, of suspension, in these paintings, has always seemed too close to my own sensations, and the color palette as well. Many of them looked dehydrated and coming from an emptied world, alike Morandi's colors. Morandi is the painter that gave me the key to escape from metaphysics. The world in his paintings (the carnal, physical world) seemed to have gotten away so as to make last one thing from that which is durable in the world. Thus, he kept himself, in a way, always a metaphysical painter, but substituted the title, the rhetoric of movement, by the adoption of a repertoire much more connected to the daily life. (If, at one side, I owe a lot to Matisse, on the other side I owe a lot to Morandi too. Maybe this homage between both of them can be explained in my formation's idiosyncrasies, and there I could also include Volpi's paintings without damaging a possible notion of coherence.)

These works on gouache were unequivocally figurative. Mannequins, instruments such as hammers and scissors, tables, chairs, hats and plaster molds were frequent motives. After a year of work in this direction, I went back to using oil paint, now with the add-on of bee wax (a means also called wax varnish), which opened up new expressive possibilities in my work. This gave oil a darker light and straightened the passages between colors, and, if I may say, created a distinct temporality for slowing light down and making it less luminous.

I gradually abandoned the metaphysical concept of objects as well, and began searching for a repertoire of more simplified forms. The successive oil and varnish layers began to erase images, turning them into image vestiges. These corresponded as well to a more resolute disposition of the canvases surface, which became gradually more plane and topographical. These pictures were architectural forms, essentially. Arches, pediments, ogives that, at the same time they

connected myself to the past, gave me the possibility of structuring the painting as a plastic, autonomous field.

The way which these pictures were painted also evoked the said past: they came up while I removed the last or next to last layer of paint, in the colors of the previous layers. Looking back to that time a couple of years, it occurred to me to think that they thus realized a kind of drama of painting, of a serious space of painting, and that it was born from the desire of a young artist looking to get closer to this language so engraved in history already.

After that (and "that" was already in the beginning of the 90s), as a manner of painting in a way to reveal less traces of painting itself, to make it more affirmative and less referential, I began to make the series I call "shards". I began by reproducing the image of a floor made up of ceramic shards, which was in fact my atelier's floor, and organized them into a random pattern. Next, I organized these shards as autonomous elements, which proportionated new formal arrangements. From that point on, I began to use paint, instead of withdrawing it, and I think that this way helped me to achieve that what I still desire to acquire more of: the presence, the present.

The tonal passages were built by the successive adding of paint layers, but it was hard to break with the general tonalism, once I wanted to do it using a second and a third color (I had never thought my painting of that time as monochromatic; this characteristic was acquired unintentionally, rather one of the many eventualities that happened to me during my career.)

After five years working towards that goal and seeking for bigger and less fragmented spacial unity, I began to paint what seemed to be the space between arches, which were used in previous works (where I worked with many architectural forms), making this research result in images similar to columns.

There were still denials, hidden areas of previous paintings, but when they had a more defined and structured space by these forms, colors could then vary. With this aspect, I think I've gone forth in my search of that which I call the "present", of accepting contrasts present in reality. The manner that I painted these "columns" also suffered variation. If previously, in the "shards" series, I had used a smaller brush and went on with it building the pictorial net tiny streak by tiny streaks, in this new stage I could also, because of wider forms, magnify the brush's size and accomplish more plain and uniform colored areas.

From these "columns", I obtained a larger number of variations. New articulations appeared: from the space between them, the shape of some kind of sharpened pencil came up; withdrawing the third columns, I had an empty space to be lightened up by color; two

forms which looked like bottles (in fact, the “pencil” itself, but with a longer and round tip), in symmetry, made appear between them yet another column, etc.

Simultaneous to this research, I began a series of works inspired by the shape of a toy spintop. Just like with the shards, what came up in the beginning of this new series was the emphasis on shapes, on the theme. I valued the spintops, forgetting a little bit of that which is most interesting to me: the activation of space where things are, a space made up of fullness and emptiness, always mingled together. By making the spinning tops and the space to come together, that is, at the same time, is when I began to expand them to the canvas’ limitations, thus creating for the first time big shapes that did not fit into the canvas. With that, I found out other shapes between the drawn spintops: hour glasses, upside down goblets, and so on, which became the new themes.

The more elements I have to paint, the more possibilities to my work I accomplish. That contradicts a little bit what most observers describe as being the first thing to notice in my paintings, which is color. In fact, I think it is due to this widening of forms that color gained more space and strength.

I also think sometimes that this strength or saturation of some colors that I use would come to compensate the forms that become difficult to be seen, precisely because they are immersed in this chromatic density. These form-colors become strong, but also veiled. Maybe that is the origin of the tough conquer of a certain calm, beating, hidden energy that they possess.

When I think about light, I also think of the form (just like colors only exists because of each other). I do not disassociate them in the elaboration of my work. I’ve always liked colors that bear light, and in this aspect I recognize a point of union between previous and current paintings. My colors are composed, they come from a derivative palette, that is, they’re colors made up from the physical palette, of physical colors. I like them when they abandon their industrial characteristics, when they begin to go through the process of experience, when they may become other colors, when they modify themselves through the neighborhood, when they are added to each other and suffer mutation. I used to use that metaphor of the fruit to characterize them. I am satisfied to believe that pictures mature in front of me. A fruit also accomplishes the highest stage of saturation of color and taste when it’s ripe, but in the next day it may become rotten. Colors become rotten as well. I would like my colors to have something analog to that, that they would be at the same time intense and abandoning, a perfect wed of beauty and extinction.

It would not be an exaggeration to think of the forms I use now in my work to be transformations, a species of slow transformation of forms that first occupy and build my doing, and that were described here. In this sense I can also say that they possess origin, or to say it better, that I can figure out where they come from. I also think that this isolated fact wouldn’t be enough to explain them, such as I know this will of coherence and organicity may most of times come against a more airy condition of painting. But I have had more estimation for this aspect of my work. It seems to me that today, I am more distant from my origins, and thus my work seems also to ask less of these strengths that were essential to it before. The new — and not the novelty — would be the question of my whole work, and of all new painting, and this question I believe acquires here a problematic nature, precisely for this work also seems to desire structuring surprise, or prevent it.

I also think that passages, be them from a colors to another, or a theme to another, as much as a condition to another, would be one of the most important vector to comprehend what I do. Passages would cause, invariably, changes and transformations. Now, how to transform and at the same time identify myself with what I do? Maybe that is where my attachment to series, similar form’s unfoldings and the desire for each work to bear witness of that which has been lived comes from.

Looking to my current painting, I notice that it was progressively abandoning a kind of interiority, of essence, to become more fluid and agile. I do not possess much identification with artistic languages or paintings that make reiterations of the superficiality of the world a critic to this same state of world. In this sense, although I know how to evaluate its importance, I’ve always had a difficult time with Pop Art. I would rather see works in which this place is pointed by its absence, not by its ostensive presence. When I accomplish creating this space in my paintings — this kind of emptiness — I recognize in them the same contents as my beginning pieces, those of more influence in the metaphysical movement, only this time this condition would be given more to the formal construction than by figuration.

My works gained these features I call fluidity and agility by the year of 2004. I can identify many factors that collaborated to this. I remember seen with a lot of interest Sean Scully’s room at the Sao Paulo Bienal in 2002. They were big paintings, of a plain composition, to which the big task of constructing light was assigned to color. Light emerged by means of counterpositions as well as superpositions between themselves, thus the painter reached a surface unequivocally

pictorial and a harmonization through luminous atmosphere, which reminded me a lot of Matisse. I remember also the canvases inside the screen, that is to say, small canvases inserted inside bigger ones, as if they were “breaking” this referred harmony, and at the same time they seemed to repose the question about the theme of the work itself: painting within painting.

In 2004, I became aware of the south-african writer’s work J.M. Coetzee. I read many of his romances with much interest and was also impressed with the manner with which the writer accomplished transforming literature in his own theme. Many time, its narrator, in third person, was also a writer or literary critic, thus duplicating the narrative, making it stronger and ambiguous. I would avoid the term “metalanguage”, in both cases — the painter and the writer — because I believe that both seek to insert themselves in a different place than that one. To me, it is like they were working on the eternal and recurring theme of question by the sense of making, thus transforming their own work into fiction. (The work’s emptiness, to me, was always the question of what should I paint). Also in 2004, I presented a series of paintings in which I applied many forms similar to the one I denominated “beams”. In fact, this name occurred to me because these forms suggested building beams, where a vertical beam made a horizontal beam suspended. Inside these bigger beams — the vertical and the horizontal making an orthogonal arrangement —, a smaller one would be inserted, as if they reproduced themselves, or as if one could contain the other, suggesting thus that the theme was born within itself, or mirrored itself. Like I said, that was suggested to me by the two examples from artists mentioned above.

Proceeding thus, I could also vary thickness, places and proportions regarding these beams. How they organized better the space, leaving it more dynamic, and also my colors, I think, were better organized by them as they became more rapid and contrasting. When the beam came down, that is, when the horizontal one was lowered, the shape that was formed was that of a cross. By the same impulse, I doubled it. I made it two. Two crosses was my theme and my motive for five years, and I still work with this shape’s unfoldings up to now. I got from them a bigger activation of space, making it planar and defined. I abandoned as well the construction supported in hand and pencil: if before I constructed forms freely, today I have the aid of sticking tape to obtain better precision. This aspect also collaborated to give these works a bigger mobility, even if subtle. The screen’s shape also got bigger, and by means of this procedure I think I accomplished re-powering that kind of modesty towards the presence that has always marked my works. I think the same

about the usage of color: if latency of forms made it come up as wrapped in languidness, now they are ready quicker.

The mentioned two crosses were unfolded into three crosses. Today, this space I created from three elements was simplified: I took some parts of these pictures and this emptiness is filled by color. In this game between picture and background, as I’ve sought to describe, colors is the filling, creating thus an ambiguous place for painting. By the way, it was thinking about this constant game that I began a series of paintings entitled “*funâmbulos*”. The name, of course, was suggested by that which brings ambiguity, on addressing the unstable equilibrium between one shape and another: *funâmbulo* is the man that walks on the tightrope. A certain funambulism between one thing and another would be precisely the zone of indecision between these things, or between forms and colors. The forms I use look like the “bottles” in previous paintings, between the one standing up and the one on the ground, they make appear between them another form, at the same time background and image, in a constant permutation.

I understand I can’t affirm many things regarding my work. To affirm in the sense of seeking having with it a distanced relation, inserting an analysis that would put me invariably outside of it. I could seek for a poetic solution, a poetic writing. But I seldom believe this form would make me come up to a fair self-observation. I seek to reconstruct a little bit of its internal history, narrated by means of its forms. Its sense, wider and more complete, of course, is not of my knowledge, and I believe it must remain thus. In this key, I believe also that my painting will always be forwarding (regarding my position). What I can see of its meaning are only those particularities that induce me to make the possible, possible. I wouldn’t know for example to say what I’ve already said about my choice of colors. I can point with much precision the chromatic palette of some painters with which I possess deep affinity: for example, Bonnard, Diebenkorn, Brice Mardem. But the palette of these painters is not dissociated of what they paint. The chosen themes or the formal solutions found by them do not dissociate from an expression by these specific colors. There is always, to me, a bigger affinity between that which they paint and the way they do it. In a Bonnard’s green and mauve self-portrait, these colors would also be this portrait. They are its form, once they cooperate in a fundamental way in its sense. The same could be said of a scenery called “Ocean Park”, by Diebenkorn. The landscape portrayed there are also colors. Colors build this space and are constructed by it. I believe that it has been made clear to me, that which painting has to do with how to paint. And I believe even more in the strength and

value of the artwork when these themes come internally, engendered and transformed by previous motives, in a species of self-feeding. A new motive would have to be filtered, decanted by work, until it has been absorbed by this kind of system that I seek to build. But here, the question would also be fitting: which system? I would not know how to answer that, maybe because it exceeds myself as a producer, but it would obey the same needs to identify painting, my painting, its time, with the time that was lived. Up to that point, I think, more impulsive actions, arbitrary choices and voluntary ones would not have way. Like I've already said, I need to recognize myself in the paintings, in what is possesses in the result of added states, to understand it as ready. I walk in the measure the work also walks, and I recognize it in the measure I'm recognized by it. Temporality and duration would thus be the dimensions where operations in which my work seems to be based on occur, and on this path I put myself, distant also from separations between form and content, and from its equivalent time-space relation. Sometimes it occurs to me to think that my biggest "issue" would be in a kind of unsolvable question, which is that of being inside and out of painting at the same time. How is it to be inside when you are outside? Maybe it comes from this endless permute, between positions that would like to coincide, this infinite desire to "posses what possesses you", as in Manuel Bandeira's famous quote. I seek to extract the sense and strength that update my work.

December 2010

PAULO PASTA: Born in Ariranha, São Paulo, in 1959. Painter, drawer, engraver and professor (painting and drawing) at the Department of Plastic Arts graduation program at Escola de Comunicação e Artes/USP. He graduated in plastic arts at the ECA/USP, in 1984. In 2011, he obtained a doctorate's degree in arts from the same university. Since the year of 1984, he's been exhibiting his work. His doctorates title is *A educação pela pintura* (Education by painting). It was a reunion of essays already written in the area of Arts. This monography accompanied an exhibition of recent works in the Mariantonia Center, in March 2011.