English

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Technique and drive in Iberê Camargo

Translated by Ana Carolina Azevedo

ABSTRACT: The article reports convivial experience with artist Iberê Camargo (Restinga Seca, 1914 - Porto Alegre, 1994), pointing his apprenticeship training and workshop practice, emphasizing the expression through a painting driven by intense dramatic drive.

KEYWORDS: Iberê Camargo. Painting. Dramaticity. Pictorial drive. Faintness.

For many years, on Sunday afternoons, a group of friends used to gather with Iberê and Maria Camargo in the artist's studio. In these meetings, I learned a lot by listening and observing Iberê while he painted. When he stopped painting, when he expressed his ever sharp positions about artistic movements and the artist's commitments.

The reflections that follow were born of this contact, of which I am a grateful and in debt; on a first moment, in 1991, I wrote in the present and now I rewrite it in the past.

I begin by attempting at a simplified definition of painting, formulated for specific use in the restoration:

Painting is a series of markings organized significantly (as signs) on a suitable surface (a support/stand). These markings can be achieved through many different techniques, such as gouache, Encaustic, fresco, watercolor, tempera, acrylic, pastel, etc. In fact, these marks can be made by any of these techniques (or other) which, when applied solely or together, produce a visible sign. (Rosenfield, 1997, p. 93).

A more traditional definition, suggested by Giacomo Devoto, considers the painting as being:

The art whereby the reasons for an intuitive switching or dramatic come true in a predominantly two-dimensional composition, traditionally associated with certain techniques or with a predominantly mimetic intention. (Devoto, 1971, p. 717).

If we wanted to define Iberê Camargo's painting (Restinga Seca, 1914 - Porto Alegre, 1994) with any of these formulations, we would immediately find that it doesn't fit in any of them. The first definition highlights the intuitive aspect or dramatic pictorial expression, whilst the second focuses on the physical definition of the work. Only a combination of these two definitions can bring us closer to

an understanding of Iberê Camargo's work, since his works express a singular form of unifying the dramatic and the technical.

When we say that Iberê combines these two branches, we mean that, unlike other painters, he was not concerned about only one of these dimensions. A comparison between his initial drawings and paintings, done between 1941 and 1943, reveals a small discrepancy: while some of his drawings display shy strokes – in some cases, we have found blurred strokes, lacking in drama –, the paintings, from the beginning, manifest intensity through the strength of the stroke and the saturation of colors.¹ So even though the drama was not always present in the initial drawings, it was already present in his painting. It is important to note that, ever so early as during this period, the dramatic expressed himself through the thick brushstroke technique and the use of the ink's pastiness.

The painter's personal history indicates a concern with learning the technique of oil painting through copies of painters like Rubens and Vermeer, done at the Louvre. This way, the painter learned to master brush strokes and the purity of colors. He also learned to show movement and power through his strokes. There we can see a precocious choice: Iberê sought to study painters whose techniques could teach him to express intensity. With Rubens, he learned about plasticity, movement and stroke energy, and the simultaneous use of several colors in the same stroke, maintaining the purity of ink. With Vermeer, he learned to use white, to reproduce the effect of brightness through color and underpainting.²

This "magical" work is creative passion; it explores all the possibilities offered by technology. With a thousand angry strokes, graphisms made by hard ends of brush handles, his dabs, thick from times to times, in order to reach infinity in the search for conclusion.

His struggle with painting's demons is not restricted to the realm of material and technique. It also considers the use of colors. The artist presents his relationship with them in an apparently enigmatic manner. "I am not fond of colors, colors are fond of me", as he used to say on Sunday afternoons. In the past, his conscious will was to paint solely in black and white, but even when he attempted at doing so, he eventually used carmine or emerald green to paint colored lights. After a while of monochrome paintings, Iberê ultimately substituted black for blue, using the latter as his reference of black. After a while, he went on to mix blue with red, turning it

1. These differences may be observed also in the signatures of some 1943 graphite drawings of the human figure on paper and the painting *Dentro do mato*, 1942, both belonging to Maria Camargo's collection.

2. The observations presented here were thought up by the author during the restoration of the aforementioned copies.

violet-colored. Later, the red was added in even greater quantities, turning blue into reddish violet. This change of tone shows that Iberê began by replacing black – which represents the absence of light, attracted by the dramatic capabilities of the dark – by the varieties of violet, which allowed him to overcome the intense suffering that he experienced in his struggle to translate his painting drive with much drama.

The dramatic drive in his paintings was even more prominent due to the blurring technique. Blurring is the succession of opaque paint layers – transparent layers are called glazes, characteristic of Flemish painting – that happens when the painter applies and scrubs paint, leaving a thin, heterogeneous layer. If we inspect the painting in detail with a magnifying glass, we may see a lot of colors behind the thin layer, the layer that makes the visible image. This blurring creates an effect of depth that bypasses the prospect, but adds a past – a succession of steps —, displaying the artist's struggle with technique and representation. Iberê thought that painting was not a matter of mimesis of reality, but of pictorial structure and drama. The painter once said about a portrait he had made: "I don't want people to say it looks like the model. I want it to look like a painting".³

To Iberê, the core painting isn't in the opposition between abstract or realistic painting. Contrary to many critics, such as Walmir Ayala (BERG, 1985, p. 23), he never thought of himself as an abstract painter. According to his own words, as quoted by Icleia Cattani, he stated that:

My so-called abstraction has always been but a decomposition of the real world and a composition in other images. You can't make things come into being. I've never been abstract, maybe I don't make recognizable shapes... (Camargo in BERG et al., 1985, p. 53).

And Cattani continues:

One more aspect tells us that every time a form can be isolated from its general context, and seen and recognized as a form, and connected to other forms or to a background, the form shall be an image. Same as in *Desdobramentos II* and so many other paintings. Therefore, why do we think of it as an abstraction? It is a necessity that we feel to name the unnamable. (Berg et al., 1985, p. 53).

Iberê had been figurative, for even in his paintings labeled as "abstract" from his series of reels he worked with the childhood elements from his memory.

The same was said when he started painting *As idiotas*. Once he exclaimed: "I don't need any more of these models to paint, I've drawn them so many times that these shapes are already engraved in me".⁴

According to Walter Hess (p. 114), the abstract, on the contrary, "seeks for absolute painting, detached from the object, seeking to substantiate all of its experiences under the laws of (artistic) sensitivity". In Iberê's works, there is no such refusal of the object; there is work done on the object. This work on the object secures the near and distant times.

I dug up the reels from the battlefield where cousin Nande and I fought epic battles between *Pica-paus* and *Maragatos*. Then, the reels, carrying reminiscences of my childhood days, became mythical characters of a fantasy saga of visions. (In Berg et al., 1985, p. 22).

The same occurs with the dummies painted by the artist, which seize a present and immediate dramaticity. Thus, the securing of the time that the object reveals is too the securing of drama in the artist's painting.

Normally, it is hard to decide whether the work of a painter has dramaticity (the vigour, strength and tension of the brushstrokes and dabs) as the reflection of the artist's personality or as an intensity that s/he absorbs from the outside. There is no such separation in Iberê's works. He managed to unite these two sources of drive – the drama of the world and the intensity of his personality – in the gesture of painting. When Iberê works, he gives so much of himself to his work that his whole body is involved in the act of painting. In addition to his gestures, he had his voice, railing incessantly; his body, moving in all directions; his large eyebrows that resembles the tip of paintbrushes, and all of this formed an inseparable set of technique, tension and passion. It is as if the exterior drama conveyed his persona to his painting, making it permanent. This conveyance may only be done by artists like him, who have great mastery of the technique and combine it to a moral control of action. This coherence, this desire to do his drive justice, which required to endlessly rework on paintings and allowed him to reach the end of their personal and pictorial intensity.

[...] one may not lose the momentum, the strand of thinking that guides the hand in its fast and wide movements when you are amidst the flow of creation. It is a stream that cannot be contained. A stream that flows within this arduous search. [...] The canvas, sitting on its support, is the opponent with whom one settles the

3. Testimony to the author.

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dialogue or the fight. As in a hand-to-hand combat, during several rounds he lunges at it, scratches, paints, erases, firmly scratches it. After that, he retreats, only to go lunge once again towards it, thus establishing the process through which the metamorphosis of creation finally happens. (Tenisa Spinelli, in Berg, 1985, p. 30-31).

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CAPTIONS OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The image in this article can be viewed in its original version in Portuguese.

Figure 1. Iberê Camargo, *A idiota*, 1991, oil on canvas, 154,8 x 199,8 cm. Personal Collection Maria Coussirat Camargo and Iberê Camargo Foundation at Porto Alegre. Photo: Fábio del Re.

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