

GALERIA  
DA GÁVEA

## An Expedition Inward

Daniela Name

*That's why I'm sad, proud: made of iron  
Ninety percent iron in the sidewalks  
Eighty percent iron in the souls  
And this estrangement from what in life  
Is porosity and communication.*

– Carlos Drummond de Andrade, *Confidências do itabirano*

And, as always, there is something stolen, along with a hole that remains due to that absence. There is no way to fill the gap opened by the shutter, a latent and painful laceration in the things of the world: a photograph is always a scar that tells us about the metamorphoses of life and death that it accumulated before being transformed into an image. Ultimately, this is what is conveyed to the viewer by this set of works by Pedro David featured in the show *Extração inframundo* [Infraworld Extraction]. By focusing on the duels between man and nature in the construction of new landscapes, the artist also reveals a little about the viscera of the photographic act itself.

The sensation of a battle is keenly present in the series *Madeira de lei* [Hardwood], in which Pedro records the relationships between a grove of eucalyptus trees and other tree species. Due to the fury of industry, especially the steel industry, the eucalyptus has become a predator of other species and is grown on large monoculture tree farms in a process not much different from the deforestation brought about by the advance of livestock farming. The “reforestation grove” puts an end to the forest. And this takes place mainly for the production of charcoal, an essential ingredient for transforming iron into steel – a haphazard alchemy of greed.

The haphazardness is clearly seen in the Jequitinhonha Valley region in the state of Minas Gerais. Here, the vast eucalyptus groves have dried up the aquifers and transformed the climate, but have adulterated much more than the landscape. By sprawling over areas that were formerly home to small family farms and trees that were part of the region’s diet and routine, the eucalyptus has made the Jequitinhonha region into a human desert, forcing the inhabitants to migrate away and modifying an ancestral culture of popular art that was always directly linked to the earth. The *noivas* [ceramic statues of brides] and fantastic beings created here are colored by various tones of clay.

By forming the image of a tree imprisoned within a grid of countless eucalyptus trunks, Pedro immerses us into a game of mirroring and empathy: we perceive that, in this war, even the victors are vanquished. Like the besieged tree, we are a species suffocated by excessiveness and homogeneity. The artist enhances the suffocation brought on by the images through the very skillful application of a compositional resource: although the grid of eucalyptus trunks would otherwise suggest rhythm and depth, Pedro blots out the vanishing point with the imprisoned tree. Just as it looks like there is no escape for us, the gaze that observes these images is likewise trapped within them.

For its part, although the *Terra vermelha* series presents another sort of subtraction and reinvented landscape, it involves similar relations between man and nature. Pedro recorded the images for this series on walks through his neighborhood in Belo Horizonte, where there is an iron mine. The holes and different levels in the soil left by the excavator create lighting effects that are enhanced by the presence of various materials to impart hues to the earth ranging from blue to red, including purple and orange depending on the time of day and the amount of cloud cover filtering the sunlight. These images are photographic yet extremely pictorial: the lighting transforms the earth into pigments, reminding us of the importance played by iron historically, and yet today, in the creation of ochre, umber and sienna tones used in painting.

These photographs of exposed earth also involve an apt coincidence. With them, the artist once again throws us into a real and imagined trench, insofar as the void left by mining, which removes chunks of the soil, can catalyze insights and reflections. When the iron-imbued earth becomes a painting, this brings to mind the reds and yellows of colonial religious painter Mestre Ataíde – colors which came out of the ground to fly into the skies of the churches in Mariana. Like Drummond, who opens this text, Ataíde could almost be a cliché, if he were not also an inevitable basis for a perspective formed in Minas Gerais (as is Pedro's case, and, indirectly, mine). And when speaking of Mariana and thinking about the region's memory it is obligatory to take note of wounds that never heal: the holes and deep grooves of the *Terra vermelha* series are also a nod to the catastrophic collapse of the iron ore tailings dam on the Rio Doce, which tainted the landscape and the human lives along the river with tragedy and impunity.

Iron: like Drummond and Ataíde, it is a stone in the path of the references to Minas Gerais that pepper the collective imagination Brazilians with images and feelings. Iron as progress and destruction; iron for construction and for war; iron which also reveals death itself. The oxides that provide the basis for the pigments are nothing more than rust, a sort of ruin shed by the hard body of the mineral like flakes of skin. Iron bears within itself its own ruin – a very important notion for understanding this exhibition.

This is moreover clearly evidenced in *Ossos* [Bones], Pedro's first foray into sculpture. The pieces were born from the process of gathering: he collected branches of tree species endemic to the cerrado [Brazilian tropical savanna], which were already lying on the ground, cut them, and created a sort of inventory of trees that are disappearing due to human action. But he does not show the branches themselves, rather, he uses them as a mold for bronze reproductions. In a certain sense the sculptures are also a photographic double, ghosts of something they once were and could be. Here, we see the ruin as a sort of museum that is also a cry, a calling. We are reminded of Walter Benjamin – not the thinker who reflects on technical reproducibility, but the one who questions about the human experience possible in scarcity and poverty. What will we do among the rubble we invent? Ruin which is also, as pointed out by Andreas Huyssen, the nostalgia for a past we no longer have access to. The bronze tree branches are simultaneously fossils and unrecognizable objects, a mystery like Arthur Clarke's and Kubrick's monolith in *2001*.

The idea of collection brings us to *360 metros quadrados* [360 Square Meters], a series of black-and-white photographs under development since 2012, in which Pedro creates a sort of codex for the universe around him, rearranging the objects and the space in his house. The creation of this inventory of images, the "infinito particular" [private infinity] of each individual, as in the lyrics sung by Marisa Monte, offers us a broader understanding not only of

the production brought together in this show and of the title Pedro chose for it, but also concerning the entire ambiguous relation with photography that pervades the current moment. (I was going to use the phrase “our time” instead of “current moment” but decided not to, since we have images that prove to us that this time does not belong to us collectively but rather to each person; there are at most some folds of common experience).

Similar to what takes place in the social networks, Pedro decided to photograph things in our surroundings, creating images that are theoretically mundane. But this is not the logic of the classic artist-traveler who ranged outside his own geography to discover new maps: Pedro’s process inverts this logic through a second inversion. Instead of capturing this routine like the rest of us, using a cell phone and then immediately uploading this extract of the real world into the network of virtual sharing, in making the works of the *360 metros cuadrados* series the artist chose to coagulate the fragments of his world on rare, soon-to-be extinct 4x5 inch negatives. This technological anachronism fills these images with the murmur of other times, and when these become loud they force us to observe more slowly and intensely.

Pedro is not collecting snapshots, however, but rather instants: the image that could be fleeting and trivial, just like so many similar ones, is also transformed into a fossil, as takes place with the sculptures of *Ossos*. And fossils of images glow red-hot and are in constant movement, as Aby Warburg teaches us. By prodding us to reflect on the natural world ransacked by the human hand and coupling this to an expedition headed toward an inner landscape, Pedro makes us think about photography as an extraction of significant fragments, a chunk of iron that becomes distinct and is broken away from the earth as something we wish to keep.

Every absence is that which hurts us in our inner world. The infraworld fractures are infinitely calcified, they are a hole that never closes.