

Some indications, noticed during appreciation

PAULO GOMES

Da capo

Each time we come across a work of visual or plastic art, the first thing we need to do is fit it into some kind of genre. These genres offer us the certainty of being able to employ our prior knowledge about them so that only then can we embark on a more relaxed reading-appreciation. That is what we do with paintings, photographs, sculpture, installations, prints, site-specific works, videos, drawings etc. The same goes for this very recurrent genre¹ in contemporary art, known as the artist's book.

On sources and beginning

Responding to questions about the source of his books (or objects or paintings, we can't define them yet), Frantz says that they began to appear between 2003 and 2005. Dissatisfied with the reply, as for me the *source* is not necessarily the same as the *beginning*, he says that perhaps their source lies in the distant need of covering the floor of a studio he was using in Germany in the mid 1990s. A source arising out a practical question? A group studio and the need to leave it in a suitable condition for someone else. Frantz's painting in those days took place in what he called a "battlefield", a space of gestural and emotional expression which left stains and splashes, traces and marks all over the place. After that activity was over, the artist found these

protective coverings interesting, both in terms of their beauty and in their wealth of possibilities. Frantz called these large coverings, now covered with the vestiges of his work, the "leftovers of painting."

Then comes another source – and here we are really close to the beginning – Frantz's constant need to organise the huge results of his works, from studies and tests to the completed works. Everything had to be organised (a mental and physical order), and the material arranged in bound books. This raised the possibility that they might always be available for consultation: chronologically, thematically and according to other affinities. Order and control. Prints from the 1980s are also organised into albums, strictly respecting the original way of experiencing those images: viewers sitting comfortably with the images within arm's reach.

On secondary reasons

If the initial reasons were concerned with organisation and systematisation, the secondary reasons are concerned with painting itself, or rather with the supports for painting. The artist does not see his books as artist's books, but as paintings in another format. The accepted definition² of the artist's book states that it is a work produced as the result of an activity of one or more visual artists. Isabelle Jameson suggests that the definition could be narrowed down, stating that she considers artists' books to be "[...] the result of the work of a single person in the traditional form of the book and whose message is conveyed both by the textual content and the plastic form of the object. We can then consider as artists' books those works whose container and content form a coherent whole that expresses the artist's plastic thinking."³

If we were to follow those definitions to the letter, the works in question are artist's books, But that definition could be refined when we fit these

books into a genre typology: they might be “painted books”, or the books of painters, unique and exclusive books; “book-objects”, a spatial composition using the book as a support; or even the sub-genre called “book-picture”. Elsewhere in her enlightening text, the same author mentions the reality of book-objects, writing, [...] the book format is used because it meets the artist’s requirements, but it becomes sublimated through another language. As it loses its physical and formal characteristics, the book loses its specificity as a book in favour of the status of an art object, in the traditional sense. We no longer then recognise it as a book, but just as an art object. This category of objects does not belong to the one of artists’ books, which have to respect the formal structure of the book”.⁴ So, if we consider that an artist’s book loses its identity as it loses its appearance as a book, this is not the case of Frantz’s works, which retain the book format morphologically and physically. But if the categories of “artist’s book” and “book-object” are not part of the artist’s intentions, we should investigate that situation and try to reach a consensus.

Another format of painting

Frantz explains his rejection of fitting into the general category corresponding strictly to the formal aspect of the works – books – by saying that they are paintings in another format. The issue then unfolds into another question: are these objects paintings? Certainly; chiefly because that is what the artist wants them to be, and if we fix on the appearance of things, we have canvas and paint, in other words, paintings. A painting in its traditional format, on any kind of surface (canvas, paper, wood, etc.), produced with paint applied with a variety of instruments, has a physical characteristic of “being seen” in its totality. Its overall appearance is imposed on the viewer without exemption. This imposing characteristic of the canvas (in the main) does not apply to the supports proposed by

the artist. We do not see the whole painting here, only parts of it. If the construction of these paintings is based on the principle of the organisation of parts, we have to pay attention to the kind of organisation being proposed: are they subordinate or coordinated parts? The underlying principle is the choice, of organising the available material. The governing rule is one of making use of everything: the covering mentioned previously, which is the real battleground that the artist calls the “leftovers of painting”. We might therefore suppose there to be an ordering through coordination of parts subordinate to the idea of everything that takes the form of a book, morphologically, but not conceptually. Strictly speaking, we have an edited casual composition (in the artist’s terms) according to undeclared criteria. It is worth noting here that these bound paintings have some other notable features: (1) the bindings are all identical, with no indication on the white canvas covers of what they are about; that rule changes when the artist authenticates the piece by signing one of the endpapers when the book passes into the hands of a collector; (2) with no indications on the cover, these paintings can naturally be approached from any side, which in their book format, with no indication of beginning, allows the reader/viewer to open it in any way, in the western manner or the eastern, from one end or the other, it doesn’t matter; (3) the sizes vary from the infinitely small, almost miniature, to the huge, like an atlas or some expensive book of reproductions. But we were talking about paintings...

A necessary discussion of painting

If chance, narrative or the record of events in the painting process are, by their very nature, un-organisable, the next action experienced by the “leftovers of painting” is its cutting and selection. Unlike other works that result from the synthetic action of fixing this “leftover of painting” onto a stretcher and turning it into a canvas ready for appreciation, when

the canvas is removed from the stretcher (its traditional support), and reorganised in a sequential support, the artist removes our possibility of seeing the whole picture and apprehending its underlying ideas. The cut and reassembled (edited) canvas prevents the eye from perceiving the whole and singling out the different parts. The new support forces the eye to look at the parts before the whole, which will perhaps be seen through an effort at reorganisation. But if that effort is apparently doomed to failure, it is fully compensated for by the satisfaction of transforming each part of that whole into a new whole, opening page after page (it is impossible not to refer to the way one handles books...) forming a new reality through successive visual experiences.

In the beginning there is painting. The way that Frantz develops it is something new, in that his need for experimentation prevents him from tacitly accepting the idea of putting this painting “onto canvas”. If this canvas no longer interests or excites him as a founding principle of his art practice, he will go in search of another form of gratification. His admiration for other artists like Gerhard Richter (1932) and Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) can be explained by their open-ended approach to painting: a field of experimentation unconfined by genres, formats, techniques or even by physical limits. It is the principle of a painting without rules, or rather whose sole rule is that of a constant change of position (the physical position of the artist in relation to the support, the conceptual position in relation to the idea of painting, and the material position in terms of what should be incorporated into the painting). The golden rule is to experiment, like his artists of reference. They are not models, for if dirt from the studio floor comes from Pollock, we should not talk of influence here, but rather of a privileged dialogue between two artists that results in taking a similar stance to arrive at different solutions. We should understand his relationship with the work of Brazilian concrete and informalist references, with which Frantz admits his affinity, in the same way. It is an affinity founded

on the free expression of the informalists (painting free of references other than itself) and the concretists’ need for order and absolute control (including the question of the painting-object) in other words an equation that is paradoxical.

Landscapes. Landscapes?

Yes. Landscapes. Maybe... The indecision is not mine, it comes from my perception, which persists in seeing landscapes in the images passing before my eyes. It is a perceptual position rather than an artistic idea or fitting into a recognised genre. Etymologically, landscape is the organisation of the lines and forms of a defined space in a place. Arising out of that, it is a portion of the space of the Earth represented horizontally and vertically by a viewer, which implies a viewpoint. Landscape is therefore, in principle, something that we establish from a viewpoint, be it geographical or cultural. From that viewpoint, it then becomes a reading, the creation and interpretation of the space in which various planes are established where we might identify objects and people. Understood like this, landscape involves a pictorial or literary aesthetic dimension, which is what gives it the status of representation.⁵ The issue of representation, founded on principles of morphological resemblance, is what leads us to see possible landscapes in these images. The landscape is constructed, as scholars of the subject would say, through inner sensations or the “murmur of the viscera”.⁶ Construction of landscape takes place through all the senses; it is constructed tactilely through touch, and also through other possible sensations, such as smells and sounds... But it is through sight that it becomes fully realised: a possible horizon line, a tempestuous or peaceful sky, scattered rocks or fields stretching into the distance... perceptions founded on a visual culture organised through codes of representation, and into possible configurations rather than defined forms. Does the artist want to be a landscapist or to suggest landscapes?

Does that matter now, as I look at the work which takes me to invented but plausible places?

Looking for other possibilities: new space-time experiences

If these images in book form do not fit into the genre of “artist’s books”, or into the derivative genre of “book-object”, what would be their relationship or correspondence with the long tradition of Western art? An idle question. Careful analysis shows that the artist makes works with various elements that are brought together through binding, yet which are visually separate. The question arises: what kind of support allows a unity divided into parts? As I look for secure basis for the argument the idea of altarpieces comes to mind. Yes, altarpieces, those forms from the past which, in dividing up their whole, reinforce and single out the expression of the subject matter, no matter how clear it may have been beforehand. Frantz has chosen to transform his work, which is naturally on a monumental scale, into a proliferation of fragments. What possible reasons (knowing that artists act not out of caprice but out of need) have led him to this decision: the tired and worn out nature of the decorative, narrative, illustrative or proselytizing picture? The reduced possibilities of the advance of painting in the traditional picture, worn down by distant conflicts such as the primacy of colour or drawing⁷, figuration versus abstraction⁸, flatness and perspective, or the actual status of the painting, as surface and object (which was not exhausted by the venerable painters of cubism).

The choice of polyptychs, connected by junctions or folds and divided into units, gives painting a new way of perceiving its position in space: the folds, the gaps, the ambiguous relationship with a succession of images, all work to highlight values that had been

minimised by painting on the wall, a surface or a form inserted into the naturalness of everyday things. The richness of the polyptych, fully explored both by classical painting and by the modernists, loses its way in contemporary art and, as it does so, we also lose the subtle transitions from the two dimensions of traditional painting to the wealth of the three dimensions of parts connected and multiplied in the play between recto and verso, in overcoming the relationship between figure and ground, in the play between both sides of the same canvas. The route towards a multiplicity of planes, allowed by the book, gives Frantz’s painting a complexity of results that unfold into multiple readings, also connected with issues previously unconsidered in his painting (and in painting in general), such as the relationship between space and time. If Lessing (1729–1781)⁹ divided the arts into the arts of time and of space, after 1945 the moderns, with happenings, performances and actions, considered such a separation obsolete. But the same thing did not happen in painting¹⁰. Rather than reworking the issue of “painting-object” in another key, paintings presented in book form (we still have no definitive name for these works) offer the viewer a succession of new experiences. The first lies in the possibility of a new spatial organisation made possible by the permitted sequential experience of the works. This sequential nature is, as Paulo Silveira puts it, “[...] the first great ordinal element of the book,” because it “[...] involves the time of its construction and the time of its enjoyment. Each time we turn the page we have a pause and the start of a new wave of impressions. This new impression (and intellection) makes use of the memory of the previous impressions and the expectation of future impressions”.¹¹ The second experience lies in the possibility of breaking the imposed rule of being forbidden to touch the painting. The possibility of seeing with the hands, sensing the physicality of the painting, touching the volumes and recesses, testing the textures, feeling the smoothness or roughness of the

surfaces, perceiving the movements from relief to plane through touch, the fold and the coloured surface, would be inconceivable with a traditional canvas. We are testing a new space of painting, open to new comparisons and associations, but without changing the object. We somehow enjoy the object-painting without looking for either a sensory or rational satisfaction or a response. We repeat the most visceral relationship with what drives the artist and, like him, we are also less concerned with the result.

Coda

If we were concerned at the outset about how these works fitted into this or that genre, we can now state that they are neither decorative objects nor functional painting. They generously give painting back its reflexive and contemplative nature. They are also in no way smaller to the eye than his large paintings. Instead of looking at the large canvases from a distance, we travel through them on a comfortable scale, looking at them and touching them as we wish and desire.

These notes on reading Frantz's books started from the (futile) need of fitting them into a genre, disregarding the fact that rather than organising the material of the studio to create a library, they aspired to be a large organised set of books. Just as technicians organise temporary or permanent arrangements on the walls of museums, inventing new and unexpected polyptychs (with common threads such as chronology, subject matter, format, colour, etc.), Frantz also envisages a future for his painting-books, brought together side by side like a large picture. Might we imagine this to be a way of simulating the power and scale of his large paintings? We need to see the completed project to find out. What we do know, however, is that these "painting-books" are works that eschew a textual decoding of the images, because they are pure painting, offered to the senses

in full and without discussion. Painting is the realm of silence and autonomy, and like the books, it also demands physical contact, tranquillity and lack of haste to be enjoyed to the full.

Paulo Gomes is an artist, researcher curator and lecturer at the Instituto de Artes da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). He has a doctorate in Visual Arts, specialising in Visual Poetics. He lives and works in Porto Alegre (RS).

Notes

1 The use of the word "genre" is deliberate, based on the title of the exhibition catalogue *Livres d'artistes – l'invention d'un genre 1960-1980*, organised by Marie Cécile Miessner and Anne Moeglin-Delcroix with the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, from May 29 to October 12 1997.

2 To state that there is an accepted definition of the artist's book means ignoring the multiple definitions developed by several respected authors, such as Riva Castleman, Anne Moeglin-Delcroix and Paulo Silveira, to mention the most well known here. I have chosen the definition of the term *Livre de Artiste*, which, despite being simple (if not reductive), is nonetheless easily available on the internet at: [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Livre d'artiste](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Livre_d'artiste) (accessed on 23/03/2011).

3 Isabelle Jameson. *Histoire du livre d'artiste*. Unpaginated text available at <http://www.ebsi.umontreal.ca/cursus/vol9no1/Jameson.html> (accessed on 24/03/2011).

4 Idem.

5 Definitions and approaches to the term *Paysage*, from *Vocabulaire d'Esthétique*, by Etienne Souriau (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990, p. 1116-1118) and, following the same principle of accessibility, also the term, *Paysage*, available at <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paysage> (accessed on 23/03/2011).

6 "Le paysage visible construit à travers des filtres est aussi 'sensation interne', ce que Diderot appelait 'rumeur des viscères'". *Paysage*. Une approche pluri-sensorielle. In <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paysage> (accessed on 23/03/2011).

7 Jacqueline Lichtenstein, in *A Cor Eloquente* (São Paulo: Editora Siciliano, 1994), points out that the conflict between colour and drawing, which reached its peak in the second half of the 17th century, was only one of the forms of rejection of the eloquent body of painting, and the multiple view that insisted on rejecting the pitfalls of the argument.

8 As Jean Bazaine states in *Les temps de la peinture* (Paris: Éditions Auber, 1990), by saying that a new concept of painting as to escape from the false debate between abstraction and figuration to establish a real debate between its incarnation or non-incarnation.

9 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in his essay entitled *Laocoonte ou Sobre as Fronteiras da Pintura e da Poesia* (São Paulo: Editora Iluminuras, 1998), establishes a division of the plastic arts (the arts of space) and literature (the arts of time) by saying that the culmination of an action described by poetry is not exactly the same as the one that would be represented by a painter.

10 The closest to this are perhaps Yves Klein's (1928–1962), *Anthropométries* (1960–1961) in which the unity between the art action – the making – and the result of this action – the canvas – remains as one single action.

11 SILVEIRA, Paulo. *A Página Violada: da ternura à injúria na construção do livro de artista*. Porto Alegre, Editora da Universidade/UFRGS, 2001, p. 72.