

Sketches of Clay

Every day

Most of us set off for the day with clear goals in mind: being presentable, arriving on time, completing some tasks and duties, meeting the requests of superiors, colleagues, or those of the market. Only in extreme cases in which the deepest self is daily betrayed by the job does one start to question the value of the job itself and attempt to fall back on some deeper motivations. Only then does one risk entering the perilous question of meaning.

The question of meaning is the toughest one, because whatever answer can be found has itself to be submitted to the question of meaning. In the end, if truly honest, one has to acknowledge the absence of clearly stated directions about what life should be. The reflex, here, is to shift to other criteria than that of meaning – as someone reaching the edge of a cliff will naturally grab the closest rock or patch of ground. It is difficult to work directly from the cliff; in that groove of absolute nakedness.

The one thing I always have with me is a sketchbook. If I am to flip the pages of the last seven years of sketching, a constant appears: the human figure. Human figures from train stations, sunny terraces; friends sleeping or reading; live models. And sculptures. Lots of sculptures. Sculptures drawn from public squares, baroque *façades*, gardens and museums. Marble men, plaster women, wax children; sand emperors, bronze goddesses.

Once in a while, I would paint from what I thought were the most open or suggestive sketches. More recently, I felt that this ought to become a series of works. But as I was proceeding, questions arose as to the reasons for such a choice. And as I was trying to answer those questions, more and more paradoxes rushed up to my mind. This is an attempt to formulate them. I am not spoiling any great punchline by revealing that they remain unresolved.

Stolen voices, stones display

I drew a lot in museums. This means that most sculptures were accessible to me because of their detention in that sort of cultural duty-free. Museum are a strange migration space, where objects are displayed within large and bare rooms, sometimes

in strikingly sad glass cases, with controlled temperature and humidity that cannot but recall quarantine for infectious patients.

Certain sculptures seem more at ease than others in such a context, probably because they were conceived for exhibition purposes. Others, like Greek statues and Roman busts, seem rather disoriented. Once gods and emperors, they become beautiful stones under efficient spotlights.

Many other artefacts, having their origin in funerary settings (spectacularly so in the case of the pyramids). It is amazing to think that much of the information we gather about the life of ancient civilisations come from the way they handled death. And it is unsettling to think that they are reaching us only because highly intimate spaces of rest have been violated and burgled.

Certain figures push their intimacy with death up to the point of merging with it. I am referring to corpses. Egyptian mummies; plaster casts moulded in the lava hollows created by the decay of buried cadavers in Pompei; corpses naturally mummified by a fungus in the soil of a cemetery close to Urbino; skeletons arranged with morbid playfulness and for decorative purposes by the Capuccini monks in Rome. In these cases, we are not dealing with *representations* of the human figure, but with the conservation of real human bodies in conditions that transform their appearance and exaggerate their expressiveness. They once were living shapes hosting consciousness, and they still vertiginously brush on this lost identity; nonetheless, they became inanimate and transformable objects. Such a gap is dramatically evidenced by their exhibition in the museum context.

But of all the museum's objects, the most uprooted are probably the objects destined to play a role in sacred rituals. Used to carry magical powers, and to occupy a very definite and appropriate architectural context, they are now displayed in full view, standing straight in the glass case, side by side with their unfamiliar roommates. Deprived of sand and chants, touch and dust. Confined in the rooms where Europe shows off its power to acquire anthropological knowledge by stripping religious items from their ontological vocation.

I don't mean to say that I despise museums. Few places provide visitors with such a strong illusion of safe eternity, of sheltering calmness. Entering a museum is a bit like entering a book. Not a library: a book. An absolute, comfortable *somewhere else*. Both visitors and objects are drifted out of the world. Only groups fail to hear the call for silence, the meditative impulse sent off by white walls.

Drawing in a museum is a bit like engaging in an intimate tête-a-tête with an object to which nothing is requested anymore, other than being seen. Optimal conditions for observation: bare space, sharp light; no interruption, apart for closing time. And lots to share in a no man's land that induces cravings for traces of conscious life, for the recognition of basic human features.

Welcoming sculptures as such traces and features, I was often overwhelmed by compassion. I perceived them as extremely naked, bound to wear only their bare stone shape while crudely exposed. I couldn't bring myself to forget that the museum provides a functional space to demonstrate their value as artefacts only at the price of losing their original voices.

So I would draw the stones – longing for the voices.

Frozen motion heading elsewhere

Nobody paints from a position different from the one he/she holds in the world. Often painting even acts as a revealing of this position. Mine is that of constantly observing reality - from a margin. Events, settings, people come to me. I might welcome them or I might not. In any case, I make no intervention on the way they arrive. When visiting a city, I have no interest in studying a map or a guide. I would rather have the city appearing to me haphazardly, and my image of it constructing itself out of bits and pieces. As if knowledge had to be drawn exclusively from spontaneous, first hand experience.

Thus, my impression of reality is built from fragmented instant shots; as opposed to organized, permanent form. Time is frail nowadays.

For that reason, I find it difficult to direct models, to create a pose. I like to watch the models move so as to stop them when they strike me. This comes as a surprise, as a little electric shock, as a low drum prompting the desire to paint. In the street, I more often than not wish I could freeze people in the middle of their gesture – in the short duration of a certain light.

This is precisely what sculpture provided me with; frozen motions shown in their climax. Motions that somehow involve all the surrounding space to make it complicit in their potential unfolding. The unfolding won't take place: what (good) sculptures show is the *climax of a potentiality*.

The paradox is this. However desperately still, sculptures stand for movement. Their shape indicates where the motion scatters from and what would be the

continuation of it. If we look at Muybridge's photographic action-study of a man walking, we notice that some frames, taken out of the sequence, don't give at all the feeling of motion. In contrast, others seem to synthesise the whole walking process. These are the ones a sculptor would choose.

Perversely, sculptures sometimes show us a climax that precedes the movement; as if the latter could be best understood from the root of its scattering. Take Michelangelo's *David*: he hasn't moved, dared, aimed. The catapult still rests on his shoulder. His body stands straight. Only his face frowns in an intense and anxious concentration that doesn't leave any doubt about the outcome of his recklessness.

Other sculptures focus on the very core of the action, almost a transverse cut at mid-time. The contrast is Bernini's *David*. He is taking a swing. The catapult bends between his hands and his whole body replicates that gesture. All his being, gaze included, seems to be already thrown towards Goliath.

Movement of a different sort can be found in sculptures that refer to an internal motion rather than a physical one. In Rodin's *Penseur*, the balanced tension of the muscles contains all the effort of thinking as well as the compulsory physical stillness while energies are gathered for the internal journey.

All the above works concern mankind at odds with its life on earth and within the limits of a body. Walking, thinking, fighting, overcoming. They attempt to narrate a story through bodily tensions. They call upon the viewer's own corporeal experience and count on it to induce understanding. Even the representations of corpses, as we can observe on certain sarcophagi, refer to the gesture of last lying down, of letting go of a final breath. They refer to movement as something that has just terminated.

Sculptures are eternally still objects standing for movement: pointing primarily at *what they are not*.

There is, however, another range of sculptures that perfectly coincide with the fate of stillness. Sculptures which are meant to *represent stillness*. Buddhas. Mesopotamian divinities. Some Egyptian priests. In fact, they seem more still than stillness itself. They emerge from no movement at all. They are to generate no movement whatsoever. They are. *To be* is their verb, and it takes place beyond the need to change position, to produce thought, to transform space or even to occupy it.

The more sacred sculptures are, the less they move. The more they move, the more human they look. The more they struggle to move, and the more they resemble

us. Take any crucifix with Christ's desperate contortion towards improbable relief. The most widely spread of Christian images is that of a man struggling to exist in his tortured body. And the reason for its iconographic ubiquity might well lay in our sense of belonging to that kind of suffering; in the immediacy with which we can relate to it. The crucifix insists on Christ's humanity.

As for the sacred figures, the reason for their surreal stillness is that they incarnate spiritual completeness. Their position pronounces some kind of truth about eternity. It won't change because it doesn't have to. It exists here and now and forever in total perfection. Stillness *is* the motion: it shows the exact point where a human figure stops being simply human and departs from its shape to become more than itself. The motion consists in heading to a dimension of existence beyond bodily conditions. This somehow raises another paradox: as objects, they are made of *tangible matter*, they unfold into *space* and display *human features*, but what they mean to represent is an *intangible, absolute, divine* truth.

In other words: they too point at *what they are not*.

With and because of these paradoxes, sculptures were to me extraordinary subjects of study. I certainly took advantage of them as models posing for free, infinitely suspended in positions that living bodies couldn't possibly hold for two minutes. I certainly leaned on the clever choice of a climax from the part of the sculptor, the choice of a fragmented piece of expression that generously stood for a much larger body of motions and emotions, narrations and meanings.

Representing representation

The above is only a surface explanation of my use of sculptures. Maybe it prompted it, but something else gradually took hold of the process as I discovered that I was not studying the subject itself as much as its representation. When spending afternoons and evenings with his *Prisoners*, I was really searching for Michelangelo's intuition. I was listening to him, waiting for him, and I was hoping that he would unveil some rare and precious secret about our lives.

He did.

My reliance on sculpture was like a craving for companionship, a shortcut to sacredness. Some sculptures would strongly deliver this as a slap in the face. Others would hold it in a very discreet and delicate way; a wounded butterfly in the palm of a

hand. Yet others, no matter how skilled their technique, failed to provide any depth whatsoever.

I chose to stop in front of those sculptures that somehow promised secret sharing. So that when I was starting to draw, I was already being moved. Thanks to the work of the sculptor, I was immediately projected into the emotional ground which, for me, remains the only one from which to start an image.

By choosing works of art as a starting point, I was not intending to copy them, nor to use them to compensate for some lack of 'inspiration' (whatever that might mean). I was simply trying to be part of a human continuum that has sought out ways of expressing the human condition. Representing representation: a presence testifying a presence testifying a presence. I was intensely observing solid and tangible objects, but what I was drawn to was an invisible component of theirs; the human gaze upon the human body. That singular channel by which a figure had been interpreted; that step aside, around, above, that circling of the figure which is not the figure anymore, but its partly revealed meaning.

Translating, betraying

So, what is the purpose of representation? It has been widely defined as a way to conjure up the presence of what is absent, be it a person, an epoch, a mythological or theological Kingdom we can't access. But apart from keeping time still, the dead alive and the absent present, representation is also valuable because of the process itself; because of what happens during the act of representing and during the act of seeing a representation.

What happens?

Voices unfold. Human beings claim its presence; give it a name, a tone, a singular shape.

Obviously: I couldn't make sculptures out of sculptures. This would have had no interest other than demonstrating technical skills that I am far from possessing anyway. My own input took place in the translation of a three-dimensional work onto a flat surface. This passage was my personal playground, my space for transformation. There and then, I thought, *something else* could happen.

Something else: a surprise.

I had complete freedom in picking my translation's devices. I chose to render the figures with easily readable elements. I avoided geometrical or symbolical

features preferring individual traits and volumetric faithfulness to decisively three-dimensional models.

Despite that interest in observation drawing and the pleasure I take in a technique rooted in Antiquity and Renaissance image-making, I have no particular attraction for a strictly realistic result. So, I handled the paints in a way that prevented the figures from being stable in their own presence, from completely standing by us. I tried to capture them in the process of appearing or of disappearing. A potential movement pervades any image that preserves voids and broken lines, and keeps identities blurred. This, to me, was acting as an essential reminder of what I perceived as the structure of sculptures.

In remaining unachieved, the figures allowed another presence to sneak in; that of paints. I didn't want the paints to be completely absorbed in the job of representation, to be swallowed by the figure. I wanted them to co-exist with it; for the image to speak about both of them.

Then again, you never have freelance paints and visible brushstrokes on a canvas without evoking some other presence. It is the presence of whoever painted. In hyper-realistic images, the viewer is invited to forget what images are made of, who made them, and that they are images in the first place. In the extreme case of trompe-l'oeil, the painter expects us to try to close the shutters or eat the cherries. In contrast, in dripping, blotting, watery, ragged-robed paintings, the viewer isn't offered any illusion regarding the nature of the image or its origin. He is, rather, invited to connect with the presence of another person engaged in the act of painting, of seeing, of living. With action painting, Jackson Pollock is the first to orient the gaze of the viewer exclusively on the gesture by which an image is being created. This gesture is what I look for in other people's paintings.

I don't know of any other way in which I myself could paint. Probably so because of existential reasons. To me, everything seems to affirm the mere fact that there is existence. Indistinct, unreadable blots of dripping watery paint; broken contour lines, undefined backgrounds: this is where we all come from and it is our destination. This: the melting of the shape.

At first, I thought all of my sketchbooks' drawings would ask to become paintings. But some didn't. Some wanted to become collages. They wanted me to provide them with superimposed layers of flat surfaces. It was not so much about creating relief, it was more about clearly positioning the figure on its background;

insisting on the space of display, and on the separation it provokes. These collages have much to do with the museum glass cases and their ghostly environment. Clean, cold, empty, clustered, such environments somehow clashed with muddy, dripping, gesture paintings.

Some other drawings asked for extreme delicacy. They questioned the weight and texture of the canvas as if they feared being bruised. They were looking for watercolours.

Others required a hard scratching treatment. They wanted to come out of reduction. Acrylic didn't seem to be rough enough a gesture for them. I tried different approaches, only to end up retrieving a technique familiar to any school child; that of applying a layer of wax crayon on paper, covering it with black China ink and then wiping it off and scratching it. The surface looked like stone and the scraping process felt like that of chiselling. The works seemed to emerge from one of those Roman walls peeling in the sun, telling of time, erosion and offhand owners.

Though my technical choices were always spontaneous, I was aware of the displacement that occurred on the way. Thousand year old figurines lending themselves to collage. Classic marbles ending up in paint drippings. I granted myself the privilege of using those inputs in the way that most met my intuition. I dragged the figures somewhere else, further away from their initial destination. These figures were already exiled from their geographical origins. They had already been shifted to an institutional setting that challenged their ontological purpose. On top of that, I took it upon myself to expropriate them from their formal vocabulary. I had them migrate into my sketchbook and become assimilated in my transportation. Making them mine was rendering them strangers to themselves. In some sense, it felt like a kind of formal colonialism.

The coloniser colonised

But we do that all the time. We treat images neglectfully because we are surrounded by so many of them: so many images with so many purposes. In an era of massively reproducible iconography, often at the service of a consumerist world, we wander within a sort of complex collage, and we seldom notice how much our eyes are bombarded.

We are abused by images, and we abuse of them in return. We cut and paste them, juxtapose them, digest them, forget them. The freedom that springs from an

over-abundance has been Pop art's starting point. Arguably, I used the same freedom with the sculptures I stored in my sketchbook.

But really, honestly: I was aiming at the exact opposite. I was trying to become acutely conscious of them within the realm of their own being-ness. I wanted to let them work on transforming me while I was transforming them. I wanted to meet with them on the very ground of my waking up question. It was to see if they would provide evidence of an answer; some trace of a meaning.

They did.

They did in part because of their stillness. Across those frozen faces and limbs, one has a lifetime to observe the complexity of expression, its ambiguity. The most authoritative figure is rarely deprived of vulnerability traces; joy seldom avoids addressing sadness as one of its components; pain usually calls up vitality in expressing itself. The complexity and the ambiguity of human expression is one of the most common outpourings of sculpture.

Stillness also underlines the vulnerability linked to materiality. Sculptures might outlive us, but they won't avoid erosion. They are objects after all. Over what can be a very long period of time, they endure the same ageing process as us all. Somehow, the passage of time is more noticeable on their hard and resistant surface than on our flexible and rapidly altered skin. It is evidenced by contrast, just like the wound on the heel of invincible Achilles.

Emotional complexity and the implacable passage of time cannot but call upon universal concerns. Another element that strikingly points in the same direction is the plurality of forms. Throughout times and cultures, the human figure has been repeatedly represented, as in some sort of incantation. Representation took as many roads as there are people on this earth. This produces an extended concept of the value of the body, and, therefore, of its beauty. Beauty coincides more with dignity than with any specific canon. It resides in the very fact of filling a human body with life, as opposed to forcing it into narrow aesthetic criteria. The immense body of works representing the human figure acts as a powerful counter-standardization. The plurality of shape reminds us of the fundamental fact that we belong to life first, and only second to the requests of whichever is our society. *It is by their very existence that bodies are dignified.*

Another soothing dose of universal content is found in the purpose of these figures. Why, indeed, would people feel the need to represent their likeness? Most

modern figures are aimed at expressing emotions or at sustaining ideologies. Classical figures illustrate myths or religious scenes, thus acting as narrative props. Indigenous figures are means of celebration and protection. Funereal figures confer accompaniment and luck in the journey beyond. Magic objects protect happiness and keep danger away.

In a broad sense, all these works are an attempt at understanding the position of mankind in the universe: at conjuring the dangers it is exposed to and at invoking positive forces in its survival. Whatever their specific channels and formal contents, whatever their specific purposes, these figures, when taken as a plural group with a consistent metaphysical orientation, provide the following message: *we are all searching, we are all struggling, we are all trying to make the best out of our passage on earth. This is what a searching, struggling, celebrating human body looks like – and you should look to find it in yourself.*

So, when blinking eyes and seeing beyond their formal and functional differences, these representations of human kind act as a single existential net that cannot but include us. This is where I found the strongest and most meaningful input: by allowing me to recognize my own essential shape and fate as a human being, these representations somehow stood as an invitation to be aware of our togetherness. Birth, growth, love, fear, pain, daily survival, fertility, death: these are the issues to which all our lives boil down in the end.

By so doing, the figures were responding to another universal hunger to which I hadn't lent much attention before: that of truly *belonging*. Belonging from the root, and not from the surface. Self-consciousness might be the only faculty that distinguishes us. From it springs immense richness of languages and thought, under which the question of meaning never ceases to push. This is where are blossoming the needs to confer upon ourselves some metaphysical status, to inject bare survival with sacredness, to understand our place in the great order of things. And our need to make portraits. Willingly or not, wherever we are and whatever we do, *we are still together*.

Dignity, which radiated from each and every work that stopped me in my tracks, precisely comes from taking this common inheritance on board and letting it sing through the glorious simplicity of a shape.

A shape, whatever shape – as long as it shows the way to humanity in human beings.