

Cruzeiro Seixas: Weird Corpses and Why the Portuguese Surrealism Did Not Die

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ABSTRACT

Cruzeiro Seixas is one of the main representatives of Portuguese and European surrealism, despite having initially started with neo-realism. Alongside figures such as Mário Cesariny, Carlos Calvet, António Maria Lisboa, Pedro Oom or Mário Henrique Leiria, the artist created a very unique style that allows immediate recognition of his work. If it is true that this recognition depends a lot on the pictorial, stylistic, artistic presentation, it is no less true that this happens due to the permanent use of a language that, on the one hand, keeps surrealism alive, and on the other hand, allows the affirmation of a narrative that does not run out of time in the discourses of history or art criticism. It is not a question of reinventing surrealism but of making it known as it is, as it happens in the reality of the human psyche. And what happens is images of weird corpses in unreal scenarios, as it must be all the mind scenarios. Cruzeiro Seixas is an artist of human reality and this essay seeks to give an account of his work and thereby clarify how surrealism remains alive today.

Keywords: Cruzeiro Seixas, Corpses, Dream, Mind, Surrealism.

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I. INTRODUCTION TO (SUR)REALIST ARTIST

In the beginning there was a drawing and the drawing was with the man. Cruzeiro Seixas (1920-2020) is the man who materializes this ancestral dream that brings together creativity, language, and resilience. Pictures, drawings, and designs whose vigor seeks to materialize that moment when figures/forms come to mind. Fantasies are events of the unconscious (phantoms are precisely what appear to consciousness), and to appear in this sense is to bring to the world the images that every man dreams of or lives with.

In this article, one seeks to show the dream of man, the joint dream that the imagination allows through the surrealist art of Cruzeiro Seixas. An essay that seeks to do justice, that seeks to highlight the deserved place for this remarkable artist that international critics have only recently discovered. The lack of knowledge regarding Portuguese Surrealism, and specifically Cruzeiro Seixas, is very evident; neither Jean-Louis Bédouin (*Twenty Years of Surrealism*, 1961) nor Alain Jouffroy (*André Bréton and international Surrealism*, 1990) and others, made any reference to him. Recently, only Sarane Alexandrin (from the *Revista Supérieur Inconnu*), intended to give him some recognition.

With Mário Cesariny, Fernando José Francisco and Cruzeiro Seixas, Portuguese Surrealism was founded, and our artist will maintain his loyalty, not only to Cesariny (which is “the miracle” that appeared in his life) but to Surrealism itself, from which he remains a serious defender. One might naturally ask whether this is still possible today, that is, if it is possible to remain a surrealist artist in the XXI century. The answer appears in his own words, in an article published in *Jornal Sol* (September 15, 2011), in which one also sees the convinced artist stating: “we are all desperately looking for a new idea”. Such a statement is due to the admirable coherence that the artist manifests (it should be said in the name of truth that few manage to be), and that is translatable in the non-overcoming of surrealism. Such a position is undoubtedly debatable, if framed in the current born with Bréton, but not in the work of Cruzeiro Seixas. Cruzeiro Seixas reveals a unique spirit and talent in the Portuguese visual arts scene. His artistic versatility makes us uneasy and we wonder if Cruzeiro Seixas was a poet of painting, a painter of poetry, or both.

II. THE VIBRATION OF SURREALISM WITH WEIRD CORPSES

The artist understood very clearly (like the surrealists in general did) what Heidegger would say in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, that is, that the essence of art is poetry. And it is poetry in that sense in which there is a poetic perform, a wage that brings and institutes the work of art in the world.

Poetic images that struggle to be kept in the ontological horizon of the mind, because only that can produce thought. He says:

(...) poetry is for me like looking at a flower... (...) from the depths of my anguished freedom I affirm that I know nothing about techniques and I only live from the magical guessing of things... (...) below poetry he would place sex and freedom itself.

Without poetry, both are far from their true greatness... (...) you are my eternity... (Seixas, n.d., p. 9)

André Bréton (1924), in the *Surrealist Manifesto*, referred ironically: “I hope the day comes when poetry decrees the end of money and alone breaks the bread of heaven” (Bréton, 1994).

The surrealism of Cruzeiro Seixas contains the enchantment and vitality that only great works possess. It is not a matter of discussing the longevity of a terribly dated current, but of declaring a style that knew how to assert itself, that knew how to redefine itself in modern times. Cesariny in 1973 said about Cruzeiro Seixas with regard to the defense of the Lisbon surrealist group, points precisely to the only “personality among us capable of transposing into the second half of the century, magnifying it, the plastic and erotic heritage bequeathed by the surrealism of the 30s”, thus referring to Cruzeiro Seixas.

The artist's works breathe timelessness, express the irreverence of an artistic provocation that has no time or place. Such a provocation always means a *pro-vocare*, that is to say, to make talk, bringing to light the fascination and subversion of the logic of language, and perhaps for this reason his (first) book of poems is called *Eu falo em chamas* (1986) (which in English could be translated as “I speak in Flames”) and after three years the *Desaforismos* (1989). Cruzeiro Seixas follows the creative impulse of the genius it carries; makes people see, awakens words in images, writes poems with images in his oneiric paintings. In the first works he even followed some of the techniques of Dadaism, mixing letters, making collages, painting words (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). But the appeal of surrealism is stronger, and there is an inner life that is far more precious and interesting to discover.



Fig. 1. “O seu olhar já não se dirige para a terra, mas tem os pés assentes nela”, Pacaça shell [*Syncerus caffer nanus*], collage of paper, gouache, wood and object from the sea. Cruzeiro Seixas Donation. Courtesy Cupertino de Miranda Foundation Collection.



Fig. 2. “Um anjo das minhas relações”, Clay, collage and teeth on paper (1967). Donation Cruzeiro Seixas, Cupertino de Miranda Foundation Collection.

Believing in the mechanisms of the psyche, “in the persistent faith in the automatism” of hidden images that are struggling to appear, was an irresistible appeal. His drawings gain space for a definitive affirmation from 1972 onwards, and Laurent Vancrevel writes that it is “free art: shadow games of beauty, shadow games of happiness”. From this inaugural moment of fantastic figures, from the perfect materialization of the psychic automatisms that preside over artistic creation, Cruzeiro Seixas marks a characteristic style that will never be lost, and that any connoisseur of art can immediately identify.

There is something like a nocturnal fable in permanent un-veiling. The exceptional figures that seem to (always) appear to us in white (or light tone) or in gray, stand out against a black background (black or dark blue), which refers us to the night, to the dream, to the daydream (see: Fig. 3 - Fig. 6); this form of presentation allows for overwhelming visibility of the figures that seem to metamorphose the oneiric world into emerging bodily cartography, into a dazzling array of what emerges from and/or from vision.



Fig. 3. “A grande refeição”, 1972. Chinese ink on paper.
Donated by Cruzeiro Seixas. Col. Fund.
Cupertino de Miranda



Fig. 4. “Homenagem à realidade”, 1972. Chinese ink on coated paper. Col. Moderna/Fund. Calouste Gulbenkian



Fig. 5. Sem título, 2001. Graphite, Gouache and Chinese ink on paper. Courtesy Fund. Cupertino de Miranda.



Fig. 6. “The real obstinate memory”, 2011. Tapestry. Courtesy of Galeria. Tapeçarias de Portalegre, (Bairro Alto) Lisboa-Portugal.

Such paintings allow themselves to be crossed by visually strange bodies, or rather, by bodies that do not necessarily need to be recognized. These foreign bodies seem to be strange corpses, as if they were devoid of dynamism, of elements that refer to the lived world, such as emotional expression or sexuality. If one looks at the faces of these indefinable bodies/corpses, they present, one would say, a very stylized form, without expression, almost untouchable. And yet they live. They live in the human mind, they live in the imaginary, they live on the tenuous border between the expression of life and its eternal suspension.

The oneiric life expresses much of this tenuous border between the real and the unreal, between the lived and the dreamed, as if life itself were divided between embracing the given reality or dreaming the projected unreality. As Sarane Alexandrian states:

Cruzeiro Seixas seeks to deepen reality through dreams, this is why the title of one of his books is “Hommage à la réalité”.

His creations are guided dreams, that is to say, dreams that include a part of intellectual speculation. Above all because he practices knowledge through the hallucination provoked.

Cruzeiro Seixas knows that life is a (kind of) scandal for the reason, because life is always much more than what it lets on, just see how dreams feed our spirit. His figures aim to show this enamor of the mind with life, to reveal that creative inner instinct, which leads him to inaugurate a pictorial dialogue with the “weird corpses” (a technique that consists of drawing from the trace left by the previous one without know what is drawn). If in France such drawings resulted from the participation of three or four members, in Cruzeiro Seixas it is almost always two hands, like the ones we find at the Cupertino de Miranda Foundation, for example, with Mário Botas or Raul Perez.

One of the last creations of Cruzeiro Seixas was the creation together with the artist Matisana, in 2012 of the «Tarot Lisboa» (see Fig. 7 and Fig. 8); a project that had the support of the Municipality of Lisbon and would become one of the symbols of promotion of the city. In fact, this project is similar to what artists like Salvador Dali or Aleister Crowley had already done. The Tarot deck unequivocally denounces the surrealist style of Cruzeiro Seixas and, therefore, ends up revealing a kind of same epistemological and metaphysical horizon that subsists in the background for both: the unknown and the non-conscious made visible.



Fig. 7. poster for the public presentation of "Tarot Lisboa"

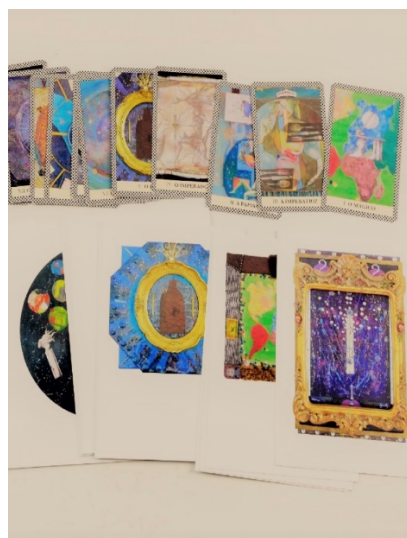


Fig. 8. The Tarot Lisboa (deck of cards)

III. A SURREAL CONCLUSION

The work of Cruzeiro Seixas is represented in various institutions and private collections; one should highlight just a few like the Chiado Museum and the Gulbenkian Modern Art Center (Lisbon), the Machado de Castro Museum (Coimbra), the Cupertino de Miranda Foundation (Famalicão) and Fundación Eugenio Granell (Santiago de Compostela). Certainly, that such a rich work like that of Cruzeiro Seixas deserved to be in other museums, but the lack of knowledge (as already mentioned) of this great master and of the country itself, it will have conditioned him (for better or for worse) to be one of the great, if not the last one of the great surrealists in the world. This opinion is based on the artist's own words, who, attentive to the political, social and economic situation in Portugal, commented with critical insight to the *Jornal Sol* (September 15, 2011): “It's the politicians' fault (...) the worst nonsense in the world today, and Portugal suffers a lot from it, is people thinking that intellectual life, art, culture, are subsidiary things and must remain in the background”.

The convergence with the father of surrealism is manifest: “we fight in all forms, poetic indifference, artistic distraction, erudite research, pure speculation, and we don't want to have anything in common with the economizers of spirit”.

Cruzeiro Seixas retired to a modest room (nursing home) in Estoril, overlooking the sea, the artist stopped doing what he liked most, spent much of his time sleeping, or what he himself called his “escape”. This designation is undoubtedly curious, and that Sartre, in his essays on imagination, designated as an escape

into the anti-world. It's just that even the unreal is always based on reality (be it the reality of the world, of dreams, of the unconscious). The “desire for freedom” that marked the artist's trajectory (especially in a century in which Salazar's regime prevailed) continues to echo in the philosophy of the French thinker, in which conscience is freedom. This freedom, far from conflicting with the Freudian unconscious, ends up revealing the strength of surrealist thought. Of course, even in this Cruzeiro Seixas's sleep, in this escape of his, it is still surrealism that dictates the rules. If waking is an “interference in reality” – as can be read in André Breton's Manifesto –, perhaps it is also worth considering his words: “Why shouldn't I expect more from the dream sign than I expect from an increasingly higher degree of consciousness? Could not the dream also be applied to the resolution of fundamental questions in life?”

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