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# Ângela Ferreira

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## POWER STRUCTURES Crouch-touch-pause-engage

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OPENING 12 SEPTEMBER 4 PM

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This exhibition by Ângela Ferreira (AF) is an important moment in the context of her oeuvre, because the dialogues she establishes and what she reveals in her sculptures and drawings do not address any moment in the history of art (her preferences for European modern art, Russian constructivism and some modern architecture are well known) but rather freely relates to a sport, bringing to light not only its artistic potential but also a historical complexity that calls for further examination.

The choice of rugby is not accidental and arises from how this sport strongly relates to South African recent history, the end of Apartheid and the slow process of decolonization and social integration undergone by this African country since the mid-1990s. These processes have fuelled a significant part of AF's artistic research.

In this exhibition, adding to the political context (I will go back to it later) the artist uses a sport like a text she artistically interprets. Summoning a team sport, regardless of the specific micronarrative it contains, implies dealing with certain conceptions of body and organization that, potentially, transform sports events into places of overcoming, of protest and, of course, of celebration.

It is important to emphasize that sportive beauty is not artistic beauty and that the instrumental notion of body entailed in sport is not how an artist usually contemplates a body. This might be one of the reasons why sport and art are two seemingly opposing poles: the canon of fine art appears to be totally opposed to the muscular volume, to the physical expressions of suffering, glory or defeat that recall the animal in us, which we have domesticated through training, repetition, exhaustion, and discipline.

The beauty of sport is in effort, in surpassing our external (lifting more and more weight) or internal (running or swimming faster and faster) limitations and in the way the body seems to overcome its natural condition and, through the incitement of internal and external conflicts, achieve a certain form of excellence. This was why the Greeks thought of sport as the place where Agon (conflict, war, confrontation) and Arete (excellence or virtue) came together: their encounter can result in the fascinating experience shared by all who have attended a sports event.

From a certain point of view, when one includes sport in the vast repertoire of fine arts one has to expand the canon of beauty in art in order to accommodate the grammar carried by the sporting body. More than a spontaneous organic form, the sporting body is forged (a common motto of weightlifting and CrossFit is precisely 'Built, not born') through a voluntary and disinterested submission to discomfort, discipline, commitment, and training.

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Perhaps this is why, in Ancient Greece, Plato and Aristotle opened the Academy and the Lyceum next to a gym. We know, at least from Plato's dialogues, that philosophical reflection is associated with the contemplation of beautiful bodies (see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's excellent book, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, published in 2006).

If the issue of the body is central when we think about the relationship between artistic and sporting beauty, another issue relates to sports implements and how these tools – whose functions can be so specific that they are unknown to most of us – can have unexpected sculptural qualities. It is useful to summon Kant and explore how the ignorance of the function of these instruments and objects allows the subject contemplating them to inscribe their forms in the sphere of disinterest, which, as we know, was the greatest Kantian requirement for the human experience of beauty in art: looking at a form with disinterested pleasure and seeing it for what it is, free from function, use or pragmatic requirements.

In the case of AF, these structures – the one that is wholly strange was found in a visit to Coetzenburg Stadium in Stellenbosch, South Africa, an important key rugby centre in the country – completely lose their functions as useful objects. The artist transforms them into a fertile creative ground, acknowledging their formal and sculptural qualities as well as their potential for meaning. In other words, their complexity goes beyond the formal and well into the historical; they are transformed into artistically and historically relevant objects

In Clint Eastwood's *Invictus* (2009) there is a scene in which Nelson Mandela (Morgan Freeman) talks to a group of women who complain about President Mandela's recent fascination for rugby, as this was the official sport of the Apartheid regime. Nelson Mandela points out the racial diversity of the team and asks: "Do you really think this is just a game?".

More a statement than a question, his answer shows that, adding to rugby's aesthetic, artistic and formal qualities, the sport has a historical and social complexity that escapes the simplicity that normally characterizes the narratives of sports events. This exhibition by Ângela Ferreira is precisely focused on the historical complexity present in the structures, forms, actions and bodies of the South African national rugby union team, a case in point that shows how a white men's sport has become an example of the inclusion processes undergone by this African country.

That a sport (as a collective event) has the potential to tell the history of a century was perceived by other artists. A good example is Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's 2006 film *Zidane, un portrait du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Their strategy, similar to the one presented by AF in this exhibition, was to identify the coincidences between cultural, historical and political relevance and aesthetic, formal and artistic qualities. These coincidences are what gives relevance to these works of art.

More specifically, Angela Ferreira's project is a reconstruction or, if you prefer, a reinterpretation of the training equipment of the national rugby team spread over a lawn near the Coetzenburg Stadium in Stellenbosch, South Africa (the team that inspired President Mandela). And this reading by the artist shows how these objects activate fundamental questions about the complexity of South African recent history.

In this sense, we can look at these sculptures and drawings as doubly performative. On the one hand, each of these works preserves the memory of a strong relation to a certain use by a struggling, moving body. On the other hand, the action of making history is inscribed on them. And it is interesting to see how the dynamism and physicality of sports practice serve as a good metaphor for the action of making history.

It is not a matter of illustrating a specific event but of using the subtext present in objects found in a certain political-cultural

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context as a plastic material for reflection. This is how each sculpture and drawing holds political potential, how they remain firm in their activism.

It is also important to highlight the way in which sculptural rationality, often preferred by the artist and developed from a dialogue with Western artistic modernism (especially European), does not have a place here. Instead, she presents spontaneous sculptures that have referents not in the formal and educated visual discourse of Western art, but that are totally unforeseen, unplanned, vernacular. If previously the work of architects such as Prouvé, Álvaro Siza or Pancho Guedes, among others, were important elements in the dialogue that the artist has been developing, here these references disappear and give way to a relationship with common use objects without any prior cultural or artistic attributes.

Finally, this exhibition recovers, summons and makes present not an abstraction, but real bodies that inhabit and act in the world. We can think of these sculptures and the drawings they provoked as actions. Each work presented here refers to a specific movement of the body, movements indicated in the title chosen by the artist for this exhibition: Crouch, touch, pause, engage. They summon the notions of overcoming obstacles, of resistance and how each body and each subject generate an energy that surpasses and relates to other energies. The grammar of the physical movements of the rugby game chosen by AF for theme is very powerful, because they all refer to a performance that requires not only an awareness of oneself, but also of the other: different bodies to relate to, to unite, to separate and act together. And this balance between subjectivity and collectivity is a powerful image for a debate on our common life.

Nuno Crespo

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## Biography

Ângela Ferreira, born in 1958 in Maputo, Mozambique, grew up in South Africa and obtained her MFA from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town. She lives and works in Lisbon, teaching Fine Art at Lisbon University, where she obtained her doctorate in 2016. Ferreira's work is concerned with the ongoing impact of colonialism and post-colonialism on contemporary society, an investigation that is conducted through in-depth research and distillation of ideas into concise and resonant forms. She represented Portugal at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007, continuing her investigations into the ways in which European modernism adapted or failed to adapt to the realities of the African continent by tracing the history of Jean Prouvé's 'Maison Tropicale'. Architecture also serves as a starting point for the deepening of her long research on the erasure of colonial memory and the refusal of reparation, which finds its most complex materialization in *A Tendency to Forget* (2015) focusing on ethnographic work of the couple Jorge and Margot Dias. The *Pan African Unity Mural* (2018), exhibited at the Maat Museum Lisbon and Bildmuseet, Umea, Sweden was conceived, retrospectively and introspectively, for the "here" and the "now". In addition to its own trajectory, other biographical stories are simultaneously narrated, exposed and hidden in this work. In *Dalaba: Sol d'Exile* (2019) a work focused on Miriam Makeba, one of the most prominent figures in the struggle against apartheid, Ferreira created sculptural pieces based on the architectural elements of the exile building where Makeba lived in Conakri, almost like a prototype of the relationship between modernist and African vernacular architectures. Her sculptural, sound and videographic homages have continuously referenced economic, political and cultural history of the African continent whilst recuperating the work and image of unexpected figures like Peter Blum, Carlos Cardoso, Ingrid Jonker, Jimi Hendrix, Jorge Ben Jor, Jorge dos Santos, Diego Rivera or Miriam Makeba.

Selected works: *Dalaba: Sol d'Exile* (2019); *Pan African Unity Mural* (2018); *Remining* (2017); *Talk Tower for Diego Rivera* (2017); *Boca* (2016); *Wattle and Daub* (2016); *Hollows Tunnels, Cavities and more...* (2016); *A Tendency to Forget* (2015); *Wild Decolonization* (2015); *Messy Colonialism* (2015); *Revolutionary Traces* (2014); *SAAL Brigades* (2014); *Independence Cha Cha* (2014); *Entrer dans la mine* (2013); *Mount Mabou* (2013); *Stone Free* (2012); *Political Cameras* (from Mozambique series) (2012); *Collapsing Structures/ Talking Buildings* (2012); *Cape Sonnets* (2010/2012); *For Mozambique* (2008).