



Selected Texts and Press

Paulo Monteiro

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Paulo Monteiro was born in 1961 in São Paulo, where he still lives and works. He grew up in a large family with parents who specialized in history and histology and in an environment bathed in music, literature and art. Politics were complex, especially after the military coup of 1964, which ushered in a dictatorial regime in Brazil that lasted until 1985. Monteiro first crossed the country's border in 1982 for a month-long trip to Europe, where he visited Paris and Düsseldorf, as well as several Italian cities.

Under the influence of Robert Crumb and Gilbert Shelton, who published comics in underground magazines in the 1960s in the US, Monteiro started drawing comics too. These would appear in magazines that did not have a license to exist and to be sold such as Boca, Papagaio, Almanak Makongo. In this way he became part of an artistic underground scene in São Paulo. After graduating from the College of Fine Arts in São Paulo Monteiro co-founded Casa 7, a collective of artists that was based in a house with the number 7 in São Paulo. The house functioned as both a studio and exhibition platform from 1982 until 1985. They shared a mutual desire to paint with a focus on exploring the materiality of painting. Casa 7 connected a whole generation of writers, film-makers, musicians and other artists. This had a major impact on a new artistic generation in Brazil. In these years Paulo Monteiro made large paintings that were loaded by many layers of paint.

Towards the late 1980s Paulo Monteiro's interest shifted towards sculpture. He started collecting materials that had been rejected by their owners such as wooden planks, iron bars and ropes. Through a search for composition, he assembled parts into a harmonious unity. It was a process of cutting, bending, connecting, searching for balance and experimenting with gravity. The sculptures touched the floor or the wall without any intermediary. Soon a desire for liquidity, fluidity and movement entered his practice. He focused on drawing lines that travelled in their destined space with an attraction to the borders. The identity of the line was irregular, playful, elegant, soft, unique, personal and directed by the hand of the artist. The line could turn into a shape or three-dimensional form. Around 2005 he integrated colour in his gouaches and later in his sculptures. The space

at borders, between layers or inside a mass is of great meaning to Paulo Monteiro. His works find their existence between painting and sculpture. Every element in his oeuvre is equally important to him no matter the size, the medium or the choice of display. There is no room for hierarchy.

Since 2014 twelve works by Paulo Monteiro have been acquired by MoMA in New York. More works can be found in public collections, among others in the Museu de Arte Moderna in São Paulo, The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the Museu de Arte Contemporanea Niteroi in Rio de Janeiro. His work has been included in group shows at the Pinacoteca do Estado in São Paulo, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in Paris and Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon, among many others. He has twice been invited to the Biennial of São Paulo, in 1985 and 1994.



Paulo Monteiro, "The outside of distance," installation view at Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo (2017). Courtesy of the Artist and Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo. Photography by Kenji Takahashi.

Minimal art can elicit feedback far beyond artists' expectations. Paulo Monteiro's two-gallery exhibition, titled "The Outside of Distance," serves as an example. Among the works shown at Tomio Koyama Gallery, all produced in the last two years and all untitled, the epitome of Monteiro's art is a series of small oil-painted wooden blocks running horizontally along the wall.

The ends of each block are painted in colors that contrast with that of their main body: pink and orange juxtaposed with light blue, and so on. They are paintings with minimal composition as much as they are sculptures with little volume — their diminutive stature calls attention to the space they fill. By contrast, a small, thirty-by-forty-centimeter oil on canvas consists of a yellow mound in the lower half apparently applied over a pale blue ground, visible through a single vertical scrape of pigment — an undaub, as it were — balanced by a thick white streak along the top edge. More than their color, form and meaning, the sheer materiality of paint stands out here.

Monteiro wields Misako & Rosen's temporary exhibition space as a compact showroom for works, again untitled, dating from 1990 to 2016. One wall comprises works on paper; painted bronze bars are mounted on another, along with combinations of small canvases and oil-painted wooden bars. The artist has remarked that "distance has outside and inside," suggesting something unfathomable about the distance between objects. Yet as seemingly abstract and universal as Monteiro's concept is, these untitled works fit seamlessly into Japan's diminutive living spaces, in buildings without numbers on streets without names.



It was a short while ago that I first saw the black and white photograph taken almost thirty years earlier. In it, the artist is a twenty-something youth gazing at the camera with a serious demeanor, leaning against the back wall of the room, his air half shy half cool. Around him, on the walls and on the floor series of objects built from materials that seemed to have been rescued from some corner of the studio, "little nothings" or leftovers that may have taken years to accumulate. In that image there was none of the nobility and permanence of the materials of traditional sculptures, nor even the precision or the monumentality that characterized certain branches of three-dimensional work from the postwar period. On the contrary, they were arrangements made up of fragments of wood, rubber, tubing or rebar that seemed to find their balance upon transitory points of support, suggesting the imminence of motion or collapse. And, in spite of the rustic appearance of the materials many of them stained with paint or dirt or worn by use—each one of the pieces produced a situation in which the association of these raw elements in precarious stability highlighted their most tenuous and delicate qualities. More than the presence or the sharp expressiveness of the material, what those relatively simple and rudimentary compositions sought to emphasize were the small interplay of forces structured by the physical qualities of the elements; games that, in their characteristic feebleness, created a field of impermanence, instability or even hesitation.

Although I did not know exactly why, that image remained in my mind for a long time. They were works that, until then, I had no knowledge of and, although fully aware that the vintage aspect of a photograph is able to elicit every manner of fetishistic hallucinations, the pieces possessed a raw but extremely timely nature that opened up a new dimension for me in Paulo Monteiro's work. Some time later, the artist told me that those works no longer existed because they had literally fallen down; a fact that struck me as quite appropriate more than regrettable - as if they had somehow fulfilled their calling. Ultimately, for me they were much closer to speculations regarding the physical possibilities and limitations of the materials than categorical statements of permanent forms.

More recently, in another conversation, I became aware of a surprising albeit initially

unimportant piece of information: to wit, that Monteiro is very interested in dance and has practiced ballet for many years. And so, still, quite vaguely, all this seemed to conspire to the reaffirmation of the importance of motion in the artist's work, something that photograph only insinuated. It would not be a matter, however, of relating that idea of movement to the gestural painting of the beginning of his career influenced by the aesthetic of Neo-expressionism and of the Transavanguardia, but especially to that which belongs to dance: a certain immediacy in the doing finding points of balance, the torsions of the material or the singularity of the gesture that is inimitably executed each time.

The vast series of drawings in graphite begun in the late 1980s, for instance, enhances the immanence of the black line upon white paper in unique trajectories that often surpass the limit of the support. In these works, there is no focus on narrative or representation although the hand trained to draw comic book stories during adolescence insisted on producing forms that occasionally suggest fragments of bodies. Absurdly think that in these drawings it would be possible to glimpse both the impact upon Paulo Monteiro of the discovery of Philip Guston's work at the beginning of his professional career, and the dialogue he established with Mira Schendel, some years later a field in which the supposedly contradictory and irreconcilable forces of the persistence of the figure and the autonomy of the living line are to be found. Nevertheless, no matter how tempting it may be to delve into digressions regarding the possible origins of that series would mean to disdain aspects that seem to me to be far more relevant to the development of the artist's work in the years that followed.

The obsession with which Monteiro dedicates himself to exploring the possibilities of the line, hundreds of times, upon the same vertical format for almost ten years is, at the very least, evidence of an urgency to pursue something that was not yet exhausted. To this end, he used one of the simplest and most direct techniques: only graphite and paper. And, although that process is marked by the ad infinitum repetition of the same procedure and by the almost Spartan restraint of formal variables, each one of the drawings is the result of a unique confrontation with the act of drawing, and their singularity resides precisely in the problems and solutions found each time the collision takes place. In that sense, there is no place to be reached, given that it is not a matter of a search for some stable or ideal form, but of a process in which the repetition of improvised action necessarily produces difference. Perhaps this is why the lines are never completely straight and the diversions and changes of course become apparent, recording in their trajectory a process of trial and error in which there is no pre-established idea of success.

The rawness and immediacy present in those drawings are qualities that permeate a significant portion of Monteiro's work, from the three-dimensional experiments recorded in the old photograph to the group of lead sculptures made in the 1990s. In them, the piece made from the lump of clay bears the undeterred marks of the arm and forearm, as well as all the imperfections stemming from a work methodology centered on the instant of the body's action upon matter. As in the drawings, there is no absolute control over the final result, although the artist establishes a set of rules that must be obeyed in each operation. Beyond this, in both cases the persistence of the figure is repeated, albeit not yet immediately recognizable nor seeking some type of a priori formalization. But whereas the figure appears in the drawings as an element that can both contain and free the line beyond the limit of the support without ever guiding it absolutely, it emerges, in the sculptures, primarily as an axis for orienting the forces at play in each piece, as Monteiro himself describes on following passage:

The lead pieces that I made were a continuation of the wall work. I'd get a lump [of clay] in the shape of a

mound, or something like Guston's Back View painting and made the thing remain vertical for as long as possible. When it was about to fall, I would squash it to deter the fall. But that alone was not enough, it was also necessary that some figure should have emerged as a result of that action, which I was already doing in the pieces I showed at Raquel in 1987 [...] a figure in the sense that if you look at the piece and see that it's standing and leaning, and of no abstract form can it be said that it is standing or reclining if there isn't some figurative allusion. A smaller side on top, a larger side underneath... a head, a foot...

In the group that includes the series of drawings on paper and lead sculptures, Monteiro appears to have forged a language of his own in which figuration and abstraction insinuate themselves with greater or lesser protagonism, producing works that situate themselves in a zone of hesitation, duration, and motion. It is as if they inhabited a permanent state of uncertainty that does not allow for sweeping affirmative gestures of preconceived ideas. On the contrary, they create a kind of inventory of countless urgent and forcibly frustrated attempts, given that they do not strive for nor even contemplate engendering any type of redemptive experience through ideal form. With their apparent flaws, their fragile points of support and its distorted aspect, the sculptures rest directly upon the floor, eliminating an alleged hierarchy between artistic object and environment that presupposes the use of the base in order to create a place for mediation between that which is or is not art. Evidently, countless artists before Monteiro did away with the use of the base in their sculptures and I intend to stake no claim here for any type of inaugural gesture in these works. However, the fact that they do not present themselves as objects apart from that which is mundane emerges as an additional fact that compounds his mistrust and discomfort with regard to what would be a "resolved" work.

Simultaneously, it may be said that Monteiro is a classic, in the sense that he works fundamentally with the most traditional art genres: drawing, sculpture and painting. Far from being a conservative classicism it appears to be nearer to someone like the iconoclast Michael Clark, a dancer and choreographer known for joining the technical rigor achieved through a traditional education at the Royal Ballet School of London with the experimental and transgressive spirit of punk and post-punk, at approximately the same time that Monteiro began his trajectory in art. But whereas the anti-establishment stance that gave rise to varieties of artistic expression in the United Kingdom emerged as a reaction to the Thatcherism that set off the process of dismantling that country's social welfare state and the victory of neoliberalism, Brazil was experiencing a moment of democratic transition after two decades of military dictatorship. What should have been a period marked by optimism and celebration was, nonetheless, an extremely troubled period in this country. Amid economic recession and hyperinflation, various social sectors went on to organize demonstrations in favor of direct presidential elections, culminating in the great march of April 1984, that gathered one and a half million demonstrators in São Paulo's praça da Sé. And although the Diretas Já movement had emerged victorious, a sharp political and economic instability characterized the years that followed, including the death of the first civilian president after 1964, still indirectly elected as late as 1985, and the subsequent swearing-in of a vice-president associated with the country's most retrograde forces. The situation of instability and uncertainty would aggravate itself even further during the next decade, when political episodes in the country involving everything from drastic economic measures such as successive substitutions of currency denominations and the confiscation of savings accounts to the impeachment of the presi-

dent and the unexplained death of his campaign tree achieved heights of absurdity such as might be found in a telenovela script.

This brief historic digression is necessary to situate Monteiro's work and the work of his generation within a political environment far away from the progressive utopias of the post-war and from opposition to the military regime that so marked a large part of the artistic output of his predecessors. Indeed, as opposed to the openly political or militant character of the generation immediately anteceding its own, they reject the certainties of an activism able to identify its object of antagonism, which does not necessarily make them alienated. I do not intend to claim that the drawings and sculptures Monteiro made in the 1980s and 1990s somehow attempted to represent the political reversals that Brazil was experiencing at that moment, but in any event their nature of indeterminacy and a certain punk nihilism that becomes visible in the almost violent line or in the lack of finish of the sculptural form are symptomatic of the ideological stalemate of its time.

That feature already seems to have softened in the colored gouaches of the 20s, in which the large color fields are shot through by lines that resemble those of the graphite drawings. The appropriateness of the movement's mistakes and hesitations remain, but now it is attended by different vibrations and intensities created by color combination. Yet while the line of the drawings or the gesture of the action upon clay were able to stretch the limits of the support, they were still contained within themselves, for the problems they articulated, though very often coincidental, remained intimately yoked to the properties of a given material or support and manifested themselves in series that were exhibited as relatively independent groups. In their most recent iteration, sculptures, wall pieces and paintings take on an environmental scale, insofar as they are no longer presented as autonomous works, but now as part of a spatial composition that establishes a series of relationships of force, intensity or vibration between each piece.

This essential difference in the concept behind the display of the works, which recalls the way his earliest three-dimensional experiments occupied the studio space in the image described at the beginning of this text, therefore retrieves an entire field of possibilities that, in a way, was already latent since then. In so doing he incorporates certain central elements developed throughout his work, such as the incisions that first emerge in the lead sculptures of the late 1990s, present not only in the volumes but in the horizontal cuts that emerge from the contrast between two distinct color fields in some of his paintings. But above all, by establishing relations between certain qualities specific to each piece in space, he creates different rhythms that we only grasp when we experience the whole. No longer fated to destruction, like the sculptures captured in the photograph from the 1980s, but possibly redeeming the potency of simultaneously distinct movements in a single environment contained in that image, the works finally dance.



In the last decade, Paulo Monteiro has created three-dimensional works out of less than noble materials sold at hardware stores and stationers. He has used pieces of rope, wood stumps, snippets of paper and fabric, adhesive tape, cardboard, nails, mortar, aluminum strips; fragments that had not been exploited by industry or consumption; cheap products that might elsewhere be considered waste, leftovers, debris.

All that junk has always been present in Monteiro's work. If not as material, then as subject matter. In his Gustonian paintings of the 1980s he had already introduced trinkets strewn here and there. Recently, the artist made a series of watercolors in which the figures of shovels, keys, hills, and rocks coexisted with formless stains. Indeed, everything in them seemed more or less formless - a key could become a stain and a shovel a rock.

Currently, the artist works with literal objects and relates them to one another. Next, he plots a way according to which they may function in space whether on walls or on the floor. It is the manner in which these fragments relate to one another and with space that bestows form upon these sculptures.

In 1986, Monteiro used less orthodox products in his work for the first time. He leaned wood beams corner shelves, metallic structures, and stones against one another. He yoked pipes to iron rods. With them, he created structures based on the weight that one object exerted upon the other, on the physical tension between two distinct parts. The only record of this work that has not been lost in the photographs taken by Chico Aragão. Through them, we perceive a formal composition that is slightly different from later works. In the 1980s, in spite of the brittle aspect of the elements used, this leads us to perceive them as fragments of some sort of object, the final arrangement constructing organic links between one another. The appearance that remained was that of a whole structure. In the photograph, we can see that the wood easels are stable, balanced as if they had found an appropriate arrangement. In works from that period, the material of the sculptures conciliated itself with the form. There is a complete adhesion of the parts to the composition. That is why it is possible to differentiate them from the residues and dirt of the dissolute appearance we

see on the studio floor.

Paulo Monteiro's most recent work is different. The artist uses elements similar to the ones he used previously, and very often repeats combinations that already existed in the 1980s; today, however, we see a looser combination, as if form did not bind the elements into a robust unit. The sculptures possess a more amorphous look. The elements do not become part of something bigger; they continue on as loose fragments, cast aside. Had they been photographed in that essay, they would more closely resemble debris than the works of yesteryear. When we cease to notice the subtle relationships that the artist imprinted on these works, the objects continue to resemble simple sticks of wood and bundles of rope. There is something unfinished, dispersed about these works. Even the manner of mounting exhibitions strengthens this detached aspect. The pieces lean against the wall, the floor, in slight misalignment, off kilter, looking for a place to stay. It is as if some transformation had begun in those materials, but nothing ever came to conclusion or conquered a definitive form. Rather than the final form conciliating one object with another, in a new image, it reinforced the tense relationship between one part and the other. No matter how similar the parts of sculpture may be, they do not make up a well-finished unit.

For example, in sculpture from 2011, on display at his solo show 'Viagem ao miolo do meio' [Journey to the Middle Core] (2011), the artist joins two loose strands of rope. Contact between them is superficial. One is under [below], the other above [on top?]. At some point, they touch slightly. The upper part sprawls lazily over the lower part, which, despite its limited rigidity, comports itself like an Achilles and raises the lower extremity with its highest tip. The parts fold in over one another. Together, the extremities may form a body... They are reliefs that are projected in our direction or retreat towards the wall (or another surface upon which the objects are hung). With greater energy, the ropes reveal themselves as if in a ballet in which the slender mass gains unique identifiable body. All this renders the objects more interesting. The artist draws from them the appearance of indolent lines, and makes them volumes. Through the curvature that connects one line to the other, the artist seems to suggest the design of a movement.

But nothing is permanent. The material cannot account for the purposes allegedly ascribed to it. The rope is limp, fragile. The weight of one makes the other give way. The surface of one part does not fuse completely with that of the other. They are bodies seemingly superimposed by chance. No more definitive or whole relationship appears to impose itself upon the parts. They continue to be separate volumes that seem to seek a movement of sorts. Because they are cotton ropes, the reliefs appear softened, lacking a structure to give them rigidity.

All attempts by one rope to suspend the other prove inglorious. Gravity is stronger and the bundles settle naturally upon one another, as if relaxing their muscles to achieve repose. Extremities that were once taut, pointing forward, fall, sluggardly. The sculpture seems to lose the form that was suggested in the contact between one rope and the other. Albeit by fits and starts, something of the original drawing is preserved. The weight withdraws any semblance of a determined line, of the stiff volume of the cotton ropes.

A good deal of Monteiro's work gives in to weight. Gravitational force is an important component of his aesthetic. Even when he uses light, fragile materials, as in *Irmãos 2* [Brothers 2], 2014, gravity acts. It renders the drawing of the felt strips more irregular, undulated and distorted. This is even more evident in the welded sculptures. The torsion that the artist imprints upon the material in "Dois passos trabalho" [Two Steps Work], 2012, seems to leave the volume a hair's breadth from rupture. The gesture that attempts to bestow order unto that lumpy block - nearly utterly solitary. The effort of imposing rigorous form upon the

materials, by means of a precise intervention, renders the appearance of the work even more fragile and breakable, even when it is cast from the most rigid materials. The volume is deformed in the attempt to singularize the mass of clay.

Perhaps the motion suggested by these welded sculptures of 2012 bears some resemblance to a stumbling gymnast or ballerina; or to people who fall over in attempting to perform a highly demanding physical and technical requirement. The glorious feat is converted to misfortune. Although greater, the accident is added to the disappointments that we collect in our everyday lives. Even if the dancer performs his spin correctly, the joy caused by its accomplishment is momentary. Life moves on, ready for stumbling a new.

Monteiro's work is made of such small misfortunes these small accidents. Not by chance do we identify with such weird pieces. The sculptures are graceful slightly dramatic and even amusing because they retain the marks of one who tried but didn't quite make it. Such a common sense of failure. The movement they appear to represent is that of one who falls, picks himself up and moves ahead, only to fall better, later, in the next city block. There is no room in the work for absolute redemption; nor for infinite tragedy. Even the gestures, the movements suggested by the piece, as in the sculpture of Degas, seem momentary, temporary. It is a hit that lasts for a very short while before it comes undone.

This does not occur only in works with irregular surfaces. In the cylindrical epoxy and metal pieces, the roll is twisted and folded. The parts are modified when one piece touches another. Distant from an alleged previous unity of a symmetrical tube, the tip may become a leg, a protuberance or sign of movement. Here, they are broken parts of a body that wants to reinvent itself. And the contact that takes place between them does not restore the original mass. They are also temporary contacts. One part touches the other, sometimes merely approaching it, sometimes compressing it, in the attempt at a new fusion. But the pieces do not wed. They meet, they do what they have to do, but one piece is different from the other. Yet all efforts notwithstanding, the structure will appear incomplete, unconcluded, unfinished. Doubt remains as to whether a body is being formed or losing form. It is this area between one thing and another; this undefined appearance that interests the artist.

For a long while now, Paulo Monteiro has been creating works that seem unfinished. It is not a question of the draft aspect, of a project for some work to come. None of that. He creates broken volumes, gestures and movements that seem unfinished. Their appearance is raw and unpolished, lacking the stabilizing aspect of a recognizable figure or geometric form. All is seemingly at stake. An image that did not attain its ideal, stuck in a stage between matter and form. Or even a representation of a body part, a partial, fragmented view.

In his drawings, the lines reveal silhouettes that are not presented in their entirety. They appear to be figures that have their backs to us and are depicted from very close up. The lines are drawn on the margins of the paper and do not appear to contour a figure that differentiates itself from a background. They are loose lines. In attempting to understand what happens during the interval between one and the other, images may be noted that occupies nearly the full extension of the surface. Insinuated creations, which, because they are not fully revealed, we do not what they are. We are able to see parts of the form, but never the whole. It could be the fragment of a figure or a piece of some object. The lumpy look of some of his paintings and sculptures generally compounds this impression of incompleteness and the tradition of art history, as derived from Aristotelian thought, the matter is unstable, more uncontrollable than form. Paulo Monteiro's volumes imitate the consistency and format of an amorphous material, a substance that is neither liquid nor pasty but nor does it quite possess the rigidity of solids. Although his sculptures are cast in metal, we see something soft, lumpy, in a transitional state, which does not yet seem to have achieved its

final consistency. The material seems not to comply perfectly with the purpose of the form. The sculpture may be coming apart or putting itself together. But something there seems uncompleted.

There is a history of the unfinished in the visual arts. For example, we may remember the non-finito of Michelangelo's sculptures or, still, some seventeenth century artists who suggested figures with rapid inconclusive brushstrokes. The unfinished may have several meanings. In none of the aforementioned cases does it mean badly finished. Oftentimes it designates a relationship between form and material. A composition a sculpture, for example, that leaves parts of raw material exposed next to the polished form. It can also be an unconventional way of suggesting a figure of sorts, with quickly painted lines or brushstrokes.

In his sculptures, Monteiro seems to depict a process that was never concluded and will never be concluded. Critics expressed the uneasiness that met his work quite nicely. Taísa Palhares, for example, declared that Paulo Monteiro's works are forms that seem to want to define and annihilate themselves in equal measure", And the question asked by Rodrigo Naves reveals the spirit of the thing: "In the end, do Paulo Monteiro's sculptures grow or wither away?" The work's appearance seems to issue from that aesthetic in which form and matter reveal themselves to be irreconcilable terms. As noted by Taísa Palhares, the work fulfills itself between the effort to define the form and the inevitability of its dissolution.

Paulo Monteiro is not an artist of heroic tones or romantic ecstasies. He seeks to coordinate relationships between lumpy materials and simple, direct, unadorned, undisguised solutions devoid of pomp. Although it deals with disagreements, with the dissolution of things, his work is not tragic. When he deals with those aspects in which things do not turn out as expected, the work may take on a comic or melancholy tone, as is common with everyday disappointment. This way, it looks like the account of a routine event.

In analyzing his work, we identify what the artist did and in what way the material, the surface or color reacted. They are gestural interventions that yearn to suggest some surface motion or volume. The artist wants these parts that seemed inert to prove themselves active. As a matter of fact, Monteiro prizes the distinction made by Philip Guston his greatest artistic influence between inert and active (or living) materials. In 1966 while explaining studio work during a lecture at Boston University, the Canadian artist said:

I am not interested in making a picture. Then what the hell I am interested in? I must be interested in that process that I am talking about. I don't keep the studio very tidy. You have on the floor like cow dung in the field and I look down at this stuff on the floor and it's just a lot of inert matter, inert paint. Then what is it? I look back on the canvas, and it's not inert, it's active, moving and living. Why I need this kind of miracle, I don't know it, but I need it. My conviction is that this is the act of creation to me. That's how I have it.

In a recent interview, Paulo Monteiro recalls this passage from Guston, and remarks that in his work he, too, proposes to transform the "dead object" into a "living object". In his case, the material is not only inert, but it is also decrepit; the chance of showing itself alive is provoking some action or some gesture. The will to be something more than a rag. It is the effort to make some gesture to animate matter. The aspect of his works comes from that friction. In that sense, Monteiro is an artist of action. He makes gestures of displacement, of cuts, attempting to ascribe some activity to the material.

I recall the first time I saw Paulo Monteiro's work. I was a young man and quite unfamiliar with the visual arts even so I was impressed by the misshapen aspect of his sculptures. I had

the impression that they were losing volume, disintegrating. As if what was being exhibited were what was left of what had once been a work. I was clearly wrong. The work is more complicated than that. Actually, it tackles a relationship to form that is hard to define. In the sculptures, for example, the mound of clay upon which the artist molds his intervention over no longer possesses the same appearance of raw material, nor is it that different from a block of clay. Even when cast in lead, the work's final appearance is that of something that has not taken on a final form, a finished form, but it is also no longer the inert material it used to be. It is not a lizard, not a butterfly, not a chrysalis.

Since 2012, this indeterminacy of the work has taken on a greater complexity. Monteiro has made paintings in which everything disagrees. It is no longer a question of the tense relationship between form and matter, but of a particular way of distributing colors in the space of the canvas.

In a series of simple paintings, for example, one plane is covered by a thick layer of paint that takes up almost the entire surface of the canvas. We might suppose that specific color—let us take brown by way of illustration—would be the color of the pictorial plane. It would be the first layer of paint to tinge the fabric. It would cover its full extent. Which could lead us to suppose that there might be nothing behind that layer. What should have happened in the painting would take place in the relationship between brushstrokes of that color.

That would make the canvas a monochromatic work which it is not. Just below the upper and lower reaches of the canvas, the chromatic homogeneity is interrupted by small marks. Their color is different from the color that dominates the plane. Its format more or less recalls the form of a fingertip. The marks are not superimposed upon the plane, they are grooves in it, revealing another color plane underneath the thick layer of paint on top. The color that is revealed by the cavities indicates that something is happening behind the brown. Those furrows eventually function as markers in Monteiro's painting. They are used to divide, above and below, the extension of the canvas. This is why they appear near edges. Because their arrangement is not geometric following the artist's judgment—the grooves are as irregular as the distance between them. Most of the time they come in pairs. Therefore, if we have one on top, we have one below; with two above, two follow below them, successively. There are works with varying quantities of furrows above and below; yet, in all the works, the lower marks never occupy the same space within the extension of the picture than its corresponding part above. They are essentially asymmetrical, creating the discrepancy between the upper and lower portions of each canvas.

The artist arranges thick horizontal lines of paint upon the marks on the edges of the frame. The slender mass does not occupy the full extent of the frame. It appears in the interval between one mark and another, or in the corners; between the marks and extremities of the frame. Here, too, there is asymmetry. Whereas the thin top strip is divided and runs along the borders, between a mark and the corner of the canvas, on the bottom part, the horizontal line of thick paint is applied to the center between one mark and another.

The first effect is that the layer of color that dominates the painting can no longer be mistaken for the homogenous plane of a monochromatic canvas. Another color pulsates behind it, suggesting a certain interiority to which we have no access. Henceforth, the artist attempts to break any possibility that we might see symmetry or regularity in these canvases.

For example, on a 2012 canvas, it may be supposed that the pink line that travels the edges of the lower part of the red painting, from the edges to the center, was interrupted and relocated between two orangeish marks in the upper part. Yet they do not complete one

another. In fact, they clash. Like one of Willys de Castro's Active Objects, reconstructing the homogeneity, the stability of those paintings, and undoing their displacements is not possible. The suggestion of continuity exists due to the resemblance between the elements that occupy the upper part and the lower part of the canvas. Nevertheless, the suggestion is deceitful. Any attempt to reconstruct a harmonic, symmetrical unity of the paintings, any attempt at understanding what happened to those elements meets with failure.

In another painting (of 2012), the plane is covered by two slightly different layers of blue. And, as in other works, one layer comes over another. One is a darker blue the other a blue that lightens with watery brushstrokes in soft pink. Upon them, we see simple, elliptical forms in pink, black and gray. One of those small forms is pink and salient upon the canvas; the others are concave, colors that appear in the cavities of other layers of paint.

Initially, we understand the colors' order of juxtaposition. A pinkish-blue seems to have been applied first and to have received other layers on top of it. A small but thick pink form was painted, leaning against the lower part of another, darker and thicker blue that seems to be the last layer of paint to have been painted. Obviously, the layers behind suggest a background; the foregrounded ones function as figures amid these surrounding.

Yet when we look at the colors inside the grooves, we realize things are not quite what they seem. Nothing unexpected happens behind the dark blue layer. The pinkish blue, painted first, appears underneath it. Everything changes when we notice what is behind the cavity opened in the pinkish blue. The dark blue that was covered that layer of paint appears underneath the bottom one. The order of the layers is inverted. What was posterior becomes anterior, what was anterior becomes posterior.

Paulo Monteiro is another moment. There are very few people as knowledgeable as him on the subject of modern Brazilian art, yet I believe the problems of his work do not respond directly to this history. They are professional doubts that emerge intuitively as part of studio work. Even so, that undefined space reappears as a problem and, because of its potency, seems to say a great deal to us about our times.

In Monteiro's painting, unlike Guignard's, for example, forms are directly and perceptibly different from one another. Yet the artist ascribes mobility between them, withdrawing the sense of hierarchy from these pieces. Positions are no longer guaranteed. His game is to get these very self-evident forms to perform inversions of meaning and of the form of disorienting us every time we relate one element to another.

The social life of contemporary capitalism appears to have inversions similar to these paintings. In mass democracies, for instance, the citizen's power of decision collides with the decision-making structures of global capitalism that make a very obedient monster of Leviathan. Relations, social groups, political positions all seem indeterminate and shifting in the present. Not by chance, the previously identified positions of rebellion, formerly identified with the radical transformation of society, today, very often, provide support for the most conservative positions.

Paulo Monteiro does not treat these problems directly in the work. His attention is focused on matters of another order. What he deals with is art. For this very reason, and for their power, his superposition of forms speaks more loudly of our stalemates than any social discourse of art. Beyond enunciating an event, he compels us to deal with many of our contradictions.



*Between the idea And the reality [...]
Falls the shadow*

- T.S Eliot

It if were up to Euclidean geometry, the world would be settled, accounted for, predictable, irrefutable. In Euclid's scheme, formulated in his treatise Elements, space is geometric, symmetrical and unchanging; the point, that which has no parts or magnitude of any kind; the line, that which has length and no width. But that is not how things work, how the world presents itself to us. As shown by Paulo Monteiro, the world is founded on ambiguities. It is enough to touch things, handle them, and draw them towards you or, what amounts to the same, leave your marks on them, for the enigma to emerge on the surface of the most familiar objects, making them dissociate themselves. Where does this enigma originate, from the material that we handle, or from our own enigma that gradually impregnates it? Or is the enigma an intersection between these two distinct territories? Be that as it may, this is an insight that applies to everything, a landscape being produced by history, the fragment of a brick, a piece of string.

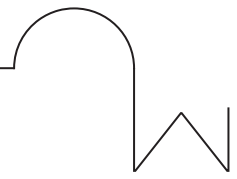
Let us take, as a starting point, the way the line has been treated by the artist, not only now, in this concise set of drawings, paintings and sculptures currently being presented, but during two decades of work. Viewed in isolation, before and now, the line, in Paulo Monteiro, imposes itself by force on fabric or paper. It carries the borrowed weight of paint and graphite, gradually deposited by the pressure of the hand that wields the brush or pencil; the line begins to conquer, with determination, the resistance that both offer, moving slowly, revealing clearly the effort spent by the calculation and forethought required for them to come through.

In the case of painting, the brush, dipped in dense pictorial material, is a sensitive extension, a portable seismograph of the decisions taken along the path fashioned on the extended plane. A trickle of black on the white of the canvas, or of color on a colored field. The line sets off, decisively, registering bumps and imprecisions throughout the process, especially since the artist enjoys pushing it to the edges of the quadrangular field, confronting it with the confidence, the arrogance of straight borders, with the cutting edge, a purely geometric invention that separates the world from the territory in which action takes place. Alongside this marker filled with certainty, the handmade line breathes, inflates and, ironically, like an animal exploring a territory in order to mark it, begins to claim large portions, either from the surface or by advancing subterraneously. Fissures are opened, trails gently circular and winding, whose origins cannot be pinpointed but seem to lie somewhere outside. In fact, the action of this line, the result of a calculation, and of the artist's hand with the materials, goes beyond what one can see in the canvases, beginning before and outside.

Enlarged, borderless, the line takes a leading role in the work of Paulo Monteiro, who plays with it, demonstrating that, depending on the given treatment, it can become flat or simply rest on the edge. This reversibility of terms, of elements, is confirmed, and becomes even more complex, when one realizes that parts of the colored fields trickle in linear filaments, extending into other lines that evolve in favor or against gravity, a clear indication of their autonomy, and proof that the internal logic of painting can work against the laws of the world that, after all, are as invented by man as the laws of art.

If, until now, the argument has been for a lack of definition between one element and the other, line and plane, what can one say about the semantic ambiguity that happens when the paintings suggest objects, landscapes, situations? Is that a plane obtained by using a dark and rough shade of red or is it a coarse representation of a hill? Or both? And what about the shovel wedged in the same plane? A drawing that carries the power of pictorial matter, the simple result of an emphatic and exact gesture, while being also a prosaic object? The core of the sign carries, ingrained, the presence of something that is not there, since the object is not to be confused with its representation. How is this possible?

It is possible, Paul Monteiro argues through his work, because the world reinvents itself in direct proportion to its incessant manipulation, by the curious and eager exercise of the hands, opening up the core of things, attacking the nerves directly, expanding them into infinite possibilities. The gesture is the shadow of which Eliot speaks, the gesture as the source of everything, and the continuous task of crushing the material, cutting it, slicing it, loosening it, fracturing it, stretching it, is a strategy to agitate things and ways of being, awakening them from their inertia. Hence the eloquence obtained from small pieces of different materials, the sculptures made of bronze, aluminum, tin, lead, cotton, etc. What matters here, one stresses, is the presence of the hand stretching the ball of clay, turning it with the palm of the hand, crushing it with the fingertips, until it becomes a snippet, a worm, a snake, something close to, but not so much, a being. Something that, curved at the edges, curled, seems to stir, awakens from its lethargy, and faces, with a trace of curi-



-osity, the world around it. The line, wrote Henry Van de Velde, contains the power and energy of the person who drew it. Thus a simple yarn, derived from a thread extracted from a cotton seed, processed and twisted with other yarns into a resilient fiber, contains so much condensed energy; the same can be said of the block that, sliced, finds itself two blocks, and the point that, as we saw above, is that which has no parts, expanded and ruptured, affixes itself to the wall in order to display its expansive condition, both capable of advancing outward, radiating into the environment, or inward, toward its intimacy, its infinite and unfathomable intimacy.



Before anything else, Paulo Monteiro's recent gouaches surprise us with the intensity of their colors. Combinations like pink and orange, light blue, lemon yellow and wine red vibrate at nervous junctures and, not satisfied with that, Monteiro occasionally uses fluorescent paint to obtain even more intense vibrations, achieving effects so acid that they sometimes appear lysergic.

Then, upon closer examination, we see that beyond – and before – their chromatic relationships these apparently unpretentious gouaches operate in an extremely singular manner! Very similar to what we find in the most recent pencil drawings, woodcuts and, mainly, his digital drawings. A line starts somewhere, follows a certain path – sometimes turning back and passing itself in the opposite direction – and is interrupted for reasons, and at places, that we don't quite understand, but then another one comes along (or begins) and, skirting the first, advances along the paper surface, as if persevering in its conquest of the plane.

And for those who know his work well, these gouaches also surprise because of their discreet, non-gestural marks, since Monteiro has always been an artist of action. In his sculpture, for example, the masses of clay are formed (or deformed) by a "handful," even though they remain basically amorphous, because what matters is, precisely, to reveal the transformative power of action over matter. The same thing happens to the sheet of paper that receives the graphite marks and becomes a figure (a body). The origin of the blank sheet or the amorphous mass of clay, all remains visible, with matter and action becoming one and the same.

Artistic creation, performed like this, looks simple and mechanical, like twisting a door-knob and opening a door, or hammering a nail in the wall (with one or two blows, at most), or unpeeling an orange. To a significant extent, the esthetic pleasure derived from Monteiro's works derives from the immediate and total perception of the transformation made visible by the operation. Drawings and sculptures are better suited to this creative principle because color, as an element, can be dispersive, superfluous, distracting our focus from what is essential.

But, despite all that, while developing and modifying his sculptures, wall reliefs and pencil drawings, Paulo Monteiro never stopped making paintings and, principally, gouaches, hundreds of them, an absurd quantity. And in both the gouaches and canvases that he has made since the 1990s (when the exacerbated materiality of the 1980s is abandoned), what we see, upfront, are quick, ample gestures, as in the pencil drawings, always attempting to resolve the work with a minimum of gestures, not from hurry, but from the desire to maintain a unity where there is no division into parts, one in which brushstrokes and support are like a single thing, as in his lead sculptures.

To make action clear – like he always has – and maintain this unity, Monteiro often resorted to a dominant background color (his preferred ones being grey, ultramarine, and earth), with black serving as the structuring and totalizing element, like the line of a drawing (even if, due to the width of the brush, it presented itself as an area). This generated certain difficulties because the graphic weight that black ultimately exerted on the paintings prevented their expansive and liquid nature from realizing itself completely; they needed de- structuring more than unity.

In 2005, Monteiro's painting developed into something new: he was able to free himself from the imperative of essential unity, allowing sections to insinuate themselves and become individuated on the picture plane (possibly from losing the fear of becoming compositional device, which they, in fact, are not) and, instead of maintaining the exacerbated gestures and striking contrasts that attempted to manifest the decisive shaping of a mass of clay or the stroke of pencil on paper, he began to dissolve his paint on surfaces where nothing much appeared to be happening to claim our attention.

And if these paintings were not striking in color (or in any way), subtle differences between tonalities of grey, beige, blue, pink and lilac began to establish a field of uncertain domain, without that dominant contrast that, to a certain extent, hindered their urgency. And those three preferred and functional colors were abandoned in favor of a greater range, with an infinity of options and alternatives. And, thus dissolved, to the point where we can sometimes see the grains of pigment coating on the surface (properties inherited from the gouaches on paper), these areas began to expand with a serenity that makes me see these paintings as existing in their basic, or universal, condition, that is, of pigment dissolved in turpentine and applied to canvas, nothing more.

Just as these works seemed to be pointing away from the drawings, it was precisely from the drawings and woodcuts that these gouaches emerged, acquiring, in an unforeseen development, a chromatic intensity unprecedented in the work of Paulo Monteiro. If the lines of the drawings always established a "this side" and a "that side," or an inside and an outside (reversible, of course), here, in addition, the lines become area and the areas become line, except that it is a rather wide line, just enough so that the color with which it is drawn – in fact, not drawn but, rather, filled, painted as if it were an area – can vibrate with the adjoining colors. They are like peninsulas, or isthmuses, that emerge from a territory or color and connect it to some other, or to none; while some are just lines that go from here to there, following apparently random paths.

Besides establishing territories and indicating directionless movements (because lines are also paths that have been travelled), this singular system promotes an exponential increase in the relationships between colors. If much of the attraction that colors exercise over an artist derives from establishing contacts between them and, thus, producing a current of visual electricity that fills us with pleasure, these gouaches, with lines that turn back and become involved with others, and then even more others (some have two, three, four, even five colors), with hollows separating areas and lines, must contain meters and meters



Paulo Monteiro
Selected Texts and Press

Paulo Monteiro's new gouaches, 2009
Text by Rodrigo Andrade for Monteiro's first monograph published
by Pinacoteca and Cosac Naify

of contact between colors, all vibrating differently, depending on whether they are areas or lines. In this manner, a lemon-yellow line crosses a light-blue area and penetrates our retina like a blade of color.

It seems to me that these little gouaches, so unpretentious at first sight, perform great esthetic feats. A very subtle sense of humor suggests awareness of their strangeness, of their almost grotesque nature, while their colors emerge like the easiest thing in the world, confirming the incredible ability that Paulo Monteiro has always had of getting his hands dirty with art, without hesitation or embarrassment, taking his discoveries and investigations to their ultimate consequences.



Routine has its challenges. Here, space is always the simple vertical rectangle of a sheet of paper, the perfect combination of time and space where a line tries to advance; each drawing is like a day in the time of the work. Few artists have found, in such an intense and systematic way, so consenting a unity between time and space. Always the same, equal and challenging. To confront, always, without choice but to move forward, even though there is no sure path or direction, nothing pre-established. Even success with one is useless for the next; this is not a cumulative process. It is like the destiny of a tiny Sisyphus, for whom the mountain is the daily rectangular sheet of white paper.

The line leaves the paper, not standing on ceremony, going where? And returns attracted by who knows what. A force pushes it out, while a kind of stubbornness in moving forward first stalls and then continues, a tortured back-and-forth that makes movement difficult, like a vehicle struggling on a muddy road. The line creates a faltering, crawling, irritated trajectory that aspires, at all cost, to be continuous and entire. Sometimes it succeeds, sometimes it doesn't. It is not the attempt that matters but the result, the countless and manifold results. Even when these are achieved, one finds no apparent reconciliation or satisfaction.

There is not a single straight line in these drawings. Might that be part of this enterprise, to avoid them altogether? An unswerving line that moves along a previously established direction goes against this work's every ambition. If the precision and decisiveness of a ruler cannot always be followed, line, here, remains no less determined and precise. It may appear abstract but is concrete, and bears the entire, and relentless, conflict with reality. Comings and goings, frustration and pleasure, rebellion and submission, right and wrong, all condensed in a single line. Nothing more, nothing less than the daily Paulo Monteiro line-character. Like him, if we were lines, we would also be like this. One line, a single movement, a single gesture. All want to impress a tonus upon the inert surface. A surface that is neither the plane of representation, nor an illusory space, but reality itself, if one can say so; a reality that is always the same white sheet of paper. The line doesn't design, it desires. But desires what? Nothing more than the temporal experience of existing in a specific rectangular white paper space. To risk everything for nothing. In

this manner, it is neither just a line nor a blank sheet but a specific drama: a line's daily vicissitudes. As in Mira Schendel's *Monotypes*, Paulo Monteiro has discovered a unique time of permanence on the sheet of paper, a time all his own and, like Schendel's, distinctive and inimitable. These voluble lines undergo varied and successive humors, their pace oscillating between decisive or erratic. Restless, urgent, reticent, although the last thing they want is to be spontaneous and gratuitous graffiti.

A notion currently exists that drawing frequently connotes confession, intimacy, annotation, but there is none of that here. This line, adventurous, provocative, goes out in search of an event, its movement projective, not introspective. The fact that it is a line shows the integral unity of the action, one that does not fragment or scatter but ventures forth, facing the world alone. That is why it is often not content with the available space. It does not give in to limits; it resists confinement and presses against external space. This unity is the same that, inversely, we find in the sculptures. There we find an almost explosive pressure of matter against the limits imposed by form.

In the sculpture, it is as if all the forces at play in the drawings reversed themselves, turning inward en masse, becoming solid and impeding the slightest movement. A compact mass that only ever allowed a single movement; a fracture, a dislocation, a fissure. It would be preposterous to speak of a minimalist Rodin, schizoid, deformed, but maintaining faith in the imperious strength of the mass, in the imposing presence of the block, even within the minute span of a few centimeters. And one could think that this diminutive scale, of pieces that fit in one's hand, was a requirement of the sculptures, themselves, to promote a tactile experience of their strength. Because to hold them is to feel a perfect correspondence between vision and touch; tactile weight and visual weight come together in the same unit.

Like a line, each sculpture is a singular thing, entire and complete, dense and compact. Lead and graphite, materials of a similar nature, malleable and rigid, are perfect vehicles for this work. In the drawings, the thick mark of graphite wants to be more than a scrawl, wants to be incisive, ultimately incised. An incision that, as in the woodcuts, lies not only on paper but against it. The drawing attacks the surface, strongly, without slipping, crawls over it, dissatisfied, a Giacometti-like dissatisfaction. The gesture is not simply directed at the sheet of paper, on the contrary, it intrudes upon it; it begins dissatisfied and finishes dissatisfied, undetermined. Hence the sometimes slow, sometimes quick movement, cross and tense because it carries a weight that neither dissolves nor comes to rest easily; a weight that the sculptures condense.

What is immediately appealing in these sculptures, besides the indolent drama of the mass, is the oily gloss of lead. The surface is alive and its stillness misleading, because restless – would it be strange to mention Rodin's surfaces? Always, in each, the block's possible unity is ostensibly severed by an arbitrary slit, as if cracked by a violent blow or fall. These sculptures, in fact, did more than abandon the base, they literally fell from it.

They are true non-objects. They have achieved the unprecedented quality of our not knowing what they are. If the drawings resemble remnants of drawings, the sculptures resemble remnants of sculptures, as if their only ambition was to be what could not be used, what was cast off. And, even so, they attract us with the discomfort they provoke. If they could make a sound, it would not be a whisper, but an insolent PLOFT – a sound that Fautrier would have appreciated. A shapeless sound, motionless and still, like them. How can something so shapeless be so solid, imposing and challenging, when it is little more than compact paste? The fact of having undergone a liquid state is still visible in these sculptural masses. They were cast and do not hide it, exhibiting, without shame,

an insolent shoddiness. If we found them in nature they would be lava; crude, hard, rough, impenetrable and untreatable like lava, similarly born of some convulsive material violence, containing the traumatic memory of misshapen liquefaction. Or we could find them in our daily routine if we paid attention to the mimicry of form that we deposit on a brush when we squeeze a tube of toothpaste; what the sculptures intend is this intermediate moment between being and not being.

Like the drawings, the sculptures also appear to veer away from each other, as if about to move in opposite directions, like the line that moves here and there. In these works, there is no time for color. Only the absolute black of a woodcut could bring the work to a halt. It is as if absolute black were a paralyzing drug, a narcotic that induces a moment of death in the drawing, a deep and lethargic slumber. The line, when mired in the black matter of ink, loses the restless mobility of the drawings and acquires a negative condition; the incisive line becomes an incision on wood, and the woodcut presents a less ambiguous space, less shaped by indecisions of line. The absolute contrast between ink and the white paper stages a scene, as it were, a single day seen from within, the inverse of the light that the line-being extracts from the blackness of the world.

Here, drawing, sculpture and woodcut present not only a diversity of techniques but the diverse moments of a challenging routine of labor.



Paulo Monteiro begins his career in the 1980s as part of a group of artists who practiced a return to gestural painting, one whose dense matter referred to the universe of art history as well as that of mass culture. His work, together with that of other painters, is immediately associated with neo-expressionism and transvanguarda, international artistic movements that marked the return of figurative painting while reinterpreting the tradition of modern painting and the person of the author as expressive subject.

In this first moment, Monteiro dedicated himself almost exclusively to painting. His pictures, however, were already characterized by a strong graphic component. A creator of comic strips, the world inhabited by his characters invaded the picture plane, where it lost its narrative content. In truth, his figures often resembled large colored blobs; they were beings seen from behind or only partially outlined, often represented by assembled fragments of bodies and objects.

A leg here, a cigarette there, a shoe, an arm, a chair, composing a large and indistinct mass. Unlike some of his national and international peers, Monteiro did not resort to pastiche or citation as a way to apply an “erudite” veneer to post-modern painting. If, on one hand, he shared the same violence of expression, the indeterminateness and the material potency of his canvases suggested, even if only intuitively, a sense of malaise. Latent tension between his vigorous self-expressive impulse and the disenchantment of those beings suggested a lingering and uncomfortable “interior nucleus” that could not be updated through figurative means, or by any external means.

Since then, Monteiro's work has evolved using the most diverse languages. In assembling such a multi-faceted body of work, one of the challenges of the exhibition “Paulo Monteiro – a selection, 1989/2008” has been the effort to understand, or at least outline, the thread that grants internal consistency to his poetics. Through a reasonably encompassing panorama of the last twenty years of his career, we are able to evaluate, for the first time, the role that it plays in the recent, but already consolidated history of contemporary Brazilian art.

One could say that it was during the 1990s that the artist conquered a singular place in this history, particularly with the lead sculptures shown in a special room during the 22nd São Paulo International Biennial (1994). In these pieces, Monteiro managed to combine the materiality of painting with the powerful and succinct gesture characteristic of his drawings, achieving a synthesis that appeared to, nally, articulate the nucleus of his poetics.

What is surprising, however, possibly because of limited access to his earlier work, is the discovery of how the more mature production retains the character of tension identified in the first canvases. In fact, what now becomes clear is Monteiro's ability to explore, without falling into a kind of virtuoso repetitiveness, a single problem during this entire period. It is true that it was able to take on many forms, but that only proves its persistent actuality.

On one hand, this might be a game between the ruminative attitude of his figures and their need for externalization. As observed by the artist Nuno Ramos, in an essay from the late 1990s about the large lead sculptures, there is always, in Monteiro's production, a mix of loneliness and will for the world, detachment and devotion. In a way, the ambiguous movement suggested by the pieces – as if their souls aspired to exteriority even while attempting to maintain some unspeakable or inexpressible element – was already present in the monumental figures that appeared in his paintings from the 1980s, in which the contained space of the canvas was pressured by occupation up to its margins, insinuating a repressed, but still potent, explosion.

At the end of the 1980s, the artist began to dedicate himself almost obsessively to drawing, as if seeking to rediscover the nature of his gesture. This self-restrictive discipline made him temporarily abandon the color, matter and dimension of painting in order to focus on action, on the inaugural moment of form. The result was an investigation that came from within, no longer deconstructing figures solely in terms of fragmentation but incessantly recapturing their recognizable aspect with dancing lines that impregnate the white surface of paper.

Seen as a group, these drawings give Monteiro's work a new profile. The line, now grown more reflexive, expresses the body's presence to the extent that it also materializes surplus energy. The borders do not establish limits for the figure; it emerges in a situation of latency, allowing continuous passage between exterior and interior within the graphic field. In addition, these forms suggest a kind of "life in movement": they could point to the promise of what is to come as much as the memory of what once was. In short, they establish a curious state of indefiniteness.

It is exactly this ambiguity, between forms that seem to seek, at the same time, self-definition and self-annihilation, self-expression and self-destruction, which we find in the lead sculptures and reliefs of the same period. A handful of gestures attempt to shape a material so pliable that it resists domination while the weight of the pieces contrasts with their malleable appearance. One has the impression that they are about to collapse on the floor. Two antagonistic forces are at play: one tries to give life to an unformed mass and make it vertical while another appears to pull it down and in, suggesting a self-absorbed denial of any well defined existence or absolute externalization.

This tension, which can also be understood as the encounter between the decision to use just a few structuring gestures and matter's own resistance to definition of form, be it lead, clay, paint or the white surface of paper, constitutes, indeed, the subject of Paulo Monteiro's work. Its actuality, what it manifests in terms of poetic potency, appears substantive-



Paulo Monteiro
Selected Texts and Press

Absorption and Will for the World, 2009
Text by Taisa Palhares for Monteiro's first monograph published by
Pinacoteca and Cosac Naify

ly in the new bronze sculpture, his largest to date, produced for the Estação Pinacoteca exhibition. Faced with this large work, we are again confronted with the strangeness and comedy of a being that appears to exert tremendous force to affirm its presence in the world and achieve, finally, its autonomy, while simultaneously sensing the imminent failure of this effort because of the constant threat posed by the weight of the mass that keeps it anchored to the ground.

The situation would even be funny if we didn't, each of us, recognize a little of ourselves in it.



In one of his most famous canvases, Philip Guston paints a figure seen from behind, wearing a helmet, scarf and coat, resting on a red horizontal plane, contrasting with the vastness of a clear horizon. Despite having turned his back on the world, lonesome like a dung heap on the plain, filled with the subjective loftiness and plenitude that the experience of Abstract Expressionism might ensure, this strange character was unable to prevent the attachment, to his flank, of the soles of six cleats or shoes, plus some undefined crosshatched beings. It is to this adhesive, gelatinous world, already full (a half painting/half comics swamp that trails us even when we try to escape it), that the nearly hilarious loneliness of Guston's characters is going to offset its mix of resignation and loftiness.

The ambiguous refusal of a world whose texture it cannot avoid portraying makes Guston's painting a musty, flesh-colored ground from which emerge unceasingly hybrid beings of paint and name. It is not just about recovering humorously the concreteness of things, the familiarity of our everyday life that the subjective exponentiation of the New York School would have thrown out. Work like Frank Stella's, in its pragmatic and methodical advance upon the world, might best, and with more potency, perform this task. In Guston, recovery and loss, alienation and introspection are synonymous. Isolating oneself means, at the same time, attracting to oneself the gummy slime of objects and

goods. Turning one's back means exposing the inevitable world (out of whose heterogeneous matter this back is, itself, made), the alienated but, in its own way, full world – that cannot, therefore, be born again, from within its savage heart, like a Pollock dripping was born.

Few things are as characteristic of Guston as his singular intuition about fullness and emptiness. There is, in all his work, starting with the abstract canvas of the fifties, a curious condensation, an entropic cohesion that, unlike the centrifugal force of almost all Abstract Expressionism, makes the picture fall within itself. The palette intensifies (going, for example, from pink to red) and the gestures seem to linger in an internal region of the picture, strongly differentiating the part from

the whole. Among the many solutions to the old figure/ground relationship problem, Guston proposes the intensity variable: the stain in the 1950s and 1960s, the character or figure in the 1970s, all become denser, more intense than the background, despite being made of the same matter. There is no root distinction between the character that isolates himself in his characteristic dunghill and the emptiness that surrounds him; it seems merely less diluted than that indefinite horizon. The same matter, the same thick paint, circulates both here and there: some crosshatches, à la Robert Crumb, are enough for it to earn name and familiarity. With this, Guston can offer, speaking for his whole generation, a lofty response to Pop: if, on one hand, the world is irremediably full of shoes and beetles, of clocks and lamps and K.K.K. hoods, these are, however, different stages of condensation of the same pictorial material, a kind of cultural lava that precedes the goods themselves. This is where much of the loftiness of Guston's beings comes from, sometimes their backs turned, sometimes just a single, enormous eye, in profile. If, in their resignation and detachment (maybe that is why they never face forward), they accept the adhesiveness of things and allow shoes to be stuck to their backs, it is because they maintain a more deformed and ancient matter of which these same things are made, these laces and soles.

Paulo Monteiro's sculptures seemed to have fully achieved what they had set out to do since his first attempts, dating from 1991: this is one of the best bodies of work seen in Brazilian art of recent years, and possibly the densest (density being its stylistic differential) of our generation. Having reached the maturity that the graphite-on-paper drawings had already achieved in 1991, they restore, for our time, that determined and conclusive poetics, except made from the resistance of things, that Amílcar de Castro inaugurated among us in the 1950s. It is perhaps worth reflecting a little about these two sets of works (the sculptures and graphite-on-paper drawings) with which, little by little, but one step after the other, and with surprisingly methodical linearity, Paulo Monteiro has been developing his practice.

Before going any further, Guston: here, too, there is distance and adhesion, loneliness and desire for the world. The same resigned loftiness of Guston's figures is found in Paul Monteiro's lead cylinders. The excessive weight of graphite on paper and lead on the ground suggest an exponential cohesion and determination, a self-centered and self-referential gravity, a dubious narcissism, more matter (lead, graphite) than form, reminiscent of Guston. The result is a poetics of expression in which, paradoxically, doubt and hesitation have no place. Impenetrable in their density (like an exceptionally heavy ship horn), these sculptures always seem to have their backs to us, like the above-mentioned Guston character, self-satisfied in their monotony and autism. They whisper among themselves, substituting their own internal tension, derived from subtle cracks and small burrs, for the externalized spatial relations characteristic of almost all post-Minimal art.

Much of this is based, both in the sculpture and in the drawings, on an originating format that conserves itself in the end. Few draftsmen have understood as well as Paulo Monteiro the four external lines of the sheet. It is they who order all the other lines, that always begin to seem, by contrast, crooked. With this, the freedom of the mark, the childish enjoyment of the scribble (made exponential by awareness of its autonomy), consolidated by Miró, gains this format-restricting counterpoint.

The compression of the four borders of the sheet is already presupposed in the very flow of lines upon it, which appear simultaneously lyrical, in the sense of dreamy, and constructive, in the sense of ordering.

This same tension between line and paper field is perhaps the hallmark of a body of work that served as a reference to Paulo Monteiro, that of Mira Schendel. There, also (especially in the monotypes on Japanese paper from the sixties), much of the originality comes from this presentification of the field, that appears as self-sufficient, fully complete before any activity takes place. The lines of the drawing are, thus, absorbed by the excessive porosity of the paper, as if they wanted not to overlie it but, rather, ingrain it without disturbing. Schendel's trace populates the drawing field with small asymmetrical beings, nearly transparent passengers, like someone seeking to go with the flow with life without over-determining it. The field, here, serves to attenuate and restrict the subject's action, which acquires reflexivity and ethical definition from this withdrawal.

This same play between the lyrical expansion of the lines and the restriction of the paper field acquires, in Paulo Monteiro's drawings, a reversed, frankly sculptural accent. Unlike with Schendel, here we are back to the forceful, foundational gesture: the field is such a powerful unity that it must be cut with a knife, its lines sliced, anticipating the lead of the sculptures – if the hand that drew, in Schendel, weighed only a few grams, Monteiro's weighs tens of kilograms. These lines are, furthermore, always eccentric, skirting the paper, almost never crossing each other. They seek to relativize this entirety by crafting spaces and bodies from it, sometimes towards its exterior, but never in internal isolation. This interior must be attacked from the edges, never from the middle; it must be surprised in its border, in its contiguity with the world. The edges of the sculptures, like listening ears, are already a given. The drawing tries to open the field, excavate it, relativize its gravitational force – the lines appear strong and heavy because they fight against it. In truth, two moments contrast here: in Schendel's case, the intensely project-driven time in which she lived (the post-war period) aroused her doubts and intuition about measure and lightness, about prudent delicacy. In Paulo Monteiro's case, the failure and dissipation of this same project, which closed the field of the possible, requires that it be knifed open again.

In the case of the lead sculptures, the lump from which they originate performs a function similar to the paper field in the drawings. The fact that both start from a volume tensioned by the possibility of being reconstituted at the end, besides the happy reminiscence of the neo-concrete tradition, accounts for much of the singularity of these works. A vague cylinder or a rounded cobblestone will undergo a few actions, determined and sufficient. Up to the works exhibited at the 1994 Bienal Internacional of São Paulo, these actions were the result of a few simple gestures, made with the finger (a furrow) or palm (a pushing down to the base of an edge of the initial mass) on the clay, later cast in lead. With the progressive increase in the size of the initial lumps, these actions began to encounter a level of weight that hindered the ability to control these gestures. Thus, in recent work, a lump's severed edge will slide by itself, from its own weight. With this, the movement of the piece, which gives the lump its otherness, is produced by the natural, gravitational settling of the severed masses, and no longer (as in the sculptures of the 1994

Bienal) by the action of a handful of formalizing gestures. With this, the lumps have become simpler, even more remote and withdrawn, losing expressiveness. The pieces now shift in order to rest a little further, leave their axis in order to find it soon after, awaken only to fall asleep again, moving towards what they always were and shall be: shifty stones or paralyzed animals.

Surely, it is no longer from an issue of constructive economics, of optimistic rationalization of productive efforts, that these pieces maintain such a pronounced look of containment – they are, in their own way, contemporary, and know how to distance themselves from the formal fluency of modernism. But, on the other hand, they do not harbor any root distrust for the possibilities of Form. I believe that their apparent immobility (but how they dance, when we circle around them!), their black hole density that transforms formal operations into matter, their camouflage of promised lightness that changes into demonstrated weight, all come across, rather, as discursive astuteness: faced with the loud, intolerable volume of the outside world, better to move grudgingly, so as to avoid further confusion. Better, in a sense, to take it as unchanging, constant, full, without ever conceding more than an edge, a barb, a slit. Best to maintain cohesion within its own lead and weight.

Maybe the astute subject suggested by these pieces, centered in his own coarse and anonymous feature (all lumps look alike), yet still unique and irreplaceable, is more powerful than he appears, and within each of Walt Disney's seven dwarfs lives a prophet by Aleijadinho. Abandoned in the flux of banal life, without the broad horizon of a project, he withdraws into his own density, distrustful, turning – like Guston's character – his back to the world, despite being hopelessly in it.

Hard not to see in the work of these two artists a tribute to anonymous man, massified in Guston, and simply common, provincial perhaps, in Paulo Monteiro. Here there are no grand gestures, like Pollock's power to transform life from within, none of the infinitely reflective and absorptive subjectivity of a Rothko – and nothing of the blood-colored pampas of Iberê Camargo. The game appears already played and the world, in large part, shows definitive or excessively long contours. However, far from the near-cynical acidity of Pop and the root pessimism of Giacometti or Beckett, where the exiled subject finds his thin and true mirror, these works are more modest in purpose and somehow optimistic in their prosaic wisdom. It may not be wrong to think about the films of Frank Capra, about the forgotten hero of small, impossible-to-compute gestures, like James Stewart's character in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

After the wingless angel creates a nefarious alternative world to show him the hell which life in general (not just his own) would be without the small kindnesses performed during his existence, James Stewart recognizes that he is back when, climbing the stairs of his house, he accidentally yanks an ornament off the handrail. He kisses this loosened and exasperating sphere, one that every day he had vowed to fix, now converted into a symbol of his return and triumph. It is of this strange elation that works such as Guston's and Paulo Monteiro's speak of. In an era when meaning has clouded (even in its most catastrophic predictions), it remains, seemingly, for the Pollockian hero to return home and follow his manias, becoming singular through them. After all, who knows if that manner of frowning, that late afternoon sadness, that grayish drudgery of small decisions, may one day end up providing enough material for a wonderful life?



After all, do Paulo Monteiro's sculptures grow or do they waste away? To be sure, their movement reveals a kind of expansion, as if some internal nucleus were commanding an uncontrolled and unpredictable swelling. But as soon as thing rises up, sticks its head out in a rather awkward manner, it seems to stagger and lose contact with the force behind it. It then hesitates, as the lead it is made of grows even heavier, and threatens to tumble, making paste of that which had been form. At times these two movements occur simultaneously. The pieces drag themselves along as someone who walks with great difficulty, as if the material of which they were made constituted more an obstacle than necessary condition for their existence. In Paulo Monteiro's work, that old couple form and material engage in an endless quarrel.

In one way or another, this play of forces has always been present in the history of sculpture. A laborious spirituality would leave its mark on metal or stone, with these materials showing greater or lesser complacency, acting form within or on the outside of these objects. Sculpture once represent the revelation of a complete ideal, where spirit and matter coincided, a breath of divine air, the light that sublimated the rudness of stone, or the organic force which gave life and meaning to inert objects. Now it seems to possess nothing more than a rubber soul. Its capacity to give form to a resistant matter

here becomes mixed up with the docility of the element that is to be shaped. That which suspended the opacity of a brutish being, furnishing it with some meaning, becomes a property of that very being. Hence, it no longer knows which way to turn.

The rather disjointed, limbless appearance of these works derives from this. Nothing proves able to stop this material which flows so readily and lazily. The marked gestures that seek to ordain this mass of clay – later cast in lead – are something pathetic. They retain the highly ethical character of great decisions. Yet they act upon an apathetic volume, which is indifferent to the importance of the choices made. Then splat! A structure emerges from this movement. There is no doubt as to that. But it serves mainly to highlight the instability of the whole – its tendency to return to its original shapelessness – rather than actually conferring order upon it.

In any case, the artist is the odd man out in these works. There remains really no room for him, of for the practice that always had been characteristically his. The clumsy activity that he carries out is not revealing of his ineptness or lack of talent, rather it shows the near impossibility of spiritualizing matter, of giving it meaning. He must feel around and knead the clay in a somewhat random fashion, until he obtains an acceptable look and body. Even Giacometti sought form. Though form may have gotten away from him and though his innumerable attempts may have led to a growing corrosion of his material, this does not prove form's non-existence but rather the difficulty in presenting it as an accomplished fact. Giacometti's greatest deed was to derive meaning from failure.

Paulo Monteiro, on the other hand, does not even know what he let get away. All he knows is that he must make this spineless mass stand up, he must try to give a backbone to an indolent world, one which is tired of being a support for presumptuous shapes. His works definitely look like sculptures. At times when we catch them by surprise, they will exhibit volume, movement and even direction. But they do so much as an animal stretches himself, only to go back with even greater pleasure to his peaceful rest.

This rather indolent character of his sculptures draw his work close to Oldenburg's and Philip Guston's. In both of these artists, a gelatinous consistency pokes fun at the aseptic elegance of objects and persons, turning them inside out, introducing morbidity and decomposition to technological fine finishing and to the polished manners of the civilized. But both Guston and Oldenburg have some form to start out with, and their ironic effect derives from the confrontation of the limp character of their works with the normal appearance of people and things. But for Paulo Monteiro, all that remains is that excessive malleability that pop art captured from finished objects – showing the violence to which materials and men were submitted to produce the appearance they had come to acquire – without really knowing where this plasticity was leading. That is why his works stand against the lightness and irony of pop object.

In their malleability, these masses seem to acquire a characteristic that, some time ago, used to grant form and meaning to things, soul, spirit, consciousness or praxis, it really doesn't matter what it is called. But if this flexibility of the material tinges it with spirituality, a powerful indetermination remind us of the limits of such an operation. Like few others, Paulo Monteiro succeeds in conferring visibility to this contemporary dynamic, to this process in which suspending the resistance of objects, organisms and people gives way to an age of happiness. These household pets, always ready for when they are called, also have their dark side. From one minute to the next, though some sort of slippery mimicry, they can change from cat to monster. Andre Araujo, the critic, once said that these works are not exactly made of lead – They are lead. Indeed, they



Paulo Monteiro
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leave no room for any kind of action that could conduct them to a stable form. We are always left with the impression that an internal force moves these organisms, leading them progressively – as paradoxical as that may seem – not a form but to the material's encounter with its own perfect identity. Then the lead would reveal itself really as lead, free from any sort of submission. But this new attempt to seek a convergence between spirit and material – no longer the beautiful form of the Greeks but rather the brutal elegance of an autonomous material – seems destined to a permanent divergence. At its culminating point, the lead draws back. We no longer know if it is the real thing or just a ghost in a tuxedo.



They resemble something: a man, a reptile, what else is hard to say. All, in any case, suggest a figure. The effect is ironic, unprecedented. They look like something, but somewhat grudgingly. There is an entire constructive operation, simple and subtle, that harnesses the flatness of the floor and the delicate arrangement of the parts in order to free them from the ground, after which they transform themselves. They stop being relationships between lines, planes and volumes. A physiognomy emerges to coalesce the constructive process. And that is why they are unprecedented. They did not begin with a feature; it attached itself to them, only feasible at the end of the process. Could they, then, not resemble anything? They could. During production, a bunch of these aborted beings emerge that could have seen the light of day, that, for better or for worse, were able to balance themselves, and were also composed of pipes, hitches and similar things and that, nevertheless, functioned poorly. The problem, here, is the opposite of the figurative artist's. He has a specific motif. His problem is how to paint or sculpt it. But the "how," in Paulo Monteiro's case, is almost a solved problem. But there are days in which these awkwardly good-humored beings (which is a way of saying that there is a sadness, a solemnity even, which pulls them down) do not want to emerge from the ground. In others, however, all the weight that might unbalance them is recycled into the interior of the piece. The parts enervate each other, hurl themselves, and open in space, by rising,

into the territory of the body. The strategy of connecting symmetrical sections, turning and lifting them from the ground – even if only minimally – meets with success. A shoulder, for example, emerges, so heavy as to be on the verge of collapsing. But it is this same volume that articulates the body for the emergence of a foot that has everything not to be a foot, that seems poised to slide, but that sticks firmly to the piece and gives it support and posture.

We are far, therefore, not only from the figurative artist's experience, but even from related ones. This is not about placing two eyes on a doodle, in any shape, or finding images in the clouds of heaven or psychology. Here there is no projection of images upon a support, since the support is also being fashioned. This is also not about developing, if not as motive at least as motivation, the territory of children's drawings, or the art of other cultures. If these weights and counterweights, if these lines, planes and volumes acquire physiognomies, it is because these are attained at the last minute. They do not struggle, from the beginning, to be born. They merely erupt, alive, in the interstices of the mechanism. Matter and geometry pull them towards a mineral, ferrous and faceless territory, but this jostling opens loopholes for expression. A soul then takes over these beings of geometry, even if awkwardly. The creative process, already on the prowl, finally finds its "habitat" here. Which implies, it is true, a physiognomic horizon throughout the process, but this process, this gestural trap for the apprehension of aspects, presupposes no particular feature. It is only the niche for a sudden countenance. And that makes the works bear the hallmark of conception, since they emerge as the sudden coupling of information, of a living scheme, of an organic nature that was already plotting a destiny, an identity, even if vague. But where does this scheme come from, if not from a motive, or from a projection of the subject upon unformed matter, or even from a retrieval by art of the vocabulary of children's drawings or distant cultures?

The point is that Paulo Monteiro's works are, like much current art, hybrids. The work is produced by the collision of two procedures: on one hand, abstract and constructive operations, on the other, a tacit physiognomic horizon, insinuated already in the choice of elements and operations. In this sense, it is correct to say that the scheme projects itself from without, even if not upon a support, but upon the act of making itself. But it is also true that this only happens at the last moment; the entire approach is based on constructive and genetic operations in which the parts that will later suggest a member, a chest, or something similar, are still just lines, planes and volumes that seek, some more, some less, a verticality.

If they were purely constructive and abstract, these works would cease to be ironic, and would no longer combine, as if perfectly compatible, things that, after all, share different roots. Similarly, if they were only ironic, they would extinguish in the initial disconcerting surprise. Such is the mixture, both true and false, subtle and grotesque, which generates the rather clumsy grace of these works, and that carries, seen from the other side, a gravity, a sorrow even, that magnetizes the surrounding soil, and wants, as it were, to dismantle these simulations of bodies. Humor, in this case, is also at the service of drama.