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Jorge Molder: “I’m a photographer in particular”

Interview with CLAUDIO ROZZONI¹

[CR] I should begin by mentioning something you’ve already made very clear in other interviews, which is that art is never about anything. It’s an almost provocative statement, and one that seems quite important when approaching your work. Similarly, you have defined yourself as a “constructor, a creator of images”, rather than as a photographer. With these assertions in mind, my first question is: if we were trying to describe the structure of this construction, could we talk about your work in terms of a series of series, where the recognizable themes are always the product of these kinds of resonances running *through* them?

[JM] Claudio, let’s just take these ideas one at a time, since your first question contains a lot of different questions, and we have to start somewhere.

So to start off, you mentioned this question about me believing that art is never about anything. And this is very important to me. Without going through the reasons (which I feel are more or less clear) to advocate for “purified,” rarefied abstraction, I think that there is a set of issues. And sometimes art is already so involved in these issues that it seems that these issues are part of art—but this is not quite true; it’s more a matter of rhetoric. Later on, such issues are usually left behind by time, they get diluted by time and only the art itself remains—it endures beyond those reasons (or pretexts?).

For example, look at the artistic production that accompanied the revolution of 1917: the political reasons for the art have been left behind, but the good artistic practices remain. What I also mean is this: there is a set of areas to which art can get close, but which art cannot develop in a systematic way; and this makes the divide clear. Philosophy, anthropology, sociology, let’s say all the humanities—

¹ This interview took place in Portuguese on June 21, 2018, at the artist’s atelier in Lisbon. English translation by Claudio Rozzoni.

and even politics, especially when it is a reflection rather than a closed praxis—have a thematic corpus and presuppose a system of developments and in-depth analyses. As my friend Waltercio Caldas says, art is “not about”—it simply *is*. This is not to say that these rooms, halls and cities are alien to art since art can only be sustained through one thing, which is life, and even though art and life are two separate things, art has no other ways of searching. The important things are those that are part of life and also part of art. Well, my point is that art does not develop in a finalistic or systematic form. Chaos, confusion and other types of disorganization fit into it well. I don’t know... for example, Guernica is something beyond the Spanish civil war; it will always be an extraordinary moment about suffering. Without setting aside the concrete terror of what happened, it takes us where the word and the scream fall short.

Another one of your questions was about series. Let’s say series are a sort of approximations having an unstable principle. Let’s say they are moments of a vision—a simultaneous system of organization and disorganization of my vision, of what I want to see, and of what I want to see turning into what I still want to see, or I want to see differently, or whatever it is, provided that these impermanences and impertinences bring me closer to something that surprises me.

Let me try and put it another way. I have a way of working, and that way of working goes through series. What is a series? A series is a moment of work originating from different starting points. They help start the working process, and then they are subsequently altered, deleted and enlightened, changed, and thus they give rise to other principles, means and ends.

Now, you could say, “But this is such a loose idea that it practically doesn’t mean anything”. It turns out that something happens almost organically—something that, after all, contains this whole history of approximations, of removals, and of disappearances and reappearances of images. It’s curious since there is no complete control. Not even partial control. In a general way, I can tell when a series is finished. And when is that? It is

when I think it is finished. There’s no answer more objective than that.

Another curious aspect is that sometimes I’m working on a series, and I’m taking a lot of photographs that I feel are not going to be part of the “work”: they’re sort of a side occurrence. So the question is, do I go back to these photographs? At times, yes. It’s quite unusual, but sometimes I keep some of those images, and they stay behind, as if I’m leaving signs of a passage that will perhaps come to make sense. That’s it.

Another theme closely connected to that of the series is the theme of deformation. You already talked about “alteration”; the moment of deformation seems to me to play a decisive role, to hold a specific power, i.e., a revealing power...

Hold on, what do you mean by deformation? Deformation, to me, is to get away from my initial path, almost in the sense of a physical pathway you let yourself get lost on, and this letting yourself get lost is inevitable, even strategic. Sometimes you have to move off the path, to let yourself get a little lost so that other paths appear. This is not in order to produce an immediate effect, but to be able to allow something to happen—that is, we set a sort of trap in order to see if something happens.

In order for something to happen, some things have to be prepared. This is why I think that there is such a thing as propitious work. I had a very close friend, Ana Hatherly, who died three years ago; she was a great Portuguese artist, an extraordinary poet, and a great specialist in Baroque poetry. Many years ago, she shared a secret of hers with me, and I’ve been following it faithfully ever since: she started in the morning by copying the things she had done the night before. So the first work she did was a kind of handicraft, to put her hands and mind into action. She believed (because she knew) that these actions or activities of copying trigger what is going to happen, what we are really looking for; I’ve come to believe the same thing.

We have just talked about pathways. I also mentioned deformation in the sense of altering

an image that would allegedly be the "original" one. As you said, the first image is not a genuine starting point—it's a first step, it's going to be modified. And I would argue that creating a double is never betraying an alleged original; it's a way of manifesting the essence of that "original" through its alteration, through its diversity (or diversities). For example, your doubles, your replicas, are not copies of an original that represents their "truth"; your replicas call into question the very notion of an original. That seems important to me.

Once again, even though I agree with you, I think it's better to break this long question down into several.

First thing: what is an alteration? An alteration has no unequivocal meaning. It doesn't always mean the same thing. It's not exactly an alteration in the sense of jumping from one form to another. At times, an alteration is a modification of sense: a metaphor. Other times, it can be a change of form—form not necessarily in an erudite sense but in the sense of what I call, in an enigmatic intimacy, *the satisfaction of images*. I bet you never suspected that an image could also join in our satisfaction and think, "Finally." Sometimes sense only comes afterward, even long afterward.

I believe that, when you do a lot of things, something can always happen. And this thing might be that we discover a sense we would never have thought of otherwise. We might find ourselves on another extremely curious path: other people can look at something and see things we would never have picked up on, would never have suspected, or that alters our way of seeing. The fact that others see things differently can change our way of seeing. We incorporate their gazes into our own, that is, their gazes become part of what we are doing. So when we talk about alterations, we're talking about a lot of different things: there are alterations we do ourselves, on our own, and sometimes there are alterations we do on behalf of others.

And then there's a third aspect that seems extremely important to me when it comes to mak-

ing things out of things, and that is chance. I'm not referring to pure randomness, I'm referring to chance that is elicited, situations where a set of provocations, approximations and fragmentations—and, I don't know, of concentration and dispersion of attention—develop and elicit the chance. Chance isn't controlled, it's uncontrolled by its very definition, but in a manner of speaking, we lay a set of traps in order to catch it.

In this sense, there is a tension running through each image, one that points in two directions: towards a "before" and towards an "after." There is no single point of departure that would be truer than all its modifications, nor is there a single point of arrival that would be a stable and permanent result. In musical terms: there are no variations without a theme, but the theme only truly lives on through the alterations that renew it. And this also seems to happen as regards series. For example, a new series can come to "sound" different and thereby change the sense of a previous series or modify one that follows it.

Furthermore, series aren't exactly concepts. They are operational procedures. That's how I organize my life as an image-maker. And to return for a moment to this notion of the fabrication of images—or if not fabrication, perhaps we could call it "construction"—this is important because there's a "*faber* side" that we cannot avoid. We have this tradition of using words in an uncontrolled way. When it comes to artistic creation, for example. I completely understand the sense of the word, but the way we use it is often a little bit extreme, at times very extreme, or maybe misplaced?

Things end up meeting in some way. With the series, it isn't quite like it is with Leibniz's monads, which remain in complete isolation. Different images from very different series sometimes intersect through in serendipitous ways. So, it's not something that is settled once and for all—a series isn't something that exists only in isolation, only in one form.

Earlier you referred to doubles, which are certainly far more complicated. Many years ago, I made a long series of self-portraits. It was in the early 80s, or maybe as far back as the late 70s. I

only showed the entire collection once, in Montpellier, even though parts of it have been shown here and there. From that time on, I started doing works that we might call self-representations, since I'm the model for them—I became an actor, but within a negotiation that is peculiar in a certain way, fixed through continuity.

It was important for me to have a certain *trait d'union* among the works over time, and I thought that this kind of “distant continuity” among them was what I was looking for. In a way, I was myself and someone else at the same time, or I was neither myself nor anyone else. I called to mind “*Todo o Mundo e Ninguém*”, or “Here Comes Everybody”, and some others I can't even remember. But these moves always lead to the same result: the double becomes inevitable. This common character is always *me* and *another me*. Let's see if I can manage to describe this. When you start having a relationship with yourself that isn't one of self-analysis, of deepening a specific understanding, but rather one of sort of asking someone to do something, a certain doubling becomes inevitable. As much as you hate to ask or order, it has to do with distance.

On the other hand, if you're always working with yourself, you're always changing, like it or not; there are some aspects of this representation that become ambiguous, that is, they influence the character directly, they become part of what is more personal within it. What do I mean by this? What I mean is that there's one thing you can't escape, and that's time. If you work with someone over 20 years, he's the same person, but he's older. He's changed. He's changed irrevocably. And time is always present in this representation; it is unconditionally part of it. Everything intervenes. I think that art and life are separated by a little eternal division. The only thing art can deal with is life, but the result always manifests differently, even if the difference is only slight.

But this difference (or distance), tiny as it may be, is impassable. It's a separation. But I tend to think this impassability as a cloth separating two things, and to our great surprise, the cloth is beginning to wear, creating reflections crossing through it. This all relates to all the ingredients of

this recipe I was talking about, since, in my opinion, time is what ensures that this cross-contamination never stops happening.

Speaking of time—which you once referred to in an interview as “our old friend”—I think your series offer temporal experiences. Could we say that your series make us aware of time's action, which, as Proust said, usually remains invisible in everyday life?

Are we victims of time? No doubt we are, but we also know that, without time, the sense of everything else would become more than dubious. We could ask some professors like Saint Augustine or Jorge Luis Borges to help us understand the concept of time, and the latter in particular as regards immortality. I think that provoking it is an impossible challenge: time's provocative capability is far superior to ours. It is a very uneven fight. We are in different leagues, to use a word borrowed from football... I am not exactly in the Champions League.

Philosophers can talk about time. Artists can, too, but in a different way. Philosophers reflect on time; artists reveal it and die on the battlefield. Proust talks specifically about men as victims of time, time manifests itself through bodies' deformations...

And your answer to this provocation, to time's terrible game, perhaps has something to do with the issue of magic, of *noir*, of detective stories, which seems to toy with our beliefs—or better still, with a zone of indecision that is the source of every occurrence. A temporality of the passage, of the transition, which is a coexistence of possibilities.

You know, many years ago—a very, very long time ago indeed—a great friend of mine wrote a short text for one of my earliest expositions, and it left quite an impression on me. He ended the text by saying that there are no miracles, there are only tricks. The figure of the magician is extremely fascinating to me, because he's not himself, he's the man who creates illusions!



Figure 1-6. From: *Jeu de 54 cartes*, 2017. Digital pigmented print on Arches paper 640g/m² .152 cm x 102 cm (96 cm x 96 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

And artists are similar, they do the same things, they also create illusions. They use things to show other things. Here, too, we have a divide: photography is something so vast that it doesn't make sense to refer to it here. I'm referring to my work, since in my work I use a pathway, a certain way in which photography involves a system of transformations—transformations from what I use to what I get. There is an American song I am very fond of that I think, in a sense, describes my way of working and of thinking as well: *I'm gonna use what I got to get what I need*.

In art, too, not everyone is looking for the same thing—which is a good thing. What I'm seeking is to show things starting with what I have; or with things that I was able to get; or with things that I am going to try to get; or with things that I am going to lose. And that's when I came up with this song's title. To get back to your ques-

tion, it's a bit like the idea of the illusionist. The illusionist creates illusions: firstly, through a transformation, possibly a small one, but then also by causing us to believe we are seeing one thing while we are actually seeing another. There are certain parallels between art and magic. They both involve, and trigger, mismatching, deviation, other ways of using and confusing reality—though of course they work in very different ways.

In this respect, two of the themes that play a key role in your images are also associated with magic: namely, “black” (background) and “mirrors” as elements of multiplication and disappearance. A double function...

Blackness (darkness) is where everything can appear, and everything can disappear. When talking about this, I always refer to St. John of the

Cross: only in a black room you can see a ray of light. Blackness is what makes light visible.

Photography is images created through light, so darkness is part of its origin. Consider that photography, which is light, develops through the magic of the darkroom. On the other hand, besides being a color (or an absence of color), black is naturally favorable to appearances and disappearances; it's also a vehicle for making things happen in it, to lend them a certain sense of enchantment. I think there's a great fascination with black. An artist and thinker by the name of Avigdor Arikha once wrote about colors and their visibility, about the nature of light and the qualities that allow us to see colors and their nuances. We realize that this ideal visibility is only possible with natural, filtered light, far from the extreme of darkness but also from the strong light that obscures vision rather than facilitating it. Only at this gentle intensity level can I see things perfectly and perceive subtle, minimal changes within them.

I try to play in these two worlds at the same time: to profit from the accentuation of contrasts and enhance the effects of slight changes in gentle, nuanced light. I've only done one series in which white is dominant: *Pinocchio*. And something quite odd happened while I was creating it. I'd never experienced what it was like to work with white, and in creating the series I discovered its somewhat morbid character—I had the sense that white was closer to death, to the inert, to the phantasmatic than black, which is commonly strongly linked to grief, to the tragic, to the terrible. I've grown very close to this series, which is somehow painful to me.

I was just about to ask you about *Pinocchio*... We were just discussing the importance of black in your work, but this atypical, extraordinary series emerges from a white background. So there's a white background, a white mask... without eyes, with two black holes where 'your' eyes were. It reminded me of the amazing chapter on "whiteness" in Melville's *Moby Dick*—that is, white as an abyss, the terror of the white...

I don't remember that chapter. I've read *Moby Dick* more than once, but it was a long time ago. I remember a lot of scenes from that book, though; it made quite an impression on me. I've always seen it as two books: one goes from Ishmael's arrival to the point where Captain Ahab encounters his enemy; the other is a book on writing and on artistic practice in general. It's a great experience. Important.

Though I don't specifically recall that chapter, it's clearly not lost on me that it is a matter of the abyss and of the Leviathan, which, by the way, is white. This association of white with the monster of monsters, Ahab's *raison d'être*, is incredible—but we can also interpret it as the "monster" that writers and others swear to find, since a redemption is only possible in such a showdown. And yet white is often linked to purity, to innocence.

But getting back to our original topic, in *Pinocchio* the usage or nature of white has nothing to do with those qualities; it signifies only the pallor of death. Black already serves the purposes of our illusionist well: things don't appear or disappear in luminosity, their appearance takes on greater significance in the dark. The contrast creates the most hospitable visual environment—the spectator's focus is less likely to waver. At times, presentiment goes beyond what we see, draws our eye to something we want to see—or worse, what we don't want to see. Black has been serving my work well. It's a kind of principle from which things arise.

I have one last question regarding the process you use in constructing your images. Images of "your" face, for instance. Your face and its deformations are famously a privileged object in your creation of images. Who's your "model" in these cases? I mean, do you do any preliminary work as regards your facial expressions? Is there a theatrical element, a performative aspect to how you set them up, or are they spontaneous? And even in this case, is there a recognizable strategy?

Claudio, you don't have one last question. You have several last questions. Firstly, the process of

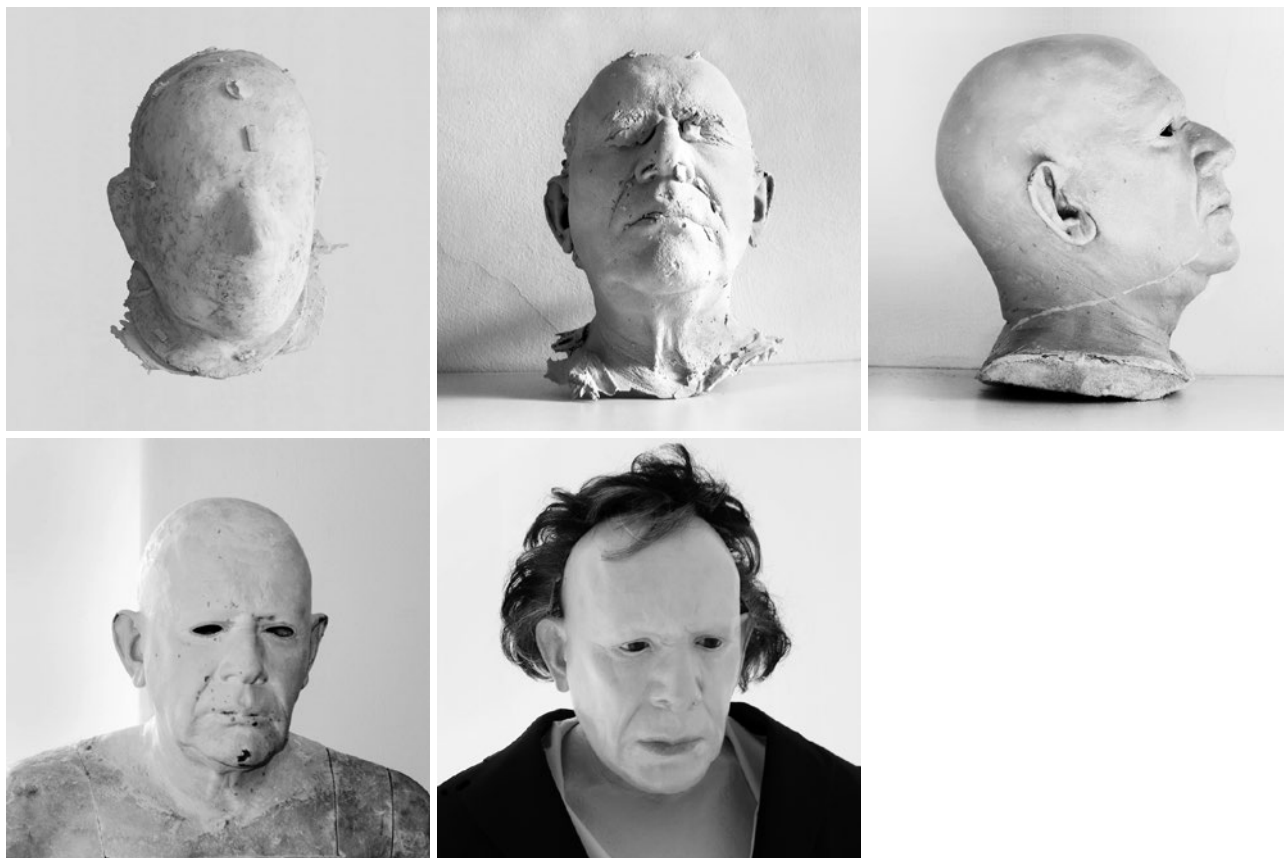


Figure 7-11. From: *Pinocchio*, 2009. Digital pigmented print on Arches paper 640g/m2. 152cm x 102 cm (96 cm x 96 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

construction: the way we do things changes over time—over time’s time, but also over our personal time. We can keep doing the same things we’ve always done, but there are also things we have stopped doing, either because we can’t do them anymore or because there are new ways of doing them. I experienced the irruption of the digital: first small steps, kilo, then mega, then giga, to today—from a process that deserved our attention but was definitely rough, to something that quickly exceeded our expectations. So, I was seduced: not into believing that digital was the same but simpler, but into suspecting that something new and different lay ahead. It’s hard to account for gains and losses.

Everything changed. Size, procedures, precision, even categories.

Everything changed.

Boundaries changed too. I create a lot more images than I did before; digital represents an

unrefusable invitation to profusion, which, of course, makes choices more difficult. I seek to work my way through steps of approximation until I make a final choice. I start with indifferent contact, going through routine recognition until I arrive at a level of familiarity (or perhaps it is just proximity) that allows me to choose for certain. I believe that the feeling of having left something better behind—a feeling that never leaves me—is part of the process.

Face, hands, and objects have always accompanied me. They are always the same, and they are always completely different. Face and hands are incorrigible; they possess endless powers of change. Objects are always strange and vulnerable; they create unexpected affinities. They might even turn out to have the power to become self-portraits. Undoubtedly, the other parts of the body show more what we expect from them. Surprise

is not among their powers, and yet, even so, they can amaze us with unexpected beautiful and sinister qualities.

We take photographs, we take dozens, hundreds, thousands of them, but the world barely moves, at the very most it can show a certain boredom, which also inevitably infects us. We, too, are bored with images.

I move more like in theater. I prepare. I prepare everything for everything, even prepare for what might occur. And in this sense, I have to make more of the theater, of its creation, part of me. Even though I am a truly unfaithful spectator. You know, I'm not a photographer in general, I'm a photographer in particular.