

## PROFILE OF A SOLITARY ARTIST

The painting of **Gustavo Fernandes** is a very rare and extremely interesting symbiotic product of visionary art and dramatic social-critical humour, of neo-Romantic sensitivity, hyper-naturalist expression and profound surrealist inspiration.

Even if the value of the pictorial oeuvre of this -still young - plastic artist is not fully recognised, (in the ever more confusing and less renowned among the people Portuguese cultural scene) he has already crossed the threshold of credibility and will end up imposing his authorial stature alongside the most unique emerging avatars in the recent historic discourse of our poly-morphological contemporaneity.

The bulk of the public careers of the most perpendicular and *non-naïf* artists has connotations -more or less assumed by themselves, as authors - with the careers of those other artists (contemporary and/or resuscitated from other eras), whose '*opera primae*' and biographical profiles, more or less openly, influenced the meaning and direction of their own individual and social behavioural trajectories.

The originality that each artist craves - so that they are considered '*primum inter pares*', according to the temporary standards of fashion - mainly aims at becoming more *socially reputed*, so that they can succeed in the cultural market (professional, elitist and prestigious) of their contemporaneity.

Scholastic achievement, academic qualifications and the panoply of distinctions acquired, are some of the primordial factors of fame, which, *latu sensu*, grant them the most obvious practical forms of public recognition and project the evaluation (as a tangible product) of their technical and aesthetic work and, above all, in the ineluctable aspects, (of less and less random valuations) within the market.

The intrinsic potential reality (as metaphysical essence of creativity) of an author, and his or her oeuvre, is not usually made known except as a set of factors - abstract and subliminal - relegated to speculative or conjectural domains in the multiple examinations in which (the critic asserts itself and) the critics proffer and register allegations which are not always documented nor sure of themselves, and not always (or, for this reason) without a certain literary merit (between the *ars poetica* and an erudite pan-historic-social account).

The oeuvre which **Gustavo Fernandes** has produced - throughout twenty years of persistence, in an unfavourable (if not hostile) family environment, and, from his childhood, pursuing an obsessive vocational talent - does not dispense with, and deserves, already, perhaps a more profound study than the one which, in this book, is accorded to it. It has already asserted itself, matured by the consistency of an incontestably professional work, which has surmounted the awards<sup>1</sup> with which it has been distinguished, bestowing just merit on the author, as well as cultural recognition and a dignifying price-value<sup>2</sup> notion, in the difficult and heterogeneous Portuguese plastic arts market.

His human integrity, social posture, preservation of individual dignity and his emotional surrender preside over the creative solipsism, which characterises him. Laterally, they confer some originality to the practical reasons which guide his professional and business strategic management, whose healthy firmness constitutes a singular example, in the exercise of a

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<sup>1</sup> "Award for the best set of works" attributed to Gustavo Fernandes, by the Jury of the "Electroliber" Award 1992 - Rui Silva and Maria João Raposo (*Attachés of Tourism and Culture of the Sintra Municipal Council*), Rita Poppe (CM) António Faria (*Electoliber*) Ernesto Neves (*representative of the plastic Artists and Santa Theresa Gallery*) the 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize, attributed to the picture "Snow", by Gustavo Pires Fernandes by the Jury of the "Fidelidade" Award for Young Painters 1990 - Albertino Marçal, José Maria Saldanha da Gama, Lima de Freitas, Jose Luis Santos Vaz and F. Pernes [539 works in competition, 42 were selected and exhibited, in the National Library, in Lisbon (DN-12.11.90/Margarida Botelho)

<sup>2</sup> *elaborated under the research* of Mariana Mendes, a market value of 620.000\$ (€3,093.00) appears in print (for the first time) in January 1998, attributed to the piece by Gustavo Fernandes «*Showers*» oil on canvas 130x89 1997, according to "Art Stock Exchange" instituted by the magazine Casa Decoração (*with the collaboration of the Galleries LCR, Sintra and Palmira Suso, Lisbon*)

professional Artist-author statute which the inertia of the political society of this age already accepts as inevitable, but still does not, by definition, legitimise nor value.

An atypical and extremely remarkable case in Portuguese plastic arts at the turning of the century, **Gustavo Fernandes** is a born creator, who has lost his roots. He is irrepressible and impossible to explore under the constraints of the standards of movements and of erudite intellectuality. The turbulence and restlessness of his *parallel world* - compared to the attention of many of the specialists affiliated to certain of the avant-gardes (nowadays circularly traditional) - make the strength of his distanced, heretic and stubbornly unique personality undeniable. It is the personality of a re-inventor of imaginary spaces, created to be *a place of things and objects*, in which he compacts the controversial sentiments of life, with silent and dramatic eloquence, in which there is a latent implosion and a diluted explosion, suspended from the irreconcilable attitude of man, destroyer of both nature and himself. The affirmation of the *anti-status quo*, mediated by the perfectionist cult of the metaphoric abstraction of the figure (as concept), supported by the most impeccable technically self-demanding nature (classical, in drawing) based on generically recognisable studio technologies, in the accuracy of form and by their stylistic uniqueness, in a substantive acceptance of communicated image.

His uni-personal and singular assertion of himself as a plastic artist - and as creator of fractal temporalities in parallel universes (to *this one*, in which we believe our feet to rest firmly on the Earth) - is paradoxically both at odds and harmonised with the genuine hyper-realism to which the aesthetic accuracy of his landscape art and the almost photographic definition and outline of the figures that he chooses as symbols obey, with which he constructs his magnificent mythic-legendary and oneiric, fantastical or with a surrealist bent, interpretations.

**Gustavo Fernandes** has always defended the serious irony of mental *vagrancy*, libertarian and without perfidy, of those who believe in Art as a profession of faith, and in painting as a project of self-realisation. By option, with hopeful sacrifice and as a life alternative (art demands it!), he dedicates himself to it, following, without perversity, an ascetic cult in which a social attitude can be seen, contrasting greatly with the legitimate virtual-defiant exhibitionism (common among many of his contemporaries, and even common to some ex-partners and to many authors supported by the media), the ignorant attitude which corresponds (in the outworn majestic plural of the last century) to the claim of exclusive property rights over the first place of access to the discovery, or over the invention of originality leaving to others the generalised sins of plagiarism, of copying and of imitation...

In parallel with his primitive studies (drawings and watercolours) completed in the light of scholastic academism, under the guidance of his teachers while he was still very young, he executed, like so many other adolescent students, hundreds of hidden sketches, which transgressed the rules and the subjects taught. He tried to interpret and reinterpret, in portraits, in landscapes, in the reproduction of his fictional imaginary world, impregnated with the seduction of multiple stigmatic images, stored in his visual memory, or collected in notes illustration clippings and photographs, all of which he absorbed with little critical feeling and regardless of any selective spirit. However, it must have been in the secrecy of this chaotic self- information that, as often happens, he rooted his independence, laterally to his familiarity with the compulsory subject...

His work registers the passage of more or less durable and possible to refer phases of search, of trial, experimentalism and technical research, posterior to scholastic learning, revealing influences of sympathy and empathy, of inebriating attraction and fascination, before the work of other authors, as envied for their careers and projection, as for their supreme workshop<sup>3</sup> or thematic mastery<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> e.g.: **Robert Bateman** (b. 1930, Toronto), remarkable painter whose public career began in 1965 (and who, through Prof. Carl Schaefer (of Hart House 1950) follows - as does, curiously, later GF - the **Nikolaids** drawing method)

<sup>4</sup> e.g. **Leonor Fini** (b. 1908, Buenos Aires - 1996, Paris), from Latin-Slavic origin, a remarkable artist, exponent of contemporary self-taught painting, friend to Max Ernst, P. Élouard, J. Cocteau and Morávia, among others, but ostensibly not an adherent to the Bretonian *Surrealist Movement*.

PROFESSION: PAINTER  
TWO DECADES TO THE NAKED EYE

Gustavo Fernandes interrupts his studies in Canada and returns for the first time to Portugal in 1979, where he begins an approach to the European artistic world. He benefits from the opportunity to become familiarised with professional portrait painting, under the guidance of Master Francisco Oliveira, whose atelier he assiduously frequented for two years, diligently absorbing the master's teaching. In 1981, he once again departs for Montreal - Quebec to conclude his studies. Here, he works intensively and begins to exhibit his work in 1983, and, until 1988, holds six individual exhibitions and takes part in four collective shows.

In 1987 he appears sporadically in Portugal, in a first collective exhibition (in the Estoril Casino), but it is only towards the end of 1988 that he returns definitively to the country.

In the following year, he lays the foundations of his "Atelier of Artistic Development - Galeria dos Arcos (Gallery of the Arches) in Oeiras, which will be consolidated in 1992, after his collaboration with an art sociologist<sup>5</sup>. She is his first analyst<sup>6</sup> and, in the preface to one of his catalogues, she refers to him in a curious impressive synthesis: [...]« *In suspension, there is the constant fruition of one space and another space, as if the horizon touched and overcame itself, any limit to sensations ceasing to exist (in it?). [We enter some to "roam" the "cosmos", feel the transmutation of the body into another body] [...]« or see our faces multiplied in other faces, in the invisible mirrors we inhabit.» At a given moment, «the feeling of touching the "natural", which immediately dissipates, absorbed by the subjugation of the real, as if the attraction were freed, as if the wrapping had disappeared and, in the transparent bath of colours, words grated against each other»[...].*

The first critical study of his work appears in print this same year, and stimulates his definitive settling in the country. It is an evaluation published in a particularly discerning study by two well known Art critics and historians<sup>7</sup>, when the artist was «*still in an experimental phase, despite having presented work of great technical refinement*», and shows the influences of the «*various movements which have touched him*»: Caspar D. Friedrich (German romanticism); René Magritte (Belgian surrealism); Edward Munch (figurative expressionism) [...] and Chirico. The scrupulous critical analysis favourably acknowledges in the new author, referring in particular to the work entitled "*Machinery in my Pocket*" (a set of five busts) «*in which the faces present similarities to physiognomic features, even though the expressions vary according to the inclinations*», the «*wish to introduce beauty in the most agonizing and tragic situations, a beauty which is represented in the equilibrium, the harmony and the fragility of our condition, which may as well no longer be that of humans as come to be so in the future*» highlighting that «*he stands out, as a revelation and young hope of Portuguese contemporary painting*».

Another analyst<sup>8</sup> asserts that he [...] «*is an artist to be considered*» [...] «*he has an involving painting*» [...] «*at one time aggressive and captivating, which tells stories of loneliness, intensely sucked to the last cup, suffered drop by drop*» [...] «*to the exhaustion of the colours, canvas after canvas, in his atelier everyday life, in which each picture represents the struggle of destruction*» (resulting from) «*human decadence*» [...] «*at various velocities, according to the different seasons and their rigours, and on different levels, depending on whether we are witnesses to the slow decaying of the most elementary values, or to the progressive physical degradation of everything that involves and surrounds us, or above all to its continuous (and uncontrolled) mental deterioration, because it is dehumanised ...*» [...]«*We are before an artist of surrealist origin who portraits*» [...]the extreme (and

<sup>5</sup> Maria do Céu Gomes «Cultural Patronage/In the Space in which we Live Today» (Art Sociology) Masters in Art History - Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 1989/90

<sup>6</sup> Inês Sousa Gomes (*pseudonym*) in «I see the Artist like this» (impressive synthesis) preface to the Gallery Trindade catalogue - Lisbon, 1990

<sup>7</sup> Manuela O. Synek and Brás de Queirós in «Up and Coming Portuguese Plastic Artists» (reproducing "Machinery in my Pocket"), Lisbon, 1992

<sup>8</sup> A. Almeida Brandão, in magazine «Artes Plásticas» August/September 1992

*demented) situation of a loneliness taken to its final consequences, narrated in a pictorial (and poetic) language» [...] «at the same time concerned only with itself, almost masturbatory with details and insistencies that are at first guessed at and later confirmed as being gratuitously masochist, when confronted with his oeuvre, from a critical and detached perspective» (?)...*

The following year, in 1983, he co-founded the **Grupo Artitude**, with Luis Vieira-Batista, Magnus de Monserrate and Victor Lages.

The synergy that establishes itself among the four artists (three painters and a sculptor) mobilises their forces and will excessively absorb **Gustavo Fernandes's** energies for three fecund years of non-stop cultural activity. The intensity with which he dedicated himself eventually gave rise to insurmountable operative incompatibilities, in terms of functioning and concept. Some expectations were frustrated and his individual autonomy was restricted. The full interactivity of the team was jeopardised. And the disintegration of the group is unanimously assumed, with total reciprocal respect for each other's individual cultural and artistic personality, in 1996.

Outside any discussion about the supremacy or existence of hierarchism in the domain of **Gustavo Fernandes's** artistic interventions while part of the Grupo, it would be unjust and divested of accuracy to exclude the beneficial influence that, reciprocally, for each and every artist, resulted from this enriching common experience. It would be difficult and outside the scope of this work to isolate this question, and would moreover be premature and not objectively relevant. **Gustavo Fernandes's** individual exhibitory activity is practically nil in this interim period, although the pictures that he signs, for the collective exhibitions in which he takes part, besides the projects in common and the group projects in which he participates, prove themselves through differences it is needless to quote, and indubitably identify and distinguish him, at least from a structural and constructive, but also a conceptual and interpretive point of view, taking into consideration the perfectly focused, genuine and personalised calligraphic, compositional and morphological differentiations in the creative, authorial identity of the three painters and sculptor.

From an epistolary text<sup>9</sup> by Vieira-Batista (one of his closest friends and member of the Grupo) I would like to point out, with emotion, a few passages, in which the unforgettable climate of esteem among equals that united them is evoked: [...]« *I am thinking of some of your canvases with nightmare figures in dream landscapes and along came the fireman, once again!*<sup>10</sup> *It seems to me today that you killed him and left only the landscape. Fortunately. [Nobody "attacks" a picture like you, with a naturalist accuracy of successive approaches, as detailed in the far off mountain, as in the cellular division of a leaf, with the slime trail of a snail that crossed it. [The capacity for observation one perceives in your lively eyes, allied to the tenacity and the way you give yourself to each canvas, is your major triumph. You have learnt by working, and, as you work so much, it is remarkable and impressive what you have learnt...»*

Further on in the same letter, filled with the reminiscences of a triennium, the beginnings of contestation and bitterness, before the cultural absurdities of post-1975 Portugal, can be seen: [...] «*this country seems to have decreed that Art and artists are dispensable.*»[...]«*I think that you and I did wrong. You should have stayed in Canada, where they club baby seals to death, and I should never have left Switzerland, where wealth comes from money soiled with the blood of the helpless.*» [...] «*But we chose to follow the romanticism of a people that blind nightingales to make them sing better...».*

These excerpts from this letter must form part «*of the words which attach themselves to the canvases*» of **Gustavo Fernandes**. And they make it evident, that the words are assumed here as a «*mnemonic of the moment*» of his painting, in this fundamental and unforgettable period of his oeuvre, collectively exhibited, from which «*The Blue Planet, The Divine Tragedy, The Nymphs of the Tagus River...*»<sup>11</sup> stand out.

<sup>9</sup> Luis Vieira-Batista in *private letter* to GF, dated 2002-03-02 (excerpts/authorised publicising)

<sup>10</sup> allusion to a news item published in the press: «*Firemen of Beja destroy more than 400 swallow's nests*»

<sup>11</sup> three of the most important exhibitions of the *Grupo Artitude*

The construction of his later work obeys primarily a solitary research project and develops itself in the incessant search for a simultaneous transposition of sensuality, of the emotional and of the most intimate critical thought, into the communicational world of the invisible. The visionary language which he establishes, between the enigmatic and various scales of figurative evidence, reproduces itself in multiple readings and proposes the diversity of innumerable interrogations, subjugating the observer, luring him into his virtual world, intimating him to ignore clocks, the calendar and appointment books of everyday existence and thrusting him towards outer space atmospheres, without the convention of time (*or generated in their own Time*), where the *All and the Nothing* are written in images of eloquent silence.

Besides a peculiar and exciting *monumentality*, endowed with strenuously pursued technical mastery, *Gustavo Fernandes's* painting clearly assumes and manifests some initiatory values of surrealist symbolism and a marked aesthetic influence from *hyper-realism* (to which the exploration of his themes gradually becomes more faithful).

One of the most independent and respected Portuguese researchers and art critics<sup>12</sup>, dwells on an analysis of his work, in 1993, referring to it as [...] «*Emotionally attached to the aspects of Art which Fantastical Realism produced*» (*Chirico, Yves de Tanguy and others*) [...] «*it uses universal symbolism to communicate his own notion of contemporaneity.*» [...] «*figures, attitudes, compositions and already recognised archetypes*» support «*a continuously more personal, aesthetic language*» [...] «*Naturally predestined for a painting of formal accuracy, he could aspire to the fame of Marcel Mayer in hyper-realism.*» [...] «*drawing beautifully and mastering with fine technique the use of pigments*» he charms us «*by the fluency and apparent ease with which he constructs his discourse and also by his attachment to a surrealism still marked by Dali*»

Without the - *rarely authentic* - recourse to literary erudition, which fashions and fashion makers frequently resort to, the artist shuns speculative complexity and restricts the titles of his paintings to a conniving simplicity. In this way he removes any cultist, metaphorical or allegorical (*which, I substantially, attribute to him*) meaning from the emotional and thematic meaning of his work. Thus he omits himself from or reduces his part in - paradoxically - the ambit, meaning and conceptual content of his work. This is how he *baptises* it, explicitly or implicitly, in words and expressions minimised, due to timidity, to humility, or to legitimate pretension, to the sufficiency of his signature.

A large part of the exhibitory path of *Gustavo Fernandes* was mainly traced and prefaced in the second half of the nineties, through sensitive analyses by a specialist<sup>13</sup> who places him close to the surreal track of Magritte, Chirico and Paul Devaux, framing his thematic approaches simultaneously in the acceptation of «*underground theatre*» and the «*open work, according to the conception of Humberto Eco*», on one hand lingering on a commented reading of some canvases, stressing her preference for the «*tangible sensuality of some of the figures*» and, on the other hand, asserting that the artist «*translates the dream, he does not interpret it*» and «*fosters the creativity of our imagination, as spectators and attentive observers of his representations, awaking in us a happy interior admiration*».

It is as if the Earth's planetary memory led the writing of the dynamic «essence» of Water, as if it was concentrated in the water we drink today in the cities, which is previously disinfected, purified of the most recent memories of industrial sin, the amoral murderer of the future of Mankind. To *Gustavo Fernandes*, the four philosophical Elements of Alchemy - Air, Water, Earth and (only very *subliminally*) Fire - remain as an initiatory code, although this notion has been scientifically rejected since the publication of the «*Law of the Compressibility of Gases*»<sup>14</sup>, which does not appear to have, to the naked eye, any apparent repercussion on Human Life, nor to advance additional visible meteorological changes, on the surface of the planet...

<sup>12</sup> Edgardo Xavier art critic | AICA/Unesco) places him as a reference in "a field of action" similar to *Artur Ramos, Margarida Cepêdo and Barahona Possolo*, in preface? to the exhibition «*Everything is possible because everything is unreal*» Le Méridien, Lisbon, 1993

<sup>13</sup> Alice Branco, in (prefaces) «*Crossing*» (1996), «*The Eternal Return*» (1997), «*Voluptuousness*» (1998)...

<sup>14</sup> from Boyle-Mariotte (late 17th century)

A well known and attentive art critic in the Portuguese press<sup>15</sup> refers to his painting as originating from «*a mitigated surrealism, which some critics name figurative expressionism*» [...] and considers that it keeps «*very close to the magic realism*» which characterises the beginning of his career, defining «*a figuration continuously more replete with literary echoes and populated by enigmas, fantastical and hallucinatory images, and markedly visionary scenes*», pursuing a «*trajectory distinguished by a heavily symbolic nature, following the paths of a metaphysical hyper-realism, in which space is converted into an aggressive and hostile environment to which the human being (or even the animal) seems to have become accustomed*» [...] «*revealing him as one of the new Portuguese creators to be followed attentively*» [...].

A Spanish critic<sup>16</sup>, singles him out, in his first appearance in Valencia: «*es un Nuevo valor joven de la escuela portuguesa [...] y realiza una bella obra cuidada y con bella lectura, con atisbos surrealistas y resoluciones hiper realistas, su obra se sitúa tre lo nuevo, con temática clásica y tratamiento actual. [...] breves momentos del panorama cultural actual, libre y sin condicionamientos externos atentos siempre a lo nuevo y digno de exponen*».

In his pictorial work, some of the successive marks of geomorphic erosion remain latent (even when he moves away from human figuration and isolates himself in hyper-naturalistic landscape pictorial representation), with the radical subliminal aspect of mythological transmutations and of various mystical occlusions, in the collective sentiment, onto which the most tempestuous psycho-social tensions are projected, to which the committed environmentally aware generations adhere, concerned with the eco-systemic equilibrium of the world we live in.

This concern is systematically reflected in the imaginary world of **Gustavo Fernandes**, perhaps in a more neo-romantic than militant, activist and flag-waving way, but endowed with the same philosophical and visionary eloquence found, throughout the centuries, both in the painting of authors of all epochs, and in the chronicles of academic guerrilla warfare, in the history of revolutions and in cultural reminiscences, latent in the legendary traditions of *the great human families*, throughout centuries and millennia of evolution, co-habitation and the struggle to survive on this ship, the satellite of a solar universe of small cosmic grandeur.

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<sup>15</sup> Rodrigues Vaz (journalist and art critic of the plastic arts), in «*Correio da Manhã*», on the exhibition H2O, 1997

<sup>16</sup> Rafael Pons in ARTE | Valencia, Madrid, 1999

## UNDER THE EMPIRE OF WATER

The Earth populations (fauna and flora), from the beginning of time constituted by 50 to 70% Water, continue to share the possession of the surface of this Spherical Ship, piloted by the close control of a *Moon* and *Sun* interdependent of their own system, integrated in a vaguely explored galaxy, inscribed in the *Time* of an *Unknown Universe*. The painter multiplies and divides the concept of this same Water, whose biological and geo-scientific importance is assumed (qualitatively and quantitatively speaking), since the 19<sup>th</sup> century AD of the Earth:

- 1) Three quarters of the Earth surface (75%) are occupied by the *Salt-and-Water* of the oceans, our still mysterious «*fifth continent*»;
- 2) «*living*» beings are thought to be composed of 50 to 70% Water;
- 3) 2.15% of the water (*ice*) of the polar-regions is found in a solid state;
- 4) Man uses a small part (0.55%), which constitutes the waterways, lakes and interior seas, and is condensed in clouds or dispersed in the atmosphere.

These notions are contained in life and appear, almost systematically legible, in the painting of Gustavo Fernandes, as the basis of a kind of doctrine peculiar to his critical thought, as news of some sort of longing for the future, without rancour or remorse, but also yearning for the inheritance of our prodigal collective past.

On the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the rich of the Earth seem to be responsible (in political theory), for the progressive pollution of the Water, which they themselves and normal people (the less rich and the less poor, the poor and the poorer) drink and consume - polluted and also polluting it - in their turn<sup>17</sup> ignorantly digging a chaotic and abyssal pit - in the name of a short-lived lifestyle - instituted, as a bequest from their generation to their descendants.

Being the stereotype of our age of fertilisers, detergents and pesticides, detritus, scrap metal and radio-active waste, metals and non-metals, metalloids, oxides and salts, acids, compounds, fats, perfumes, poisons and decomposing corpses (mixtures and compounds of about a hundred and fifty new elements<sup>18</sup>), they will cause the chemical matrix of the pure Water of the future to change.

The imponderable mutations of the ecosystem happen to the progressive cadence of a suicidal rhythm, accelerated by the same collective unconscious which promotes Wars, while we dream of the chimera of Peace and wishing the *Global Village* could convert the planetary island we live in into an «excellent Republican state»<sup>19</sup>. Meanwhile, some managers of virtual reality are constructing, randomly, their own destruction.

The artist falls asleep - and awakens - to this chimera, every second day. He perceives, has a foreboding of and feels anew the syncretic chaos of the realities of the world that surrounds it. He experiences these realities in his social existence, writes about them and describes them in his pictorial language, resuscitating old themes, reformulating the theories that instructed him, creating and organising, in the apparent great simplicity of the canvas, compositions of great formal beauty, in which, in the majority of the cases, these contents are made less dramatic and subject to irony.

The progress of scientific knowledge has enriched itself but, outside humanistic wisdom (in a version lateral to Gustavo Fernandes's thought perspective) it becomes dehydrated, with the breakthrough of information technologies, and one poses this question:

<sup>17</sup> ... in quantities not always capable of being calculated per head in inverse proportion to his fortune and in the exact proportion of doctrinaire-cultural postures

<sup>18</sup> *discovered since the first six hundred years after the 1st Millennium*

<sup>19</sup> «*Utopia*» by Thomas Moore

Will humanism be, in the final analysis, recovered and maintained (or genetically memorised, in the soul of the new forms of life - philosophically and theologically prophesised), in the symbolical and allegorical sense of armageddons and apocalypses, whose memory the populace and erudite people recover and emphasise in years which mark the turning (of centuries and millennia, based on the registers of legendary intuition) ... or resuscitate from the cemeteries of culture (the monuments, libraries and museums)?

Normal people - and all other known beings (*alive or dead*) - indiscriminately have, in a subconscious or unconscious state, a *fearful respect* before the latent threat of individual extinction and the inevitability of death. In parallel, *other men* - less common - fight *the rich* in vain. Some, among themselves, reveal a fateful inclination to become their equals. Others invent new and more resistant forms of prolonging the life of the species, to which they can bequeath the memory of the last human generations of the planet. Still others imagine artificial means to escape from the planet, at any cost, in premonitory useful time, dreaming of better worlds, sacrificing themselves to religions, dying in political revolutions, or hiding in the scientific discovery of the escape from gravity, which prevents them from attaining complete liberation and conditions them to the lunar calendar.

Gustavo Fernandes - myself and many other people - attend and witness (perhaps without the passivity of anthropologists and the average basic-consumer citizen), act and intervene, (from an obligatory, self-defensive, but insufficiently watchful distance) in the refractory (and only episodically denounced) phenomenology of this implacable inevitability.

Water retains here, as an assumption, the Memory of Humankind. Its non-metallic crystals (almost metallic) keep the eternal essential Truth (in the biosphere reality of the Earth). In its interior molecular micro-universe, in each atom, in the lowermost new universe of each particle.

For this reason it will be supposed that Christian baptism and the purification of Jews, Brahmins, Buddhists, along with many other rituals (adopted by the followers of no religion), were instituted and made sacred under the global, mystical shield of an *aqua mater* of the morphogenesis of Life.

Romantic virginity is symbolised poetically, according to an exemplary text<sup>20</sup>, in the waters of the Danube at dawn, in the same way the female body, in the visionary vision of Gustavo Fernandes, is transmuted and re-identified (rarely travestied and trans-sexualised), without the misidentification of the sex. Maybe due to similarities and other causes, reasons and transcendental motives, *hydrophobia*, and *Satanism* (as in the *werewolf*) could be assumed as different revivalist, neo-traditional expressions, formerly androgynous, nowadays virtually ultra-sexualised, through certain frightening metamorphisms, which the heterodox sensuality of this Portuguese plastic artist freezes and sublimates.

Many of the abjectionist morphologies tended, at first, to favour the idea of a radical extinction of life (by *playful extermination*) or divided a bipolar<sup>21</sup> Manichaean theism into:

a) Evil - whose protagonists are diabolical gods, revengeful and cruel monsters;

b) Good and infinite mercy<sup>22</sup> - placing the soul condemned to perpetual death in (dichotomous) opposition to eternal life, which this same soul was supposed to acquire (if it were cleansed by punishment and torment, represented by identical, *beautifully monstrous* imaginary worlds<sup>23</sup>) or neater still, triumphant and even glorious! in the light of various pre-conceptual-customary codes - despite the lucidity of pragmatic materialism and of the most wholesome intellectual positivism - in its perpetual and heterogeneous validity.

<sup>20</sup> the «*Virginity*» of Woman in «*Armance*», novel by Stendhal)

<sup>21</sup> as in *the light and the darkness*, *the Unionist Army and the Indians*, *the Christians and the Moors*, etc.

<sup>22</sup> the Salvation of the souls (through divine pardon) assures *material survival of the soul* (?)

<sup>23</sup> psychic and corporal, inflicting benign punishments (like cremation while alive) comparative to the punishments of the Inferno (in the «*Divine Comedy*» by Dante Alighieri)



Can it be considered (in this obvious and simplistic acceptance) that the most *rage filled*<sup>24</sup> human beings would be *subjects of Evil*, or *followers of wicked historical leaders*? Or that the redemption of the spirit depends on the ethical conscience, on the *colour of fear*, of the richest of the rich, or the poorest of the poor?

As if it constituted an interminable post-grammatical study of classical iconography, Gustavo Fernandes's painting creates, in the apotheosis of each canvas, the restored notion of enlightened present prophecy<sup>25</sup>, inspired by intuition, but brought about by formal perfectionism.

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<sup>24</sup> therefore «*hydrophobic*» see **Postface**

<sup>25</sup> **Nabi** or «*Le Nabis*» (Hebrew prophet) posture adopted by young painters like Maurice Dennis, Vuillard, Bonnard, Roussel, P. Sérusier (a century ago, about 1890)...

## A UNIVERSAL VISION BETWEEN TWO CENTURIES

All that the pictorial visionary art of Gustavo Fernandes transmits, reveals and invokes, suggests, allegorises and puts in hymns, permits - more than to compare it - to associate it to a paradigmatic reference of philosophic humanism, the recourse to different subjects, to which a great Portuguese thinker and artist<sup>26</sup> dedicated part of his life, influencing and illuminating some of the artists of the generations of the last half century of Portuguese culture.

In a global analysis of his painting, the imaginary spaces adapt themselves to the canvas, are finally absorbed by it and are intuitively used for the definition of its (abstract) co-ordinates in Time, in which the inspirational energy resides that gives strength to it and originates, not only the perceptibility of its nature and physical dimensions but, above all, the extension and poetical intangibility of its message.

The fascination of magic, the seduction of the mythical symbolism and the mystical wonder<sup>27</sup>, sometimes subliminal, acquire, in his recent work, new potential and impact. It can be affirmed that - as in the classical *masterpieces* - the lexicological frontiers of the written word and its interior phonetic resonance (as they are stipulated, codified, decoded and reformulated, eroded and transmuted) are eliminated. He managed to establish an intangible vocabulary, according to categories of communicative intervention, possibly identical to the mechanisms and instruments of the natural and artificial psycho-physiological automatic mechanisms, in the semiotic evolution of a linguistic communication, which the author did not develop and, for which he never felt he had a vocation, manifesting (as, by the way, is very common) obvious difficulties, not of precision or concision, but of eloquence, or erudition, in the written and spoken language.

And, nevertheless, his plastic language is conscious and consistent with an extraordinarily *communicative* coded depth (*soit disant* non-literary) - albeit suggestive - as if we were dealing with inspired poems or eloquent speeches!

On the other hand, the technical refinement with which he gradually enriched his studio work, consolidates the consistency of his painting, conferring a remarkable authenticity to its plastic nature, which becomes more and more solid and genuine, predominantly stratified without material layers, with scarce vestiges of gestural painting, of tachisme, or of calligraphy, rather consequently and very clearly comparable to a classic-traditional stylistic assertion, more perceptible from a purely workshop viewpoint, than in the legibility of the contents.

It can be perceived<sup>28</sup> that the painting of Gustavo Fernandes gradually acquired a more distinctive personality, when his creations emerged from the salutary competitive act of liberation (which legitimates the assertion of a greater and more vigorous autonomic assertion) after the emotional rupture which drove the Grupo Artitude (from which he had gathered, as mentioned before, a valid and fecund experience) into extinction, perhaps prematurely aborted due to typical and inevitable relational conflicts, as a consequence of the professional difficulties, typically generated by the synergies of teamwork.

A chronological map of the two decades of his career could be relatively easily sketched today. However, because it is an oeuvre whose reading does not always reveal itself to be as simple as it seems, at a superficial glance, as soon as we consider its origins and meaning, enigmatic interrogations arise - which coil like the *Nidog* and become ramified like the *symbolic Tree* (cosmic and Cabbalist) - contextualised in more complicated fields, which prevent a thematic and linear schematic compartmentalisation. If we mean to attempt to

<sup>26</sup> Lima de Freitas, José Maria (Setúbal, 1927-Lisbon, 2000) to whom Gustavo Fernandes pays homage, posthumously, in one of his most significant exhibitions -H2O- in the Water Museum, Lisbon.

<sup>27</sup> see *Postface*

<sup>28</sup> scrutinising results of the study of his phased evolution (through a documented previous time of more than 800 pieces, produced between 1986 and 1999)

equate the questions it gives rise to - especially in the correlation of the comparative criticism and the epistemological posture of his aesthetic authenticity -we face a genuine research labyrinth. **Gustavo Fernandes** appears not to submit to an orientation planned and projected by limited objectives, not taking into account (as exceptions) cases in which he follows a theme, or a motivation, due to commission obligations, or deadlines for the delivery of works for an exhibition...

For this reason, in the conception and organisation of this book, we chose a simple method of documental grouping, concerning the reproduction of the works which illustrate it, having conducted a thematic selection (discretionary and arbitrated by a subjective criterion), subordinating it to vague numerological presuppositions (as if at random) of a pentagonal projection (6 sectors). Regardless, thus, of any chronological sequence<sup>29</sup>, it will consist of a sampling of his oeuvre, highlighting some pieces of exemplary quality, through the images we consider representative of his more recent, matured and significant work.

Despite the partition established for each of these five groups, we attributed - as a common denominator - a pseudo-systemic designation (according to an organisation of almost exclusively practical convenience), although a certain order prevails, or relation to the meaning of the contents, themes and motives, under an encompassing concept which appears to be applicable to them.

**Gustavo Fernandes** is, in our opinion, a remarkable painter. The Oeuvre that he has produced until today would deserve, with all due merit, a more profound and developed work. It will surely be undertaken, if the future comes to re-evaluate this lapse of a universal vision, between two centuries.

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<sup>29</sup> all of the illustrations mentioned refer to reproductions of original works by GF, identified and dated