

Imma Prieto

THE ESCAPE... A FUTURE YET TO COME

“A female silhouette searches for itself in the mirror; a silhouette in profile, centred and geometric, made of remnants, tissue paper and fragments in various shades of blue. A blue that will continue to appear in the different media which Ana Vieira (Coimbra, 1940 – Lisbon, 2016) had gone on to explore.

If we stop at this small collage from 1963, it is not without reason. In some manner, we find in it the different elements that will serve as an introduction to some of the interests that accompanied the artist throughout her career. In this work from the nineteen-sixties, a clear interest in the relationship established by the subject, especially the woman, with visibility and with domestic space is already there. A relationship with what we see and what we do not see. What does the mirror return to us?

Vieira invites the viewer to take part in the dialectic game she proposes with *A Senhora M.M.T.S.* [*The Lady M.M.T.S.*] (1967): again, a female silhouette, a mirror; but this time, the mirror is real and awaits the visitor’s reflection. The early two-dimensional fragments, in turn, extend into space and come forward to meet us. The artist’s need to explore artistic media in relation to frames (physical and symbolic), led her to a spatial opening-up of the physical limits. Layers of space framed in wood capture an overexposure: a male silhouette in blue and the female silhouette in the mirror within the first. It is curious that the same blue fills the whole of the body imprinted on the steps of *A Passagem da Senhora M.L.T.* [*The Passage of Lady M.L.T.*] (1967). Perhaps the artist projects this body imbued with blue into an unknown, desire space as a rising path to liberty.

The series of silkscreens done between 1973 and 1976 and some of the intervened photographs (1973-1978) introduce us into a reflection about the domestic sphere, those everyday tasks associated with women and the responsibilities that women acquire for family life to go smoothly. Is it a simple thing? A plate, some silverware, the necessary everyday intimacy; setting the table for the satisfaction of the those to be fed. Vieira introduces the elements, but she also includes the longings, projections of the future. A train, a ship, a road; signs that materialise the wish to find other ways to live. The blue associated with liberty, from the sea to the sky, frames the furniture.

Gradually, the house bursts, scrutinizes itself and shows its guts. Leaving, going out to the exterior, is a must. Vieira oversteps the boundaries of private and public and brings us to the possibility of another reality. Blue tinges black and white photographs in the intrusion of objects and structures that make up a private identity. The stairs, a wall clock, a chair. Of all these, two are surprising. The reflection of a woman projected in a window; it is literal, we do not know if that female silhouette is an object, like the furniture, or a reflection of that projector drawn at the top of the stairs. And the curtains, curtains that insinuate two of the constants the begin to appear in the artist’s references: movement and visibility.

The installation *Ocultação/Desocultação* [*Hiding/Unhiding*] (1978-2010) is resolved with a direct gesture, marking the architectural limits of the home with the habitual construction materials, that is to say, bricks. The definitive feature is the inclusion of language, which leaves no room for doubt. Vieira marks and writes out everything that she would like to do; perhaps surprisingly, even the action of breathing is included.

Between 2004 and 2008, Vieira creates work that is part of a natural process of evolution with respect to the body, to the corporeal. While until then, she introduced

us into her thoughts using gestures and subtle suggestions, she now makes us take part. Our bodies are to move around the work, touching or, rather, grazing the space and the materials (it is interesting to underline the subtlety, not lacking a certain seduction). In the *Close-Up* series (2004), the artist regroups several of her interests with a special emphasis on internal observation. She delves deeper into the observation of relationships between human beings, on the one hand, and the objects and spaces they live with, on the other. Her work establishes a dialectic between that which is visible and that which is invisible, between exterior and interior, or even between movement and pause. At the same time, she questions the fragility of what we call the politics of the household.

The play and seduction that is inherent in all that is to do with visibility is one again present in the work *Atravessar o Visível* [*Crossing the Visible*] (2008): words reduced to their minimum expression hide behind the white of the page. Like a voyeur, the visitor examines them and seeks to read them coming nearer to the work, the paper and the white tinged with inscriptions.

The spectator's gaze and presence are altered by the challenge posed by Vieira's work. It is the spectator who decides what to see and what not to see. At the same time, the artist's interests have been shaped by a constant need to transgress limits, both on the semantic and spatial levels. Since the nineteen-seventies, Vieira is immersed in a series of projects in which she gradually introduces new challenges: the frame or the medium, the object, the perimeter, the volume; invisibility and movement. Travelling on physical and mental paths, the visitor's perception of and relationship with the work and the space are transformed.

Vieira's reflection on the home, traversed by a multitude of signifiers and signified, is extended from the moment when she introduces socio-political interests and issues. The gesture of going outside is neither easy nor simple. Once the home opens up to the exterior, what do we find? What do the street and the square have in store for us?

Ana Vieira establishes a dialogue with domestic space and with the social fabric; a reflection in which she engages, in some cases, by employing a metaphor from the artistic language. Architecture turns into a framework from which to broach issues ranging from the situation of women in the home to the weakening of the social structure as a result of the 2007-2008 financial crisis. This leads her to reflect on the exclusion suffered by everyone.

In 2014, Vieira creates pieces which represent an important turning point. The objects that accompany the house, those that have reached beyond the limits of the home, undergo a drastic intervention. Vieira splits them open, as though with a scalpel, and shows us the interior. Objects that lash out against the situation of those who live with them. As though the smallest and most personal thing, perhaps an essence, were to wish to abandon its form and search for a new body to inhabit. Between the installation *Sala de espera. Os móveis a afirmarem a sua inutilidade* [*Waiting Room. Furniture Affirming its Uselessness*] and the photographic series *Os móveis a fugirem do seu desígnio* [*Furniture Running Away from its Fate*], the artist proclaims her indignation.

In the first work, we find an empty dining room, which is always a waiting room. Chairs, a table, a hanger, chairs that blend into the walls, beginning to lose their identity and wandering between the colour of the wood and the white of the walls. One chair amongst the furniture seems to rise and completely merge with the wall. Emptiness stirs up the conscience, and not few are the hours that many women have remained in waiting in their own homes, with no other dialogue than that of the silence of the objects. Those same objects that lose their usefulness in a general crisis. The

installation creates a great pause within the space, it freezes time and reminds us of passages of the texts of Kafka or Brecht. What are we waiting for?

The photographic series, on the other hand, reveals the relationship between people and institutions; the images convey reaching a saturation-point. Guts and rebellion, again, but also, wounds and scars.

The project invites to reflect on how, from the outset, and using diverse languages and media, the artist sets forth a series of procedures which place us on a threshold and lead us closer to crossing it. Her frames of action allude to the dialogue between person and space. The aim is to exhibit the mechanisms delimiting our everyday life, that is to say, lend visibility to the relationship of the subjects and their context. In terms of integrity and responsibility, Vieira's body of work, created over more than fifty years of activity, speaks of audacity and strength. With masterful subtlety, Vieira employs the languages of art and architecture to propose new ways of thinking about the life situation of millions of human beings throughout the world, and especially women. Owing not only to being responsible for the organization of most homes, but also to occupying an exceedingly fragile place at a time in which the system that, in theory, supports us hardens. One of the artist's last works is a metaphor for that. *O desenho da menina a fugir do seu suporte* [Drawing of the Little Girl Running Away from her Medium] introduces the audio-visual language for the first time, and with an absolute simplicity, synthesizes and redefines: the silhouette of a woman who is fleeing, escaping from the structure, this time artistic, architectural and social.

Writing about Ana Vieira's work also compels to contemplate the nostalgia, the solitude of generations of women who inhabit homes with no other company than that of objects. Women who construct the individual and collective identity without being acknowledged. In this sense, Vieira's work is an homage. Countless instants that come together not only in the execution of each one of the works, but with all that they come to signify. As she reminds us in one her last statements in 2014, this solitude also translates into social abandonment; into the neglect to which economic forces subject the lives of communities. To leave, to flee, to escape, to run. Like those young girls who inhabit the walls and disappear behind them".

**Exhibition brochure *Ana Vieira: The Home and the Scape*, Palma de Mallorca, Esbaluard
- Museu d'Art Contemporani de Palma, Spain**
