

“What Remains”

Portugal is *my* country and Évora is the city where I was born. It is considered a museum-city, where roots are *shaped by some 20 centuries of history, going as far back as Celtic times*¹. In the 15th century, it became the residence of the Portuguese Kings when its golden age profoundly influenced the architecture in Brazil. The University where I have been graduated “University of the Holy Spirit”, was founded by Jesuits in 1553. The decoration of *azulejos* in this University is considered one of the most beautiful and biggest *azulejo* collection in Europe.

Christianization took place for the first time in Portugal, when it belonged to the Roman Province (called *Lusitania*, area comprising the south of the Douro river), during the Roman Empire (about 44 BC to 1453 AD). German tribes already Christianized - Visigoths - , came to the Iberian Peninsula in the fifth century and joined the Roman. What remains of the Visigoths in Portugal are several churches and archaeological finds. In the beginning of 771, Christianity prevailed in the north while the south was conquered by the Moorish in the *Al-Andalus* period. Territorial boundaries suffered constant changes and attacks from the Christians until they drove Moorish out. As a result, Christianity helped Portugal to be a distinctive cultural and religious entity.

Although I consider important, it is not my intention to write about the history of Christianization in Portugal, but explaining why I have decided to go forward with this group exhibition and clarify the importance of the strong influence of religion in the culture that characterizes the daily life of the Portuguese people. Therefore, I am also carrying this heritage and spreading it consciously and unconsciously through the nature of my work as a visual artist. In the last 5 years, I have been travelling around the world and have been meeting different cultures, religions, ways of being and living. It has been a process of acculturation whenever I change place, and also when I return to Portugal. Now, I am living in Finland and here everything is different.

Working among Finnish and international artists has been an experience which gives me the chance of sharing knowledge, ideas and above all, building friendship bridges. In this sense, I have invited Maija Holma, Minja Revonkorpi and Päivi Hintsanen to share ideas about *ex-votos* and its relation with the Catholic religion. But someone may ask: “What are *ex-votos* about?”

¹ UNESCO (2011) <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/361>

We can say that *ex-votos* are votive offerings that are left inside a holy place in gratitude or devotion to a Saint or Divinity. They may be placed in a church or chapel. These places are normally decorated with *ex-votos* and related with pilgrimage. These objects are left by people who seek for a miracle, a bless or simply want to demonstrate gratitude by writing a text, or leaving a photograph, a painting or a reproduction in wax, wood or metal of a miraculously healed body part.

Now someone may ask: "Why have you chosen this theme?"

I answer: This theme is related with one of my last travels in Portugal and also as a dedication to a village near Évora called Viana do Alentejo. Here, I was, at the age of 7, left in the *Immaculate Heart of Mary*, a Christian Internal College ruled by Nuns. At the time, they had around 60 orphans and 1 mentally disabled girl. I was in the middle of them, but I had a mother and a father, which were in Switzerland and South Africa. I was the only member of the family in Portugal then... and also my grandfather which had tried to visit me and never was allowed until he died, only after I knew the history.

In this college I have learned to sing, to make beds, to correctly fold the sheets, to wash the floor, to pray, to wash my teeth and dry the brush, to check the time in a normal clock, to play a role in theatre for the first time, to hand wash clothes, to prepare the table in lunch time for the dinner, to wash dishes... Here, I have seen the biggest tomato jams, I have seen fireflies for the first time, I have cried and felt how is like to be left alone and far from family care.

In weekends, local community and family friends sometimes picked some girls to spend time in a familiar atmosphere and there were times when I have been picked up to. I remember a place near a Church. In that place there was a traditional party going on. Men were killing a pork, which was attached from a tree upside down, and I remember, after the knife cut, his blood going through his throat. I remember the sound of his despair while he was dying slowly. I remember that every drop of his blood was taken to make food. Women were taking care of it and preparing it while children were playing in the farm. For them, everything was normal, like the wind blowing through the leaves of the olive trees. I remember to visit the Christian Church just beside the farm. The Church was beautiful, dedicated to the Saint Nossa Senhora d'Aires and build in 1748. It is a place of pilgrimage and it was built with the help of the local business and farmers' community which promised to build it if the epidemic problem that was devastating that area would be vanished. Its architecture is characterized by a late baroque style (Rococo) and it has a massive golden Altar in the *Holy Place*. Behind the Altar, there is a

door leading to circular room called the *Miracles House* which was full of old amateur paintings representing people in bed and angels in the ceiling. They were representing miracles. There were wax objects all over the place. These objects were legs, breasts, heads and children bodies. There were hairs inside boxes, there was a giant snake on the wall, and there were photos from soldiers hanging crocodiles and tigers in Africa. There were broken glasses, there were golden and silver old and new frames mixed. There were little hand written messages beside the photos, asking for miracles and protection. I was very impressed.

In the summers of 2004 and 2005, I was working in a Gallery in Portugal named Casa das Artes de Tavira (C.A.T). Near the gallery there was a Printmaking workshop where Bartolomeu Cid dos Santos was working. We have worked together for some period and I was observing his paintings made on old pieces of wood from boats, still caring different layers of ink painted by the sailors, which he carefully selected and collected from the beach. These old pieces of wood, etched and red inked broken stones of white marble, broken glasses and even crystal balls among other organic materials; were carefully gathered in boxes which were hand made by his assistant Miguel Martinho. When Bartolomeu was painting these boxes, we spoke a little about it. I remember him saying: "This is my last one", and in the next week he was starting another. I have helped him to clean the glasses from the boxes and remember him calling them by the name of *ex-votos* boxes. Intrigued by the meaning and beauty of the memory, space and time *assemblage*, as well as his paintings representing mermaids and female figures such as his wife, Fernanda dos Santos, I have after researched and later understood its meaning. He wrote me a letter to Japan saying he was ill. He died just some months later.

After 22 years and after living in U.K, Japan, Azores (Portuguese Islands in the Atlantic Ocean), Germany and Finland, when I returned last year in Portugal, I have visited this church again.

What remains is the same. The only difference is that time passed in me, but not there. There were the same objects, broken glasses and frames, no order nor aesthetic worries... and I have recognized some people who had died in the photos. But the snake was still there, the hair also. I was again very impressed. I felt immediately that it was important to do something about this.

I felt that this faith translates the strong devotion from the local people. I felt that experiencing different cultures and atmospheres through time, gave me a sense of *non-belonging*. I felt I should gather *foreign* sensibility to experience this. Ask them what they think about it and

observe the impact that these objects may have on their own perception of the world and life fragility.

As a Christian, I feel the need of saying thanks to the local community of that place, including the *Immaculate Heart of Mary* College. I feel the need of saying thanks to Bartolomeu Cid dos Santos for showing me the meaning of ex-votos, among other strong life, friendship and artistic values. I feel the need of build bridges between the North and South. I feel the need of showing *what remains* inside me as Portuguese Visual Artist in Portugal. I feel the need of say thanks to Minja Revonkorpi, Maija Holma and Päivi Hintsanen for accepting this challenge and taking part of this collective project.

In this exhibition, the presented works were already made in Finland, but some are partly made in Portugal. They were chosen during the process of developing the collective project. In this sense, it should be clear that the artists already have been developing the chosen works before knowing that they would come to Portugal or that they would accept the proposed challenge.

These artists have been developing their work through different media (photography, sculpture, painting, printmaking, mixed-media...). I think they are not worried if they specialized themselves in just *one* technique of visual expression. Even though they are *professionals* on their chosen media of Visual Art, I guess that the most important is to express their *thoughts, volitions and emotions*², with the material that they *feel* more comfortable about...and it doesn't matter if it is through painting or even through a mysterious play between digital media, photograph and printmaking, like in Päivi Hintsanen's work, per example. In her works, as well in Minja Revonkorpi's, *Lupaus* - that means *Promise* in English and *Promessa* in Portuguese - , a fusion between visual elements representing time, memory, life passage and anonymous messages left by human existence can be perceived by the observer. The artist explained to me that in this work... "There is old couple that is waiting for their son... waiting and waiting because he has promised to come". In Maija Holma's photography is an important part of the way her imperceptible ideas are expressed. Through her sensibility, time rests in the beauty of ephemeral moments which can only stay *alive* and

² KS, Laurila (1944) *Ästhetische Streitfragen*, 2. Ed. Pp. 451-454. In KUISMA, Oiva (2006) *The History of Finnish Aesthetics from the late 18th Century to the Early 20th Century*, Societas Scientiarum Fennica, The History of Learning and Science in Finland 1828-1918. P. 158.

become perceptible under the light of her work. Travels are part of this process, forgotten objects are selected, collected and after *reborn* in a poetical surrogate reality.

Through them, we can perceive mystical and mysterious atmospheres, maybe as a result of the impact that northern natural environment has on the aesthetic perceptions and artistic praxis. In Minja Revonkorpi's, Maija Holma's and Päivi Hintsanen's works, is evident the presence of time passage in life, where imagination produces *objects of contemplation based on material taken from the objective world*³. In them, we can perceive the relation between art and nature and between art and religion.

In these works of art, the life of the artist's spirit is manifested in their individual visual expression of colors, materials and associated sensory stimulus, which in Päivi Hintsanen's sound installation, per example, comes from the people's whispering in a Cathedral in Italy.

Taking the observer to another romantic feature view from the world, the evocation of beauty in the presented works is connected with universal values such as love and religious devotion, in this case, Catholic and Lutheran. Therefore, this exhibition represents a poetical and emotional communication of the artist's state of mind, a mysterious play of symbols and meanings.

*Reality is different. It is – I say it again and again – myth and magic, enchantment and charm. One can use an even stronger expression about it. It is ecstasy.*⁴

Rita Vargas, 21 of August, Jyväskylä, Finland.

³ KUISMA, Oiva (2006) *OP. Cit.* P. 64.

⁴ KAILA, Eino (1943) *Syvähenkinen elämä.* Otava. Helsinki. P. 113.