



BIENAL DE FOTOGRAFIA
LAMEGO E VALE DO VAROSA

THE INVENTION OF CLOUDS

MANUEL VALENTE ALVES

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The scientific definition says that clouds are a collection of water molecules, liquid or solid, that are in the atmosphere, aggregating and disaggregating, which makes clouds ephemeral, fickle. Their restlessness unsettles us because they don't obey the disciplined axes of our representation of the world: space and time. We think of the world based on the notions of place, territory and borders, which don't apply to clouds because they are uncertain in size and configuration. They unsettle us and at the same time fascinate us because they are unrepeatable, intangible, without residence or anchor.

In this exhibition, Manuel Valente Alves frees the theme from literal interpretation towards a progressive abstraction: photography, painting and drawing. The radical nature of his proposal is manifested in the drawings that will be his most refined expression. The exhibition begins with a black and white photograph (2021) in which the clouds have a discreet presence as if they were just a quotation framing a larger issue: a stone fortress stands out on the horizon with the sea in the background. It's a robust presence, but it shows signs of destruction, a reflection of the conflicting interaction between architecture and landscape, between nature and culture.

Manuel Valente Alves has developed work around the concept of landscape, problematising its relationship with the body, memory and politics. The reflection on the complex relationship between nature and culture as human action that runs through this Biennale is present in these clouds that are landscape.

Manuela Matos Monteiro

Exhibition from 20th July to 31st October

Manuel Valente Alves (Abrantes, Portugal) Has a degree in Medicine and as a visual artist has developed work around the concept of landscape, problematising its relationship with the body, memory and politics. He has held around three dozen solo exhibitions and participated in more than forty group exhibitions in various cultural institutions, both inside and outside Portugal. His interest in interdisciplinary thinking and practice has led him to carry out research and curatorial work in the areas of history, philosophy and museology, linking art, science, medicine and visual culture. He is the author, editor and co-editor of books, has organised conferences and curated several exhibitions combining art and science.

<https://www.manuelvalentealves.org/>

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Full curatorial text of the exhibition 'THE INVENTION OF THE CLOUDS'

The scientific definition says that clouds are a set of water molecules, liquid or solid, that are in the atmosphere. These molecules aggregate and disintegrate, which makes them ephemeral in form. In the 19th century, science sought to explain the clouds that until then were the domain of arts and literature. Unlike Keats, who accused Newton of having destroyed beauty and poetry by scientifically explaining the rainbow, Goethe is fascinated with the classification of clouds proposed by Howard ⁽¹⁾ "The man who distinguished the cloud from the cloud". In a text dedicated to Howard, Goethe declares: "My desire to give form to the formless, to

find a principle that can govern the infinite mutation of forms, is equally evident in all my efforts in the scientific and artistic field”⁽²⁾. In 1817, he elaborated an essay in which he presented Howard's classification revised and modified with the title "Camarupa", - name of the Indian deity whose attribute is to change the forms of visible things, a goddess who can weave various forms, among which forming and breaking clouds. In the penultimate line of the poem dedicated to Howard, he writes: “The cloud, rises, thickens, thins, descends: *stratus, cumulus, cirrus, nimbus*”.

The restlessness of the clouds

The restlessness of the clouds is unsettling because they do not obey the disciplined axes of our representation of the world: space and time. We think of the world from the notions of place, territory and frontier that do not apply to clouds because they are uncertain in size and shape: sometimes they stretch, sometimes they compress, ending up disappearing when changing state. Classified, they can be named, but their restlessness makes the comfort of categorization precarious. The time of the clouds is uncertain, not obeying the disciplined agenda of the clocks, sometimes it passes faster in turmoil, sometimes slower in digression in an eternal becoming. Bernardo Soares says that the clouds are “fictions of the interval and the detour”⁽³⁾ which takes us back to our mortal, finite, transitory, precarious condition. Restless, clouds worry us and at the same time fascinate us because they are unrepeatable, intangible, without residence or anchor.

Beyond the clouds

Stieglitz, after a path that marked the history of photography, directs his camera towards the clouds, developing a body of work between 1923 and 1932. The approximately 220 photographs, organized in the work “Equivalents”, present clouds without having the horizon as reference. These are images that correspond to the author's desire to free photography from the level of literal representation of reality. They constitute the first works of photography that can be considered abstract.

Manuel Valente Alves goes further. Like Stieglitz, he frees the theme from literal interpretation towards a progressive abstraction. The radicality of his proposal is manifested in the drawings that will be his most refined expression. In his creative path, he started first with drawings, followed by photographs, then paintings, followed again by drawings that are reconfigured and more connected to painting: the clouds appear entwined in the geometries.

A route, a (mis)path

The exhibition begins with a black and white photograph (2001) in which the clouds have a discreet presence as if they were just a quote framing a larger issue: a stone fortress stands out against the horizon with the sea in the background. It is a robust presence but one that shows signs of destruction, a reflection of the conflicting interaction between architecture and landscape, between nature and culture as a human production. And this conflict can be intuited in the paintings and drawings organized in a line that flow into the video “Chão de Lava” filmed in Tenerife. Consisting of still and moving images, it presents the landscape defined by the Teide volcano and occupied by human presence as if human beings were always testing their limits in the manner of Faust. Underlying this exhibition and so many other works by the author, there is a reflection on the complex and critical relationship between nature and culture.

For Manuel Valente Alves, clouds are not scenery as they are for so many painters, he does not unfold them to analyze them as scientists do, nor does he see them simply as aesthetic objects. He works them creatively and the two artist books and paintings of clouds on a table present his work as if recounting a path in which he mastered the purification of the discourse on clouds.

Invented, the clouds do not lose their identity: they take you further into greater reflection and it is quite possible that in the clouds we will find the drawings of Manuel Valente Alves.

Manuela Matos Monteiro

- (1) On the Modifications of the Clouds and the Principles of their Production, Suspension and Destruction, Luke Howard, 1803
- (2) O Jogo das Nuvens, John Wolfgang Goethe, p.29, Assírio & Alvim, selecção, tradução, prefácio e notas de João Barrento, 2003
- (3) Livro do Desassossego, Bernardo Soares

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