

JORGE MARTINS. *Shadows and Paradoxes*

A WORD BY THE CURATOR

JORGE MARTINS. *Shadows and Paradoxes* is the first major exhibition dedicated to one of the foremost names in 20th-century of Portuguese art to be held in Spain. Still working intensely at the age of seventy-eight, Jorge Martins (Lisbon, 1940) has become a reference within the rich present-day Portugal creative scene, as much for the firmness and independence of his aesthetic pursuit—largely aloof from the to-and-fro of international fashion art that, decade after decade, dictates the collective drift of creation—as for his unique position on the generational map. In fact, the attention his work has lately been garnering among young artists is an important element to be considered now that the time has come to evaluate the pertinence of a body of work such as his, in which impeccable formalisation combines with a continuous search for new approaches and solutions while delineating his visual images.

A leading contribution towards both the vitality of the work and the prestige of the artist was certainly the indefatigable exploration of drawing Martins has been carrying out since his first exhibitions, precisely sixty years ago; in fact, it was his drawings that brought him, already in the late 1970s, to the Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris, where a solo exhibition of his work was held. Drawing, that once 'secondary', if not subordinate, art form, currently enjoys a happy moment of renewed interest in all its aspects, be they conceptual, processual or formal; and Martins is one of its foremost practitioners, not only in terms of the appraisal of its historic successes and limitations during the second half of the 1900s, but also of the horizon line that surrounds it in our aesthetic present.

Our exhibition focuses precisely on drawing, that part of his abundant production in which this artist so excels. Large, dazzlingly versatile drawings where the predominant note is the abundance of registers: from geometry to the expressive gesture; from mathematical order to verbal enunciation in the form of writing, letters or annotations; from the silhouette to the patch, from the figure to the monochrome... Martins does not limit himself to a formula that can be multiplied into infinity by means of variations: unlike what is usual in creators around his age, who exhaustively explore an already conquered territory, our protagonist constantly avoids the repetition of a recognisable repertoire of gestures, marks, formulas or iconographies previously defined by himself as placed under the aegis of the signature.

For the exhibition at MARCO, we are presenting a broad selection of works, representing every productive phase of the artist. From the beginning, we have avoided the concept of retrospective (our exhibition is meant to highlight the remarkable moment Martins is presently enjoying, with a fully open and active studio, where some of his finest work ever is being produced), thus obviating the museum-mausoleum quality that tends to cling to such events. That same reason has led us to refuse the chronological ordering of the exhibits, as well as anything that might have caused the impression of a false linear development across Martins' vast trajectory, where past successes may appear to lead, in a sequential and somewhat unavoidable way, to others, derived and causal, that incorporate them. Things are almost never like that, and in our case that would certainly amount to prevarication. On the contrary, our selection criterion, the exhibition plan and the internal organisation of the book you hold in your hands all showcase how the artist's concerns renew themselves continually throughout the years and decades of his trajectory, growing in a spiral, so to speak, rather than in successive order.

For that reason, we have organised the artist's trajectory in a series of thematic nuclei where his recent works cast oblique gazes in every direction—including the past—in order to generate unpredictable sequences and highlight reflections and illuminations that are transversal in time. Besides that, these are often previously unseen drawings, some of which were still being finished at the time of their selection, and which display the stunning versatility of his syntax, the singularity, richness and refinement of his creative processes and the wide range of iconic elements he handles.

Our exhibition offers a number of new angles to approach Martins' work which enrich and update the abundant critical response to the artist throughout his career. Namely, we will look at drawing as the seismograph of the artist's moods, of his 'vital' and emotional pulse, showing how it is paired, in many of his works, with a remarkable analytic precision and an equally remarkable ability to organise the image's components on the plane of representation. A whole room in our exhibition will be dedicated to this balance of 'hot' and 'cold' moments. Similarly, the performative qualities resulting from the execution of certain works in the large formats that are typical of the artist, who while drawing must often use his whole body, like a dancer, will have a special place within the exhibition's layout. The paper's relationship with the drawing materials, on the one hand, and with the human scale, on the other, plays a decisive role in the physical creation of the pieces. Thus, the dominion of the wrist and the control of the wrist-elbow-shoulder-hip axes are sometimes associated to features of corporeal gestuality, of the body's dislocation (as a whole or just in part) over the paper's surface, like a dance or a gesture, until the desired linear rhythm is achieved. Another part of the exhibition will highlight the limits of the drawing when compared to painting, narrative, architecture, scenography and/or their present expanded fields. In this respect, there is a need to focus on the relationships some of these drawings have developed with other decisive moments in late modern art, such as the French *Supports-Surfaces*, as well as concrete features of Post-pictorial Abstraction, Field Colour Painting and the great achievements of Abstract Expressionism, though subverting in every case many of the canonic premises of their respective poetics, 'translating' them into the graphic codes of drawing. This playful, paradoxical and almost perverse re-reading of canonic late modern tradition is another amazing achievement of Jorge Martins to be suitably highlighted in our exhibition. Finally, his drawing's ability to express such intangible—but not immaterial—elements as light, time, language or space will also come under our scrutiny. Our intention is thus to present as one of the most remarkable features of Martins' work his admirable ability to stage within the limits of the paper leaf, a number of symbolic, spiritual and metaphysical dimensions that are basically uncontrollable outside the plane of the image. The exhibition's title, *Shadows and Paradoxes*, suggested by the artist himself, points out this somewhat unfathomable dimension of art at its core condition: the drawing.

Here we have, then, several intersecting series and sections, which should be looked at in an open, non-linear way, both chronologically and thematically. And all this, shall be finally completed with a selection of his sketchbooks, which will allow to come to light just a sample of the vast work accumulated over the decades in the more than one hundred cards that Martins has completed with annotations, reflections and drawings. These will be the protagonists of a specific publication prepared by the museum, where the reader can enter the dense and elegant intellectual world of our protagonist in which is the first time that an institution collects and studies such valuable materials.

Óscar Alonso Molina
Exhibition curator