

MATERIALIZING THE IMAGINARY

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The Zen master Dhongzhan wrote the *Hôkyô Zanmai*, or *The Precious Mirror Samadhi*, in the ninth century, urging his disciples to look within themselves, not at others, and to liberate their minds from all illusory thoughts and concepts. The precious mirror reflects all those phenomena of the cosmos that appear and disappear freely, while the “samadhi” is a Sanskrit term referring to a state of meditative absorption. *The Stone Woman Gets Up to Dance* is an extract of this text that Pamen Pereira has adapted for this exhibition, in which she sees herself reflected as an artist.

Pamen Pereira is a regular practitioner of Zen philosophy. The time she spent in Japan and her constant travels have been essential in shaping her artistic practice. She seeks life’s meaning through poetic impulse, where, upon organizing chaos, surprise and wonder surge forth. Her works usually find beauty within nature, using it as raw material and transforming it into poetic, mysterious images. This process of transformation is like a journey into her own depths—a journey like the creative act itself, in which interiorization, learning and exteriorization of new experiences ignite the senses.

The exhibition *The Stone Woman Gets Up to Dance* gathers several works of Pamen Pereira going back to the 1990s and presents them in conjunction with new productions. These works portray the facet of the artist-chemist, as can be seen in her manipulation of different materials and media. Thus, earth, air, water, and fire are converted into poetic objects that somewhat ritualistically form a vital cycle within a space. In the same way that a scientist works with matter, an artist works with emotions. Pereira’s matter is the basic elements of life combined with imagination, putting into practice Gaston Bachelard’s notion of “material imagination,” and her emotions are brought about by memory, curiosity, and instinct. The union of both brings her to create works that reincarnate the spirit of Romanticism as well as that of the *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) movement, in which the “storm” emphasized the sublime power of nature as a source of inspiration and “stress” referred to the role of emotions or the will to express how nature only appears confusing.

In this way, the artist searches for unity between matter and spirit. Contemplation of and communion with nature emerges by means of internal adhesion or intuition. It is

therefore intuition that tells the artist to pick up a certain branch that she finds on one of her hikes or to transform an old piece of furniture or clothing. She keeps found objects in glass vitrines in her studio like a scientist would, until their time has come to find their place in an artwork. Pereira works in keeping with the aesthetics of austerity, without concessions to adornment, which underlines her great admiration for the Greek master of *arte povera*, Jannis Kounellis. Yet her art is a far cry from Kounellis's sober, corpulent works. In contrast, her works levitate and glitter in gold, a color that is highly appreciated in oriental culture, as is evidenced in *Kintsugi* art. *Kintsugi* is part of a philosophy that considers fractures or repairs as part of the history of an object. Cracks must be shown, not hidden. Embellishing them with gold exalts an object's memory and transformation. Pereira works with the same philosophy. On a trip to the family farm, she found her grandfather's old, worn jacket. She covered the interior part of the jacket—everything that touched her grandfather's body—with fine gold leaf, transforming a rusty, fragile object into something beautiful and valuable. Entitled *Ramón Pereira, el sol es una estrella* [Ramón Pereira, the Sun is a Star] (2003-2004), the jacket, placed carefully in a varnished wooden showcase with its new gilt interior, brings out the light of her grandfather's love and is reminiscent of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's observations on the reflective power of gold and the importance of shadows in his book *In Praise of Shadows*. Thus, the exhibit adopts a *mise en scène* where shadows highlight the works' beauty.

For this exhibition, Pereira employs not only gold but silver, creating a kind of contemporary *vanitas* to remind us of the transcendence of life and the certainty of death. She combines silver objects with winged vertebrae in an installation that evokes a bullhorn, the horn of abundance, underscoring the exhibition's ritualistic aspect. Traditionally used to store offerings or to communicate in high mountains, the bullhorn reaffirms its presence in *La doma del buey I and II* [The Taming of the Ox I and II] (2015/2016) as an esoteric element.

In the middle of the hall rests a heavy granite bed, a *Lecho de piedra* [Stone Bed] (2001), surrounded by two *Zafus* (2002). The objects bring us back to the meditative process where dreams are the primary influence and introduce us to two fundamental concepts in Pereira's works. First, the presence of the classical elements, perhaps best exemplified by a quote from "[...] the ancient author Lessius [...]: 'Thus some, who are choleric, are chiefly affected in their Sleep with the imaginary Appearances of either Fire or Burnings, Wars or Slaughters; Others of more melancholy Dispositions, are often disturbed with the dismal Prospect of either Funerals, or Sepulchres, or some dark and doleful Apparitions: The Phlegmatick

dream more frequently of Rains, Lakes, Rivers, Inundations, Drownings, Shipwrecks; and the Sanguine abound in different Kinds of Pleasantries, such as Flying, Courses, Banquets, Songs, and amorous Sports.”¹ Each type’s dreams work with the elements that characterize them: fire, earth, water, and air. Second, the confrontation of polar opposites: dreams and meditation suggest that the life we have opens doors to other dimensions—from the ground to the air, from weight to weightlessness, from the material to the spiritual—while, at the same time, the granite bed with sepulchral semblance reminds us of death.

The idea of death is repeated in *Gnosis* (2016), a pile of unearthed bones made from bread. *Gnosis*, a Greek word meaning intuitive knowledge, is associated with esoteric teachings that expose its followers to a path of salvation based on knowledge of certain hidden truths about God, humanity, and the world. However, the bread—a staple food and an essential part of Christian liturgy—is converted into a symbol of death. Pereira had already produced a work with bread back in 1997, tracing the Japanese kanji *mu* (無), the name for the first *kōan* in many collections of texts of Zen Buddhism. Thus, *Gnosis* creates a beautiful communion between East and West, between Christianity and Buddhism, between life and death.

Pereira leads us from *kōans* to the esoteric world of tarot, with works surrealists might define as object-poems—in which the juxtaposition of elements converts the invisible into matter and causes weighty objects to soar or buried things to be unearthed. The elements are fused by impossible encounters such as in *El caballo blanco penetra la flor de la caña* [The White Horse Penetrates the Cane Flower] (2012), where an antlers and a palm flower are joined as if it were their natural, inevitable destiny, or in the two roots of *El sumo sacerdote* [The High Priest] (2010), which form a symbolic union that in the world of the tarot refers to the “real journey”—a journey symbolized insistently by shoes.

In these works, Pereira “makes a testimony based on the very experience of recognition and reflection and her relation with the mysterious forces of nature and the subtle energies related to the conscience.”² I would liken this approach to Chinese painting, calligraphy in particular, where a great deal of mental and physical self-discipline is required to execute a thought in action: “Indeed, before painting a

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas, TX: The Pegasus Foundation, 1983), p. 4.

² Pamen Pereira, “Antartida 2006,” online: <http://pamenpereira.blogspot.com.es/> (accessed 9/1/2016).—trans. KG.

picture, an artist had to go through a long period of apprenticeship, during which he strove to master the many types of brushstrokes representing the many types of beings or things, brushstrokes that were the result of a minute observation of nature. It was only when the painter was in possession of the vision and the details of the outer world that he began to paint. The execution, instantaneous and rhythmic, thus became a projection of the shapes of external reality as well as of the inner world of the artist.”³ Pereira observes and contemplates nature—its constant movement, mutations and transformations—and the cycles that produce its balance, as a way to express existence and to try to understand the dimension of the human being before, and as part of, nature.

Nature is the raw material and the subject of representation in many of Pereira’s works, and it often appears as if the creative process or thought process is more important to her than the final object. Elements from the artist’s studio are a testament to this process. *Gabinete de trabajo* [Bureau] (1998) is a desk which supports a mountainscape made from grease. These mountain ranges are reminiscent of places of pilgrimage or spiritual retreats as a means of understanding one’s self and one’s relation to the world. In fact, mountains are a recurring motif in her work, as can be appreciated in works such as *Vista isométrica del continente antártico vista desde el Mar de Ross* [Isometric View of the Antarctic from the Ross Sea] (2006) and *El curso circular de la luz I* [The Circular Course of Light] (2005), both of which were inspired by the artist’s journey to the Antarctic in 2005/2006. One finds parallels in the creative process of these smoke-made works to other works like *Chaqueta de trabajo* [Work Jacket] (2000) and *Ecuanimidad* [Equanimity] (2015), objects from her everyday environment that bear candle wax drippings, the by-product of her smoke paintings. As such, these works are bearers of time, memories, or stories that develop a life of their own and are the material evidence of this spiritual search—a search that leads her to the “sublime,” a Kantian concept that describes extreme ecstasy that transcends the rational.

There is evidence of ecstasy in those works that deal with the power of nature. *Tampoco el mar duerme* [Neither Does the Sea Sleep] (2015) tries to contain the rough forces of the sea in a small vessel in order for us to feed from its vital energy. Placed on a desk, it resembles a liturgical object on an altar protected by *La mujer de agua sigue cantando* [The Water Woman Continues Singing] (2015), a pair of winged shoes covered in lead scales. Could they be the scales of a fish, or even a dragon? In any case, the shoes seem to want to take flight, incited by a strangely

³ Françoise Cheng, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, trans. Michael H. Kohn (Boston and London: Shambhala), p. 67.

ritualistic audible beat that pervades the exhibition space. While they remain on the ground, held back by the weight of their leaden wings, a nearby flock of swallows hoists the artist's desk into the air, also lifting apothecary bottles, literary reference books and maps, while leaving behind a scent trail of chocolate.

This is *The Second Wind* (2016), an installation where all the elements that summarize the references in the work of Pamen Pereira are found in a state of weightlessness, suspended in time and space. She materializes not only *Sturm und Drang* but also the dynamic imagination of Gaston Bachelard, which indicates how all landscapes are an oneiric experience—a reverie—that leads to contemplation and, on a more conscious level, to representation. The artist creates a fantastic still life with her artistic tools. Written in white chalk on one side of the desk is a quote from Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev*, inspired by the life of the fifteenth-century Russian painter. Pereira shows us the power of nature in the midst of humankind's fragility to later lead us to tranquility with the beating flame of *Voz primal* [Primal Voice] (2015), which condenses matter and energy—the origin of life and the whole universe—within her heart. Again, the opposing poles confront each other in this work with fire, the ultra-living element, which is perhaps the only element that carries the opposing values of good and evil: "It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is apocalypse [...] It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation."⁴ It urges us, as Henry David Thoreau says, to direct our eyes inward, to return to the primary sound of the beating of our heart.

This interior beating is the sublime that makes us face obstacles of great magnitude such as a storm, a volcanic eruption or a tornado. Pereira's cosmos is filled with opposite poles of weightlessness and gravity, heaven and earth, light and darkness, where earth, air, water and fire—the four elements of life—coexist with a fifth element—*mu* (emptiness). "Linked with the idea of vital breaths and with the principle of the alternation of yin and yang, it is the preeminent site of transformation, the place where *fullness* can attain its whole measure. [...] At the same time, emptiness offers human beings the possibility of approaching the universe at the level of totality."⁵

⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C.M. Ross (USA: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 7.

⁵ Françoise Cheng, *Empty and Full*, p.36.

Through emptiness, “man’s heart can become the model or mirror for itself and the world [...]”⁶ And before this mirror, the wood man sings, the stone woman gets up to dance and “the four elements of phenomenal life always end up returning to their origin—the essential emptiness—as children return to their mother, or as rivers return to the ocean.”⁷

⁶ Ibid, p. 53.

⁷ Jianzhi Sengcan, “Comentarios al Canto al Corazón de la Confianza de Taisen Deshimaru,” in: *Xin Xin Ming: Canto al Corazón de la Confianza*, Spanish trans. Dokushô Villalba (self-published, 2009).—trans. KG.