

ANA MARIA PACHECO

Be Aware

Be Aware

ANA MARIA PACHECO

and

ROBERT BUSH

in conversation



Ana Maria Pacheco

A conversation with Robert Bush

RB

Ana Maria Pacheco is known principally for her large multi-figure sculptures in the round, but in fact one of her earliest commissions was for a large-scale relief that still remains in the city where she was born, Goiânia, Brazil. In the following conversation Pacheco explains her continuing interest in relief sculpture and focuses on aspects of her most recent set of seven pieces, 'Be Aware'.

AMP

I have always looked to extend the experience of dealing with images and what lies behind them. The reason I am interested in relief sculpture is because it exists between two and three dimensions. The elements that you have to deal with when working in relief are more complicated as you have there the space that the figures emerge from, unlike in three dimensions where space is all around.

When I was twenty-four, I did a very large relief in soapstone, commissioned by the Clube Jaó, Goiânia. I depicted a historical event in which people from the coast came inland in search of precious stones and

tricked and exploited the natives in brutal ways. It took two years to complete and it is there to this day. After that, my focus was mainly with freestanding sculptures as well as drawing, painting and printmaking, all of which feed into my sculpture. I did, however, make two reliefs in 1996 using Portland Stone, based on the novel *Macunaíma, a Hero without a Character* by Mario de Andrade, a Brazilian writer of the modernist movement.

What really rekindled my interest in reliefs was my spell at the National Gallery from 1999-2000 as artist-in-residence. In this capacity, I had the opportunity to study in depth early Renaissance paintings which evolved straight from, and are quite like, reliefs; think of the work of the predecessors of Giotto and of Giotto himself, for instance. And considering these paintings, I thought it would be interesting to make reliefs and use colour, to push things further. So that was the challenge for me. There is very little precedent in twentieth century sculpture – the famous 'Back' series of Matisse and some Gauguin reliefs come to mind and Eric Gill's, but little else.

I also thought it would be interesting to explore different materials. Having seen in the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Norwich Castle Museum some English alabaster reliefs that became famous across Europe, I

thought it would be interesting to explore this rather beautiful material, all the more so because in the English tradition they were all painted. Of course, many have lost their colour but some time ago, in Santiago de Compostella, I came across an example of a painted relief in perfect condition. All of this resulted in my series of eight alabaster reliefs, *Enchanted Garden*, which I worked on from 2011 to 2015. They were exhibited in Norwich Castle in 2015 as part of a Norwich-wide exhibition of my work.

RB

Marina Warner saw this series as "imagining kindly beings and benign creatures in paradise" and likened it to the dreams of Jorge Luis Borges which "make visible the marvellous, wherever it springs".

AMP

I was also keen to work in wood. To a certain extent the material determines how you approach the form and the subject. So, I was keen to explore three very different materials and see how they would turn out. The only point of commonality would be that I would colour them all, but even so the paint would be applied differently on each one. For example, on the alabaster I would be using tempera, whereas on wood I would adopt my sculpture practice of mixing oil and water by friction.

My reason for using colour is to take to an extreme the use of a form that is between painting and sculpture. My paintings have helped me a lot in the manipulation and application of colour to my sculpture, helping to simplify without becoming reductive.

RB

Your piece of 2012, 'The Turning World', is sculpted in high relief. It's hard to believe the birds are not three dimensional. The title and the birds' perches suggest the cycle of decay and renewal. And I notice the practice of using real objects in your sculptures has migrated here to reliefs. Employing nails to depict a bird's feathers is extraordinary!

AMP

And that practice carries over into Be Aware.

RB

What drew you to the subject of 'sin'?

AMP

Born in a Catholic country, I was familiar with the iconography of religious art from an early age. I have long been fascinated by the so-called dichotomy of vice and virtue and felt that the demarcation between them is far from clear-cut, especially in the terms used to define them. Nor can morality be defined simply by the values of Christianity. From my researches, it is evident that the codification of sin was a means of structuring the act of

confession to enable individuals to unburden themselves. In its way, science has extended this function beyond the field of religion through the practice of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Moreover, on the subject of language, it seems that the initial Latin terms for these 'sins' - these behaviours or states of mind - have, over time, been distorted in translation, in some cases expanded, in others reduced. It is not easy to give each of my images a title but in discussing them it is difficult to avoid.

AVARITIA/GREED

RB

It seems here that the male figure on the right has acquired a crowd of mainly female followers. The only other male is lounging in a hammock, seemingly unaware that he is being hauled along.

AMP

People clever enough to become leaders win hordes of followers who are insecure in their comparative poverty. The leader hauls them along using his strategy - here the technology of wheels - to propel him. Some of the followers are totally unaware of what is happening.



INVIDIA/ENVY

AMP

The English translation of 'invidia' as 'envy' immediately limits its range. In fact, the English word 'invidious' retains more of the Latin range. It seems that 'envy' is regarded as the worst of all sins because, I suppose, it basically implies the wish to replace, or even to destroy, the envied one. In my series of reliefs, I am dealing with human feelings and their translation into cultural values.

RB

This image seems to me the most sinister. It is chillingly monochromatic, apart from the blood-red gloves.

AMP

The background figures owe something to the figures in my sculpture *Shadows of the Wanderer*, where I was playing with different spaces, suggesting different states of human experience: the real, active space of the two foreground figures; the platform and background space of the *Shadows* who have no agency, symbolised by their having no hands; and below, the subterranean space, a fossilised forest which in the relief of *Invidia* is suggested by the skull.

IRA/ANGER

RB

From chilling stasis to red-hot violence.

AMP

Unleashed brutality. I recalled the hooligans of the 1970s, the era of that frightening film, *A Clockwork Orange*. I wonder what happened to all those skinheads and their braces. As it happened, I had at the time a chemise with a small leather strap which fitted the main thug perfectly, so that's where he got his braces from! The use of real day-to-day objects in art is far from new: Picasso and Braque, for instance, incorporated them into their cubist pictures. Among the many objects I have used in my large sculpture ensembles are a real bench in *The Three Graces*, a real ladder in *Remember*, and countless prosthetic teeth in the various heads I have made. It causes the viewer to do a double-take.

ACEDIA/SLOTH

AMP

There is much literature on the history and meaning of the word acedia. 'Sloth' and 'laziness' are only two aspects of a condition which embraces, among others, melancholy and depression. When the Portuguese began their colonisation of Brazil, they regarded the natives as

lazy. In fact, the natives were nomadic and had a quite different pattern of life from the colonisers', who were imposing on the natives their own alien cultural values.

RB

This relief has some of the sombreness of your "Invidia" but intensified by the horizontality and the menace of the harpies.

AMP

They hover as if they are about to devour him. He is passive, semi-naked and has his eyes closed; he is not on terra firma but in suspension and, as such, very vulnerable. If you look closely, you can see that the hovering harpy has a claw in the man's heart. This, I have to say, was not by design but by some kind of intuition. I love the expression 'dullness of the heart' and Pascal's comment: "The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know... We know truth, not only by the reason, but also by the heart."

LUXURIA/LUST

AMP

In this relief I have deliberately set up a space that suggests one interpretation but could be read in reverse. At first glance it seems obvious that the four men are behind bars and gazing lustfully at the four women, but

in fact the reverse is equally possible. I love the story from *The Arabian Nights* in which a genie has a lover who sleeps with many other men. He is so annoyed he has her locked away in a box and sent to the bottom of the sea. Someone comes along and says, "I heard you locked her in a box and sent her to the bottom of the sea. You know what...She goes out every night!" When a woman wants something, she will get it.

RB

It's true, you can read the image as four males behind bars being sized up by the women, but I am also reminded of all the disembodied heads you have made in the past...

AMP

The head is the seat of intellect. The women are more rounded in their diaphanous garments.

GULA/GLUTTONY

AMP

Through science we know that food can be a subterfuge. Eating to excess is a symptom of mental health problems, especially in the West where food is so abundantly available. The figures below are like shadows that infest you when, like Gula here, you have lost your grounding.

SUPERBIA/PRIDE

RB

This is quite an enigmatic image.

AMP

Many paintings on this subject show a woman admiring her reflection in a mirror. Indeed, the figure in my relief initially held one herself, but not only was it too small in the composition, I also felt it was hackneyed. The more I thought about the subject, the more I thought that the danger of pride lies ultimately in losing awareness of our finitude. Hence the ground littered with skulls and bones, the surrounding flames and the neglectful *Superbia*. The cat's cradle she holds suggests her delusion that she is in total control.

Right: *Superbia/Pride*, 2022 (detail)

Be Aware 1-7, 2022

Relief

Polychrome wood and mixed media

Each: 28 x 38 (depth variable)



Published

PRATT CONTEMPORARY

The Gallery, Ightham

Sevenoaks, TN15 9HH

07704 626747

pca@prattcontemporaryart.co.uk

Works referred to in this publication
can be viewed on the following websites

www.prattcontemporaryart.co.uk

www.anamariapacheco.co.uk

Text

Ana Maria Pacheco and Robert Bush

in conversation

Photography

Neil Webster

Copyright

Ana Maria Pacheco, *Be Aware*, 2022

©Ana Maria Pacheco. All Rights Reserved 2024/ Bridgeman Images

PRATT CONTEMPORARY, UK

