

The Honesty of Drawing

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The Stone of Madness is one of Laura Mesa's most horrible drawings.

It is a piece that consists of a variable number of figures that look like fragments of brain mass, elaborated reproducing a model of the human brain at a full scale, a detailed model - divided into eight parts, four per hemisphere - of those used for anatomical studies. The figures are made of pure graphite stuck together; they represent solid drawings, more than two hundred strange pieces of brain, like a rhythmic collection of black brains in a redundant scientific cabinet, two hundred methodical reproductions of reproductions of a human brain. They are also, literally, pencils.

The piece makes reference to a small oil painting on panel, attributed to El Bosco or one of his followers, displayed in El Prado: *The extraction of the stone of madness*, of 1501. In the image there is a healer practicing a trepanation on a man to extract a stone from his head, supposedly causing mental illness. The artist presented the scene in a sarcastic tone, showing that the surgeon is a charlatan and the patient an imbecile, talking about the trickery, the ignorance and the abandonment of science. It is not known with certainty if this type of surgery was performed in the Middle Ages or if the image is only a comic fantasy, but it seems certain that many people really believed that evils like madness or epilepsy were caused by a stone that was lodged in the brain; a solid object that, if it could be extracted, would take away disease of the mind.

The idea that madness can be represented by a physical object, alien to the brain, is a fascinating superstition, in that it presupposes a transcendental link, alchemical in nature, between mind and matter. For Laura Mesa, this bizarre belief constitutes a suggestive mythical image, literary, that marks the brain itself not only as engine of thought but as the physical substance it materialises into. Also reflecting on how creative and advanced speculation has sometimes considered madness to be; then that stone in the brain would be something like the matter in which lucidity takes shape. For the artist, the fact that thought can be located in a material object with its own weight and volume, and that is consequently "removable, and therefore, unity", allows us to look into an interesting topic: how ideas nest in the matter of the work of art.

At this point, Laura Mesa dialogues with the tradition of conceptual art. In 1963, Robert Morris acted as if the aesthetic quality of a work, being something immaterial and incorporeal, was differentiable and separable from its material support. Morris's movement originated as an act of professional reparation: that year he had sold *Litanies*, a small piece of metal, to an architect who did not pay him within the payment deadline. The artist then issued a statement before a notary where he withdrew from that work "all aesthetic quality and content", and declared "that from this date onward [November 15, 1963] the work mentioned would lack any quality and content whatsoever."

This notarial deed, attached to a graphic description of Litanies, constitutes the Document piece, which was curiously purchased by the same architect and, this time, paid to the artist accordingly. Did he really leave Litanies to be a work of art? It is a good topic of conversation; at the moment the piece, which according to its author lacks artistic content, is currently in the MOMA collection. What is interesting here is that Morris' statement presumes that the artistic value of a work of art, although immaterial, is an object, therefore a unit and therefore removable. In other words, if the outrageous characters of Bosch suspected that madness can be extracted from the brain in the shape of stone, an indignant Morris declared just the opposite: that it is possible to extract the madness from the stone.

Both ideas seem equally absurd, but they make you think. In proposing the brain as a stone in her work, Laura Mesa plays with both ideas: she states that her works can be considered solidified thoughts, turned into objects and units, and that at the same time they are mere physical supports of some contents or aesthetic values that can only be attributed externally and conventionally. Therefore, at a general level, the interest is in speculating with the mind as a visual figure to talk about issues that have to do with processes of representation.

The image of a human brain is eloquent because it is obvious, it is the most highly used icon of thought. However, it is also a complex metaphor. It must be considered, first of all, that conventional images of the brain are no more than elaborate representations of an organic material that would be very difficult to interpret, or merely conceive, without being anatomists. That is, they are conceptual syntheses, ingenious visual artifices designed to understand a complex reality. But above all, it is necessary to bear in mind that, in relation to knowledge, the physical form of the brain is nothing but inert matter, since the mental processes it harbours are essentially connections of an electrical nature, and therefore immaterial. In this way, it can be said that the relationship of brain with thought is similar to the relationship between a work of art and its aesthetic content; in both cases we speak of a physical substrate that can be perceived as an object, but which has meaning only as a container and trigger of a system of relationships or connections as valuable as intangible.

We can say, then, that drawing a brain aims to represent the machine to be represented. With this in mind, Laura Mesa turns a model of the brain into the cornerstone of her exhibition: all the works have been made using processes of reproduction, recording, trace or tracing of that same matrix, which adds one more phase to the sequence of the representation. The whole work unfolds between layers of successive codifications, some derived from seriation processes, and others from the use of technical and rhetorical devices of drawing.

Drawing is a means whose practice necessarily imposes a very obvious code system, so much so that it always remains uncovered: let us say that it is feasible to generate effective illusions, journeys, through painting, sculpture, photography or video, but the drawing is condemned to exhibit its artifice, blessed by the precariousness of fundamental resources: the pencil line, and the ink stain. Laura Mesa elevates these two techniques, central to artistic drawing from modernity, graphite and ink, to a status of conceptual elements: they are so associated with the codification of drawing and its cultural readability, that they can be considered already the same, rhetorical mechanisms of representation. Therefore, what the artist does when using

these materials to produce her brain reproductions is, literally, to draw, and not only because she works with the techniques, but, fundamentally, because she activates the conceptual machinery of drawing to create representations significant of a given reality. Reality that, in turn, in an eloquent circular movement, is a representation of the conceptual synthesis of a much more complex reality: the human brain, understood as a physical body and also as an iconic abstraction of the concept of knowledge.

With these material and theoretical components, Laura Mesa creates solid drawings, objects of solid graphite and ink, which places her works in an interesting space of conflict. To understand this, we must know that drawing was always the most direct medium between thought and its representation. Only the pencil lead is between the artist's body and the paper. The drawing is the most faithful trace of the movement of the hand, for that reason it speaks of the immediacy, of crude ideas, of the spontaneous and full freedom of the imagination; it is a means contingent in itself, immaterial, slight, ephemeral and elusive, it is related to the ethereal and the accidental, to the air and spirituality. When drawing, artists undress, they have nowhere to hide, they cannot mask their artifices. That's what Laura Mesa refers to when she considers drawing as an "honest means"; and for that reason it can be said that her drawings, at least those part of this exhibition, are horrible, because they are perverse; because they flee from what they were meant to be in order to become something different: graphic signs with volume and weight, which are also meditated, contrived, refined, the result of laborious, complex and rhetorical work processes. And it is precisely within this conflict that her drawings permeate, mature and lucid but also delicate and suggestive, where the interest and value that they have as works of art unfolds.

Let's take their Chinese ink pieces as an example. First, they look like crumpled papers, which implies an inversion of the first characteristic of the drawing: here is the stain that registers the texture of the paper, and not the other way around. However, this visible rhetorical game is not, in reality, but the visible trace of the measured and convoluted technical process that allows the author to reproduce the shape of a tissue paper enveloping a fragment of the brain model in Chinese ink. This produces a mechanism of multiple and sequenced registration by which the original form ends up inscribed in a solid spot of ink, generating a vestige-image, a barely recognisable residue of what it was. This fragment of reality fossilised in ink is the end point of a reproduction process destined not to represent its object, but the impression that that object generates on paper, so that it, paper, as an intermediary between the shape of the brain, symbol of thought, and the final piece, the significant matter of thought, speaks poetically of drawing as a space of tension between idea and matter. These works are delicately introspective and mysterious, but their quiet beauty opens when you see them up close, feeling the reflections and the smell of dry ink; by glimpsing the poetry of a contained, petrified drawing.

In *The Stone of Madness*, on the other hand, the brain model is faithfully reproduced, which is presented very clearly as meta-representation. The work unfolds as the exhibition of a collection of serial objects, imitations of an original assumption, which have been produced manually through a specific reproduction process. It is not a mechanical process, but artisanal, and therefore no two pieces are exactly the same, so here, the issue of representation lies in terms of the duality between the one and the multiple - the real as that which is equal to itself and different from its representations. It is a frequent method used by Laura Mesa: from *Epiculture* (2016-2017) to *Column* (2018), she frequently configures her works as

accumulations of copies or variations of a model; products of the same repeated action to achieve, according to its author, highlight its absurdity or insignificance.

With this system, the artist seeks to place her work in tension between the concepts of repetition - multiple is not a single or genuine object, it is the same one repeated - and different - through an intentional and attentive care of the object, it is individualised -. In this balance, the seriation in the works of Laura Mesa does not refer to the industrial productive processes of modernity, its purpose is not to obtain multiple objects with which to speak of banality or depersonalisation. On the contrary, their interest is to focus attention on the process that originates these objects. The seriation expresses the rhythm of a sustained action, which is always different despite being the same.

The methods used by Laura Mesa to create her pieces are translated into a series of artisanal reproduction processes, costly, imperfect and economically inefficient. The dimension of the human impregnates the results of seriation, and not only because they are visible in the objects an inevitable irregularities that differentiate them, but, above all, because the multiple function as evidence of a certain "ethics of doing": even when much of her work consists of a routine process of manual copying, it is the artist herself who carries it out, not because her hand is key, but because "it is what she has to do". Laura Mesa proposes the recidivism in action and caring for objects in an ethical dimension, aware of doing the same thing over and over again. For the artist, these serials imply "a constant, repetitive movement that almost becomes a mantra during the creative process and that becomes a fundamental part of the construction of pieces". In other words, the proactive value of this serial action is ultimately the main meaning behind her drawings.

Laura Mesa relies on Deleuze to highlight the importance of this attitude: in her thesis *Difference and Repetition*, the philosopher claimed "to make the movement itself a piece; without interposition; to substitute direct signs for immediate representations ". If this proposal is sensible and the movement itself -understood as the sustained action of the artist- can be conceived as the true content of his work, then through these processes as the intentions of the artist are really inscribed in his drawings, even if like a certain shadow, like a smell or a barely audible echo. That is to say, when presenting her work as a movement, Laura Mesa converts her motives into the theme of the work - the motives of drawing - understood as the motivations that lead her to do what she does.

Observing these pieces, therefore, requires listening to the rumour of the way they have been created, inscribed in their drawing. In *Mito* (2017), she patiently fabricated hundreds of spheres of tissue bound together with egg tempera and white ink. In *Ascension* (2017), she made a mould of the scar on her back to make hollows from the furrow of her skin in paraffin and gold leaf. These processes belong almost to an intimate area, to the place where the author recognises herself as a person and as an artist, in which she finds that her actions makes sense, in that she assumes her responsibility to do what she must do, transcending what she had to pursue and what she wants to be. And there is no mysticism in this, transcendence is not sought, there is nothing illuminating in making several hundred pieces of solid graphite; on the contrary, it is rather a tedious and routine work whose importance lies in the fact that it is right there, in that intention, where Laura Mesa expresses the value of her personal responsibility, of her freedom.

At this point, it is easy to see that while the artist admires the essential honesty of the drawing, her work overflows with rhetoric, veiling and subtlety. That is why *The Stone of Madness* is a horrible drawing that composes a silent and rhythmic image, as delicate as it is intelligent. But the important thing about Laura Mesa's work is that she thinks and activates her drawings to condense her motives in them, her intentions; her pieces are, in short, thought expressed through an action. Hence, the honesty of her drawings does not lie in her subject, but in her work; in the "constant and repeated movement" of the artist, which is the sign of her will to be. In truth, the ethics of art, its possession, lucidity, and much of its aesthetic quality, does not take shape in stone, but in madness.