

THE ANATOMY LESSON.

(...) For the first time since leaving the ward, she felt a shiver, it seemed as though the stone slabs would freeze her feet, as if burning them, let's hope this isn't a fever, she thought. It wouldn't be, it is just an infinite fatigue, a desire to coil up within herself, the eyes, most of all the eyes, turned inwards, more, more, more, until they are able to reach and observe the inside of her own brain, where the difference between seeing and not seeing is invisible to plain eyes. Slowly, even more slowly, dragging her body, she went back, back to where she belonged. (...) SARAMAGO, José. *Blindness*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 1995, p. 157. (as translated by Sofia Barbaresco)

A white blindness, made of light (and not of darkness) proliferates for no apparent reason among the characters of Saramago's book, Blindness. I am reminded of it when I visit Raquel Nava's studio, echoing the feelings that her paintings awake in me. I'll begin by commenting on two small excerpts.

1. (...) an infinite fatigue, a desire to coil up within herself(...)

To fully engage yourself in a task, to be prepared for complete immersion in your decision to build, to face yourself in the vast space of the unknown, are conditions of art. Not the only ones, and not exclusively, but they are there and it is impossible to imagine it any other way. A fatigue that causes shivers seems to me an accurate image, a metaphor for this dedication. The complete exhaustion that the exchange of an entire world ought to require. Not fatigue as a result, a weight, or a price to pay, but as a dimension, as a necessary form and state. A state as intense, immense and absolute as fatigue.

Likewise, coiling up within yourself, gathering your limbs, decreasing your area, reducing friction, encompassing yourself in contact, all as a return to comfort. The image transmits the necessary settings for a great interior adventure to the self, in the process of building a personal universe.

2. (...) the eyes, turned inwards, more, more, more, until they are able to reach and observe the inside of her own brain,(...)

Word for word, Saramago's text seems to correlate with my visit. In this passage, the Portuguese author mirrors a process, an artist sinking into her search for pictorial terms. Going deep inside herself, to the point of seeing her own organs. I'm not proposing a purely figurative meaning of these words. I truly believe that this inward dive is possible and the paintings in Raquel Nava's studio demonstrate this trajectory.

I imagine that this course could have begun by closing one eye and fixing my sight on the point of my nose. Little by little, as I push away the world around me, I concentrate on the shadows that my own eyelids make on the bridge of my nose, and from there I slip inside myself, quickly glimpsing the passage between

my eyelids, then I endure the darkness up through the back of my eye, slipping further back, back to a wall where images are stored, and I go further "more, more, more," without the fear of not being able to return through the same opening, "back to where she belonged."

From left to right, paintings by the artist, no title, acrylic and metallic varnish on canvas, 2010 and an x-ray of

a skull. (www.radpod.org)

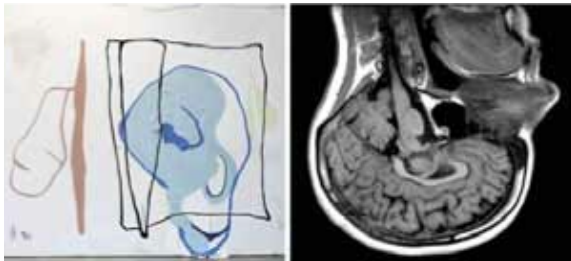
Raquel Nava paints a broad surface of non-color, sometimes white, sometimes red, praising the paint as it runs, like skin that settles onto bones, wrinkling as if time accelerated and then came to an abrupt stop, simply because it felt like it. I say non-color in reference to the idea of environment that the artist lends to the surface, as opposed to background. There is no perspective, nor the intention of continuity in her use of a broad monochromatic surface.

This non-color (can it perhaps be called shadow?) seems to construct blurred surfaces, so as to give the subjects prominence, and the physical support fades into a blind spot. The broad surface (of color or non-color, of light or shadow, of body or place) serves as an environment, not a background, upon which solid forms and arabesques float. An internal space – made up of fullness and emptiness – that is reached through tactile awareness of its limits and surrounding space.

By paraphrasing the name of a Rembrandt painting for the title of this text, The anatomy lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp (De Anatomische les van Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, 1632), my intention is not to restrict meanings. For me, the use of anatomical investigation as an origin for imagery in the artist's work is as interesting as the classic notion of canvas as a space to accommodate its subjects; as an environment to organize the group's actions, showing a frozen dynamic through painting.

The ordering of spaces in the artist's work gains a core value – the occupation of space – as a basis for the construction of a thought. This order, which dates back to classical painting, establishes unity in Raquel's exercises with different media and lays the foundation for her foray into the construction of a personal language.

However, the artifices of academic painting were overcome. There is no chiaroscuro, there are no layers of varnish to sugarcoat the chromatic passages, there is no shading to hide or abstract its structural axis, nor is there lighting in important areas of the piece. Instead, the scenes are open spaces full of blinding light, white, red or two bodies of color touching, squeezed, one over the other. Set loose on wrinkled skin of synthetic enamel, we see folds, grains of matter, nodules, all their own things, and the logic of a body that the artist visits.



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Raquel Nava treats the piece's structural support as an area to be conquered, disregarding its physical limitations. All her pictorial space is on a continent larger than the eye can reach – containing pentimento, decisions and abandonments - but rarely bearing the body than you imagine. Here, the delicate results do not hide their spent breath and muscles.

I would like to compare one of her paintings with a classic example, using the artifice of the negative of each one, side by side. Below I present one of her works (untitled, collage, acrylic paint

and metallic paint on canvas, 2008) and the cited work by Rembrandt. I make this comparison in an effort to study her work, with the modesty that ought to go with one who reveals the anima in an analysis procedure, and which should not be assumed as a method of the artist.

Above, the mentioned work of the artist. From left to right, the same image in positive and negative, respectively.

Above, a reproduction of *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*¹ Rembrandt van Rijn Harmenszoon, 1632. From left to right, the positive and negative of the same image, respectively.

Raquel Nava does not do informal abstraction. Her painting is rooted in the figure, from which derive the organic forms she creates. Her environment is not in any way abstract. Her areas of color are recurring images, silhouettes modeled from memory, as one who seeks a lock that fits the keys left in your hands. Her toil is recorded on the surface of the painting, done with fingers, brushes, instruments, and their services remain visible in the frozen image. The speed of a broader brush, the lightness of a very long brush, held by the tip of its rod, the natural drip of the color. Time is made visible in each piece.

¹ This artwork is in the public domain because its copyright expired. This is valid in Australia, Brazil, the European Union and all countries where copyright is protected for the life of the author plus 70 years. [Editor's note]



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She stores acute feelings, figures imprinted on the retina, floating between shapes who settled in the macula, illusions held by the persistence of the image, trying to compare patterns as if they created a vocabulary, as if she were trying to recognize where she was, as if she searched through a drawer crammed with stamps. Raquel exchanges memories as one who seeks the final pieces that are missing in the game and this game takes place in the relationship between areas of color, the simple and original nature of painting.

The shape of an amphora is persistent among her symbols, open as in the symbolism of the eternal feminine or closed as in the reproductions of archaeological artifacts. Handles, spouts and bottlenecks replicate vaginal cavities, glorify penile appendages, and portray penetrations viewed from the inside. A narrative of battles, just as the classical inscriptions that decorated these

vessels, in which heroes wield weapons, the figures aligned in a zigzag fashion.

From left to right, a painting by the artist, 2009; schematic drawing of an elongated amphora, another painting by the artist, same as presented above, 2008; picture of Greek amphora (Louvre Museum, publicity, www.acemprol.com).

Raquel's visual field also resembles the images of medical tests, examining the body, cutting off each part, whether they be hard or soft tissue, bone or visceral. The forms of the painting are based on the lines and contours of groups of organs (the thin veins and solid parts that make up the animal) and are complementary to objective figuration she develops in other media.

Raquel Nava also makes drawings, videos and photographs, installations and performances, subjecting the body to a meat grinder, laying on it vipers, viscera, vermin and vessels. Literally. Different media that complement each other through the need to define a territory.

In her videos a simple focus on the central event - a scene captured in India or on the floor of the studio in Asa Norte - can distract us from the action among the masses of colors, the space between forms, the negative that surrounds the figures, patterns of pictorial origin. They are, repeatedly, the same spaces that we find in her painting. If only we could get away somewhat from the edited narrative of hundreds of fragments of film, in hypnotic editing cuts, colors and images, maybe we can focus on the key frames that are repeated in the obsessions of the artist.

Ground beef, one of her videos, stays fixed on a shot of cows and animals in a pen, tied to the prospect of sacrifice, replacing deaths with systematic dilutions of the image into points and fragments of color, simple light signals or a microbiological culture for laboratory analysis. The texture resembles the wrinkled enamel on canvas a political character stands out in the image.



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In her drawings, Raquel Nava records her plans of action as calligraphic notes, practicing with the crimson spots of cochineal beetles (both an allusion to hormonal flows and an appeal to the political content that guides their research) and accumulates exercises with the wires of a pen, as if waiting for a electrical discharge. She experiments with the pornography of suffering, shown in her photograms, and does so without restricting herself to gender issues.

Cochineals, a subject of the artist's lengthy investigations, led her to the desert of Nazca in southern Peru. Carmine acid, a dye widely used by multinational companies that control the global food production, has its price set by scalpers on the street. Dollar, gold and beetles are assimilated in the local financial market. In an installation piece, the artist organizes her anxieties about the subject, summarizing her notion of sculpture by bringing together photos, maps and objects. A piece of metal (in the form of a clamp or rod) joins together the cactus that serves as home for this little insect (a plague parasite) and the drawings of geoglyphs that scratch that ancient land. The

loaded gun over the image establishes the relationship between heavy metals, whether they be cast in solid form or diluted into chemicals on a surface, formulating an equation: body + environment = action. A perfectly horizontal line drawn on the map reveals a fatality, a bond, and is transferred as a tattoo to the body of the artist.

Her photographs are experiments which recreate a pink body, solid, made of frozen milk and pigment, an explicit nipple, swollen, simply food. The meanings of the words "being" and "food," are mixed, mixing up the body and the background, separated by a thin contour line that barely supports what is about to melt, thawing in front of the camera or diluting out of the focus. Or they are photographs of a metal figure, dipped in goo, transformed into stain, and stored inside. An object of worship sheltered in a dense environment, a memory objectified, like in the obsession with inserting objects into the body, causing bleeding.

A glossary of the pictorial universe of Raquel Nava also should include words like abyss, bag, belly, cliff, crack, cup, horn, hymen, membrane, sewing, string, womb. But also, anesthesia, cloth, cramping, cut, footprint, numbness, rag, scar, shiver, step, trail. Raquel compresses, leaks, pushes, punctures, sticks, stretches, ties. Heaps, penetrates, ravel, and stacks.

We must remember that the work of an artist is not just that we see. It is always something else, bigger, something still about to be. The work that we see exists because it has outdone itself, and not because the work is complete. There is no finitude in any breakthrough and to make art is to practice and inaugurate discoveries.

Raquel Nava accepts the physical nature of her questions and gives her work an endpoint like someone who ties a balloon filled with air, to the limit of its being, to surpass the conquered body.

Ralph Gehre September, 2011