

ECO | ECHO based on a true story  
curated by Nico Oliveira & Nici Oxley

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## ECO | ECHO based on a true story

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Curated by Nicolas de Oliveira & Nicola Oxley

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OPENING 15 JAN. 10 pm

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*All knowledge is enveloped in darkness. What we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow-filled edifice of the world. (1)*

'To paint the echo while facing the silent mountain...the sound like a sculpture, a body moving to and fro in space' (2), writes Luis Paulo Costa on describing the process of the canvas *Eco* (2018) – a shimmering white mountain. It is an apt metaphor for an oeuvre that is defined by repetition, erasure, and return. He does not advocate a fresh or innocent look, since what truly matters deserves to be reprised, contending that 'to look again is not the same as to see for the first time', but infinitely richer.

The exhibition *Echo/Eco: based on a true Story* takes the form of an artistic essay, it is 'a momentary staging of objects that are constantly in motion as they make their journey between the studio, museum, gallery, collection, reproduction and onwards. Each encounter and each contact adds experience, pulling the artwork out of the past into a series of presents. An exhibition can either report or experiment – it may confirm something that is already known such as art historical facts, aesthetic continuity, artistic progression and so on; at other times, exhibitions may also challenge received ideas and examine the boundaries of practice.

Though Costa's output has included sculpture, photography, video, digital imagery and installation, his is essentially the work of a painter, a realization that becomes abundantly clear in this exhibition. Regardless of material attributes, the sharp painter's eye always shapes the work, an Occam's razor that peels through the layers of replayed images, in an attempt to depict the world, not as it is, but as it should be.

Working with images from the Internet, print media, and his own photographs. Costa frames, cuts and manipulates them, inkjet-printing the results onto canvas. Finally, each image is scrupulously repainted in oil; the action presents a paradox of simultaneity: the act of painting both reveals and obscures the image with each gesture.

But each painting reproduces the image beneath according to the quality of the reproduction. This accounts for the paintings having quite distinct and different surfaces. However, none of the works are entirely flat, since the labour is always rendered visible by the subtle texture of the brushstrokes, and indeed of the canvas. Accordingly, the artist reveals the 'action' of painting itself, a textured agglomeration of painted gestures. But these are not mannered, they do not serve to demonstrate the painter's virtuosity or imagination, but rather the consistent application of a certain conceptual principle. It is not about the painter but the (idea of) paint.

*Sete igual a um* (2018), an installation composed of 7 seemingly identical grey paintings illustrates the principle. Closer observation reveals subtle variations in the panels that show sections of sky and are fragments from a larger, cut up canvas. Critic Shirley Ann Jordan asserts that 'while several objects may be mutually defined at once, no one may ever be defined in isolation.

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(1) W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, Vintage, London, 1998, p.18-19.

(2) Luis Paulo Costa, email correspondence with curators de Oliveira and Oxley, 22/7/2018.

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Nothing is knowable in itself, but only in its relationship with other objects.' (3)

Waiting for the Snow (2018) supports the above argument for meaning to reside in the oscillation between objects. It features a number of slim, galvanized metal poles painted in the alternating colours of black and yellow and inserted into the gallery floor. Seen together, they delineate an ambiguous, hypothetical territory whose riddle can only be solved in consultation with the title; we are momentarily propelled into some future wintry time when snow will pile up in the space, its depth measured by the poles.

Costa's renown continues to grow as he reaches his most productive, mature phase; and whilst his core vision remains undimmed, and his beliefs held fast to, his rich and varied oeuvre has acquired a renewed painterly urgency. The Kantian differentiation between 'Vorstellung' -a mental picture or idea- and 'Darstellung' -a representation- is useful since it elaborates on the relationship between the immaterial imagination and the tangible display of something already present. (4) The oscillation between these provide a central dialectic in the artist's work.

Accordingly, an object and its representation are distinct entities, held at a distance from one another. But perception seeks to present unified experiences, rendering the world as a picture, according to philosopher Martin Heidegger, while the artwork becomes the object of subjective experience.(5) Costa's series of paintings from 2018 depicting hands shaped to cast animal shadows examines this paradox. The hands cast no reflections on the wall, the only shadows in evidence being those on digits and palms, rendering the ludic gestures entirely futile. A similar approach can be seen in the earlier work Interior (Jarra) 2010, which shows a bunch of wilting flowers held upright by an invisible support. The title points towards a vase, but the latter is omitted from the painting. The fact that we cannot witness something does not mean it is not present.

This truism lies at the heart of the European still life tradition in painting in the 16th and 17th Centuries. The depictions of vessels, plates, game, fish and vegetables laid out on tables and plinths suggest hermetic completeness, worlds unto themselves. And yet, much persists beyond our grasp, since the backs of the objects remain invisible to the eye, like some pictorial dark side of the moon.

Echoing the approach of the classic *natura morta* the exhibition presents two large-scale works Composition (Table) (2018) and Composition (Carpet) (2018). The floor arrangement presented on an industrial grey carpet commingles objects from 2004-2018 – open and closed cardboard boxes, a wastepaper basket, paper bags, ventilation covers – painstakingly painted so as to be identical to themselves. A similar slant is taken for the elongated table display, which brings together carbonized fragments of wood, repainted in a glossy black skein that replicates their surface, bleached-out bunches of asparagus and a pair of flattened white gloves. The installations are also referred to as *Artificialia*, and *Naturalia*, the manmade and the natural, recalling the taxonomies employed in the displays in 'Cabinets of Curiosity' by early collectors. A set of canvases under the generic rubric *Based on a true Story* accompany the installations, depicting aspects of the displays. But rather than showing them under the glare of the gallery's spotlights, the new paintings are crepuscular, using only the muted blacks and greys of nighttime. The paintings *Espargos brancos* (2018), give the bundled vegetables the appearance of something spectral, of bleached bones penetrating the gloom.

These double repetitions tie in with the literary and cinematic technique of 'mise en abîme', a reflexive strategy where the content of the medium is the medium itself – the story within the story. This infinite regress is the paradigm of the referential nature of images, the way they are incapable of reaching the bedrock of reality, like the infinity mirror that does not know when to stop.

By reducing the light in the works, the artist invokes the sensation of the Nocturne, a tradition so effective in art and music, from James Abbott McNeill Whistler's lugubrious, meditative paintings to John Field's and Frédéric Chopin's piano compositions.

*The pale stars were sliding into their places. All about them it was still and shadowy. It was a moment when, for a lack of a visible horizon, the not yet darkened world seems infinitely greater – a moment when anything can happen, anything can be believed.* (6)

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(3) Shirley Ann Jordan, *The Art Criticism of Francis Ponge*, W.S. Maney & Son Ltd, 1994, p.32.

(4) F. Scott Scribner, *Matters of Spirit: J. G. Fichte and the Technological Imagination*, University of Pennsylvania Press, PA, 2010, op.cit.

(5) Martin Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*, in A.I.Tauber (ed), *Science and the Quest for Reality. Main Trends of the Modern World*. Palgrave Macmillan London, 1977.

(6) Olivia Howard Dunbar, *The Shell of Sense*, in *American Fantastic Tales: Terror and the Uncanny from Poe to the Pulps*, 2009, Literary Classics Inc., p.333.

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De Olhos fechados (2018) shows a nocturnal view of a house, its windows shuttered and opaque. The dwelling is further obscured by what appears to be a partially reflective, misted windowpane interposed between the eye of the spectator and the subject matter. As the title suggests the blurred quality of the surface renders it akin to an oneiric experience.

These works invite the audience to observe, to reflect, and to become attuned to the 'scripted space' of the exhibition. There is no disclosure of a narrative, but rather an emphasis on a tone or mood we might call an atmosphere:

*An exhibition is a kind of atmosphere: we find ourselves, for a time, airlocked in the artificial environment that the works and the space conspire to enclose.[...] An atmospheric art - an art, that is, which enfolds itself into the dark, which hints at affinities and correspondences across time, which evokes rather than narrates, inspires rather than argues - may well be the art that most closely answers our sense of wonder and curiosity. (7)*

The chiaroscuro tones of Agosto (2018) underline Costa's debt to key painterly techniques, and chimes with writer Brian Dillon's praise of gloom who argues that 'it is the shadows that allow us to see in the first place'.<sup>(8)</sup> The work, showing a sylvan parkscape, is entirely defined by the distinction between shade and shadow, a dialogue painted in subtle hues of darkness texturing the atmosphere.

The critic Brian O'Doherty writes: 'Things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them' adding that 'indeed, the object frequently becomes the medium through which these ideas are manifested.'<sup>(9)</sup> Accordingly, Costa's work references the importance of the arena within which the discourse of contemporary art takes place, namely the gallery, which is a marker or placeholder for the idea of art as a form of exhibition. But these very circumstances can also preclude access to the work by all but a selected few. The art historian Camiel van Winkel writes that today's art may represent 'a postponed act of mourning for an authenticity of experience...around the melancholic awareness that culture is a matter of signs referring to other signs, a game of illusions and ineluctable deceit.'<sup>(10)</sup>

Contrariwise, the exhibition Echo/Eco: based on a true Story does not set out to mystify the spectator. It proposes instead an immersive, sensorial engagement with the space, the subject-matter and the works. Philosopher Michel de Certeau distinguishes two types of spatial experience: the static map, and the mobile route or tour. The former allows for the entire territory to be taken in at a glance, whilst the latter is a whole sensory experience, in which the location is explored through engagement. Curatorially speaking, an exhibition follows the map analogy to display the different works in a certain sequence so as to present a reasoned aesthetic argument, while an installation is a totalizing environment – the autonomous lair of the artist – a tour that is gradually revealed through experience. Echo/Eco: Based on a true Story can be said to occupy the intersection between these positions since it combines both curatorial and installational principles in close collaboration between the curators and the artist. Working together, the notion of authorship moves away from a fixed premise and is handed around between individuals, reflecting the different stages of development; it functions perhaps as a momentary instance of the term *parergon*<sup>(11)</sup> used to examine the discourse of the frame, questioning the binary division between inner and outer; The exhibition is then both the actual arena in which the work is presented, as well as the field of discourse in which it operates. It is at once an atmospheric space and a critical and conceptual support structure for the encounter with the work.

Nicolas de Oliveira & Nicola Oxley

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(7) Brian Dillon, *Waterlog: Journeys Around An Exhibition*, Film and Video Umbrella, London, 2007, p.24.

(8) Brian Dillon, *ibid*, p.24.

(9) Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, University of California Press, Berkeley, p.14.

(10) Camiel van Winkel, *During the Exhibition the Gallery Will be Closed: Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptualism*, Valiz, Amsterdão, 2012, p.95-6.

(11) Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, University of Chicago Press, 1987, op.cit.