

A Conversation About Maria José de Figueiredo Ciríaco Chương-Đài Vĩ and Gustavo Ciríaco

Chương-Đài Vĩ I'm delighted to be in conversation with you today. We're going to talk about your mother, the artist Maria José de Figueiredo Ciríaco (1939-2020), and her influence on you as an artist. I'd like to begin by asking why you decided to create this duo show *Caravanserá* at the Centro de Arte Moderna of the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon.

Gustavo Ciríaco I grew up not knowing that I would become an artist myself, and having a mother who was an artist opened my ways of seeing things, my perception towards the world, towards myself.

When I started my education as an artist, as a dancer initially, and later in a more expanded way of seeing dance and choreography, one of the main influences I had was my interest in visual arts. It was through this interest that I realised that my mother had very specific ways of building her work, of doing her artworks.

The more I matured as an artist and got to see and understand her art, the more I felt responsible to make her art visible because she was away from the professional market, doing her art at home or with her primary school students or with anyone who crossed her path.

Merging her art practice with mine made more sense as I observed in my own trajectory a relationship with the haptic dimension of art, its relationship with the kinetic sphere, and the space shared through an artwork. Through the scenography and costumes of *Caravanserá*, we will activate examples of my mother's sculptural devices.

CDV Can you talk about her formal training and the informal influences that shaped her as an artist?

GC She had pursued a fine arts education at the Escola de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro Federal University. But she didn't conclude it because it was during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985). It was getting more dangerous to be in the university with all the censorship and the constant patrols in the university. And she became pregnant.

She studied fine arts for two years. Before that, she had studied to be a school teacher. This education was very diverse: they studied music, drawing, Latin. This was in the 1950s. She belonged to a generation of women for whom teaching was a way of having a career and escaping a domestic life.

She worked with sculpture, painting, plaster mainly, and drawing with charcoal. This influenced how she would cut and use different materials. I feel it was not during her formal education that she started using recycled material, but later on, maybe because of the malleability and possible transformation of materials.

She used mainly paper and plastic. She might have been influenced by Neo-Concrete Movement artists such as Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape, who were from the same generation. They saw art in a relational way. She was not a part of the movement, but I can see in her work some of the traits of that generation.

After she passed away, I had her artworks and archives organised: flags, *penduricalhos* (pendants), *porta-trovas* (poem holders), notebooks, dolls, mobiles and so on. I could see that part of the work she did was very abstract, experimenting with form, format, texture.

After she had her children, later in the 1970s, some 10 years after her first education, my mother graduated in communications and public relations. She was from a generation that was just slightly before the generation that really broke free in the 1960s and 1970s, and set different parameters regarding becoming a woman—with more liberty and less pressure. Although most of them had a profession, emotionally it was the generation that suffered more from these changes of time. They had been educated to join a world that suddenly had changed very much.

CDV

I'd like to talk about these two genealogies—your mom's and yours—in relation to the carnival parade that you're creating. I understand that it will be a parade or a performance that will unfold over several weeks.

GC

We are creating *Caravanserá*, a carnival parade. It's inspired by the *caravanserais*, the Persian name for the outposts along the Silk Route, which connected the Mediterranean Sea to the Far East. Along this long and dangerous path, there were roadside inns where caravans could stop for the night, feed their animals, get provisions and rest. At the same time, *caravanserais* were places of encounters and exchanges of stories. I changed the name in Portuguese slightly to mark the future of the verb “to be”, *será*: a caravan *to be, to come*.

My mother saw *caravanserais* as an inspiration to think about what an art yard could be. Brazilian houses, mainly in the suburbs, all have yards.. It's a place where families throw parties, invite friends and relatives over for barbecues and socialising. It is an important space in the house in Brazil. My mother would open the gates of her yard for the neighbourhood children. It was her *Quintal das Artes* (Art Yard). For her, it involved installing a place where people could rest in art and create, using their imagination.

This *caravanserá* is a parade project I'm developing as an artist-in-residence at Centro de Arte Moderna. I'll be building different elements of the parade: the choreography, the costumes, the scenography, the music.

The scenography will play an important part in this parade. It is inspired by the paper sculptures my mother made to hold poems: *porta-trovas/poem-holders*. She would fold the paper in a great variety of ways, always discovering new forms of bending this material, interlinking or binding them with cloth or recycled plastic. The plan is to rebuild these manual artifacts, and make them much bigger, as devices to be used by the dancers to frame or interact with the participants of the parade.

The project involves devising choreography through the use of these interactive scenographic devices as well as creating a samba theme based partly on her texts and stories. The costumes and the scenography are mainly inspired by her use of the international maritime code flag system in her *porta-trovas*. The code is made up of colored flags, where each flag stands for a particular letter or a number. They offered my mother an almost infinite variation of colors and formats.

The residency includes workshops of scenography, dance, music, and sewing, so people can make their costumes for the parade. My wish is to interact with my mother's work, not losing the spirit of her art yards, to make people imagine through materiality, which is the thing that links her work to my work: materiality and imagination.

CDV Your mom created a word for art called "DETER-GENTE".

GC My mother came up with this term when she was giving a drawing workshop. She noticed people were stocking detergent under the bandstand she was working on. In Portuguese, *deter*, like in English, means "to stop, to make stop", while *gente* means "people". So *DETER-GENTE* poetically means "making people stop", "making them pause". For my mother, this was a critique of the current times, its frenziness and health anxiety. In Brasil, there's a really strong presence of drugstores. My mother was fed up with this medicalisation of life. She wanted a place where these things would not come in.

CDV You're building that concept into the *Caravanserá's* scenography in terms of rest stops, places where people can pause?

GC Yes, but this pause is not exactly related to space or time intervals, but to a rupture of how you perceive them. It can be for a split second—you could be walking and suddenly there is something that goes over you or makes you alter your path.

The scenography, composed of signal flags painted on cardboard, aims to create an ephemeral architecture. The dancers will use these different elements as playful devices on a human-scale, but no longer hand-scale. The elements become like a folding screen that you can open and close. It can be small, it can be big, it can linger because it's light. These are the elements that will provoke this break of perception and make people stop.

- CDV Your mother was interested in the relationship between language or texts and the visual—different forms of language. Can you talk about her interest in the maritime flags and how she wove that into her poetry?
- GC I don't recall where she found this inspiration. Maybe when she was close to a former soldier who fought in the Second World War.
- When we were children, my father had put up French wallpaper, this was in the 1970s. My mother started drawing on it. She drew a big landscape with a lake. And this was my first relationship with a landscape. It was around my bed.
- Images became more a source of communication, not only a surrounding. There's an image my mother saw as a girl, of migrants from the Northeast, people on the move, carrying all their belongings on a cart, that she reproduced in a panel. These images are strongly connected to figuration. But later on, more and more, her work became more abstract. It's the format of this visuality, the format of *poem holders*, as she called them, *portatroyas*, that she dedicated herself to.
- CDV **CDV:** Was she attracted to the flags and to poetry because they are condensed forms of communication? The poetry holders hold the poems, the flags hold a color, and a combination of flags holds sentences. They allow for an efficient way of communicating something larger.
- GC Totally. In one diary, she mentions the importance of protecting a poem through not showing it bluntly, but by holding its seclusion. She emphasised the importance of color. There was a book about colors that she said you have to read because colors are fundamental. This makes the connection with the narration, which is this unfolding of the materiality of the thing. Drawing is related to painting, sculpture relates to painting, actually everything is related to drawing. This is something that I came to realise, the importance of drawing, as I also started to draw in the last five years.
- CDV We worked together in Dakar for the *Africa-Asia Festival*. During the rehearsal for your performance with your collaborators, you would ask them to do certain warming-up exercises. You and the other dancers would move your hands in a certain way, or you would ask them to imagine they were plants or animals and create movements in relation to those forms or the trees and plants that they may inhabit. I also remember the costumes that you made for yourself and the other dancers, costumes made of blocks of color. When I saw the performance, it was like watching a painting moving in space. I can see the influence of your mother's interest in flags and in how she folds paper.
- GC When I was in Dakar, I was in a context I didn't know much about, and I was not sure of the other dancers' backgrounds. I was trying to find ways to communicate, and that's when I used images for them to relate to their work—the body not as an anthropomorphic figure that they would copy, but an incarnation, embodying something they imagined, because imagination is important.

My mother made all the clothes we had when we were children. And she made kinetic structures that were like wind chimes, but with no sound. I always saw her working: cutting paper, molding things, sewing clothes. The first costumes I had as a dancer were made by my mother. She would make something totally new, like creating devices to experiment with. That would inspire me to create work.

I am also inspired by Brazilian neo-concretist artist Hélio Oiticica's relationship with color and transformation through his different phases—from color as painted powder, and then as an object, as a sculpture.

CDV Did she have public exhibitions or performances, or was her work created mainly for the home and for people who would visit?

GC She created things mainly in the domestic sphere, as for our birthdays, she made kites, put doves inside a cage over the cake, produced an ephemeral disco. But she also brought her creativity into public settings like the primary school where she worked, and later on when she was a volunteer of the Red Cross and part of the Troubadour Association of Espírito Santo. She became a member of the Sociedade Brasileira de Belas Artes, the Brazilian Society of Fine Arts, which hosted amateur salons in central Rio. She would participate in these salons. Her work stood out from the others for its sui generis character. She once had an individual exhibition at SESC - Serviço Social do Comércio, an art institution in Brazil. She also had poems published.

She was in contact with important Brazilian figures such as Monsenhor Pedro Casaldáliga, Araguaia's Bishop, theatre maker Amir Haddad and poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Drummond wrote weekly for *Jornal do Brasil*. One day his column was about his daughter's birthday, and my mother was reading it as we were singing birthday, lighting matches. She wrote to him saying that her kids, without knowing it, were celebrating his daughter's anniversary. Through the newspaper staff, he phoned my mother to thank her for the letter. They became friends through phone calls and letters.

CDV You have a background in political science and anthropology, and then your practice moved to visual arts, dance and choreography. Did that trajectory have to do with your mother's influence on your interests?

GC My mother saw an article in the newspaper about cultural exchange programs. I followed her discovery and applied for a scholarship, which I got, becoming the first Brazilian exchange student to travel to Norway through *Youth for Understanding*. It was the beginning of an international life. I started to see culture through different lenses because I realised I had a culture that left traces that are beyond myself, that had been sculpted through society, through cultural patterns, and through the territory I came from. I experienced this with a coming-of-age and being a gay teenager in another country. When I came back to Rio, I felt like an anthropologist. This trajectory has really influenced the way I work with people. I try to not put my culture on top of other cultures. I try

to understand and to create paths, to learn the language, to perceive how others move. That's why I love languages and social sciences and studied them as part of a plan to become a diplomat, although I have left this path.

CDV There's a very strong element of play in your work, as in your mother's work. In describing your project *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, you talk about Friedrich Froebel's philosophy of play as a tool for learning. Can you talk about that in relation to how your mother thinks about play and her projects with dolls?

GC My mother was a very playful person and character. To give an example, she would play a person who didn't speak to see how people would react to her and she would write, make drawings, gestures, smile with her eyes saying, "I'm here with you". Suddenly at the end, she'd say, "Goodbye". Or take a thick crystal ball out of her purse, and say, "I'm a witch." She would do things that made people change the way they relate to her. And always with a great sense of humour.

She was this irreverent figure. Her playfulness influenced me because play opens portals to different ways of being and thinking and telling stories. In Portuguese, to play is *brincar*. It's not like playing a role. *Brincar* can only be *brincar*. It can only be to play like a child or to joke. My mother said that to be healthy is to be a jumping, dancing, and playful being.

Her first doll was called *Doreni*. She later related it to the musical notation system Do-Re-Mi-So-Fa-La-Si. She would tell the stories of the dolls *Do-Ré-Mi*. It's like the call-and-answer of a musical scale, because she also was a musician. These dolls were sort of her alter ego or messengers of the world.

I've been going through her archives, and now I realise that these dolls, made in different formats, referred to the three wise men, the Maggi kings who gave gifts, toys to Jesus Christ. In Brazil, on the 6th of January, we celebrate this visit as *Folia dos Reis*. There is a powerful folk celebration that involves dance, costumes, music and blessings when the *brincantes* (playful characters) go from house to house and each house welcomes this group of beings, their playfulness, jumping, dancing. She would call these things *Janeirices*, "things from January." I want to include in this *caravanserai* her do-ré-mis, the three Maggi kings, as dancers, being disruptive like her sculptures.

My mother's name was Maria José, but she liked to put it as Mary and Joseph, like the couple who invented Christmas. The toys were a way of making us reconnect with the playfulness of our childhood, of our inner selves, but they were also a way of dealing with life, not being consumeristic or centered on disease, but promoting life.

CDV Your mother's work is very collaborative. She created spaces that welcome people, whether they were children or adults. This project that you are creating is a conversation with your mother, but it's also a conversation with collaborators who are working with you to build the scenography, the sculptures, the costumes. I'd like to conclude

by asking you to talk about the role of collaboration, both in your mother's work and in your own.

GC

Thank you very much for this question.. My mother was like a sudden ray of sunlight or someone they were not expecting and who interacted with their lives in very meaningful ways. Her collaborators were mainly playful children.

In this project, I'm accompanied by wonderful, playful and beautiful collaborators, too. We've been exploring how to translate and to be in dialogue with an artist's practice. When going through my mother's archives, her diaries and artworks, my collaborators have helped me to understand how my mother treated the materiality of things, the way the elements brought forth her playfulness. We are trying to understand how my mother made her poem-holders and what they can invoke on a different scale, to understand the ethics at play.

My mother had a Polaroid photo of two turtles meeting in a small garden in what she called a notable encounter. I think it's this kind of collaboration that I want—we are going in different directions, but moving so slowly that it seems that we've stopped in the same field. And then we have this notable meeting. I like to think of collaborations as this ephemeral yet temporal exchange of breath.

CDV

Thank you, Gustavo. It was wonderful to hear about Maria José de Figueiredo Ciríaco's practice and her influence on you.

GC

Thanks, Chương-Đài, for making me come with words to describe things that I hadn't described before, but have lived. It's how these things come to the mouth.

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