

Clear Enigma¹

*There is a flurry of lightning over the world
from just imagining it the light strikes me,
on the other side it is still shadow*

– Luiza Neto Jorge

For over a decade, Lucas Arruda has been dedicated to conquering a minimal landscape that emerges from the very membrane of painting, from the inside out. The small brush snakes lightly across the surface, creating a gradient of small textures and bringing forth a shower of silver seeds, or announcing a farewell sunlight that is already hiding behind the horizon. If we recognize in his production phenomena and attributes of the natural world – the dense rainforest, the heavy sky, the dance of the clouds, the bright light of dawn, the melancholic fall of night, and the moving pacts between rain and wind the work rather expresses an operation in language, leading us to believe that the image is not a given, but carved, constructed. Through a repetitive and somewhat ritualistic refinement of the pictorial gesture, his works do not shy away from displaying their own method, the way in which they become what they are, coming and going in the transition between constituting and deconstructing visible forms. Mnemonic, his painting also rejects direct observation in order to operate from mental images. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty once said, “Nothing changes if they [the painter] do not paint from the motif: they paint, in any case, because they have seen, because the world, at least once, has engraved the cyphers of the visible within them.”

It turns out that the visible, in Arruda, can only be approached obliquely, through veils and screens that make it bearable to contemplate. Light, his persistent interest, is not exactly an available and abundant source that bathes the scene, affirming everything as surface; that direct sunlight of the classical pictorial tradition. On the contrary, it is a veiled phenomenon that emerges from the background – from the depths of the ground or the painted atmosphere, like a latent incandescence waiting to be revealed. It needs to be conquered (literally un-covered) through a process that reverses the additive logic of painting: it often comes to the surface through the removal of paint, as if the painter were engraving or sculpting not on stone, but on the chromatic material itself, dosing its appearance. With the back of the brush or a piece of cloth, he scratches, scrapes, and delicately removes the thick layers of paint he previously added,

¹I have borrowed the title 'Claro Enigma' (Clear Enigma) from Carlos Drummond de Andrade's book of the same name, published in 1951. In it, the poet skillfully addresses fundamental paradoxes.

in a play between layering and removing, veiling and revealing, until something lights up in the depths of the surface.

Perhaps this is why it is possible to speak of monumentality and sublimity, despite the fact that the canvases are often only 24 by 30 centimeters in size. The result is a somewhat dizzying depth that invites us to the edge or navel of the represented world. The concept of landscape is also subtly suggested here through the frontal horizon line, which is also the result of this archaeology of removal. However, the artist's horizon does not merely function as a divider between earth and sky; it operates as an ontological threshold – a line of tension between the visible and the invisible. This experience is taken to the limit, especially in the medium-format monochromes, where a rarefied horizon acts more as a promise than a demarcation, connecting the parts in a certain zone of vaporous indeterminacy. Its subtlety means it functions less as a geographical line and more as a perceptual event: a thread that simultaneously delimits and dissolves, indicating a beyond that we cannot see.

It is no coincidence that Arruda often references the tale of *Assum Preto*, a bird which lends its name to several of his exhibitions. In certain traditions of the north-east of Brazil, it is common practice to blind the animal in the hope that its song will become more beautiful – just like Tiresias, the blind seer in Homer's *Odyssey*, who was denied sight by the gods in exchange for the gift of prophecy. "Everything around is just beauty: April sun and the forest in bloom. But Assum Preto is blind: not seeing the light, oh, he sings of pain..." goes the song of the same name by Luiz Gonzaga and Humberto Teixeira, composed in 1950 and passed on to Arruda by his father. Ironically, for the painter, blindness is revealing. Perhaps that is why he has held exhibitions in the dark before, with works illuminated only temporarily, or created pieces using slide projectors that emit almost imperceptible light. This concept is now explored in his vertical paintings featuring paired squares that vibrate and dissolve before the viewer's eyes.

Therefore, interpretations that associate his work with the Romantic tradition and its focus on the sublime must be cautious. Despite his productive dialogue with English artists, such as Turner and John Constable – masters of dissolving forms and creating indistinguishable fields of light, color, and movement – it is not the great dramatic upheaval that prevails here. Nor is it the transcendent monumentality of Caspar David Friedrich, where light operates as a mystical revelation through dramatic contrasts and theatrical mists. Arruda inhabits a more nuanced zone between the Romantic sublime and the meditative, contemplative. While his works may echo Turner's late atmospheric dissolutions, in which light emerges from layers of paint as an almost alchemical phenomenon, or Agnes Martin's search for inner light through subtractive techniques, they do so in a more suggestive and less assertive manner. There is also something of Rothko's idea of light emanating from within the pictorial surface – not as external illumination but as the incandescence of the chromatic material itself – never hostage to the contours of form.

There is also room for dialogue with the contemplative Eastern traditions of Chinese landscape painting (*shanshui*) and Japanese Zen monochrome painting from the Muromachi and Edo periods. In these

traditions, mountains and waters dissolve into mist and diluted washes, respectively, making gestural economy a spiritual principle. However, while Eastern tradition cultivates silence as wholeness, Arruda is more ambiguous. While the paintings seem silent from a distance, proximity and contemplative refinement reveal myriad small procedures and micro-minute revolutions on the pictorial surface. These include the differential pressure of the brush and the particular density of the paint. They declare that difference is produced in repetition through incessant variations that unfold from within. This occurs via the loving persistence of the gesture. Each return to the same motif functions as a deeper excavation into language. Thus, repetition becomes a continuous exercise in constructing an image. Perhaps this is why all his works are titled *Deserto-Modelo* (Model Desert), taken from the poet João Cabral de Melo Neto. “Model” is not understood as a fixed form but as an incessant and inexhaustible testing ground – the desert as a space of prolonged rigor and rarity.

This results in certain pictorial idiosyncrasies. Alongside the more classical seascapes, there are instances where the sun is reflected in the sea not as a luminous surface reflection, but as an incandescent body fallen or buried in the depths. Sometimes, words are carved into the canvas, suggesting allegorical interpretations and meaning. Still others drift into more ambiguous territories, in which the horizon is an interstice between sea and land. It’s as if the artist were establishing points of contact between his seascapes and his dense forests – two families of works already familiar to us. “Repeat, repeat – until it becomes different. Repetition is a gift of style,” as the poet Manoel de Barros would say.

In addition to these, there are new large-format vertical paintings that significantly change the physical relationship with the work and reveal a deeper shift towards the symbolic and spiritual. While the small canvases create a contemplative intimacy, these expanded surfaces establish a more direct dialogue between the viewer and the painting. The center of these compositions is no longer merely glimpsed; it imposes itself as an apparition that fills the visual field. This transforms the artist's experience of “inner light” into a kind of architectural revelation, giving the work a more ceremonial character. The areas of color are more clearly defined, and the contours are more precise, giving the work a more graphic quality that dialogues with the tradition of mystical painting. It’s as if the repetitive refinement of the gesture, which was previously focused on conquering inner light, now also addresses constructing a visual vocabulary capable of evoking a transcendent atmosphere.

We will have to follow this development, but it seems that a curious complementary dialogue exists between large and small. The larger works give the smaller ones the idea that landscape is a codified system of signs and symbols. This system transcends observation and affirms that the image is a fictional version of the real world. This further reinforces the spiritual dimension of the image. In turn, the small canvases give the large ones a sense of lived authenticity. Each sign comes from an initial, real encounter with the world.

In times of chronic anxiety and dead ends, Arruda's work suspends the historical dimension, connecting us with a time outside of time. His work reminds us that language expands the horizons of the possible. Though tiny and opened with the fingers, Arruda's works are continuously extendable, much like persistent human desire.

– Pollyana Quintella