

Safekept

On Francisca Valador's still life

Critical text by Diogo Pinto

Anyone who was lucky enough to experience childhood summers by the beach knows there is no greater joy than stumbling upon a cluster of tide pools. It's as if the vast ocean suddenly shrinks to fit in the palm of your hand, allowing you to easily reach for anything of potential interest: tiny shrimp, starfish (if lucky), shells, little fish and so on.

A world within a world, like an image within an image, tide pools are micro-ecosystems that mirror the surrounding landscape in a dramatic flip of scale. An entire coast reduced to a puddle, grandiosity now contained within manageable holes in a rock. All through an interplay of perspective that leaves the open-ended question: in these occasions, has the ocean recoiled or have we grown gigantic?

I suspect the question will remain forever unanswered. Because in moments like these, when our sense of spatial dimension trembles, we lose ourselves in a kind of roleplay-situated somewhere between leisure and possession. In other words, the double-edged excitement of being all-powerful towards a world apparently smaller than one's own—a reality turned not only understandable and compact but available and ultimately at your mercy.

In "safekeeping" (or "memento keeping") we are also transforming vastness into something graspable by "bite-sizing" time itself. A gesture of containment in trying to distill the fleeting "now" into an object which will hopefully last just a tad longer. Think of fossils, pressed flowers, foreign currency... almost any pattern-breaking thing, not only physically speaking—the oddly shaped, perfectly symmetric or distinctly designed—but also emotionally—ticket stubs, diner date receipts, polaroids... Small items imbued with meaning and a presence capable of holding memory itself. A glance at the contents of a junk drawer is at times enough to trigger a seemingly endless cascade of remembrance—visions of times lived long ago. The urge to build such a collection of "life detritus" is an act of resistance to the inevitable flow of forgetting, trying to hold still moments otherwise lost. A deeply symbolic gesture which, in its hopeless attempt to "freeze time", inevitably brings with it a melancholic side.

A certain atmosphere of recollection seems to reverberate through Francisca Valador's aesthetic experiments, brought together in the artist's first solo presentation at Matéria, A partir daqui só há dragões. For the occasion, Valador has produced a new body of work comprising oil paintings on stainless steel, mixed media sculptures, and an installation of shaped wall-pieces lit by custom lightbulbs.

Far from the grounds of Chardin—who searched for a unique meditative naturalism in humble table settings—and closer to the virtuosic excesses and symbolic intricacies of 17th-century Dutch hyperrealistic painters—the likes of Clara Peeters, Rachel Ruysch and Jan van Huysum—Valador's work parallels the history of still life painting in several different ways.

The Dutch school's detailed renditions of ornate arrangements—with all sorts of domestic miscellanea—sought to obtain a certain "table-side totality", an all-encompassing grasp via intimate fragments. Reality was not something to faithfully capture but something to stage, manipulate and toy with. Through brush and paint, "truth" was made to bend to the will of symbolism and effect, even if that meant impossible outcomes—like the common employment of bouquets blooming with flowers from different seasons.

This manipulation was mirrored by an era increasingly enthralled by observation, cataloguing, and mastery of the natural world—a confidence bolstered by technological innovation (such as the invention of the microscope and other optical lenses). As these tools of magnification advanced, so too did the impulse towards extreme precision. Morphological accuracy became not just an artistic virtue but a form of empirical curiosity; painting expanded into territories of obsessive notation, where no freckle, fiber, or insect wing was too fine to render.

Four hundred years later, Valador has channelled this heritage into her paintings, sculptures and installations. Even if embedded within seemingly minimal compositions, her work reveals the same silent power of detail-saturated images—calling a magnetic force that can hijack the viewer’s gaze, collapsing the distance between iris and carefully applied layers of pigment. In this visual pull, the works become a site of pleasure and epistemological inquiry, seducing the eye into a state of scientific attention.

In the depicted elements from horticulture, animal biology, cutlery, fashion, and other sources, arranged in playful display, we can recognise the repetition of patterns from across the natural world: spirals, radial symmetries, fractal branchings, and the subtle proportions of the Golden Ratio. Forms which are not only flourishes but reflections of an underlying mathematical order that governs growth. The spiral of a shell, the unfolding of a fern, the seed pattern of a sunflower—all reveal how necessity and beauty converge through hidden laws of expansion and efficiency. In Valador’s care, such structures appear not only as studies of nature’s surfaces, but as gestures toward the deeper geometries that sustain it, becoming an act of inquiry: a recognition that beneath the world’s apparent disorder lies a profound and ancient design.

Although Francisca Valador’s practice arises from distinct processes, they are unified by a shared sensibility—a gaze suspended in condensation of details, a distillation of energy. Like tide pools in the beach—where tiny worlds can expand into vast terrains—we are taken by a perception shift. In the gallery space, rendered nearly bare and interrupted only by small-scale interventions that punctuate walls and floors with quiet precision, we experience a scenography poised at the threshold of visibility. Here, perception unfolds not instantly, but gradually, through an unspoken agreement between viewer and work: the longer you look, the more you see.