**Not a Competition but a Conversation**

Notes on **‘** *Memorabilia* **’** a painted installation by [Rui Macedo](https://uk-mg42.mail.yahoo.com/neo/launch?.rand=9bggj381td395) at Convento dos Capuchos , Costa Caparica , Portugal by Stephen Farthing

I learned to paint at the Royal College of Art in London . Beyond the curriculum , the process involved, first making a painting , then sitting with that painting and one of my tutors, (who was always an established artists) and discussing the strengths and weaknesses of what I had done.

Over time I became less surprised by what they said, I in fact began to develop the ability to guess how they would respond to the picture . Over time I learned to tailor my paintings to my audience ( my tutors) , to please and sometime willfully irritate them . I knew that John Golding would home- in on a small area of color and praise its lyrical interaction with an adjacent area of color, that Peter de Francia would be consumed by a need to establish the meaning of the painting and Howard Hodgkin would move freely between poetic and iconographic reflections – between them they used words to make a better painter of me.

It wasn’t just words – their words always lead back to the paintings and drawings of other artists – seldom their own, usually a balanced mix of contemporary and historical sources, so my education was a conversation.

A conversation between me , the canvas and not simply two or three generations of artists but the entire history of art . From those conversations I learned , not only become a more effective painter , but , that all good artists enjoy talking.

So the conversation Rui Macedo and I have entered into over this , his most recent work , is in our minds, as a much a part of our continuing education, as it is an explanation to others of his practice as an artist to a broader audience.

When the Brazilian curator Caroline Menezes introduced me to Rui Macedo she presented him as *“ A Portuguese painter who dealt with the traditional attributes of painting and their relationship with the exhibition space where they are shown”*

I wondered if he was a latter-day Raphael , painting today’s equivalent of the Pope’s historic apartments in the Vatican ?

This was his response.

*“ I do not consider myself as a renaissance painter, my work however, founds itself in techniques such as illusion (trompe l’oeil), genre/types (landscapes, portraits, vanitas, still-life, genre-scenes,…) and I do care about light and perspective as well as pictural deep/profundity and spatiality.*

*My references are to historic paintings that impress me, because of their “execution” (tekhne – technique and conception/ idea). The architectonic space and place are very important (as they were in your Raphael example) precisely because they determine the shapes and measurements of all paintings .”[[1]](#endnote-0)*

 During the Renaissance and Baroque periods a dispersed , essentially European group of painters managed to close the gap in their audiences mind between, tangible things and painted images, between objects and illusions . Three hundred or so years after them , an international group of painters, resident mostly in Paris, worked in groups and as individuals to reconfigure their audiences understanding of “ the viewpoint” , as a result their efforts the viewpoint was recognized by painters as something more than a physical location , it became an emotionally and intellectually invested position. During the Post Modern period , a totally dispersed international corpus of painters managed to blend the apparently opposing aesthetics of past and present, East and West into one possibly coherent whole.

In his painted installation , *Memorabilia* Rui Macedo demontrates his understanding of these painting landmarks , by first compressing our sense of time and space , then turning our intuitive understanding of authenticity up side down - and in doing so , takes us ( art historically speaking) from the pre- renaissance through modernism and postmodernism to today and his contemporary world view .

Macedo told me he chose the Latin title ‘*Memorabilia*’ to mark out the venue and exhibition as:-

*“ a space with an immense historic background and immaterial heritage”.[[2]](#endnote-1)*

During the early history of *Memorabilia’s* venue , The Convento dos Capuchos was a sanctuary for 18 friars of the Franciscanos Capuchinhos order , later it was a “School for reading, writing and counting “ then an empty building and today an Arts Centre . Sitting at the top of a hill near the beach by Lorenço Pires de Távora, still surveying the same stretch of ocean , it has since it was built in 1558 , it is now the algebra of Macedo’s *Memorabilia* , an exhibition of preserved and reconfigured art and architecture.

An important aspect of the change this building has seen, is the way it is experienced . Today the majority get to know it through the printed page and flat screen. Making the physical relationship that once bound architecture , to the land and painting to the wall , too easily forgotten.

This exhibition works to remind us of the physical nature of things, the difference between “ seeing” and “looking “ , between “complete” and “incomplete experiences”. Macedo’s *Memorabilia* celebrates not only the ease with which a good painter can take us from object to image , from the concrete to the illusion, but also transport us through real time and real space.

Over time we have learned to understand The Cueva de El Castillo , in Puente Viesgo , The Valley of the Kings , near Luxor in Egypt and The Sistine Chapel , in the Vatican city, as sites where architecture did not simply accommodated the painted image , but so embodied it that the architecture and the painted image cease to be separate entities and became co-workers.

When I started writing this essay Macedo was still formulating his approach to *Memorabilia* , although the big ideas were in place, there was still plenty flux, when he wrote to me in the early spring of 2014 he was using computer software to visualize the three different places within the complex: the chapel, the cloister and the exhibition space on the 1st floor that would house the exhibition.

*“ In the Chapel I will create a line of paintings that takes into consideration the ones that are already there ( they will stay in their original positions ) the line will be defined by intervals – distances – between the paintings already in positioning, and the ones that I paint and add . I will construct a visual rhythm. This rhythm will be disturbed by the architecture (corners, windows, doors, and tribune/pulpit). I don’t know yet what I will represent , all I know I that they will have a trompe l´oeil frame that imitates the ones already there. At the moment I am thinking about including some empty frames.” [[3]](#endnote-2)*

Later in the email Macedo went on to describe his approach to the Cloister;

*“ I will make an installation with a sentence glued 30 cm above the tiles, at the eye level. I have not yet chosen the sentence.”*

*“ By installing a sentence around the cloister the reader engages in “the everyday walk in the cloister was conversation made step by step” : the sentence is the voice of its author. It is this sentence that literally guides de reader/visitor/observer trough the exhibition.”[[4]](#endnote-3)*

At this point in his first letter to me , in advance of me seeing either the space or the paintings, I got a feel of the degree to which Masedo was not simply setting out to hang an exhibition of new paintings, but , in the best tradition of curatorial practice , construct an exhibition with a controlled physical and intellectual logic. An event that could only be experienced by : walking, reading , looking comparing and reflecting as you move through the building.

On the first floor he told me there would be a second sentence.

*“ it will start where the stair case gives access to the 1st floor , then circles the room. In this room there are many windows (when it was a monastery, each of those windows belonged to a monk cell; so this large room was, in fact, many cells). To protect the walls of the room and facilitate the hanging of work , the Art Centre has constructed false walls between the windows, these structures do not have the same shape and measurements as the walls they cover/preserve.*

*I will paint the false walls turquoise (RAL 6027) .Because these structures disturbed me, I will position my works as if they do not exist , so position them on the false walls as I would, if I were allowed to attach them to the actual walls of the room. This will create a fiction:*

*To emphasis this, all the paintings have painted representational frames. It’s a game: the exhibition escapes from where it is expected to be seen , it is as if the paintings were there before the turquoise walls , respecting the free space between the windows and the ceiling) “.*

When I asked Macedo what he want his audience to take away from their visit, he told me that he would like them to depart without “ the sense of emptiness that contemporary art experiences often tends to provoke” , then added

“ I would also like them to understand that painting – the work of a painter – is a challenge that deals directly with a cultural heritage, that it is bound to architecture – the space and place where it is seen.”

Earlier this year  a good friend of mine David Scott Kastan , a Shakespeare scholar based at Yale , wrote a catalogue essay about a group of paintings I am currently exhibiting in a 17th Century English country house, near London . Although my project was quite different from Macedo’s there is one big similarity , we both , as a part of the business of looking forward as painters, address the art , artists and architecture of the past .

Kastan concluded his essay[[5]](#endnote-4) on me with the following text , which I quote here substituting [Rui Macedo](https://uk-mg42.mail.yahoo.com/neo/launch?.rand=9bggj381td395)’s name for mine and his venue for Ham House .

“ *Macedo explores and explodes the myth of originality, not cynically as any number of contemporary conceptual artists have done, but graciously and generously. He acknowledges that artists are inspired or provoked by other artists, and that the history of art is not a competition but a conversation.*

*A conversation, however, that is often with the dead--in this case with the ghosts of Convento dos Capuchos , Costa Caparica .* “

With all of these thoughts in mind , I have come to the conclusion that Rui Macedo is a very skillful modern painter who works between past and present to provoke more interesting futures.

Professor Stephen Farthing RA Wednesday, 14 May 2014

Professor Stephen Farthing studied painting at St Martin’s School of Art and the Royal College of Art His work represented Britain at the 1989 Sao Paulo Biennale. He is represented by Purdy Hicks Gallery in London, Honorary Curator of The Royal Academy Collections and Chairman of the Royal Academy Exhibitions Committee. As a writer he was executive editor of *Art: The Whole Story* T&H , 2010 , *1001 Paintings you should see Before You Die* , Cassell , 2009, Derek Jarman : the sketchbooks, T&H, 2013

1. Macedo, Rui, unpublished Email to the author 11.30 am May 2nd 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
2. Macedo, Rui, unpublished Email to the author May 14th 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. Macedo, Rui, unpublished Email to the author 11.30 am May 2nd 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. Macedo, Rui, unpublished Email to the author May 14th 2014

   Macedo, Rui, unpublished Email to the author 11.30 am May 2nd 2014

   [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. Kastan, David Scott, Ghostworks, published by The National Trust , Ham House , London 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)