

A deliberate vertigo. The work of Safâa Erruas

By Silvia Cirelli

Whiteness as an immaculate, yet blind candour. Whiteness as a fragile skin, threatened by an imminent aggression. Whiteness as an uncontrolled constraint, that constantly forces toward a deliberate vertigo.

I never thought about the boundless power of “White” before bumping into Safâa Erruas’ great lexical finesse, an artist who challenges the confines of colour with the suggestion of “shouted silences”.

In Erruas’ aesthetic practice, things are never quite as they seem. A subtle dichotomy always to be found, hidden behind an ornamental appearance or behind an ambiguity of a forged grace. The forms mutate and objects are subject to powerful forces, where relations between touch, sensation and vision swing tirelessly. Purity and pain, suggestion and danger, insecurity and strength are mixed together in an endless dialogue, and it is in the collision of these opposites, that the artist finds her legitimate expressive voice. One which carves out whiteness to obtain the very essence of things – the underlying meaning.

“In my art there is a big difference between what we see,” she states, “and what the message really is.” The works seem to whisper secrets, which let us look at them without revealing themselves immediately. They are stories which need some time to be “seen”, and each time they unveil a new secret, similar to windows opening into a world always capable of amazing.

In the juxtaposition of this debate, it is no surprise that Safâa Erruas chooses white monochrome as her weapon of illusion. Always conceived for its lightness and genuine features, the colour white is often linked to the idea of serenity, but in Erruas’ practice this is constantly overturned: it reveals instead a “dark side”, a secret violence. A welcoming wall made of snow-white cushions (*‘Les Oreilles’*, 2005) disguises deep lacerations, stinging needles and scissors; the brightness of a faint rainfall (*‘Nuage’*, 2009) discloses dozens of sharp knives; and the softness of a bouquet-like installation, such as the one in *‘The Grey Work’* (2010) hides instead dangerous metallic wires. The intimacy that the artist is able to transmit is laden with charm and suggestion, almost resembling uncontaminated universes ready to lull the viewer. But as soon as you get closer and dig into the illusory surface, the spell suddenly breaks, giving way to unexpected and unforeseen scenarios. In a seductive universe that charms and then hurts, the artist chooses an elusive poetry that tends toward dangerous evanescence.

This sensory dimension is a leading concept in Erruas’ poetics, becoming the way to find different perceptive devices. Her expressive approach turns into discovery, invitation to reflection, and into emotional sharing with the audience, where the elegance of acts and little signs cause a sensorial solicitation, a fascinating but fatal magnetism. This idea of sensorial solicitation is easily defined in the suggestive *‘Ipazia’* (2011) installation, where fragrant and enchanting flowers tickle the audience. An intense aroma immediately captures the attention, giving the work a synaesthetic resonance highly amplified by a physical stimulation. What the viewer does not know is that hidden among the seducing flowers are thousands of sharp needles. Beautifully made and scary, these devices attract and repel simultaneously.

Another work which discloses its dangerous beauty is the breath-taking site-specific project Safâa Erruas realised for the recent Havana Biennial, 2015: *‘Fuente de Espinas’*, or “Fountain of Thorns,” in English. The Islamic-style fountain, totally absorbed in the famous Malecon promenade, fascinates for its light and mirrored reflections.

However getting close and trying to see yourself in the water is a complicated and particularly risky affair – the fountain is littered with hundreds of barbed wire poles that stick out.

Needles, razors, knives, wires, blades, or syringes, all materials characterised by their sharp and cutting features, are frequently employed in Erruas' personal calligraphy. They spread over the work's surface demolishing its immaculate form and forcing the narration toward a challenging tension. In the artist's scenario, each pure surface is in fact always carved, as if it symbolises a piece of wounded skin, silently torn apart. Sometimes directly over the wall, other times on the paper itself, the sharp instruments trace hushed acts of violence, barely curable. They represent the pain of the world, the scars of human history.

Breaking convention, to revisit in a personal way concepts of pain and destruction, Erruas pushes the discourse beyond the visual to an intuitive level; one that operates emotionally, able to transcend rationality, going straight to the subconscious. This stylistic choice overcomes rational constraints for a more perceptive dimension, where themes like violence or suffering are brought to a different level, beyond the usual logical constructs with implications that we cannot see or touch, we can only feel.

This could be easily identified also in her '*Corazones Desnudos*' series (2014), pieces made by photographic cuts and mixed media on paper. Here the body is reduced to its prime vital organ, the heart, a heart which is sadly stuck with needles, fibreglass, metal wires or broken light bulbs. At first glance, it appears to be an elegant and refined reproduction of the heart, lightened by delicate tones such as a pinkish colour and the already familiar white. But again, when we get closer, we finally see the "real heart", wounded and crossed by troubling dangerous fragments.

Along with '*Corazones Desnudos*', also the '*On my skin*' (2011) piece evokes this idea of a soul's scars, here resumed even by the chosen title. Dozens of stinging thorns assault the softness of the paper, intimidating its safety. The skin/paper allegory is quite clear and even if the thorns do not actually touch our body, we almost feel its pinpricks. The skin of the paper is our own skin, its fragility is for Erruas also the fragility of humankind, and its incisions are like the wounds of violence's gestures that continue hurting the world we live in.

In her artistic lexicon everything is left to the imagination and pushed toward an undefined boundary, a hybrid space of contemplation that aims to encourage deeper reflection on the fine line between the inner world, intimate and private, and the outer, at times too constrained or injured.

If, on the one hand, the power of the void draws out illusion, on the other it must be read as a reference to Safâa Erruas' search for an aesthetically and socially engaged artistic language.

Erruas' courage in translating into art a rebellion as personal as it is collective is further emphasised by a creative symmetry that is all her own, playing brilliantly with the juxtaposition of ambivalences and contradictions. War and love, aggression and seduction, strength and vulnerability seem to coexist continuously, confusing the observer as to what is the end and what is the beginning. Shield or trap? Game or assault? Enchant or threat? The balance must be chosen by the observer who independently and above all, emotionally, can make one side win over the other.

Disappearing and reappearing, fascinating and upsetting, are symmetries that have always coexisted in Erruas' practice, inside a boundary so elastic that at times you really have the feeling of being lost. It is precisely this ambivalence, the non-physical place where she wants us to move.

This “hall of mirrors”, where beauty and suffering are side by side, could also be read and explored in regards to her cultural background. Her city, Tétouan, her country, Morocco, but also the northern-Africa area in general, have experienced in their history a past made of “wounds”, a building-destroying cycle that has become part of the everyday life. As the artist mentions, *“Wars, hunger, diseases or viciousness keep leaving their trails in our present-day lives, framing a universal pain, quite difficult to heal. There is joy and beauty, yet there is famine and penury ... my joy is contaminated by the feeling of incapacity in regards to the horrors that surround us”*.

This specificity is highlighted by Erruas through her attention to the idea of “ruins”. The images of ruins she recently saw during her stay in Havana for the Biennale, reminded her of the many places in her homeland where streets, houses, or walls, are still showing their history “scars”. The scars could be masked, but they are always there, in their suffering but still alive beauty, because, as the artist states, *“the impact of ruins are not just part of the past, they are visible in the current reality. There is a fascinating translation of life into destruction”*.

In her view then, there is an incredible beauty coming out from ruins, but at the time, they also represent the sign of fragility. In the charm of this paradox, Safâa Erruas find her aesthetical potential, bordering on perceptive constraint, and making her own definition of “architecture of pain” palpable, a dimension in which the most authentic expression of human vulnerability is found in the juxtaposition between the visible and the invisible.

This interest in the aesthetics of ruins can be easily deciphered in her recent touching installation ‘Ruins’, where pieces of ornamentals remains, magnetic in their dazzling candour, are somehow sewn together and, with long and thin cotton threads, also stitched to the wall from which they supposedly fell down. They broke down because of the passing time, however, not only they are still there, lying on the floor – as an important visible part of the present –, but metaphorically, Erruas ties them to their “past life” as if strengthen them, trying to cure the damages of these painful wounds.

The use of the needle in Safâa Erruas’ poetics comes therefore with a strong reference to the concept of Union. By its nature, the needle puts together two pieces, connecting them in a perfect match. It unites, nullifying the distance, the separation. In many of her works, included the just mentioned ‘Ruins’, the needle has to be contemplated as an attempt to close and cauterise the agonising scars, suggesting the will to stitch – both in a practical and metaphorical way – the breach, to heal the fractures of contemporary history, with the delicacy of a gesture that at the same time is powerful and graceful.

As for the concept of ruins, also the choice of the materials she employs – such as the needle itself, but also cloths, threads, pillows, cotton gauze or bandages – are clear associations to her private and autobiographical experience. As the artist often recalls, *“the materials in my work are selected from a personal storehouse of memories, they describe the world beyond the seamstress’ shop where I grew up”*. The world of Erruas, is indeed a reminder of the female world in the Maghreb, where sewing, weaving, and embroidering are also explored for their cultural relevance.

Surrounded by a community with rich historical traditions of needlework, Safâa Erruas experienced from her childhood onwards the precious legacy of sewing. *“In my home, my mother sewed all the time, thus in my childhood needles were my favourite and easy game distraction”* the artist often declares. Her work is inseparable from contemporary art’s expanded discourse of materials, including those devalued through their association with feminine spheres of production, such as embroidery, handmade and craft-based production. This commitment remains an integral part of her artistic practice and undoubtedly uncovers a certain amount of autobiographical

interpretation, but above all it invokes specific private and collective matters pertain to human issues and social realities.

Her interest in ancestral sewing and the weaving work of women can also be investigated for its unique creative process, one which must be carried out with patience, precision and composure. Sewing hours are in fact an important domestic encounter, where women can freely express themselves. This production method conjures up the slowness of a ritual, and for Erruas this ritual is in some way like a meditative process. As she also recounts, “*creating a new piece is long, often a repetitive process, in which I try to push my engagement and reach a meditative state, so that the work is born beyond my personal limitations.*” Made by repeated movements, replicated hundreds of times, installations such as ‘*Coutures cutanées*’ (2010) or ‘*The moon inside of me*’ (2009) demand indeed a long and meticulous realisation. The repetition of the gesture, its slow transformation and the magnetic rhythm are consumed almost magically, giving a ritual meaning to the entire evocation.

The final sight is what we see, but for Erruas, the work actually begins with the first piece stitched, the first cut made, and continues for hours, in a summoning silence. This artistic experience is therefore not only a physical operation, it is mainly a spiritual one, where all the creation is some kind of “meditative therapy”, as the artist herself calls it. It is an essential and needful extension of her entire research.

This way to sense art as an emotional and meditative experience is also clearly readable in her Atlas project, where her social realities interest and the reference of the female universe in Moroccan heritage are once again a thriving point of inspiration.

In 2014, Angelo Bellobono, the founder of the residency, invited Erruas to visit Imlil, in the Toubkal Valley (Morocco), to produce a work related to social development of the Valley. Immediately the artist felt captured by the local women realities, immersed in the splendour of a natural scenario, which visibly shaped a specific cultural and social identity.

Together with local women, Safâa Erruas created a work that most of all was a participative project, an emotional path in and with the female local community, and not by chance, ‘*Le chemin*’, the path, was exactly the title Erruas chose for it.

They walked around these impressive mountains, collecting all kind of natural found objects they wanted. The walk in the nature became clearly also a walk in their personal lives, a way to start a communication connection between them. Once back to the atelier, they gave “new life” to these objects – embroidering, sewing, manually intervening on them -, a life which from now on had the personal touch of each of these women, their individual imprint. The new objects, brought back then to their place, returned to Nature. There, Safâa Erruas photographed them, converting these images into postcards, souvenirs of an experience that has been not only an artistic project, but, above all, a perceptive “*chemin*”.

The intimate connection between memory and history is often narrated in Erruas’ practice with overlapping experiences where the ultimate private space becomes public and universal. With her deep and impressive signature, she succeeds to capture collective memory and then presents it in a new metaphorical dimension, where the tenuous balance between perception (in its sensory and emotional aspects) and conception (a more objective processing) reigns. Experiencing her creative process is like walking along with her on a path that goes straight through your soul, straight through a deliberate vertigo.