

For the eleventh edition of the ongoing exhibition programme dedicated to nature, Abreu Advogados, in partnership with Carpe Diem Arte e Pesquisa, presents a series of works by the artist Sofia Leitão.

Sofia Leitão

The Porto-based Portuguese artist, Sofia Leitão, works across a wide range of techniques and materials. From drawing to objects making, sculptures and installation, the artist developed a distinctive and refined aesthetic filled with references to art history and visual culture, archeology and museology, cinema and literature. With the oil pastel drawings on paper produced for this occasion, Sofia Leitão delves into the realm of minerals and stones, and by doing so, brings to the front stage an under-explored dimension of nature in arts, that of the inorganic.

From cabinets of curiosity to more recent museums, mineralogy holds a prominent place within natural history collections. As a specific branch of natural sciences, it is related to “inorganic bodies occurring in nature, whether these be simple or compound” (chemical combination of two or more elementary substance matter).

If it first calls to mind precious gemstones used in jewellery such as diamond, ruby, sapphire, opal, turquoise or emerald, it also refers to other kinds of stones that equally offer great graphic beauty and inspirational visual qualities. French intellectual and collector Roger Caillois (1913-1978) —who was part of the Surrealist movement before positioning himself against André Breton's rigid conceptions on imagination and the unconscious mind— highlighted the oneiric dimensions of either brut or polished specimens such as pyrite, quartz, amethyst, tourmaline, jasper, onyx or agate. Defining them as “dream stones”, Caillois focused on their spontaneously artistic and evocative qualities, exposing the link between their abstract, geometric or random figurative features and their faculty to trigger visions and associations in the viewers, along with emotional responses.

While the depiction of stones throughout the history of arts is quite rare, the genre traditionally refers to the practice of illustrations for the purposes of scientific classification and identification. According to the methodical spirit of objective observation based on collection, inventory and comparison, these classic illustration plates invariably represented the minerals in columnar format on a flat white backdrop. In that perspective, the constellation of works gathered in this exhibition represents an unprecedented pictorial innovation within the field of mineral drawings. The individualisation, focalisation and magnification that is operated by Sofia Leitão when depicting each stone in its singular, radiant and charismatic appearance elevates the representation of minerals to the rank of the prestigious genre of portraiture. Therefore, Sofia Leitão extracts the stones from the impersonal field of illustration and scientific knowledge to move them into the sphere of the phenomenal and the marvellous, thus echoing their ancient link with the cabinets of wonders that emerged in Europe during the sixteenth century.

Floating on an abstract, dark and crude background marked by visible pastel strokes, the stones’ rich colours, textures and asperities are detailed with mastery. Amplified in their scale, almost sacralised, they paradoxically seem to be vibrating with life. Thus, the visual strategy adopted by Sofia Leitão enhances the auratic quality of the minerals, offering each of them to contemplation and awe. Skilfully, the artist renders the way they capture and project light, drawing their vivid chromatic glimmers and shades, their sparkling, iridescent, reflective and translucent qualities or, in other cases, their opaque, absorptive and stratified aspects. One can appreciate the variety of their shapes and structures, the irregularity and dissymmetry of their surfaces, the sensation of their roughness and hardness.

Natural and quiet, and yet majestic, reminiscent of primordial and telluric landscapes full of timeless memories, they inevitably relate to geology and to Earth's life story. But they also refer to cultural belief systems and to the historical interpretations regarding stones in general, conjuring up their presumed magical, energetic or therapeutic properties.

Recalling Caillois’ approach, Sofia Leitão’s pictorial and poetic relationship with minerals invites the viewers “to look more deeply, in order to pinpoint the mystery”.

Katherine Sirois