

ARCOmadrid  
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# Sara Mealha



## Another alphabet

The invitation from Galerias Municipais/EGEAC – CML to the young Portuguese artist Sara Mealha (b. Lisbon, 1995) to present her work in the project room of the current edition of ARCOmadrid represents her first exhibition in an international context. The artist, who lives and works in Lisbon, completed a degree in Painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon in 2017, and has since developed a considerable and solid body of solo shows in galleries and alternative exhibition spaces.

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We all remember the time we learnt to read: the vowels, the consonants, the alphabet; the diphthongs, the syllables, the words. But let us focus on that moment before we even knew how to compose sentences, that moment when we started to recognise the letters in and of themselves, found everywhere around us. They really are everywhere. Everywhere we turn, they are there looking at us, coming towards us. On car number plates, newspaper headlines, cereal packets, posters on the street, cards on school walls: with drawings that serve as a mnemonic for the first letter of the word to which they refer. I cannot remember any particular image reproduced on these cards, but I cannot forget a green letter *F*. The coloured letter, capitalised and sans serif, next to the same letter in cursive script. It is this stage, in which we collect letters that appear as drawings that attract us, which Sara Mealha seems to be interested in capturing in her work. Not infrequently in her compositions, whether materialised in drawings, paintings, site-specific interventions, we find letters and sometimes words, lost, deconstructed, spilled, corrected, and which return us to that free exercise of childhood imagination.

The integration in Sara Mealha's work of games of scale, spacing, and the adaptation of calligraphy emancipated from its given context forms part of the practice of Visual Poetry. An example of this is the spaces left blank between words and stanzas in Stéphane Mallarmé's inaugural gesture *A Throw of the Dice*. And it is impossible not also mention Marcel Broodthaers, the faithful successor and unfold of Mallarmé's poetry in various visual works. In the artist's paintings we also find the sonority of Kurt Schwitters' poems and the significant formal constructions of Guillaume Apollinaire's calligrams. Her drawing is also driven by the automatic and authorless writing of the Surrealists and notions of collage and semantic cutting as found in Lettrism, especially by the hand of Isidore Isou. Making a geographical leap to Portuguese Experimental Poetry, whose main exponents in the 1960s were E. M. de Melo e Castro, Salette Tavares, and Ana Hatherly, with respect to the latter, rather than her foray into experimental poetry, it is her drawings-meshes of letters or her *Tisanas*, brief fragments that put the word and the image suggested by it in tension, which seem to be behind some of the images produced by Sara Mealha. When looking at Mealha's work, however, it is perhaps necessary to invert the term: Poetry Visual.

This point is intended to clarify, to remove, any sense of confrontation between letters and drawing vs. graphics and symbols. Sara Mealha is not interested in the typographic exercise of graphic design, not least because her words are often not legible or do not add up to a semantic meaning; rather, she sees letters as drawings or starting points for drawing (by its nature open-ended), which is why she is uninterested in symbols which constitute unambiguous drawings or which offer a single meaning.

Another dimension of Sara Mealha's work relates to the commitment that her artistic intervention (be it a stretched canvas, a site-specific painting, or interference in a given context) builds with the scale and architecture of the exhibition space it occupies. Let's take her wall paintings as an example. These interventions start from studies and sketches. When shifting scale and adapting to the space, it is sometimes

necessary to add another line, look for another colour, bend the drawings to fit the space where they are being installed. It is only after this process that the work is stabilised, that it happens, that it is enacted. However, this moment does not necessarily (or often) correspond to the work's fixity or durability: having been painted on site, projected in a given space, conceived in line with architectural happenstance, the fate of the interventions is frequently to be erased after their exhibition. For Sara Mealha, the challenge of the work's impermanence, rather than causing her a kind of nostalgia, opens her up to other experiences. For the artist, there is no distinction between different forms of action. A comma, a splash of colour, an onomatopoeia recovered in a doodle or a painting can slip out of the experience the space being intervened upon. This fruitful dialogue with the space in which the work is exhibited goes beyond the mere formal exercise, often placing us in conversation with Art History itself, allowing us to embark on this journey because our bodies are placed in the staging proposed by the artist. I encountered the blue sky of Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel in the intervention *Qual Destes uma Armadilha* (Which of These is a Trap, 2021) in the Galeria Zé Dos Bois bookshop. I recalled the colours of the figures' robes in Piero della Francesca's frescoes in Arezzo when I saw the colours of the letters in the installation *Ne Pas Plier* (Do Not Bend, 2023) that Sara Mealha presented at Zaratan gallery, in Lisbon.

I'd also like to mention two other imaginaries activated by Sara Mealha in her work, in addition to those already mentioned: the scenic space of the theatre and comics books. I don't know which came first in her career, but I would venture to say that everything was born at the same time and in drawing. This is because only in drawing is it possible to bring a multiplicity of worlds into play on the same plane and to rehearse conflicting coexistences. Think of that cartoon in which a figure continues to run through the air after going over the cliff. Through an economy of means, the performativity of language coincides with the search for a language of its own. For another alphabet.

In her presentation for the Galerias Municipais/EGEAC – CML project room at ARCOmadrid 2024, Sara Mealha uses her exhibition strategies in a subtle and generous way, taking into account the specificities of the exhibition space typical of an art fair. The starting point for her presentation was the painting *N, e* (2023), which was part of the *Meia Bravura* exhibition at the Appleton Associação Cultural in Lisbon. For Madrid, the artist updated the series with the painting entitled *SNIF* (2024), offering a new confrontation between the two paintings. The large dimensions of the paintings converse with the scale of the exhibition walls, but this is by no means a monologue. Pay attention to the way the canvases are stretched and temporarily attached to the walls, how they are integrated into the same plane where the painting unfolds. Sara Mealha's participation also includes an artist's book specially produced for this occasion. Each page features two layers superimposed, two moments juxtaposed. Over the digital reproduction of images of paintings from the same family as those now on show, dreamlike drawings, doodles made during telephone conversations and "*boncada*" (as the artist refers to these drawings) are silk-screened. It is in the short-circuit between (at least) two layers of meaning that Sara Mealha's visual research unfolds, as we can now witness in her exhibition proposal and when leafing through the artist's book. Decisions about weight, texture, colour brilliance, and the overlapping of languages take place on the same endless page of Sara Mealha's painting.

– Maria do Mar Fazenda

Sara Mealha  
*N, e*, 2023  
Oil on unbleached cotton fabric  
160 x 241 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Sara Mealha  
*Snif*, 2024  
Oil on unbleached cotton fabric  
145 x 245 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Apoyo

