

Dear Manuel,

How is everything? Hope you are doing well. We haven't spoken much since last summer and, after your letter asking me to tell you more about my work, I thought now would be the perfect time to write you. We have been friends for so long and, throughout the years, our conversations would touch almost everything, but when it came to work we preferred to do it instead. I think now could be a great time to dive into it, headfirst, and explain to you how I function. Just for the record, I don't know how clear I will be because it's still not totally comprehensible to me how the machine works. For example:

I just finished drawing two people, crossing paths, aiming to grab each other's pistols, when I wanted to draw a figure who is suffocating on a thin transparent layer involving their whole body.

How we got from one point to the other is what feeds my desire to work again and again, the element of surprise and discovery. I would also like you to know, that, more often than not, I don't feel like working. What I really mean is, given the transformation process that I just described, I feel scared that I won't be able to "do it" this time or, worse, I feel like I have nothing to say, no image to draw. It's a vulnerable state that keeps coming back, even when you have powered through it the previous day. However, the feeling of accomplishment is the closest to the "sense of self" one can feel, I would guess.

I know we used to talk about this, and you used to tell me to embrace it, but sometimes I still wonder why my drawings seem so "dramatic" and question the sense of truth they have to carry for me to feel comfortable with them. I do know that the drawings wouldn't exist without me and that I make the conscious effort to make work that feels sincere. I wonder if one day I will do a "lighter" painting. For now, this is what we got (direct translation from a very typical portuguese saying "É o que temos", used mainly to portray acceptance to one's reality).

When I'm not working, I ask myself if my work is contemporary enough. This is correlated with the eagerness to "make it" in a society that defines success as an upwards climb and is correlated with a hierarchical and financial gain. Then, I start to be fearful of succumbing, after not being able to take advantage of the "one shot" or "the train that only comes once in a lifetime". These moments of self-doubt (and urge to guess the future) usually happen during long periods of not working. The more I don't work, the more I feel the necessity to try and control everything else other than the thing that I am not having a grip on. I also think it has to do with a feeling of powerlessness and insecurity. I wonder if you feel the same way and can relate to what I just wrote. What I've come to realize is there is so much that is not on my hands, the only thing I have a say in is what happens in the studio. That is the place where I should be alone and where I should leave doubt, concerns, need to provide and to please, wishes and ideas at the door. Guston said, recalling something John Cage once told him, that if you are lucky, even you, the artist, will eventually leave the room. This to me talks about the feeling of immersion, something that sometimes happens, where the decision-making process becomes undetectable to oneself. Now and then I look at paintings and drawings I did and don't remember the course of action and choices that occurred to get to the final image. This feeling comes hand in hand with another, a lack of ownership and artistic authorship towards it, almost like feeling that someone else made the work. Remember when I used to tell you that those works were the good ones?

I don't see painting or drawing as any different from movies, music, theatre or writing. If someone shares with me their story, even if flawed, I will be interested. Although now we see people working around the subject that is closest to them (such as queer people, black people, women finally representing themselves, telling their stories more and more and not being portrayed by someone else, who never bothered to understand), I struggle, as a queer man. I do think representation is very important and, honestly, fundamental for change. So, as of right now, I want to leave my work open enough where you can see the pains and triumphs of someone dealing with their sexual identity but also just a person facing and understanding their place in the world.

I notice how fundamental it is, for me, to look both in and outwards and, at the same time, how I try my best to discard rationality in the studio. What I do value is the emotional response to something, that is what triggers me to work; I try to turn off the brain when I'm working and let some other part of me take the lead. My life has a direct impact on what I create and what happens in the world does too. I don't discard the weight of an image, even if we have access to millions of them now. I consume media every day and naturally that bleeds into my practice.

There needs to be an image, a thought, a song or a story that originates in me an emotional trigger that makes me want to work. Then, slowly, I start pushing my idea to the surface and become more open to what's appearing in front of me. The part, where I realize what has been populating my mind (the rational phase), comes after, when I look at a group of finished works. What do I do when I'm not feeling particularly emotional or I am too much in my head? I either sort the paperwork I have been avoiding for weeks or I stay in bed all day binge-watching TV series or videos on the Internet. Usually the first comes after the second.

You asked me, in your letter, if I have already a daily routine figured out. Well, on a day to day basis, I live my life until I feel the urge to create. Once that happens, usually, I work intensely for a period of time. I do it fast, producing two to three images per day. It feels like a bucket of water with a hole on the side; slowly draining until there is nothing left inside. After that, normally, I go back to an observant state (where I consume TV shows, listen to music, research artists that I like, discover new ones, call my family and friends) until I start scratching myself with the need to do something. I always feel guilty when I don't go to the studio because, truth be told, the probability of doing a work that pleases me increases immensely if I am in the atelier. That's why I try to keep drawing during the "non-working" period and that's why it's important to recognize laziness from necessity to let your eyes breath and rest. When I understand that I'm being lazy or fearful, what mechanisms do I use to trick me into going to the studio? I'm still learning to identify the helping tools, they become more perceptible as the years pass and the problems remain. It's very natural for a solution to become more evident if the obstacle keeps showing up. One that really helps me is to take a shower and force myself to grab the bicycle (or put me on any available public transportation), open the studio door, grab the most familiar medium and just start drawing or painting with it. The simpler the better.

I often like to create rules to follow. For example: Using just one colour, blurring my eyes, using an image from my archive as a trampoline to make things, panting a memory, drawing a scene from a book, painting with a used and stiff brush. If everything fails, you can always pick up a mirror and do a self-portrait (last time I did that was at the beginning of quarantine). If you are going to do it, just know that rules have no rules. They are always susceptible to be transformed and adapted. They only

work until you don't need them anymore and as ways of reviving the machine. Similar to when a gadget seems broken. We all know the different ways to try to repair it, it starts with turning it on and off and it ends with a kick and, depending on the level of despair, a prayer.

So, to emphasize, every time I define what I'm doing and how I am approaching it, it is subject to change.

Openness, doubt and nuances of storytelling, with every contradiction that these three notions originate, when put together, are aspects that I value on an image and that attract me immensely to the work of others. The power to build the house and let others use it. A work with these qualities can result in a dichotomic response. I've noticed, from one side of the coin, if the image is open and allows the eyes to search and wonder, more answers can be found. There is a universal quality to it that can be welcomed by many. However, if the work resists and doesn't offer a conclusion right away, many can label it as uninteresting or not poignant enough. I'm curious to see the day when a question (or several, in a big soup of uncertainty) becomes as powerful as the answer.

I have just realized, Manuel, that by writing you this letter, I came to some conclusions about my work that wouldn't have happened otherwise. You helped me see things in a clearer way and I thank you for that!

I understood that I accept contradiction and I value the state of limbo in what I do, those are things I don't want to run away from. I don't see my work as political; I just see it as part of life (even though I have definitely made works with a strong political will and conscience). I often show my paintings or drawings in groups because I appreciate the dialogue and connections created when the viewers bounce their eyes between the pictures. The videos usually are shown alone, maybe because they are already an agglomeration of images.

I have been noticing that I enjoy drama and the feeling that something is about to happen (or has just occurred). I value the obstacle as a way to deconstruct virtuosity and make things exciting and I look at the work as a whole and not as single, independent, loose pieces. Finally, to feel and to process those feelings, it requires time and energy. Sometimes you are up to the task, sometimes you are not.

Now I should go, I have been very busy these past days and will be for a while. Thank you for all the years of friendship, the conversations we had growing up and I can't wait to read your letter telling me all about your work.

Send my kisses to your family and take everything I said with a grain of salt,

Love,

Manuel