

## PRESS RELEASE // CAROLINE PAGÈS GALLERY



Sofia Leitão, *Spolia* #7, 2017, Oil pastel on paper, 65 x 50 cm

### **Sofia Leitão**

#### *Spolia*

**Opening on Saturday, September 30 from 5 – 8 pm**

September 30 – November 11, 2017

Caroline Pagès Gallery

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Open from 3 - 8 pm Tuesday through Saturday, and by appointment.

### **The *Spolia* Effect**

The artist Sofia Leitão is presenting her *Spolia* series, in the Caroline Pagès Gallery in Lisbon, at a time when museums, cultural institutions, specialists and civil society are discussing whether it is necessary to return works of art, removed in previous centuries in the context of a scientific and archaeological curiosity, colonialism, wars or even the fetish to acquire exotic artefacts. This is a new body of work inspired by her research into the symbology of the *ancient* and how this aesthetic has been introduced into the contemporary world.

The inspiration underpinning this new work by Sofia Leitão is the Spolia effect - a term used in the context of art history when we talk about the re-use of materials or decorative elements from previous epochs, in modern buildings. The works presented are a set of sculptures and a set of drawings.

The sculptures were inspired by her walks through the city of Porto, where she lives and works. The artist discovered friezes, and other decorative elements used in the construction of buildings from previous epochs, as well as loose stones and abandoned elements that she included in her own sculptural works, thereby engendering a work that reflects contemporaneity - through the use of mirrors, cut into multiple fragments and artificial foliage - while also recalling ancient times, periods of fascination and discovery and of fragmented, decontextualized and mysterious elements. This is reminiscent of how Piranesi imagined these elements in his representations of ruins, thereby suggesting a certain erudite sensitivity.

Another of her small-scale sculptures also suggests this allusion to past epochs: a display window with the eyes of a bronze sculpture. It should be noted that the aforementioned classical sculptures contained elements that were added *a posteriori* - such as eyes and various chromatic interventions, based on the clothes and status of the person represented in the statue. The eyes in this work are produced using a technique called micro-mosaic, which is a direct allusion to the souvenirs that eighteenth century travellers brought to Europe after their *Grand Tours* to distant lands.

Her works on paper are a new series that was initially inspired by her interest in a helmet depicting a lion, produced for a Renaissance military parade. Once again this is inspired by her interest in objects no longer used in the contemporary world, but which are nonetheless laden with meaning? On the basis of this experience, the artist has developed a body of work in which masks, busts, lion's legs with claws and human legs, amongst other motifs, conjure up the same aforementioned general sentiment: a fascination with fragments and ancient beauty.

Who would have thought that the sculptures produced by Phidias (c. 480-430 BC), which were taken from the Parthenon in Athens by Lord Elgin (1766-1841), and are currently held in the British Museum in London, would create such a strong and present paradigm in the visual culture of Western society? Who would have thought that the seven-ton bust of Ramses II, also kept in the British Museum, removed by Giovanni Battista Belzoni (1778-1823), would also have created the corresponding visual fascination with Egyptian culture?

In fact there is a genuine fascination with these works, which arrived in a damaged state in London in the eighteenth century, transported by sea, and which were treated as circus curiosities and as entertainment for the masses, who had to buy tickets to see them. Although dismembered and decontextualized from their original environment, these stones gave rise to a visual and material obsession, that continues to the present day.

From the moment when these items arrived in London, there began to be widespread replication of images, miniatures and copies of these Greek and Egyptian marbles, which spawned numerous interpretations, in various formats, ranging from drawings to the famous true-life plaster replicas used extensively for educational purposes in fine arts schools around the world, including those made by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778). As a result of Piranesi's work the "ruins of the past" began to be interpreted as an expression of a feeling that mixes archaeological curiosity with fascination for visual culture. This type of aesthetics began to be accepted, thus countering the literal interpretation of a distant tragedy.

Faced by these works, it is up to the observer to imagine and create new narratives about the purpose and use of these bits of "stones" or their representations, produced in past epochs. How do we look at them? What meaning do they have, thousands of years after their original production? This is clearly a question posed to us by Sofia Leitão.

Lourenço Egreja  
Lisbon, September 2017

**Sofia Leitão** (b. 1977 in Paredes, PT) lives and works in Oporto. She has been represented by the Caroline Pagès Gallery in Lisbon for 10 years. *Spolia* is her fourth solo show at the gallery. She graduated in sculpture in 2005 from the Faculdade de Belas Artes da Universidade do Porto (FBAUP) and in drawing from the Escola Superior Artística do Porto (ESAP) in 2000. Her work is represented in the collections of Manuel de Brito and the PLMJ Foundation in Lisbon, Figueiredo Ribeiro in Abrantes, MG in Alvito, the Ilídio Pinho Foundation in Oporto, as well as in many private collections in Portugal, Spain, Austria and the USA.

In October 2017 her work is going to be shown in the group exhibition *Beyond the Mirror* at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon. She recently took part in the Festival Desencaminharte - Arte Pública, in Alto Minho, Portugal (2017); in *Portugal, Portugueses*, Museu Afro-Brazil, São Paulo, Brazil (2016); in *Da Cartografia do Poder aos Itinerários do Saber*, Museu Afro-Brazil, São Paulo, Brazil (2014); in *Casa Ocupada*, Casa da Cerca-Centro de Arte Contemporânea, Almada, Portugal; in *Negras Paixões* (with Helena Almeida, Vasco Araujo, Rui Chafes, Alice Geirinhas, Albuquerque Mendes), Círculo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra, Portugal (2011); in *Amália, Coração Independente*, Berardo Museum, Lisbon and *Portugal Pavilion*, Hangart7, Salzburg, Austria in 2009.