

# The work of Alberto Carneiro and the Taoist system of thought



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## Abstract

This article focuses on the influence of the Taoist system of thought on Alberto Carneiro's sculptural work. Based, above all, on interpretations of the classic painting treatises of Chinese landscape painting, I intend to establish connections between this traditional art form and the work of the Portuguese contemporary sculptor.

I depart from an interpretation of the global sense of the aforesaid texts, as well as their images. I will work on the artistic approach of the Chinese artists to life and cosmos and not the materialization of this attitude in a specific technique; an approach founded on both aesthetic and ethical principles. As in François Cheng's book on Chinese painting *Vide et Plein*, what interests us are the internal structures of this system of thought and their working principles, texts are to be read as an organic whole.

The tendency to change the natural elements into signs by the calligraphic Chinese tradition is seen as crucial. Not because of the use of the brush, but in a broader and three-dimensional sense, a tuning with immanent fusion with the natural environment. It's the understanding and experience that one has of things in the world from their interior rather than their exterior appearance. For the Chinese painter, brush-stroke lines stated simultaneously the forms of things and the drive of dreams. This painting technique aims at a tactile apprehension of a recognisable world but one that is not real. The natural substance is interpreted and reinterpreted through a refined technique apprehended at length. There's a focus on the immaterial although it is rooted in and accomplished through the tactile. Alberto Carneiro through his long connection with material substances, both through rural life and as an apprentice sculptor of saints from the age of ten, embodies in his work this technical transcendence, a dual becoming between artist and material substance that is presented as a "pure being of sensation". The forces generated by the cosmos are the same as those that generate art, with the artist as a mediator. As we will see, this is a philosophical conception deeply connected with several centuries of landscape painting in China. The place of the creation is a mediunic place where true life is possible.

Alberto Carneiro's sculptural approach presupposes the tree has an identity, a memory and that, deep inside of its body, one can find the experiential phenomena of its existence. This assumption is deeply connected with what Chinese painting theorists called the internal principle of things – *li* – and that the role of the artist is to reach it. Only then, can he really express the true nature of things in painting or, in Alberto Carneiro's work the symbiosis between Man and material substance. In his work there's a becoming tree of man and a becoming man of tree.

## Introduction

Born in 1937, Alberto Carneiro is one of the most important and influential contemporary Portuguese sculptors. He has always claimed that his two major influences were Gaston Bachelard's works on the poetics of the four elements and Taoism. Carneiro's work has much resonance with Bachelard's oeuvre and consequently this relationship has been widely studied. The Taoist inspiration is more difficult to find in studies on Carneiro's artistic approach. At first it puzzled me that there was no specific research on the influence of Taoism on the sculpture of Alberto Carneiro, but later on I understood that it would take a lot of effort to do so, therefore I did it. This paper tries to give an overview of my PhD research, about the influence of the Taoist system of thought on Alberto Carneiro's sculptural work. Based, above all, on interpretations of the classical treaties of Chinese landscape painting, I intend to establish connections between this traditional art form and the work of the Portuguese contemporary sculptor. As a starting point, I will consider the interpretation of the global sense of the aforesaid texts as well as their images. I will work on artistic approach of the Chinese artists to life and cosmos and not in the materialization of this attitude in a specific technique; an approach founded on both aesthetic and ethical principles. As in François Cheng's book on Chinese painting *Vide et Plein (Empty and Full)*, what interests us, are the internal structures of this system of thought and their working principles, texts are to be read as an organic whole.



Fig. 1  
Still from the film  
*Alberto Carneiro (3)*  
Directed by Rogério Taveira  
2011

## One, Two, Three

Alberto Carneiro's first contact with the East was through Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* in 1968, when he was a scholarship student at Saint Martin's School of Art in London. Portugal was, then, a fascist regime under Salazar, which closed the country to almost every outside influence. Being in London, in a very different atmosphere to Portugal, gave the artist a new and broader horizon. Just as Bachelard's work had struck Carneiro some years before, Laozi had a similar effect. It was like discovering a new world full of potential. When he returned home, his work had changed, and was now more complex and open but, at the same time, paradoxically, more deeply connected to his roots, a rural place in Northern Portugal where he still lives.

He started to make installations using natural and ordinary materials like bamboo canes, straw and sticks which connected him to his childhood; he had become aware of his deep relation with nature. Although this relation with the natural elements (the Western four: water, fire, air and earth), had started years before, even prior to reading Bachelard, they were now used with a clear awareness of what they meant in his work. Ever since, all his work has been influenced on *anamnesis*, Plato's idea that within us there is lost latent knowledge that can be rediscovered. In Alberto Carneiro's art process *anamnesis* works as a connection with his childhood and natural archetypes, such as forest, mountain, river, etc. It's a blending of self with environment, a remembering or connection to some primordial Principle. That is what he's been trying to find inside the trees he carves. Although trees are his chosen material he never cut one down; he planted almost every single tree in his garden, like all the other plants and vegetables, that he tends to on a daily bases. His garden is a micro cosmos, an experimental laboratory where he learns and remembers the ways of Nature and its ever-changing mood. The place where Carneiro learns not to imitate life but to work like it. The forces generated by the cosmos are the same as those which create art, with the artist as a mediator. Shitao (Zhu Ruoji, 1641–1720) said the work of art did not generate itself, it was human creation. He added that if the mountains and rivers and the infinity of things and beings could reveal their soul to man it was because man has



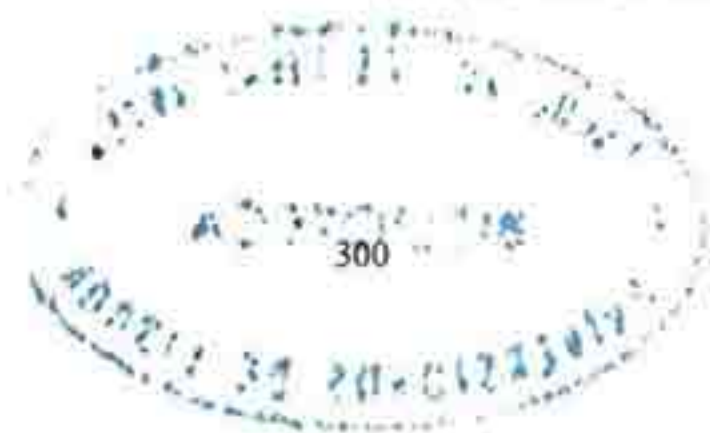
Fig. 2

*Still from Alberto Carneiro (3)*

the power of creation and life. (Shitao, 2001, p. 13) “To move within a landscape on the scroll means to communicate with the reality dimension out of which also the human existence receives its power and dignity”. (Braembussche, 2009, p. 60)

Alberto Carneiro’s intense knowledge of nature – experienced but also brought to mind in archetypes – is deeply connected to the way that Chinese Taoist landscape painters sought a fusion between self and nature, attempting to reach the Principle of things. They found in Nature an organic set of live entities that incarnated the fundamental *Original* laws. The human soul, when in tune with these laws, could accede the process of the Creation. A “Creation on the move” as François Cheng put’s it (Cheng, 1989, p. 161–162), based on the *Tao*. Here we should reflect on one of the fundamental principles of oriental thought, the idea of impermanence. Taoism, like Buddhism, has incorporated this idea of becoming, of impermanence, of mutation, of changing. We can trace this line of thought back at least three thousand years to *I Ching (Book of Changes)*. Another connection between this ancient book and Taoism is the *yi*, the absolute principle of Unity, the Oneness that Shitao uses in an amazing way in his painting treatise *One Stroke*. As Pierre Ryckmans states, the essential paradox of this work is the fact that it’s based on a technical painting question, but, at the same time, Shitao is able to charge it with a set of philosophical and cosmological Chinese references. The Taoist One expresses the Absolute in its primordial and unspeakable state, prior to any phenomenon. The double movement of the division of One and the synthesis of the produced terms (*yin* and *yang*) achieves creation. From this successive metamorphosis results the infinite of beings<sup>1</sup> in a permanent state of becoming. For Shitao his One-Stroke rule allowed him to participate in the metamorphosis of the Universe. Ryckmans notes on ideogram used by Shitao in the beginning of the sentence “Engage in the metamorphosis of the Universe” means etymologically and literally “making the three”: the artist, through his creative activity, is a part of a trinity with Heaven and Earth. (Ryckmans, 1970, p. 79–80) Carneiro has a similar ambition to

<sup>1</sup> Laozi wrote the laconic “The Tao generates the One. The One generates the Two. The Two generates the Three. The Three generates all things”. (Lao Tzu, n.d., p. 162)



dissolve himself in phenomena, aiming to reach the metamorphosis, the mutation of the material substance and being. Several of his works have direct connections with this trinity Man, Heaven and Earth, such as *Três Árvores e a Floresta* (*Three Trees and the Forest*), 2000–2005 (Fig. 3), *A Árvore da Vida* (*The Tree of Life*), 1998–2000 and *Coluna sem Fim* (*Endless Column*), 1999–2000. XingJian Gao explains another trinity:

*The self, at times, may present itself, as three distinct, separate, yet interrelated figures that go by I, you, and he. Who paints? Is it I or is it you? Then again, it may be he... The moment you withdraw from I and both the subject and the object become the target of aesthetic judgment, the artist's blind narcissism – brought about by unbridled excess – gives way to attentive observation, to searching, to tracking and capturing. Face-to-face, you and I size each other up, until dark, chaotic I starts to brighten under the gaze of a third eye, he.*

(Gao, 2002, p. 25–26)

## Inner Principle

Taoism, as in the other two major Chinese systems of thought Buddhism and Confucianism, never separated man from objects, as Western in philosophy where man is isolated from nature, and objects from other objects. That's one reason why we call a slice of the perceived environment a “landscape”. This word didn't exist in Chinese painting, because, as we've said, it implies divisiveness and fragmentation: here it was called Mountain-Water (*shan-shui* or *shan-chuan*) painting based on the complementary between Heaven and Earth. This complementary pair of natural motifs, mountain and river (water) could, by successive metamorphosis, bring to life all the other forms of life. If we think that the traditional painters were painting vectors of vitality rather than representing forms, we have a starting horizontal (river) and a vertical (mountain), then by addition of complementary pairs, life would fill the rolling paper. This fact helps to explain the inexistence of linear perspective (until European influence). Linear perspective implies a single point a view, a single spectator. The nonexistence of perspective gives the painter the freedom to have several points a view: a non-real representation of



elements, it was not about plausibility but intelligibility, nor about determination but *desubstantiation*. An image beyond images.

Nevertheless it's through the painting of natural elements that the artist may express the internal resonance of such micro cosmos. The succession of plans invited the spectator to penetrate the work through pathways created by the painter. It is the creation of a universe ruled by circular movements where all components imply and extend themselves. As Shitao put it, if the One is not caught clearly, the multiplicity of beings becomes an obstacle. But if the One is caught clearly, the multiplicity of beings discloses its harmonious order. (Shitao, 2001, p. 18)

Alberto Carneiro is unambiguous that there's a becoming man in the sculpted tree and a becoming tree in the sculptor himself. His sculptural approach presupposes the tree has an identity, a memory and that, deep inside its body one can find the experiential phenomena of its existence. Deeply connected to this assumption is what Chinese painting theorists, such as Su Tong-po (1035–1101), called the constant inner principle of things – *li* – and the role of the artist is to reach it. It's not about attempting to reproduce a form, but an inner principle of organization, a living “coherence” of the material substance. Only by reaching *li*, can the artist express the true nature of things in painting or, in Alberto Carneiro's work the symbiosis between Man and material substance. The poet, calligrapher, and art critic for The Northern Song, Su Shih describes the act of painting as practiced by his cousin, Wen Tong (1019–1079):

*When Yu-ke painted bamboo,  
He saw bamboo, not himself,  
Nor was he simply unconscious of himself:  
Trance-like, he left his body.  
His body was transformed into bamboo.  
Creating inexhaustible freshness.  
Chuang Chou [Zhuangzi] is no longer in this world,  
So who can understand such concentration?  
(Bush, 1971, p. 41)*



Fig. 3  
*Três Árvores e a Floresta*  
*(Three Trees and the Forest)*  
Chestnut tree, 2000–2005  
Photograph by  
Rogério Taveira,  
Alberto Carneiro's workshop  
2008

## Formless

The tendency to change the natural elements into signs by the calligraphic Chinese tradition is seen as crucial. Not because of the use of the brush, but in a broader and three-dimensional sense, a tuning with the immanent fusion with the natural environment. It's the understanding and experience that one has of the things in the world from their interior rather than their outer appearance. For the Chinese painter, brush-stroke lines stated simultaneously the forms of things and the drive of dreams. This painting technique aims at a tactile apprehension of a recognisable world but one that is not real. The natural substance is interpreted and reinterpreted through a refined technique apprehended at length. There's a focus on the immaterial although it is rooted in and accomplished through the tactile. Alberto Carneiro, through his long connection with material substances, both through rural life and as an apprentice sculptor of saints from the age of ten, embodies in his work this technical transcendence, a dual becoming between artist and material substance that is presented as a "pure being of sensation".

In the *The Dexterous Butcher* Zhuangzi tells the story of the cook Ting who had found a way to use his knife to cut up oxen without ever needing to sharpen it. Ting tells Lord Wenhui how he acquired this skill: what he cared about was the *Tao* which advanced his skills. When he first began to cut oxen, all he could see was the ox itself, then, with time he started to work with his spirit and not look with the eyes. Controlling perception and understanding have stopped and instead spirit wills the performance. He depended on things as they are, so his knife never touched the smallest ligament or tendon, even less a main joint.

*There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room – more than enough for the blade to play about it. That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone. However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until – flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the*

*knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away.*

(Chouang Tzu, n.d, online)

Even though this story has many interpretations, as does almost every Taoist text, what is interesting for this study is the transcendence of technique, to reach a state beyond technical questions. Like in Su Shih's poem: "Zhuangzi is no longer in this world, so who can understand such concentration?" What guides the cook is something beyond practice and skill, probably a sudden and inexplicable insight, a sort of illumination. Patrick Ringgenberg says that for the Taoists, as for the Buddhists, illumination is to perceive the union between the visible and the invisible, and accordingly art and non-art, of human and non-human. The visible cannot be forgotten in the name of the invisible, or the invisible in the name of the visible.<sup>2</sup> (Ringgenberg, 2004, p. 34)

For painters there was the concept, expressed by Shitao, of receiving phenomena without form, to dominate forms without leaving a trace: Taoist concept of perfect action. From an artistic viewpoint it's about painting like if it was an emanation of the paper itself, like the natural drawings made by cracks, patina and moss on an old wall.

For Carneiro, carving his trees involves the same detachment from the real; it's an emanation of the tree as much as it is of the man. That's why, we can say, that his sculpture is as such formless. Form is the result of a process of a dual becoming of visible and invisible forces. Each sculpture is informed by the sculptor; "believe that each tree obeys to an individual and profound nature" like Ching Hao wrote in the Five Dynasties period. (Ryckmans, 1979, p. 77) His sculptures are unquestionably made from trees, some of them even remain with the appearance of trees, but they're no longer the same natural being. They're in a different dimension; they've become an art-ificial being in a permanent state of becoming. As Carneiro says, spectators will always change the meaning of the work because they are all different; they have different backgrounds and come from different cultures. Nonetheless, Alberto

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<sup>2</sup> Resonances with Klee's thought "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather it makes visible". (Klee, 1956, p. 38)

Carneiro's sculpted trees are carved in a process of dialogue between man and natural object, an evolving process with no prior idea, and no projection. Shen Tsung-ch'ien argues the artist should let the *i* (idea, vision) die, so the work is made as creative force flowing from the universal "vital breath". (Ryckmans, 1979, p. 46–47) Every work of art born accordingly to this principle would possess *ch'i-shih* (internal eruption, lines of force). In a certain sense, to let the *i* die would be like letting go of all the *clichés* that populate the work of art when the artist starts a piece, and open himself to an immanent breath that will induce an internal boost that questions formal pre-existences.

Simply put, in Laozi's words "The great image has no form"; a phrase used for the title of François Jullien's book, where its argued in contrast to the Western notion of art being separate from the world it represents, for Chinese painters art is not distinct from reality, but rather a continuum of existence. (Jullien, 2003)

## Emptiness

Another interesting subject was the way Alberto Carneiro started to use emptiness after returning from London. For him, the nonbeing of his body that could be filled with that of the spectator had begun to be a central issue in his installations. The spectator could re-build a new world after the recreation of his own experience of material substances. Emptiness was not just the place left by the absence of material, as in Western sculpture before Modernism. Emptiness had started to have a central role in his work.

*Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel,  
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends.  
Clay is moulded to form a utensil,  
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the utensil depends.  
Doors and windows are cut out to make a room,  
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends.  
Therefore turn being into advantage, and turn non-being into utility.  
(Lao Tzu, n.d.2: online, translated by Wing-Tsit Chan, 1963)*

The concept of Emptiness has a central role on the Chinese thought. Present in all practices, artistic or not, Emptiness is a dynamic and active element, contrary to the assumptions of Western thought. As François Cheng states in his *Vide et Plein (Empty and Full)*, although central, it was not studied systematically, since it was always presented as a natural entity that did not need definition. In this work, Cheng aims to systemize this concept with reference to classic texts, in order to describe it and above all its role in the landscape painting.

As Cheng points out Emptiness is fundamental to Taoist ontology. Before Heaven and Earth were Nonbeing, the Nothing and the Emptiness. Emptiness is central to the way the Chinese conceive the universe. It is not, as Western mind might suppose, something vague or nonexistent. It is dynamic and active. Linked with the idea of vital breaths and with the preeminent site of transformation, the place where fullness can attain its whole measure. Emptiness introduces discontinuity and reversibility into a given system and thus allows the elements that compose this system to transcend a rigid opposition and one-sided development. Meanwhile, emptiness offers human beings the possibility of approaching the universe at the level of totality.

*In terminology, two terms convey the idea of the Emptiness: wu and hsü (Buddhists privilege a third term: k'ung). Both interdependent, they are sometimes confused. Thus wu, with the corollary you 'being', is generally translated in the West as 'Nonbeing' or 'Nothing'; while hsü, with the corollary shih 'Fullness' being translated as 'Emptiness'.*

*For Lao-tzu as at Chuang-tzu, though the Origin of the universe is most often given the name wu 'the Nothing', hsü is used to characterize the original state towards which all existence should strive. Emptiness is at the root of the Dao.*

(Cheng, 1979, p. 53–54)

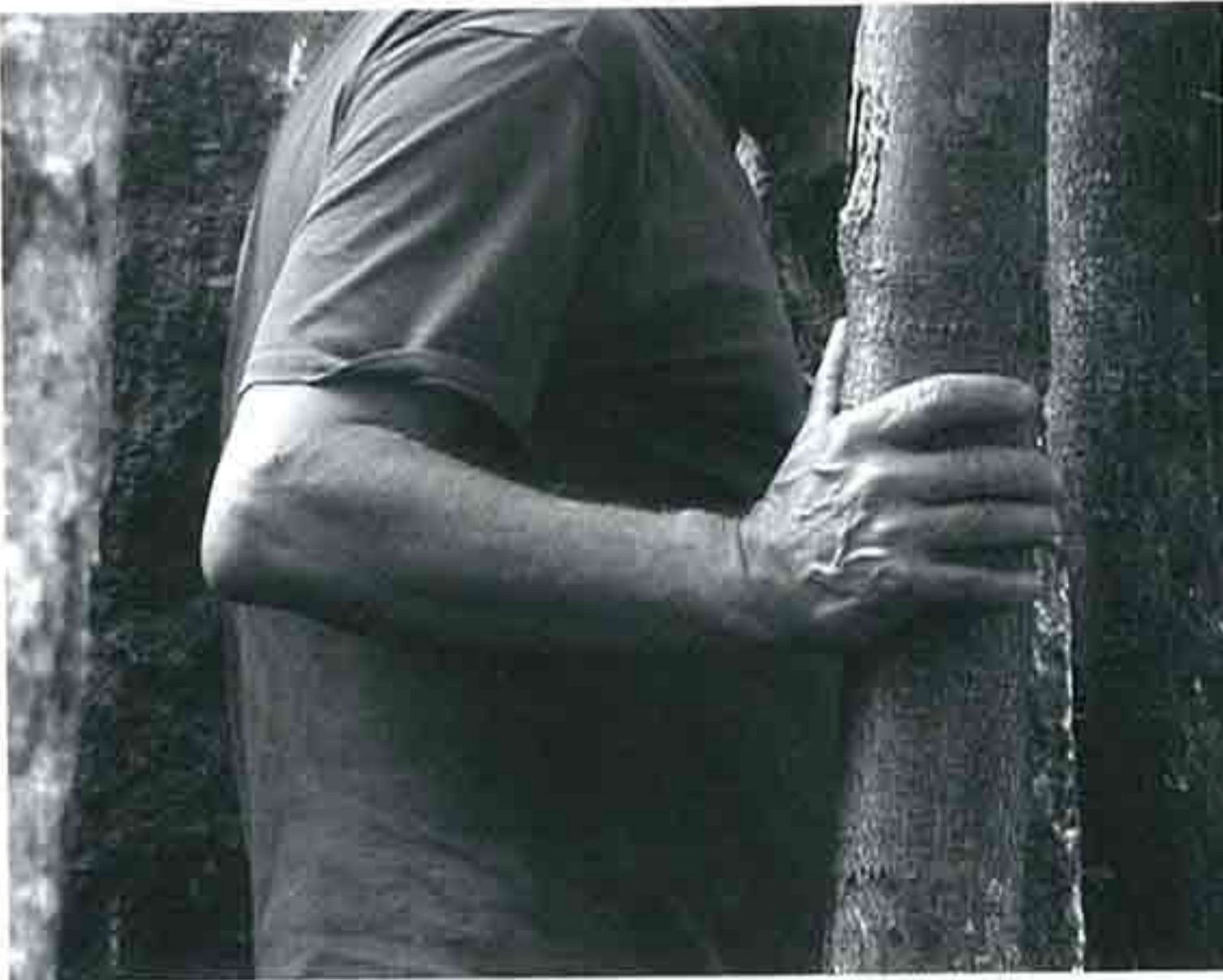
The presence of emptiness in Chinese Taoist painting is immediately apparent. Most works present non-painted areas that can comprise as much as to two thirds of a painting's area. However, emptiness is only truly comprehensible if one understands its role in the work. Empty space is not only restricted to the edges of the painting and advances into its interior, as the example of the use of clouds that mediate Mountain

and Water. The clouds play a mediating role between the two poles: they are the emptiness. The cloud was born from the condensation of water and it embodies simultaneously the shape of the mountain. There's a dual becoming of these two entities. Without the emptiness, couplets like Mountain and Water, or any kind other complementary pair would present a rigid opposition: one of stagnation. The Emptiness gives relations dynamism. "The emptiness is regarded by the Chinese thought as the place where living entities or signs intersect, exchanging in a nonunivocal way". (Cheng, 1977, p. 38) The place for a multiplicity of meanings.

Through this emptiness painters could accomplish the sensation that the Mountain could merge with the Emptiness dissolving in waves and that Water, inversely, passing through the state of Emptiness could raise itself and become a Mountain. This relation allows perceiving entities which incarnate the dynamics of the Real. This dual becoming exists at different levels: beyond the represented elements, the painter himself becomes with nature and the spectator with the painting. Paetzold wrote: "To move within a landscape on the scroll means to communicate with the dimension of reality out of which also the human existence receives its power and dignity". (Braembussche, 2009, p. 60)

Opposed to perspective or separation between man and object, this dual becoming is directly connected to the inexistence of human centrality. Introducing the third dimension into Western pictorial representation brought with it the restriction of a single point of view. The dimension of coexistence closes with the painting's attempt to approach the "real" through the simulacrum of the third dimension.

The Chinese painter should know by heart any element to be painted in all its dimensions. In the case of a Mountain or a Tree, the painter would have to know how to paint them from all sides, although only one was to be represented. Here lies the importance given to real contact with nature. Thus, travelling was part of the artistic experience, and source of poetic and pictorial expression. As with Carneiro in his garden today, and his contact with nature as a child and the many works he has done in forests, rivers, mountains, and beaches. These works, dating from late 1970s, were experiences with his body in direct contact with the elements. Performances documented in black and white photographs: *Trajeto de um Corpo (Journey of a Body)*, 1976–1977, *Arte corpo/*



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Fig. 4 and 5  
*Stills from Alberto Carneiro (3)*

*Corpo arte (Art body/Body art) 1976–1978, A Floresta (The Forest), 1978, O Ribeiro (The Stream), 1978 or Ainda o mar para além do labirinto (Beyond the Labyrinth Remains Sea), 1978.*

The non-perspectival composition of the elements in the surface allows the painter to reconstruct the primordial movement of creation. All the elements are in reciprocal relations. All Fullness relates through Emptiness, that is, if the work shows an identifiable empty zone as a non-painted area it relates to a Full painted one. This would also be true on a smaller scale, one of represented elements. Here we see the same full-emptiness relation, a space that contracts and expands. Fan chi (Ts'ing dynasty) said that a painting touched by real Emptiness should, on the interior of each line, between each line, and at the very core of the densest whole be inhabited by dynamic breaths where they could move freely. (Cheng, 1989, p. 46)

The task is executed by emptying the medium, by its absolute integration in the flow of cosmic forces. This is to empty the pulse that Shitao talks about, the first step for the passage of the energies coming from the heart of the painter, which without resistance flow directly to the tip of the brush. The Chinese painting is executed without any support of from either arm or hand. The movements of painting are neither limited to the fingers (fixed) nor to the hand, they are executed by the entire arm, which, in the East, ends in the scapula (shoulder blade) and not in the shoulder. This creates a close connection between the arm and that “mysterious flaw” called the heart: a universal place and keeper of secrets. Paul Klee was looking for the same place some centuries later:

*At the point where the central organ of all temporal spatial movement rules all functions: who would not live there as an artist? There, in the womb of nature, where the secret key to all being is hidden? (...) Our quaking hearts drive us downward, deep down to the origin of things.*

(Klee, 1956, p. 35)

Through the Emptiness, the heart of the Man becomes the rule or the mirror of itself and of the world. Possessing the Emptiness, which relates directly to the Original Emptiness, Man is in the proper source of images and forms. But this Full and Empty complementarity does

not exist only in the relation between arm and heart. There's a larger picture involving the whole body: the upper part of the body would not function without the lower part, particularly the feet, firmly on the soil. The feet embody, par excellence, the Fullness of the lower body. It is from here that everything is played, the Fullness of the lower part allows the upper part of the body to be inhabited by the Emptiness. In a similar way the left side of the upper part of the body, is also inhabited by the Fullness, allowing the Emptiness on the right. This alternation continues on the right side, where, each constituent is alternately Full and Empty. The empty shoulder blade becomes full and, following this system, the empty arm becomes full until arriving at the brush tip that must receive the emptiness: a true cosmic rhythm in the scale of being. By understanding the rhythm of Space and Time the artist can master the laws of transformation. (Cheng, 1979, p. 62-63)

*Make your will one! Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, but with your ch'i. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but ch'i empty and waits on all things. Tao gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.(...) Let your ears and eyes communicate with what is inside, and put mind and knowledge on the outside. Then even gods and spirits will come to dwell, not to speak of men! This is the changing of the ten thousand things.*

(Chuang Tzu, n.d, online)

## Alberto Carneiro and Taoism

The alternation between full and empty as a dynamic system, the complementarity between all things involved in nature recreating the Heaven and Earth process of becoming, allowed Alberto Carneiro to understand there is no right without wrong, no right without left, no front without back: a way with non-opposites. Some of his works deal with this concept of non-exclusiveness or directional non-oppositeness. *Três Árvores e a Floresta (Three Trees and the Forest)*, 2000–2005 (Fig. 3) is a sculpture where two elements are upside down (representing Heaven and Earth) and only one in the same direction as what used to be a

chestnut tree (Man) from which the whole piece is made. Similarly, *A Árvore da Vida (The Tree of Life)*, 1998–2000 an upside down tangerine tree given by a neighbour, could represent man, but has a much wider field of interpretation.

The works by Alberto Carneiro where the Emptiness appears in a more explicit manner are *Corpo Mandala (Mandala Body)*, 1995 and the seminal *O Canavial – memória-metamorfose de um corpo ausente (The Canes – Memory-Metamorphosis of an Absent Body)*, 1968. From the first showing of the latter sculpture Carneiro made clear that the central element of this installation was the absent body, not the canes or its configuration of space. It's an experience in a state of becoming. The spectator must re-build a memory, his and the sculptor's and be able to create pathways in this labyrinth immersing himself in the work through the process. The very same process of becoming one with the landscape in Chinese painting described above.

In *Corpo Mandala* four carved logs configure a Mandala. Once again the expressiveness of this work is in the absent body of the sculptor at the centre of the piece. The body that shaped the logs in size and separation, apart from the act of carving itself, was the sculptor's body. What we see are four upright mahogany carved logs in its dark shade of brown delimiting a negative space. The four elements establish a dialogue between themselves in its interiorized configuration. Nevertheless we still feel that the emptiness left inside these logs is as important as the logs themselves.

The importance of the emptiness in both works has a direct connection with the idea of the dynamic and vital breathes of Taoist cosmology. The emptiness gives movement to the sculptures. Moreover the real importance is “in-between” the elements: the kingdom of interval where the *Tao* emerges as retold by Cheng. The “between” is an entity able to perform mutations and holds, simultaneously, the secrets of the primordial code as it's connected to absolute Emptiness. It's in this gap that the artist removes himself, pointing to the ethical role of the artist. The body of the artist and the sculpture become one. The primordial Unity, the One, is accomplished through this dual becoming that is in constant mutation because of the inherent Empty/Full complementarity, present through what is visible and invisible.



Fig. 6

Still from *Alberto Carneiro (3)*

Work in progress

In the two mentioned sculptures, as in many others, the Emptiness is more profoundly inhabited than the Full. As Fan chi said it's not about not filling a lot of empty space in a painting to create Emptiness: this would be just an inert space. The real Emptiness must be inhabited in a fully and deeper manner than the Full. Emptiness is not exterior or opposite to Fullness. The supreme art is to plant Emptiness within the very core of Fullness. (Cheng, 1989, p. 45–46)

The Emptiness is not only the supreme state for which everything must conform; it is also, a substance. It exists in the interior of all the things, in the very core of its substance. Emptiness aims at Fullness. In the order of the Real, Emptiness has a concrete representation: the valley. The valley is a womb that feeds. A fertile place par excellence, to Laozi it is the root of Heaven and Earth. (Lao Tzu 1978, p. 42) The image of the valley is deeply connected to water. Water gives life, the Full makes the structure visible but it is the Emptiness that prevails. The water is a transforming element because of the force of the emptiness it contains. Both have the ability to penetrate into any fissure.

*Nothing in the world is Softer or Weaker than water.*

*But when it attacks what is hard and strong none of them can win out, because they have no way of affecting it.*

*Softness overcomes what is hard Weakness overcomes what is unyielding.*

*Everyone in the world understands it no one can practice it.*

(Lao Tzu, n.d3, online, translated by Michael LaFargue)

The sculpture *Sobre os Rios I (On Rivers I)* 1996–1998, shows two horizontal logs of agba wood that were carved mostly on the inside. It's they've been slowly carved by the flow of a river. This sculpture is about the experience of that force and the formation of riverbanks. Carneiro knows the power of water, knows that softness can overcome hardness. He uses that bodily experience to carve these two logs as if he were a river current. Once again, the force that produced the material erosion is absent in the final piece. There's no water, just two logs expressing the power of a river shaping the land, just as in Chinese paintings where water is not painted. Each log presents a different configuration: one is wider; the other, looks like a riverbed. Two complementary forms of a river in dialogue with Earth.



Fig. 7  
Still from *Alberto Carneiro (3)*  
Work in progress

Moreover these sculpted trees speak of valleys, the experience of those fertile wombs where life blossoms, the root of Heaven and Earth. Carneiro, through his dialectical approach, brought out of the tree both the rivers that run inside him and the forests. The blood and the tree sap become a river, carving the two logs. The centre of the sculpture is not the shape of the logs but the process that shaped them and that's now absent. Although they remain as logs of agba wood on the outside, they're not trees anymore: they're metaphors for forces, universal forces. As Alberto Carneiro always says, the tree is still alive it has just passed into another dimension.

Another important issue is their horizontal position. Trees, apart from man, are the only vertical beings on earth. Carneiro normally uses trees standing up, but in this case he wanted them to express a horizontal element, water. As such, both trees are not just two logs eroded by water they're also the memory of the two dimensions of a tree that stands by a riverbank: the verticality of its being reaching the sky and its shadows cast into river waters. The mysterious shadows belong to the depths, we can only access through the horizontal plane. Strategically lying down and remaining in the form of a log this sculpture's ambivalent allure is both the substance of worked material and one it evokes.

Lastly, I would like to briefly touch up invisibleness in Alberto Carneiro's sculpture. Invisibleness is probably not a good word because the topic is sound. His sculptures are also made of sound, although this is something that I only found out when filming him and his work. The thickness of the different parts of the sculpted trees produce sounds, but what I was able to prove was that Alberto is very aware of it and works with it in very subtle ways. Let's not forget that he carves with an electric chainsaw, producing a loud noise and weighting about 5 Kg. It's a very difficult piece of equipment to work with, but he some acquired skill handling it and told me that he just has to focus with precision on the point of the saw chain, as if it were a brush and he was drawing. An allusion to Zhuangzi's cook Ting story?

"The movement of a body does not generate a body, but a shadow; the propagation of a sound does not generate a sound, but an echo; the action of a being does not generate a non-being, but a being". (Lie Tseu, n.d., p. 20)

## Conclusion

Alberto Carneiro started to sculpt when he was only ten years old as an apprentice saint-sculptor. He learned with cuts to his flesh how to sculpt wood; a long process to understand the material substance which enabled him to transcend technique and focus on expression. It took him thirty years to find his path: the return to a childhood in the countryside and the memories of contact with the elements. Almost instantaneously he knew what he had to do, and started doing it.

When he talked about the importance that Taoism had on him, I took his lead and started to connect his work and the Taoist aesthetics. Still, it was not until I started to focus on Chinese landscape painting, mostly through literati painters like Shitao that the real extension of this “being in tune” became clear.

As I have tried to elaborate, the relation between the two artistic processes goes beyond the obvious difference of their technical nature. Taoist aesthetics had a strong influence on calligraphy and poetry before landscape painting. This system of thought has an impact on the smallest tasks like making tea or even sweeping the floor. To be in tune with the vital breaths one has to be able to connect with what’s beyond the simple bodily execution. As we’ve seen, Emptiness must Fill you in order to be able to perform a task. This paper has focused on landscape painting due to the oneness with nature these artists were trying to achieve so as to be in touch with the Primordial Breath: the One. The dual becoming of man and sculpted tree is, in Carneiro’s work, clear. His process is always dialogical: he works with trees not wood, beings and not a material. Alberto Carneiro’s sculptural approach presupposes that the tree has an identity, a memory and that, deep inside its body, one can find the experiential phenomena of its existence. Throughout his long career Carneiro has come to know the inner principle (*li*) of trees, the forest and the mountain: the later the name given by the sculptor to his work on stone.

Since the London years and especially since reading Laozi, he works with a different Emptiness. Although he’s a Western sculptor, he works the empty/full of his trees with the awareness that there’s a non-material

emptiness able to create mutations in his work. As seen through several examples, Emptiness is central to his work. Alberto Carneiro works with intention and active consciousness (*i*), but he's able to let his spirit (*shen*) be in charge of the process. When Carneiro sculpts trees, he sees trees, not himself nor is he simply unconscious of himself: trance-like, he leaves his body. His body is transformed into tree. Creating inexhaustible freshness. "Chuang Chou [Zhuangzi] is no longer in this world, so who can understand such concentration?". (Bush, 1971, p. 41) For Cheng any Chinese work of art consisted on four notions: vital breath (*ch'i*), inner principle (*li*), intention or active consciousness (*i*), and spirit or divine essence (*shen*). (Cheng, 1979)

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