

Alexandra do Carmo: *Time's Archeologist*

By Jonathan Goodman

More than anything else, the New York based-artist Alexandra do Carmo is an archeologist, scrutinizing memory on both a public and private plane. Her video *Wild M5* and series of dinosaur drawings articulate a process whereby the impact of the art has much to do with the audience's perception; the activities presented in the video, in which a paleontologist sifts through mud and silt while looking for such things as tiny teeth that would date the material being studied, start to work as an extended metaphor for the search for meaningfulness in both the artist's and the viewer's lives. This extended metaphor, presented as an allegory of effort, has far-reaching implications for art's ability to offer a new path by way of content, just as the dinosaur drawings, barely visible on the page and surrounded by empty space, are presented not only as representations of what we know but also renderings of what we do not easily internalize. Both video and drawings present a specifically materialist point of view and a deeply personal reading of what creativity and content is capable of, very early in the 21st century. do Carmo, like many other artists working today, proceeds along oblique paths, trusting to a degree of indirection that may make initial understanding of her work difficult in all its metamorphic implications.

Part of the struggle to understand, and in a way to complete, do Carmo's art, stems not so much from the complications of her vision as it does from the increasingly indirect notion of creativity itself. The context surrounding the art object has become as meaningful as the artwork itself; this is because many of the ideas in contemporary art are intellectually driven, understandable only insofar as the ideas surrounding the work are made intelligible to those viewing the object. Much art conceived of in this way is political by implication; there has been a steady push to politicize the implications of art because we are entering an age in which the democratization of culture is seen as central to the art effort. The ideas inherent in such work are likely best adumbrated as language-based communications, in which the idea of the piece takes over as the justification of its meaning, rather than the sensuous given of the image itself. do Carmo's art doesn't necessarily trade on the politicization of her message, but the implications of what she does are profoundly intellectual, and therefore conceptual to an extent. The brilliance of her dinosaur series is that it is based on an extended understanding of drawing--what mark making means. Her barely visible imagery at first suggests misty mountains in the Chinese tradition; however, closer appraisal shows the landscape to consist of specific dinosaur forms, for example, the head and teeth of *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

In certain kinds of metaphorical understanding, one thing becomes another, which becomes another. There is a protean freedom in our reading of art whose intellectual basis supports, indeed encourages, multiple readings on the part of the viewer. When the notion of memory is also invoked, the interpretation of the image is made richer and more complex by virtue of its relationship to tradition as an environment supporting the artist's current efforts. In do Carmo's

video *Wild M5*, we see a physical paleontologist sift through a small amount of dirt as he searches for the small teeth and bits of bone that will in fact date the ground from which the material was taken; later in the video, we see larger amounts of mud, in which the hard remnants of animals are seen. If the short scenes of research are taken together, the film becomes an inspired attempt to read such activities as central to the process of finding, even of categorizing the act of scientific research as a major way of ordering the world, of making sense of our environment. What do Carmo is after, in her powerful filmic exposition of the scientific method, is not so much an expression of the physical specifics of research (although that is a meaningful part of the video) as a sense of tradition that would bind the anthropological effort to the image-making undertaking. The search in the mud for small evidence of animals is not unlike the artist's search for an imagery adequate to the genuine intricacies associated with living in contemporary life--the key to both endeavors is a sense of history, no matter whether literal, as occurs in the video, or oblique, as intimated by the artist's efforts to forge a new vision based on the past.

For many reasons, memory is crucial to do Carmo's understanding of art and tradition. The scientific process attempts to quantify the past, while the artist's psyche is driven to interpret it, yet the point of the artist's work is that the two processes are not so different from each other as might seem at first. The viewer is also an important part of the equation, as he or she completes do Carmo's task of presenting processes and images in time. Research may be a central part of the artist's equation, whose elements are dug out from time much as an archeologist might unearth bits of culture from dust; however, the viewer's interpretation of what is seen depends upon how the drawing is read--as a version of the Chinese landscape, as a seamless representation of the dinosaur, or as a comment on the nature of creativity itself, namely, the representation of something just barely visible in the imaginative landscape, in which mark making becomes a trope aimed at demonstrating the importance of the effort--searching the mud, marking the paper--in a larger quest for meaningfulness in the postmodern landscape. do Carmo's gift to us is that she refuses to align herself with any single interpretation in particular, in part because she knows that the constraints of a single reading do not do justice to the complexity of her task.

The dinosaurs in the series first read as mountainous landscapes hidden by mists; a more careful look shows that the forms are dragon's heads and long teeth, portrayed with a subtlety and delicacy that belies the ferocity of the real-life dragons do Carmo is portraying. The artist just barely portrays the forms with an orange pen; she demands that we not only casually see the imagery but also study it for the sake of the meaning it makes upon closer scrutiny. That the images reaches toward invisibility is central to Carmo's esthetic because absence is as important to her as the presence of form. Drawing is not only a matter of imposing form on the page; it also concerns the experience of absence or emptiness, which the artist presents as though her structures were conforming to a nearly Zen investigation of what is no longer there. That the dinosaur drawings conform to another genre, their seeming appearance as Chinese landscape,

complicates do Carmo's rhetoric, wherein the given is treated as a multiple reality. The artist's interest in forms of the real is available to her audience in a process of becoming that implies a belief in more than one reality; this gives do Carmo her interest in an imagery that may be applied to more than one notion of being. The complications bring out the idea of drawing as a phase of creativity; understood in its largest manifestation, drawing possesses a realism that implicates or includes its absence or anti-self. As a result the forms, which are literally taken from a child's natural history book, participate in their own undoing.

do Carmo's esthetic, then, involves its own negation--a stance whose remarkable sophistication is understood by its very absence as form. As an audience, we are invited not only to see, but also to imagine a reality whose presence is implied as much as it is publicly stated. The video convinces us of the parallel between the objectivity of science and the subjectivity of art, just as the drawings hover delicately between absence and existence; both the video and the drawings wait for completion on the part of their viewer, who internalizes the material he or she sees in a process that imitates the creativity of the artist herself. As a result, meaning is generated within the triangle of the artist relating the work to her audience, in a way that reads creativity quite democratically--as one form of information among others. This is why do Carmo spends her time filming the working paleontologist; she sees his activities as parallel to her own. Both do Carmo and the paleontologist are archeologists of time, even though the time of the mud and teeth is literal and the time of the imagined dinosaurs is figurative or metaphorical. Both activities insist on an inner integrity, through which statements about the past may be made. The dinosaurs are icons of patience, relating brilliantly to the slow, methodical work of the scientist in the film.

do Carmo is unusual, even remarkable as an art artist because she insists on so much: the ability of her drawings to function as landscape and creature, the ability of her film to serve as a point of creative representation. Her largest theme is the meaningfulness of creativity, which she extends to include much more than what we usually associate with such a concept. For all her art's complexity, a simple reading, based upon democratic impulse, is capable of being just to what she does. It is an interpretation that calls attention to the meaning of observant activity: an awareness of the call of the real in actions that serve as metaphors for ways of living in the world. Consequently, do Carmo's demand that we read her art in all its intricacy becomes in its own way a request that we suspend our judgment in favor of more sophisticated awareness--of absence, of the deeply metaphorical nature of our own actions. Drawing becomes the stand-in for creativity, such that it becomes its own reality. The play of form, based as it is upon absence and archeological awareness, is saved for its expression in, of all places, a natural history museum, where memory treats all manner of action and object as material for study. do Carmo is as much a paleontologist studying meaning as she is an artist making things, and it is this extra awareness that makes us respect her essentially allegorical impulse as an important, indeed a central, view of the creative act. She intends a complexity best regarded as an imaginative treatment of the imagination, in which the theoretical implications of her art are as important as the art itself.

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