

June 14, 2017 - Catarina Branco is a visual artist who lives and works on the island of São Miguel in the Azores.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1681 words.

Tags: Art, Beginnings, Process, Inspiration, Independence.



Catarina Branco on finding the perfect medium for your work

You work exclusively with paper, is that a tradition that has roots in the Azores?

Initially. It has a very strong connection to the techniques of cutting paper that were brought here by the nuns from the continents, from Lisbon. There was a connection to the way they worked with paper and representations of the holy ghost, which is something I was interested in. Now, I'm less interested in the spiritual and more interested in landscapes. It doesn't interest me to use paper only for cutting. I'm interested in what can I do to the paper and what I want to say. Of course, my childhood memories are always going to be present in the work—paper was one of the first materials I used as a child, it is very much connected to my roots—but now I'm working in a new place. Landscape is more strong and more interesting. It's more abstract. Not so literal. Now I'm not just cutting the paper, I'm also working three dimensionally. It's more modeling. I work with the paper like it's cloth. You can say that I'm sort of obsessed with it. I collect different kinds of paper from all over the world to work with. It is the perfect material for me.



The kinds of pieces I make are troublesome to take care of. They are very diabolic for a million reasons. They need constant maintenance and they have to be in places that are climatized. We live on an island with a lot of humidity, which is terrible for the paper. But that is something else I like about this work—the pieces are strong and well-made, but they are also delicate and fragile.

You were born and raised on São Miguel. How is it to be a working artist here?

Yes, I was born here on this island and I was raised in the north of the island. It's a very small place. My grandmother taught me to work on paper, mostly because at the time we didn't have much access to other things. The women where I grew up would use the artifacts and materials that the fishermen might bring in. They'd end up making things out of the skin of the fish and the leaves of the corn. The women in this tiny little place are very creative.

So I lived with these women and I learned by watching them. My grandmother was someone who collected many

things and recycled them. One of those things was the paper that came from the boats from the United States. We had family there. She would use the paper to make all kinds of things—sheets for the beds, covers for the lamps. She also had a very strict relationship with the church. She was responsible for making all of the decorations for the saints; she made all of it out of paper. I was watching and observing all of these marvelous things closely because I didn't really play with other children, I only played with adults. I was an only child.

So, my imagination was very strong. I had to create things to play with and invent these situations to pretend about. Paper was a material that was always present in my life. I always loved to draw and work with paper but I didn't yet know the importance of it. After I went to study art in Lisbon, the paper came to have an important place in my work. The disciplines in art school were very divided. For me, none of it made any sense. Sculpture, painting, photography, ceramics—for me, everything was important. Still, I was somehow obliged to make only paintings. It was very difficult for me dealing with the faculty.



I had many drawing classes. At first I drew the model in a very classical way with the right proportions and everything, but it was very boring for me. In the second year of art school, I began to tear the paper in the drawing classes. The teacher was very, "Oh, you cannot do that because we are in the class of drawing. You have to know everything. You have to know the paper is one thing and the pencil is another thing." I did not understand because it was very instinctive for me. I began to draw with the paper, not with the pencil. After I thought, "Well, I need another instrument, why not the scissor? The scissor for the class of drawing." They accepted it but I was the strange person in the class... I never felt like a very typical arts student.

After art school I could have stayed in Lisbon, but I decided to return to the island. For me, it was more interesting to be on the island and work here with the ability to sometimes travel. Also, I like to be in my own place, reserved, and working. I like to be with other people sometimes, but I need my own space... so I returned. I don't regret it. I enjoy it very much to work here and live here. I've done residencies in places like Madrid and Brazil—mostly places outside of Portugal. I always return here though; I need this place to work. I understand why certain people feel like you need to be a big city to be a successful artist, but for me it was more important to live and work in a place where I am comfortable, where I feel free.

Is there a strong artistic community here on the island?

Well, I work with a gallery here. It was very important to work with the gallery because we do need some support. It's difficult for us to be alone in this world of artists and art. It's difficult. I'm always distracted and occupied making new work. I need someone to guide me. There are some other artists that are working here. We are few. I know one or two that are working in my area, arts, classical arts, visual arts. I don't know many.



Most of my colleagues stopped working. It's difficult sometimes to continue. It's a struggle. Sometimes I think I'm going to give up making art as well, but it's too important for me. It's like eating or reading. I cannot live without working. The artists I do know who are working here are all women. The women rule here.

Some of the young people I've talked to here in São Miguel have said that you have to move away from here if you want to make a living as an artist. How do you feel about that?

I work with the gallery here and I also give classes. I have both sides. I've always done what I want because I have a good gallerist. She doesn't say, "Oh you must do this or that." She always gives me the freedom to work in whatever way I choose. Yes, she knows that I need to sell things, but I need the space to make the things I want to without being worried and preoccupied about whether they are going to sell or not. I give classes and that gives me the money I need in order to live, but it's also a good thing because my income isn't totally tied up in my creativity. I want to make the things I feel like I need to make without worry about them being sellable.

How do you organize your work life?

It's a miracle. One of the reasons I like living here is because the time here is different. In five minutes I can go to school and in another five minutes I'm at home. I'm very disciplined. I think teaching is important because the kids also give me information that I need for my work. I think teaching obliges us to think and also to discover new things. It's a laboratory of thinking. I show my work to my students, and I make projects with them. They love it, but I also love it. It's important for me.



In terms of your creative work, how do you define success?

Success is when I'm in a perfect dialogue with the thing that I'm making in the moment. I feel like that is a success—when the story is making sense in my head when I'm working. That doesn't mean that it isn't a struggle—it's always a struggle—but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. My process is very intuitive. When I'm feeling happy, it usually means that I'm successful with what I'm making. The end result should always feel like a surprise. For me, it's always a surprise.

What are the biggest struggles you've experienced as a working artist?

When I was young and I told my father I wanted to be an artist he said, "What are you going to do with your life? You want to live on the streets?" I said no, that I consider this to be a profession like any other profession. My brother wanted to be a lawyer, I wanted to be an artist. It's the same. My father said, "But it's different. A lawyer is a profession. Artist, I don't know if it is a profession." In Portugal, it's not considered a profession.

It's something I struggle with all the time, this mentality. People seem to forget that art and culture are fundamental, they should be at the center of everything. Art and culture make the world go round, they are at the core of who we are. Now it's like those things are seen as something outside. Art is not a profession, not important to our life. That's something you are always fighting for as an artist, to remind people that art is important. Art will make your life better.



Catarina Branco recommends:

Traveling around the Azorean Islands

Diving in the Atlantic ocean

Antero de Quental's poetry

Name

Catarina Branco

Vocation

Artist

Fact

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