

“What’s most important to my work is not really the idea I explore, but the enthusiasm that it provokes in me.”

João Paulo Feliciano

The enthusiasm and creative impulse of João Paulo Feliciano (Caldas da Rainha, 1963) are not limited to disciplinary boundaries, rather extending well beyond the universe of the visual arts, music, and design, underpinning a multifaceted and idiosyncratic career that has marked the Portuguese cultural milieu since the mid-1980s.

*Ajax et plures* presents a set of works made in the 1990s and 2000s from the Serralves Collection and a new work conceived for the campus of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP), in Porto. The works represent different moments in the artist’s career, revealing continuities and ruptures that have marked his artistic practice over the last thirty years.

While the works from the 1990s are linked to the world of rock music and the urban reality, the works from 2004 and 2021 reveal an interest in exploring the phenomena of perception as well as an inflection in his relationship with technology. Constant to his practice is a careful investigation of the material and linguistic foundation of each work as a way of rethinking our relationship with the world, questioning assumptions of traditional artistic genres in the light of different aspects of popular culture. His ironic and provocative attitude, his desire to involve the spectator in the meaning of the work, and, above all, his insatiable appetite for experimentation run across his diverse body of work.

After an initial foray into painting and a period spent in Brussels (1988–89), João Paulo Feliciano’s work acquired an objectual dimension, making use of discarded materials in the creation of assemblages, sculptures and installations refined in form and metaphorical in nature. In *Back Home* (1990), the artist used different building materials to create an intriguing three-dimensional composition that seems to lie somewhere between a dwelling and a temple. The exterior metallic structure (*Gimme Some Protection*) defines the space occupied by the work, which the visitor can still enter and cross, proposing an ambiguous relationship between interior and exterior. The central volume (*Feelin’ Fine Here*) consists of several layers of common insulation materials, alluding to the primary function of the shelter. Faithful to the Duchampian lineage, referencing the work of artists such as Joseph Beuys and Reinhard Mucha, and anticipating operative mechanisms used by Portuguese artists such as Pedro Cabrita Reis or Mauro Cerqueira, Feliciano establishes a dialectical tension between the banality of the materials used in the installation and the solemn nature of its archetypal composition. *Back Home* celebrates what is most essential and precarious in contemporary urban reality – a theme he returned to several years later in the project, *Xabregas City* (2015–16), a portrait of the eastern area of Lisbon, consisting of thousands of photographs taken daily in the course of one year.

João Paulo Feliciano has developed a career in music (rock, experimental electronic music and pop) alongside his artistic activity and usually crosses themes and strategies from both universes. In works such as *Stored Tapes for Future Taste* (1990) or *Crash Music* (1991) the physical storage medium of music is reconsidered, and its fragility is emphasized: the then obsolete cassette tapes are stored in jam jars and LP record are thrown against the wall. In works such as *The Big Red Puff Sound Site* (1994) and *The Blues Quartet* (2004–2007) the aural and experiential dimension of the work takes centre stage.

The installation *Stage Real Fake* (1990) stands out in this context for its philosophical implications that complicate the binomial of reality/representation present both in the artistic tradition and in life on stage. This duality associated with the arts – both visual and performing arts – since Aristotelian poetics, finds a literal correspondence in this very simple, but somewhat unusual installation, that consists of a stage on which a small black parallelepiped is lit by a projector. The materials used have an immediate, almost clinical reading, and yet the ambivalence of the *mise en scène* prevails. What is presented on stage is a simple geometric solid, but it could also be a black box, absorbing what happens around it, or a trope, a figure of alterity, a simulacrum. The fascination with the idea of pretence is recognisable in

the emergence of other projects by Feliciano, in particular of his band *Tina and the Top Ten*, presented as “the very first all Portuguese fake American rock'n'roll band”; and of his first record label Moneyland Record\$ which, before existing as such, was advertised in a fictitious ad, in the context of an artistic project for a newspaper.

The work *Newtron* – conceived in 2004 for the artist’s solo exhibition at the Serralves Museum and recently restored by Diogo Tudela and Nuno Fonseca, researchers from the Digital Creativity Centre and the Art, Conservation and Restoration Department of UCP’s School of Arts – establishes new intersections between popular and erudite culture. It consists of a LED module of a giant screen that displays a fragment of the video recording of a football match, recognizable only in a few moments since, given the size of the overall image, we merely see an apparently abstract set of luminous points. This LED panel is presented as an animated pictorial surface, equating the digital image with painting, and the pixel with the brushstroke of pointillism. In fact, the screen's operating system is governed by the same phenomenon of perception that enthralled Impressionist artists, known as the principle of “optical mixing”, which describes the human eye’s ability to combine small dots of different colours, registering instead the tone that results from their combination. The will to dissect the mechanism of vision underlying digital images heralds a progressively critical path in relation to digital technology that the artist has begun to tread since the turn of the century.

In addition to the works from the Serralves Collection, the exhibition includes a new work by João Paulo Feliciano, commissioned by UCP for its campus in Porto. The artist intervenes on the windows of the corridor of the School of Arts, continuing a series of site-specific works conceived in 2004 for the buildings of Serralves Museum and the São Paulo Biennial. Feliciano once again explores the potential of the medium at play – in this case, the window – understood as a “luminous interface” that directs light from the exterior to the interior and vice versa. Stemming from the artist’s renewed interest in drawing and his recent experiments with new materials, the work *Ajax* (2022) establishes a game of changing shapes and colours, resulting in an immersive installation that encompasses the corridor’s entire space and spills over to the exterior. The chromatic variation is achieved by applying dichroic film on the glass surface, which reflects different shades of light, depending on the position of the observer in relation to the light source.

For João Paulo Feliciano – a natural born communicator with a background in linguistics and an extensive experience in graphic arts – the titles of his works are “linguistic extensions” of each piece. Synthetic and plural, literal and extremely ironic, *Ajax* simultaneously evokes a mythological figure, a football club, and a brand of window cleaner, referring to universes as distinct as those encompassed in his oeuvre. In this small set of works, we see how Feliciano’s work intersects, with tremendous elasticity, object and sound, painting and video, light and space, in a permanent state of experimentation.