

# The Habitat

by Sofia Dourron

Behind each sculpture of Elba Bairon's stretches a vast body of drawings, sketches, and quick croquis that reveal her thinking about art and her way of being in the world. This book is a kind of notebook, a record of the long process that took *Sin título* [*No Title*] from paper to the large-scale installation the artist presented at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires in October 2017.

1.

Bairon was born in La Paz, Bolivia, in 1947. As a child she moved with her family to Montevideo, where she spent her childhood and teenage years, and where she began her artistic career. She studied painting there, at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, and Chinese painting at the National Library. Aged twenty, a further move brought her to Buenos Aires, where she carried on studying, first ceramics and later engraving. In those days, the lines of her lithographs recalled Chinese painting. In the 1980s, she devoted herself to set design and made costumes, objects, and backdrops for plays by the poet and playwright, Emeterio Cerro, a representative of the excess of the Buenos Aires underground scene of the day. This was when her oriental lightness and silence started to connect with the experimentation of 1980s theatre productions. The lines that before stretched over the paper gained volume to become small reliefs bordering on the decorative by incorporating mouldings and colourful ornaments made of plaster, paper pulp, and felt. Hardly any record of these works survives.

During the early 1990s, the reliefs abandoned the preciousness of decorative objects and morphed into

organic-looking figures grouped on walls, as if drawn to each other by some force of nature. The reliefs soon became human and animal figures, again with sensual, soft curves, still lifes, and perfectly polished abstractions. As a result of Bairon's experimentation with the technique of paper pulp and clay modelling, her works began slowly to shed everything non-essential. First to go was colour, her surfaces almost always being white, although reds, blacks, and pastels always made subtle appearances. Next, the forms were synthesized to achieve the least possible expression: faces lost their features and shapes lost their defining features as we know them, to become forms exclusively of the artist's imagination, figures which bring both curves and vanishing lines into play, retrieve and reinvent the language of classical and modern sculpture by taking simplicity to an extreme. In these pieces, the artist is striving to capture a sensation.

2.

Bairon has always drawn, not because she is obsessed with recording the visible world or with representing objects; rather, it is a means of aesthetic, a way of visualizing and giving form to all her thoughts, readings, and sensations. To this end, she makes use of countless blank notebooks and notepads. This is the germ of her every work: an intimate way of looking that reveals her way of thinking and being an artist, simple drawings and fragmentary motifs that combine to make her sculptures emerge out of the paper. Here, even the simplest gesture contains an atmosphere in and of itself that materializes in her installations – a

different time, neither past nor present, that elapses in an ever-expanding space.

A long while back, notes for a work she had not imagined yet began to appear in Bairon's small notebooks: thumbnail sketches of structures, ink and watercolour drawings of imaginary houses, and pencil drafts of buildings she could see from the window of her maternal home in Montevideo. Between the blank pages, her notebooks are littered with a random succession of small outlines mostly no more than three or four centimetres tall. These black ink drawings are distributed around the page in no particular order. Now solitary and shrouded in silence, now in groups in which small houses coexist with human figures or animals that bear no sense of proportion to each other or to reality.

The same sketch is repeated several times on a single page, executed in firm, fluid strokes. It is of a rectangular single-story building, erected atop a square platform; the only visible opening is a window. The same drawing is repeated near the left margin, slightly turned to one side; its lines look faster and more energetic, multiplying and overlapping. Interspersed between the buildings are standing, sitting, and reclining figures, outlined in two or three strokes that define their individuality. A few pages further on the same building reappears, a new view of its rear side: a strange, vacant space with no walls. Above it, another view reveals a staircase leading to an entrance door, and a platform surrounding the building, perhaps a garden or patio. A watercolour shows a house constructed with splashes of violet, green, and yellow, like something from a children's storybook, suspended over a grey pool, isolated from the rest of the world. Bairon is a space

intended to be inhabited by her figures, an idyllic habitat, or perhaps an image of the original house, the result of an aesthetic and spiritual intuition. Yet each drawing is also a small indication of an idea of home, a fragment of a fundamental experience: that of dwelling in the world – an experience that shapes us both as individuals and as a whole, and that accompanies us in time in the guise of a guiding image.

3.

Drawing by drawing, Bairon gradually developed a new universe in which, for the first time, the soft gesture of her figures met with a rectilinear resistance: the house reduced to its essential form. In his book *La maison japonaise*, Jacques Pezeu-Massabuau analyzes how, in Japanese, references to the “house” always connote an idea of identity, that of the human group that inhabits it. Conversely, the word *uchi* means “my house” and is used in conversation to refer to oneself. The house or habitat as somewhere that hosts individual or collective identity seems to be the structuring idea of Bairon's house.

In it, the act of inhabiting becomes problematic, removed from the worldly activity of using a space to resolve basic needs of our existence. It is a hermetic place without windows or doors. Only two large openings at the back of the structure allow us to see its interior: an empty room bathed in a soft darkness, it is more a shelter or a cave than a home. These are two small, sharp-edged compartments which, for all their rigidity, yet have the appearance of awaiting a temporary inhabitant. These spaces expose the human limits, both physical and conceptual, of inhabiting a place. The complexity of the white geometry ultimately reflects a state of mind: the house as an *image* related

to an original existential space of intimacy, rest, and inner being. It raises fundamental questions about human existence in intimate relation to the most basic geometric forms.

In this work, Bairon pursues a precise image where the purity of form obtains and the diaphanous simplicity of line transcends geometry, which becomes soft, emerging from organic shapes: an “affective geometry” or “a state of compensation for the curve,” as the artist defines it. Bairon’s house is not an ideal home: it is the image of a search for the never-attainable balance between forms, light, and dark, an image that, in its strangeness, refuses to be determined by its own weight, because any such determination would signify the ultimate failure of that momentum.

“Have not yourselves sensed a difference in the light that suffuses such a room, a rare tranquility not found in ordinary light? Have you never felt a sort of fear in the face of the ageless, a fear that in that room you might lose all consciousness of the passage of time, that untold years might pass and upon emerging you should find you had grown old and gray?” asks the writer Jun’ichir Tanizaki in *In Praise of Shadows*. In this essay, the author reveals the Japanese artistic genius for transforming a bare space through the use of shadow, leading him into a new sensory realm. In Bairon’s habitat plays of light and shadow are constructed to reveal arrises and voids, to generate new forms and spaces, recesses for darkness and serenity. Bairon dismantles the light/dark binomial to embrace shadow, building it up in layers and creating a continuum towards light. There is in her work a permanent search for beauty and its most subtle folds.

Exploring this work produces a feeling of uncertainty. Its scale, which is not completely human, demands of the body a moment of pause and an adjustment of coordinates. A narrow stairway leads to the roof of the lowest module; not only is it narrow and its stability dubious, but its steps vary in height, as if the builder had become distracted while building it. Its shadow is cast on the floor like the edge of an old saw. Its function is called into question, and the entire construct takes on a scenographic character, one that allows it to open up beyond its status as habitat to other possible scenarios: an ancient ziggurat, a monument abandoned in the landscape, an extraterrestrial monolith just landed.

Bairon creates a synthesis of distant references: the architectural and spatial language of the modernism of Le Corbusier, the Bauhaus, and Russian Constructivism; the simplicity of the oriental gestures learned when studying Chinese painting; and intuitions guided by her personal journeys. The weight and materiality of the architecture dissolve behind an oneiric image resonant with images of surrealism and metaphysical painting far-removed from the mundane and eliciting the subdued archetypes of the universe and the self. It is the image of a house that precedes thought, maybe locked away in the unconscious. Bairon’s house conjures a deep and disturbing silence, and makes it a *sine qua non* for its existence.