

Alyshia McCabe, 'Eduardo Berliner Hybridity and Uneasiness', *Metal Magazine*, September 1, 2019

# METAL



EDUARDO BERLINER

HYBRIDITY AND UNEASINESS

A child who's kept drawing as an adult, Eduardo Berliner has grown to become a painter who depicts uneasiness, the uncanny and mysterious in his work. Set to open his third exhibition, titled *The Shape of the Remains*, at Casa Triângulo gallery in São Paulo on August 3, the artist speaks to us about his love for sketchbooks, how improvisation is part of his creative process, and how does he "cope with something deeply painful, perturbing or strange" through his work.

## **Tell me a bit about yourself. How long have you been painting and sketching? What drew you to art?**

I have drawn ever since my childhood. I think that almost every child draws, the difference being that I continued. Looking back, I see that ever since I was very young, I have had a speculative curiosity about the materials and the act of drawing. None of this, however, was conscious. When school vacation time came around and I would travel with my parents, what excited me the most was knowing that I could buy a new sketchbook and some pens. I loved the sketchbook.

Another fascinating material for me was the India ink pen with a very fine metal tip. I remember observing the drawings in a children's book and not understanding how someone could draw such fine lines. I thought it was mysterious and appealing to draw with fine, hard points like needles. I have used this material until today. I still like the sound of metal scratching the paper.

I always had an attraction for the physicality of the things around me. During summer vacations, I would play in a small stone quarry that was behind my house. I remember the pleasure of pulling the slimy green crust up with my fingernails and finding the dark and moist earth beneath it. I think that this was one of my doors for entering painting. Certainly, I still do the same thing until today when I paint. I am guided by the pleasure and curiosity of the eyes and the body.

## **Despite you haven't stopped drawing since you were a kid and have always loved to do so, you didn't study fine arts, illustration, or anything like it at first.**

I studied Industrial Design in college and got a master's in the design of typeface for reading at the University of Reading in England. During my undergraduate studies, my interest gradually shifted in a certain direction, which at that moment I could not clearly name. Something closer to my more personal motivations. At that time, approximately 1997, I began writing notes every day in a sketchbook. I would make my records mainly through drawings, collages and notations.

They gradually began to suggest points of interest which I would occasionally develop further in the form of specific projects: a performance with mechanical rabbits, prints made with Mercurochrome on cotton and a bed of flowers made with sheets of glass and band-aids. These were some of my first works. I used semi-industrial processes and materials and did not think much about the distinction between art and design. My overriding aim was to continue developing my projects in some way because they began to multiply in my head.

## **So how did you move from the more design-focused education to a more art-driven practice?**

At that time (1998), I began to study art with a teacher called Charles Watson, originally from Scotland but residing in Brazil since the 1970s. I studied drawing and I participated for a while in a study group where, besides presenting works under development, we debated about contemporary art. In that environment, I made my first attempts with oil paints and haven't stopped painting since because, in a very organic way, I managed to unite all my interests in this one medium. Drawing, photographs and objects that initially existed in a fragmented way began to fuel my process. As if painting were a sort of spinal column for my work.

Watercolour entered my life during the year of my master's in England (2002/2003) because outside my dedication to the master's, I did not have physical space for painting with oil paints. I did not take painting lessons, I learned by doing. As years went by, I was able to invest more time in my painting work and from 2007 onward, I began to maintain a daily practice of painting in my studio.



**What does painting mean to you? Why would you say you paint?**

I paint because painting increases the density of my gaze regarding the world around me. And the more I look at the things around me, the deeper I manage to look inside myself. At rock-bottom, I think that what really changes in the work of painting is your relationship with the physicality of the materials. They become extensions of your body. If you have a continuous and intense dialogue with what you do, gradually you can become a better channel for transposing to the surface of the canvas that which seems to evaporate even before we can map it in thought. It is a process that only ends at the end of one's life. Exhibitions are only ways of punctuating the space of an entire career.

**Let's talk about exhibitions then. The Shape of Remains is your third solo show at Casa Triângulo. What sets this collection apart from your past shows at the gallery?**

Defining what my inspiration was for this exhibition is not a simple matter as I do not generally work with specific themes. My starting points are nearly always more intimate. I don't feel the desire or need to make them explicit because they operate as initial motivations. Nevertheless, to materialize my uneasinesses, what I see and perceive about the world around me, recodified through the process of painting, winds up becoming a source for the construction of metaphors where the other can approach the artwork guided by his or her own repertoire. These uneasinesses can fluctuate between psychological and/or synesthetic aspects. In recent years, I have increasingly allowed myself to work for months on end without any sort of specific subject. This forces me to remain constantly attentive to my surroundings, paying attention to small, apparently irrelevant events, and especially to my contact with the painting process per se. Sometimes, I perceive that for some weeks, I am heading in a certain direction, and then, I might open a new front of apparently disconnected work, and guided by some inner or outer factor, I can change my direction once again. To the point where, after some months, I look at the entire set of what I have made and begin to note relationships and dialogues between artworks. A sort of unforeseeable atmosphere begins to arise. A sort of narrative sometimes guided by the form, sometimes by the materiality or by the colour.

**You've chosen to include ten of your sketchbooks as a part of this collection, with the pages being flipped weekly throughout the exhibit. Can you tell me more about the inclusion of these sketchbooks? How do you feel they contribute to the final result of the show?**

In 2017, a friend of mine travelled to Japan and brought back a box with small paper cards for drawing. She put it on the table and said, 'Take it. I'm sure that you will find something interesting to do with them.' Knowing that I did not have a material like this available, I thought about a project. Throughout the year, I worked on those cards only with India ink applied with a pen with a very fine metal tip, white gouache paint, and watercolour in red and earth tones. The metal tip does not allow for quick movements, it induces a certain slowness to the line, a sort of tension mixed with delicacy and silence. Some drawings have very sharp lines. They remind me of the sound of a dentist's drill. The set is formed by a regular grid of fifty cards arranged on a table/showcase. Some cards have drawings while others bear texts that I wrote.

**“I often paint or draw to try to cope with something deeply painful, perturbing or strange for myself.”**

**So it's not only illustrations. Tell us more about those texts.**

I began writing the texts as part of another project. In 2017, I participated in a group project with another three artist colleagues (Projeto Cavalo). The project involved drawing, painting and sounds constructed by eight hands. In its initial stage, we made some experiments with sounds in a group. As I do not play any instrument and do not have any musical aptitude, I decided to write some fragments of text that I could simply read, thus adding another layer of sound and information during the rehearsals. But the project went in another direction and we wound up mixing texts with videos. Despite this, I wanted to continue writing and so the small texts migrated to the project with the cards. It might seem confused, but this way of working that involves an intercrossing of processes is natural for me.

Once I finished the project with the cards, I thought it would be interesting to observe the drawings made in the same format always using the same materials. I created a rhythm and atmosphere different from the groups of drawings that I had been making in recent years. Groups normally composed of drawings with different formats of paper and various materials. During that period, I changed the format and paper of the drawing sketchbook I was working with. When I finished the second sketchbook, I saw that I had been naturally drawing more in the sketchbook than on loose sheets, and consequently, had been working with a single format. I decided to keep the same model of sketchbook and I thought that this could be a strategy to create a grid like that of the cards but in another format.

## **And what is this other format like?**

Anticipating the possibility of removing the drawings from the sketchbooks at the end of the process, I worked predominantly on the right-hand pages. I worked in those sketchbooks from July 2018 to July 2019. In 2019, however, I felt that it would not make sense to remove the pages from the sketchbook at the end of the project. In my works, the construction of the drawing or the painting generally bears a very strong relation of dialogue with the support. For example, if I paint on a loose piece of canvas, in most cases, I'm not able to deal with the idea of stretching it because working on the loose canvas affects the painting's construction. I felt the same thing in relation to the sketchbooks and that's why I decided to present the set on a table/showcase instead of tearing out the pages to construct a grid on the wall. Within my work process, it was the most honest thing to do.

During the 2012 Bienal de São Paulo, together with the paintings and objects, I presented a table with my sketchbooks. On that occasion, I arranged on the table sketchbooks of various formats made over a span of ten years. The overall set formed a large drawing composed of sketchbooks propped up or overlaid on one another. At first, I had thought about flipping the pages during the period of the exhibition, but once the work was installed, I felt no desire to change the pages as I perceived that the group of sketchbooks formed a sort of landscape where the lateral edges that showed signs of long use looked like representations of geological plates. I liked this contrast where the speed of jotting down a note was contrasted to the more extended time of the accumulation of information, discernible in the lateral edges of the sketchbooks.

## **What similarities and differences exist between the piece you exhibited at the Bienal de São Paulo and the exhibition at Casa Triângulo?**

The project for this solo show is different. All of the ten sketchbooks were made over the course of one year, always maintaining the same format, and they will be arranged side by side. A logic of change will be imprinted on the structure, as the pages will be flipped weekly during the exhibition. The drawings can be seen individually and also in relation to the other sketchbooks, thus creating a new opportunity for the creation of a complex narrative. This creates possible layers of relationships among the drawings arranged on the table and the drawings that will be presented over the weeks.

Moreover, in most cases, despite having a large space for improvisation during the process of painting, the repertoire I end up using is often one that was mapped in some way in my thoughts over the years. The drawings in the sketchbooks end up being an important place for the internalization and reordering of information. While I paint, I do not look at the sketchbooks. I prefer to immerse myself in how the act of drawing gives an order, in my head, to what I see and feel. I therefore believe that the sets of drawings can create new windows for entering the paintings.



**Does being from Brazil have an influence on you as an artist, whether stylistically or in the scenes and narratives you portray? Where does the viewer see Brazil represented in your works?**

In terms of style, I don't believe so. I do not perceive my production as an extension of the painting made in my country. In relation to scenes and narratives, I would say that when I began to paint, I frequently made very direct use of photographic references. It was even descriptive. And in part, due to this way of working, characteristic elements of the local landscape wind up entering the paintings more often.

In the solo show that I am about to open, there are only a few paintings that use photographic references in such a direct way. In some cases, they are more abbreviated paintings, where the scenes have fewer elements. The scenes are not so much about a natural landscape than a psychological environment, which makes any attempt to locate local references quite ambiguous. Nevertheless, the thing gets more complicated. Because we know that our psychological landscape also bears the perception of our surroundings: the world that we experience, the human relationships, the information that we consciously or unconsciously receive and the deformations and constructions of memory. Not all of these questions are objectively described in the artworks, but for being part of my uneasinesses, they wind up entering, not as an image, but perhaps as an atmosphere.

**Your paintings have an uncannily familiar feel to them and cause confrontation of uneasiness. The use of hybrid figures or animals portrayed as equal to humankind seems to reflect on anxieties and the human condition. What emotions are you trying to invoke with this new collection? What commentary do you hope to make?**

I'm not trying to invoke or comment on anything specific for the observer. I often paint or draw to try to cope with something deeply painful, perturbing or strange for myself. These could be questions of an inner nature or related to the state of the world in which we live. I think a lot about how my memory reorders information in ways and intensities that vary greatly over life. Despite my curiosity, I do not have a scientific basis; I reflect on these questions based on my relationship with the work itself.

Nevertheless, I believe that a painting such as *Captura* (2018) tends to embrace more objective questions such as the violence of censorship and authoritarianism. I based the work on an old photograph of two people holding the outstretched wings of an albatross to show its wingspan. I made a drawing based on this photograph, and during the process, I drew the albatross as a creature halfway between man and bird. Later, I made the painting on Formica, a very smooth surface that does not hold much paint. I mixed some colours to construct something equivalent to black. I painted the entire surface with this dark mixture and later wiped off the painting with a cloth, opening the white areas. Although the cloth removed a good part of the paint, the white areas have a greenish tone. There is no more pigment, only the ghost of the colour. This colour that returns as a ghost seems to make sense for this painting.

At another moment, I see myself affected by the birth of my son, an intense event charged with happiness and anxiety. Sometimes, I simply observe that which is right in front of my eyes. A bone; a burned-out, cool-light fluorescent lamp tube; a pigeon or two beetles. I like to think that when I am painting something by direct observation, a still life, I'm painting something that I see but I'm also painting something else. This 'something else' touches on a part of my memory that I'm not able to trace with precision. Tenuous recollections. Something that fleets away before I can name it. These different ways of approaching the paintings reflect the way that my thinking oscillates between what I see and what I remember.

**The figures central to your paintings are often depicted in ways that emphasize a grotesque hybridity. Figures are dehumanized, made other. We recognize these figures but they feel incomplete. They represent internal fears and things that we wish not to be confronted by. What about hybridity speaks to you? What do these representations of beings that are not quite human, not quite animal mean to you?**

Animals have always been part of my narratives since my first works – rabbits, dogs, turtles and others. I have been close to animals since my childhood. I have watched the growth, sickness and death of some of them. The turtle is still alive and sometimes I have the impression that the colours of its shell and the plates that cover part of its skin are getting paler. Due to the importance of animals in my childhood, I think that they became a sort of connection with other recollections. It was an impactful experience for me to see my dog needing to have its foot amputated due to cancer. With the passage of years, the memory becomes disconnected from the event and begins to represent the sensation of loss and removal in a broader way. It no longer refers to just the dog. Hybridity has interested me for a long time perhaps because I see in this sort of structure the clashing or dialogue of apparently contradictory elements. Sometimes, the memory can join entire decades together in a fraction of a second based on very improbable associations. I remember being very impressed when I was younger, when the professor showed the photo of a sculpture by Richard Deacon. The materials made me think about the very specific architectural environment, however, the form seemed to oppose the nature of the materials. As in *Odradek*, the tale by Kafka, "the whole thing looks totally useless, but in its own way complete." While I draw or paint, I can intuitively change direction.

**“Hybridity has interested me for a long time perhaps because I see in this sort of structure the clashing or dialogue of apparently contradictory elements.”**

**So there’s an element of improvisation as well in your process.**

Yes. The outline of a leg can be interrupted and completed by another element observed at that moment or brought by a lost memory, gaining meaning within a narrative but also helping to deal with formal and structural questions that arise while I work. These creatures which throughout the process gradually diverge from my initial motivations perhaps help to impart to the work, when finished, depth and autonomy in relation to the starting points, which in certain cases can be overly personal. But all of this that I am saying, while I paint and draw, is outside my control.

**Watercolours, sketches, sculpture, oil on canvas and oil on wood are all mediums that you use within your practice. Do you have a preferred method?**

No. Drawing and painting, whether using oil or watercolours, are both important to me. But I have a very different relationship with each of them. Line drawing is a sort of calligraphy of thought even while the thought is still developing; it is almost as if I could see my thought outside my head in real time. But when I draw my observation, it is a way for me to become aware of what is in front of me. Things gain density. Watercolour is very delicate, I do not need physical force; it is often about accepting the fact that in this medium, precision requires acceptance of lack of control. Oil paint is very physical and synesthetic. It is very corporal. It involves a struggle with myself. Sometimes, it is the place where I enter into contact with what I didn’t want to see. At other moments, I feel that through it, when I least expect it, I manage to materialize very special and complex visual experiences, such as changes in luminosity and their relationship with my own state of spirit.

**You have said that your paintings begin as ideas from observations, and these ideas begin to change and develop through the painting process and as they become influenced by your surroundings, other observations and personal questions. Has this always been your process? What role do planning and improvisation play in your creative process? Do you balance the two?**

That is a very difficult question to answer because my attitude can vary a lot from one work to the next. Moreover, due to my daily practice of drawing, which has spanned at least two decades, marks have been left in my head by the process of observation. That is, even when I paint something spontaneously or from memory, I can possibly find some sort of trace, even though very distant, in the act of observing by way of drawing. Or even when images arise in my head, they do not appear out of nowhere simply at a given moment; for various reasons, the points were connected.

Outside of drawings and paintings, I also produce photographs. There are piles and piles of photographs scattered around the studio. Sometimes, I choose one of the piles and find a photograph taken days or years ago. I can begin the painting based on this and the following day, cover it with a layer of colour. At another moment, I can go back to that same canvas guided by the viscosity of the paint and its relationship with some other photograph or the stiffness of the bristles of the brush that is beside me.



**So painting and photography influence each other.**

I am currently finding it hard to define where things begin. I can resolve a painting in a few hours, but the previous layer could be a result of thin layers that gradually accumulated over a much longer time. Sometimes, I go forward and back so many times that after a time the canvas looks like an object found in the street. The surface that is being constructed is what often provides the clue about what to paint. There is no rule, things can happen very quickly or slowly.

I think that what has been accompanying me for a long time is an extremely ramified process which gradually generates variables that occasionally intercross when I least expect it. Sometimes, after some time working – about six months –, I begin to identify patterns and naturally start devoting more energy to a certain group – but if something interesting happens beside me, I can once again change direction.







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Words  
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