

MASTER OF IMAGINATION

Vitor Albuquerque Freire introduces **Xico Nico**



above
Title,

opposite
Title,

Xico Nico's remarkable and unusual sculptures present a very personal and disturbing figurative world, where the actors are humans and also a wide range of animals, displaying powerful feelings, sometimes multiple and contrasting, including some with an expressionist approach or coming from the unconscious, and, in the case of animals, stressed by humour and pure inventiveness.

I discovered his work a year ago after having bought one of his sculptures, a small, iron, articulated dog, in a traditional folk art and handicraft shop. I went to his studio where I entered an astonishing world. There were hundreds of unusual sculptures of different sizes and materials, most of them never exhibited, some deeply hidden. And there, for the first time, was where Xico Nico heard about outsider art, Art Brut or even contemporary folk art.

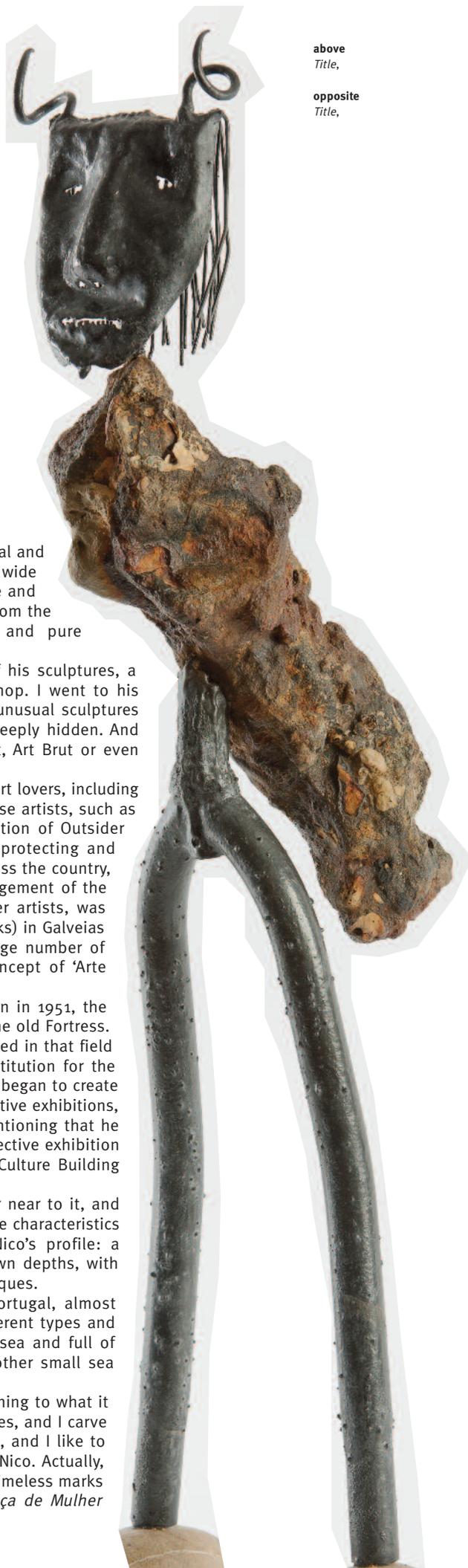
In September, I and almost 40 outsider and patient self-taught art lovers, including art historians, psychiatrists, art therapists and top mainstream Portuguese artists, such as Eduardo Nery and Joana Vasconcelos, founded the Portuguese Association of Outsider Art. Its main goals are to discover, study and promote outsider art, protecting and promoting artists, preserving collections, linking art therapy studios across the country, and to try to create a medium-sized outsider art museum, via an enlargement of the Bombarda Hospital Museum. Xico Nico, amongst several other outsider artists, was selected for the first large exhibition in April/May (with more than 80 works) in Galveias Palace, central Lisbon. It proved to be a great success, receiving a large number of visitors and press and internet reviews, as well as spreading the concept of 'Arte Outsider' (in Portuguese) and, of course, introducing Xico Nico.

Xico Nico (full name Francisco Manuel de Jesus Nico) was born in 1951, the son of a fisherman, in Peniche, where he still lives and has a studio in the old Fortress. From secondary school, he graduated in metal mechanics and then worked in that field for 22 years. In 1987, he became a teacher at CERCI (a pioneering institution for the rehabilitation of young people with disabilities) of Peniche, and there he began to create his own sculptures. Since 1990 he has participated in more than 50 collective exhibitions, although with few or no representative works. However, it is worth mentioning that he won the first prize at the 2008 Lisbon International Folk Art Fair, the collective exhibition at Portugal Pavilion in 2008, the solo exhibitions held in 2010 at the Culture Building and at the Sea Technology School, in Peniche.

Most of Nico's sculpture should be considered outsider art, or near to it, and only through that perspective can it be fully understood and admired. The characteristics appointed by Jean Dubuffet in his concept of outsider art match Nico's profile: a self-taught artist, with intuitive forms and subjects deriving from its own depths, with little or no influence from erudite art, and even creating his own techniques.

Peniche is a town in the middle of the western coast of Portugal, almost surrounded by the ocean, and Nico chooses and collects stones of different types and dimensions along the coast line. Mostly limestone, weathered by the sea and full of perforations made by strange mollusca, where, later on, bivalves or other small sea animals and plants may fix themselves.

"When looking at a stone I start searching for its soul, or listening to what it has to say; it is somehow like seeing figures in the clouds. The idea comes, and I carve it smoothly, and in most cases I don't change the overall form so much, and I like to maintain the perforations and the way nature made its art," says Xico Nico. Actually, the perforations, in a human face or in a head, give a peculiar sense of timeless marks or of a stronger feeling (see his sculptures *Sereia* (Mermaid) or *Cabeça de Mulher* (Woman's Head)).





above

Title, YYYY, media, X x X ins., X x X cm.

opposite

Title, YYYY, media, X x X ins., X x X cm.

Some works can be read in special and diverse ways, so the viewer must look carefully and discover the secret meanings tri-dimensionally. For example, *Homem Velho* (Old Man) can be read in four ways: the face (with a nose that is a fossil) can be seen as male genitals sex and an anus, then, on the reverse, we can see two human figures with their two heads, and female genitals between the figures.

Nico also uses other stones, such as the rare rose granite from the Berlengas Islands near Peniche. His *Cabeça Grande* (Big Head), an art work that Nico is particularly fond of, is extremely raw but powerful, with just slight impressions of eyes, mouth and ears carved into the original irregular shape, preserving the rich colours of the stone, where we can 'see' other meanings or details. Through the way Nico uses materials, he obtains a very rare harmony between subject and form.

Nico has different methods and techniques when working with metals, since his secondary degree in metal mechanics. In the human-size warriors, which seem to come from a war of the future, he transformed, in a complex way, old mechanical parts of cars or engines. Only occasionally, he says, will he make a small drawing of an animal and then find or buy the appropriate metal. Nico has invented methods and techniques that not only relating to metals but also to the sea stones, which he washes several times to remove the salt and protect them.

In a few works, Nico employs media such as glass or ceramic. In the disturbing *Cabeça de Velha* (Old Woman's Head), we find fibre glass and several

paint rollers. The creative process of the *Trissauro* sculpture is singular and as unique is the final result. Nico saw a dead dolphin on a beach and, with the help of his two sons, buried it nearby and made a map. Several months later, he found the grave site and started digging. When he reached the skeleton, the idea of a funny dinosaur came to him as he looked at the dolphin's skull and mandibles. He combined them with iron and wood, and covered everything with old denim, creating a three-legged dinosaur.

The wide range of animals that Nico's sculptures represent is almost incredible: from turtles to locusts, several dozen, of all sizes, some quite terrifying but always expressing their essence with humour or irony. 'Yes,' said Nico, 'it reflects my personality. I like joking and to surprise my friends in my daily life.'

Finally, and maybe the most important characteristic of Nico's work, is his prodigious imagination. He never repeats a sculpture he has created before; he is always making experimental new forms. It is an obsession that makes him happy: 'When I create, I always try not to follow the obvious. And I think that my teaching interaction with the young disabled (mainly mentally ill) and their work, during all those years at CERCI, gave me the attitude, or courage, to create freely.'

Either evoking a human face or unfolding the essence of an animal, his sculptures are powerful works that demonstrate the inner force and stunning inventiveness of a genuine artist away from the mainstream.

Vitor Albuquerque Freire

is a historian based in Lisbon. He is the Director of the Associação Portuguesa de Arte Outsider, and former founder and director of the Miguel Bombarda Museum of Patient Art and Neurosciences.

