

## **Mr malik's table**

Mario Flecha

(catalogue FUEGOGRATIS)

*"Forbidden to forbid."*

Graffiti, Paris, May 1968

*"Understanding is previous to the word."*

Ernesto de Sousa

My father is a carpenter as was my grandfather. At the end of our garden we had a workshop that smelt of wood shavings and carpenter's glue.

The day I became 17, I somehow found myself in my father's workshop with a piece of sandpaper in my hand. I remember him saying to me:

"Theo, you've got to sand this table until it's smooth to the touch. Use your fingertips to gauge the smoothness of the wood. You can't rely on your eyes, you can be taken in by them. Begin with the rough-grade sandpaper ending up with the finest. Choose a piece of wood with a good, smooth side, wrap the sandpaper round it and without pressing too hard, make circular movements over the surface and bit by bit you'll manage to plane it. Take your time."

He explained this as he showed me how to do it.

My life changed abruptly. I went from student to apprentice in one night.

I feel sure my parents doubted my intelligence and thought it a waste of my time to go on studying.

The monotony of repeating a task bored me and yet as I learnt to use tools, I began to enjoy small, daily victories which enabled me to solve problems.

My father was aware of my progress.

I would undoubtedly become a good carpenter just like him and his father. He started taking me with him as his assistant to see clients.

He was always nervous on the day we went to see a new job. He took a black notebook and a blunt pencil. He wrote down the description of the piece of furniture being commissioned as well as making a note of where in the room it would go. Giving me a steel rule, he would get me to measure the dimensions of the room in which the piece would go.

In the meantime he drew sketches of the furniture. His ability to respond to the client's needs surprised me. When I commented on this, his answer was:

"Experience."

He drew up several designs and showed them to the buyer who would suggest a few minor changes, either in order to feel he was collaborating or to demonstrate

who was the boss.

Having exchanged ideas, he made the necessary alterations. He made me measure the abstract dimensions of the piece to be made and wrote them down in his black notebook.

“So as to keep the proportions under control,” he would say.

When we got back to the workshop he would calculate costs and possible profit.

Life went on without upheavals. I learnt the skills of a carpenter, accidentally hammering my finger from time to time. Although it did not happen often, the pain it produced was unbearable and I would shake my hand violently to get rid of the pain.

One routinely peaceful morning, a client of my father's rang to recommend he go and see a foreign gentleman called Malik who needed a dining-room table. He mentioned vaguely the difficulty of communicating with him, as he did not speak our language.

As always, I went with my father and so did the black book. On arrival, an elegant man of North African appearance opened the door and gestured for us to go in. The three of us stood smiling in silence in the middle of an enormous room.

I began taking measurements of the room while my father wrote them down.

Mr Malik walked to a corner of the room, leaning his shoulder against the wall and letting us get on with our work but staying nearby in case we needed anything. Having drawn several different designs, my father went towards the man, Mr Said Malik, to show him, at the same time reciting the usual salesman's talk. He praised the virtues of certain wood and went on to develop theories on the texture and colour of the walls and why these dictated the use of a red hardwood. The style would be English, Sheraton to be precise, and he was already imagining the table's slender legs.

Mr Said Malik listened attentively although it was obvious he did not understand. My father stopped for a second. Taking advantage of the interruption, Mr Malik left the room and returned with an adolescent girl who greeted us with respect.

Her name sounded like a distant murmur to me:

“Samina.”

“My daughter.”

After an interminable time looking at the drawings, they spoke to each other in their language.

Coming towards us, she put the drawings on the floor. She sat on the carpet and waited for us to do the same. When we were ready she went through the designs and chose two. She put them next to each other and by moving her fingers over the paper, led us to understand she wanted to combine the legs of one with the

top of the other.

My name is Samina and I am tired of running away. I long to see the dunes of the Mediterranean again, to feel the heat of the sand between my toes as I run to avoid burning my feet and there in the distance, the horizon caressing the sunset over the waves.

Wandering through the rooms of this house today I felt them to be devoid of humanity. Nobody in this house had ever felt any of life's urgencies. This was where we came in summer to relax and hide. It gave us the freedom and security we needed and justified the endless hours spent travelling by plane.

The house lacked unnecessary and necessary objects as my mother made everything disappear at the end of the holidays.

For several years we escaped from country to country. I never knew the reason for this life of constant movement and my parents avoided talking about it.

My father used to say: "It's a bad idea to think but worse still to write poetry."

My brothers had settled in remote, hard to find places and now my mother had died, my father had decided to live in this house in the hope that our past would abandon us.

When I saw the carpenters, I had to stifle my laughter. Theo, the young one, was tall, slim and ungainly with an easy smile. This contrasted with his father whose seriousness made him look permanently worried.

A few moments were all it took to realise Theo was the first man I desired. We exchanged silences and the warmth of his hand brushed mine as I passed him the designs his father had drawn.

It took several days for my father to estimate the cost of the table for Mr Said Malik. Having finished, he decided it would be best to deliver it by hand as a telephone call would be complicated and we did not know how they would reply to a letter. Putting all the pages into a brown envelope and giving them to me, he said:

"Theo, deliver this to Mr Malik. The design and price are included. Let's hope they accept."

I got on my bicycle and went to the white-fronted house of indeterminate style.

She opened the door and taking my arm, took me to the hall from where I could see several doors and stairs disappearing into the gloom. While I wondered where each of the doors led, I glimpsed the sensuality of her face.

I gave her the envelope, imagining those North American films on European history in which the messenger is accused of being a traitor or criminal because the letter brought bad news. The reprisal was hanging, unless they were feeling

generous and then they would put you in a repulsive prison where you stayed until the damp ate your bones and the lice your brain.

Without opening the letter she disappeared down one of the dark corridors. I dared myself watch her.

She came back minutes later with the drawings in her hand and with a nod of the head, gave me to understand her father had accepted.

When Theo brought the letter I was alone. I pretended my father was somewhere in the house as I was frightened of myself.

He stayed innocently in the entrance hall.

When he left, I saw him getting onto his bicycle and I gazed after him until he disappeared into the distance.

My father had had to leave the country and I remained walking through the rooms, listening to the sound of my restless steps.

I avoided going outside. Shyness and lack of the local language caused my daily life to centre round an abstract prison whose limits were in my imagination yet hindered the enjoyment of my imposed liberty.

Some days I feel like travelling on the underground. I like the darkness of the tunnels and sitting amongst all that silent humanity of unattainable pasts and presents, traces of Africa, Asia or America. The limits and monotony of feeling condemned to the circular tedium of travelling each morning and evening in an unending circle with no beginning or end.

I need to see Theo.

I learnt the necessary words to communicate with him and wrote a long letter in Arabic about my family's history ending by taking a simple risk: "Theo, come."

I could not stop thinking of Samina, her presence pursued me. It was absurd. I had only seen her for a few minutes and yet that was enough for me to dream even though I understood the distances between us were insurmountable.

One morning before going to the workshop, I received an envelope. I opened it without interest as nobody wrote letters to me. I was surprised to see the indecipherable strokes of Arabic unfolding over the paper. Guessing who had written it, I started turning the pages round to try and find the beginning. I knew you were meant to read the other way round from our language and I stopped when I read: "Theo come, Samina."

Uncertain, shaking, I hid it between my books on the shelf in my room. At night I put the pages on my bed and tried to decipher them. Gradually, they transformed into a visual object. They were not words separated by space any longer but unified and ever more beautiful and incomprehensible. They had transformed

from mysterious text to revelatory drawing.

I decided to reply and wrote an equally long letter in which I told her my family's history. I learnt to write "I love you," in her language and put it at the end of the letter.

I wanted my letter to be a replica of hers so that although it would have no apparent meaning, it would become a magnificent drawing in her eyes.

Jumping onto my bicycle, I went to leave the letter at her house. The large, white-fronted house stood before me. I looked at the windows and saw Samina behind the curtains. On seeing me she knocked on the windowpane and signalled for me to wait. I heard her running downstairs, she opened the door and I went in.

We stood shyly in front of each other and I felt her hand stroke my face and her breath between my fingers.

We loved each other with the fury and innocence of youth.

His letter was left on the floor of the hall.

When he came in I took his arm roughly and in our confusion it had fallen unseen from his hands.

We walked through the darkness of the corridor and ran up the stairs to the Tower.

The Tower was my room whenever we were here.

It is small with a window in each wall from where you can see the city. We sat on opposite sides of an absurd table and I understood that time is the sum of silences.

I heard myself talking to Theo who smiled in confusion. Knowing our words were not understood by the other, we played at listening. I would say something which he would pretend to understand and he would answer in words which meant nothing more to me than the pleasure of being with him.

My hands stroked his face impulsively and then all was chaotic, adolescent frenzy.

When Theo left, I picked up the letter and saw the mysterious signs. Only at the end did I discover the magic words: "I love you." From that moment, the most beautiful smile I have ever smiled pursued me.

Would he come tomorrow?

I could neither sleep nor stop touching the pages of the letter with my fingertips. I felt his skin in every movement.

Finally I fell asleep.

A few days later my father came back.

"We must go now. They are getting near, they will find out where we are and that is dangerous."

I could not say goodbye to Theo, all was silence, confusion.

I spent the whole week in a state of elation. I felt it was time to see Samina again. Having finished work, I made some excuse and escaped.

I decided to walk to give myself longer to enjoy imagining what awaited me.

When I arrived at Samina's house, I could not decide whether to ring the bell or not. I wondered what I would say if Mr Said answered. I hung around hoping that Samina would appear at a window or we would meet by accident in the street.

After a long time it got dark and I could not wait any longer. I rang the bell expecting to hear footsteps run down the stairs.

Nobody answered.

All is silence and confusion.