

Opaque work

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Descending from Italian immigrants who took root in the south of Brazil in the late 19th century, Ismael Monticelli comes from a family traditionally dedicated to agriculture. His parents, however, have long worked with metallurgy and, for that reason, the artist has not grown up in the countryside, but in Cachoeirinha, a town in the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre, the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

There, during his childhood and youth, he lived in a wooden house. Inscribed in his body still lives the memory of fighting against the ruining of the house which, infested with termites, withered into dust every day: "Touching the walls was synonymous with caving our fingers in, like the sensation of tearing off a wrapping to reveal a void, empty interior. Seating on the floor was synonymous with having gnawed waste wood adhered to our skin, like the sensation of lying directly on beach sand"[1].

Monticelli tells that, in face of the dismantling house, he, his mother, and his sister were always – obsessively – cleaning the residues of the insects' activity. In a "silent war against the devourer," they polished the floor and furniture always in disarray. Without the economic perspective of being able to move, in the act of constantly varnishing the wood, they ended up making the house shine. Clean and luminous, yet on the verge of destruction.

1

In 2009, already as an art student at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Monticelli finally had his first paid job: a trainee extension program at Pinacoteca do Instituto de Artes of the same university, where he helped with expography projects and also assembling the institute's exhibitions. In that context, he faced another environment whose symbolic gloss was equally sustained by the historic reproduction of the gesture of—aesthetically and socially— sanitizing and neutralizing it; the white cube.

Coexisting with the production of such imaginary of purity, beauty, efficiency, and quality daily, Ismael Monticelli started documenting it. For that which would become the

series *Inframince* (2009–2010), the artist photographed Pinacoteca’s gallery daily, creating an archive of images around the relationships between the architecture, the emptiness, and the light of the exhibition space. As if he were aiming at apprehending any sign of identity—any ontological density that could possibly be glimpsed at in that place—he translated the photographs into hatched drawings made on glass plates. Overlapping one another, the plates deepened the white smoothness of the gallery, filling the performed and alleged translucence of the white cube with opacity.

In the following years, while he was also an architecture student (a course he never got to finish), Monticelli started a relationship with another device of the bourgeois and white imaginary of transparency, organization, and clarity of spaces: the rendering process. As a trainee at an office, the artist—whose body knew how to inhabit an environment that, despite its fictionalized clearness, was also in ruin—he rendered the plans projected by his architect bosses, fictionalizing them as spaces inhabited by people, plants, objects, lights, temperatures.

Coproducing and becoming an accomplice to the fictional dimension of such spatiality’s (whether they were the white cube, the rendering process, or his own house), the first works by Ismael Monticelli are shreds of evidence that the then young artist was already interested in the regimes of visibility and their fabulatory dimensions. One of his first gestures was, thus, that of rubbing distinct ways of seeing and producing images: particularly transparency and opacity.

2

The glass plates that appeared in the series *Inframince* would become the central device of his experiments in the following years. Although regarded as models of transparency, once overlapped, rearranged, mirrored, spaced, etched, etc., the plates transmuted into opacity and, more rarely, into reflexivity. The same formal expression—the glass—propagated into territories of dissimilar intentionality’s and, by doing so, highlighted not only its physical but also, and above all, conceptual, aesthetical, political, and ethical properties.

In works such as *A paixão faz das pedras inertes, um drama* [*Passion Turns inert Stones into a Drama*] (2010–2011), *Olhar o olho olhando* [*Looking at the Looking Eye*] (2011), *Projeto para paisagens especulares* [*Project for Mirroring Landscapes*] (2014–

2015), *Satélite* [*Satellite*] (2015), or *Projetos para paisagens veladas* [*Projects for Veiled Landscapes*] (2017), beyond the physical proximity of its plates, in order for the glass to perform its agency, exude subjectivity, or become a sign, Ismael Monticelli conceived it in a dramaturgical way, as part of a scene for which other elements were equally summoned up. For that reason, even though the canonical taxonomy of the visual arts would categorize these works as objects, in my view, it seems potent to reiterate their narrative dimension and, looking at them from a dramaturgical point of view, evoke the intangibility of time as their vertebral dimension—an aspect that glowed since the initial moments of Monticelli's career.

In these works, in a spatiality almost always comprised of sequenced and spaced glass plates, small characters, objects, machines, or architectural elements make themselves present. Monticelli presents us with situations in which, as one of his titles suggests, we almost always “look at the looking eye.” Like a trap for the act of seeing, the scenes ricochet our gaze in between the view of its characters, through objects that are revealed or mysteriously hide themselves, and mainly, in between the interfered air, light, and physicality of the glass plates, composing an optic regime between transparency and opacity. As the artist reveals, in these works “the enigma of transparency lies in the ability of the glass to make me see things differently from how I usually see them, or from the way I am used to seeing them.”

As such ability goes through the perspective of our gaze and the consciousness of our agency as well as the implications in that which, in the end, we see, for Ismael Monticelli, the exercise of producing opacity between translucent materiality's was also experimented as historicity: seeing is, after all, a historically situated action. Thus, if some of his installations comprised of the dust deposited on glass plates alluded to fictional geographies, it is because Monticelli knows that places are also palimpsests of sorts, territories in which historically implied space-times are inscribed, become dense, and transform themselves.

3

Far from the cartographical, disciplined, rendered, or transparent version of the world, space is, due to its historicity, a palimpsest of constant constructions and erasures. Its opacities may arise from the loss of its historical referents, often transformed into

erratic vestiges whose apparent arbitrariness demands, in turn, constant exercises of fictionalization and attribution of meaning. Continuously relived by the historic imagination, social spaces are, in this sense, also territories where different temporalities coexist. Albeit opaque to one another, in a city, on a mountain, or in a glass covered in dust, pasts, presents, and futures coexist and may be accessed, disputed, fabulated—both critically and creatively.

Towards such direction, in 2019, Ismael Monticelli proposed *Visita guiada a uma paisagem desaparecida* [Guided Tour to a Vanished Landscape], a touristic-historic walk through both buried and remaining memories of Morro do Castelo. Physically inexistent since its dismantling in the 1920s, the symbolic presence of the hill remains as a geopolitical mark in Rio de Janeiro, appearing in the name of bus lines or serving as reference points for millions of people in Rio de Janeiro.

Born in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, upon his arrival at the capital of the old Guanabara, Monticelli faced the unique force of that hill, which, although not visible, still inhabits and landmarks the city from its own point of opacity. The undeniable presence of the absence of the castle made the interests of the artist around political, ontological, social, and aesthetical regimes of visibility denser: in face of the hill's story, the western and rational paradigm of seeing and the modes of seeing collapsed.

Thus, the experience of composing with the superposition of glass plates was translated into historicity, documents, and memories, taken as materialities in themselves, from which Monticelli produced another one of his scenes: a guided tour to the center of Rio de Janeiro. Elaborated from a broad archival/iconographic research and performed by a group of actresses playing guides, the tour visited twelve points of the area, collectively depositing another layer to the palimpsest that constitutes the invisible presence of Morro do Castelo in the space of Rio de Janeiro, despite its physical disappearance in time.

As Édouard Glissant elaborates in *Transparency and Opacity*, by remaining, despite having disappeared, the genocide and epistemicide of which Morro do Castelo, its inhabitants, and communitarian culture have been the victims of—an echo, in the 20th century, of the coloniality that goes on structuring Brazilian society—demonstrate the failure of the pretensions of transparency and luminosity of the humanistic Euro-ethnocentric discourses. The solid opacity of that which is not crystalline to the eye insists

and summons us up to other ways of seeing and being seen. To other forms of facing our own (in)visibility.

4

In 2012, in collaboration with Irmãos Guimarães, Ismael Monticelli composed *Rumor*, a scene for the light, the sound, the space, and the body of the audience: all of them immersed in a dark environment, filled with more than six thousand glass pieces covered in dust and illuminated directly—flasks, jars, laboratory glassware, etc.

Enigmatic, the scene is almost like a whisper to our ears, from a voice that reflexively occupies the same point of view of the audience. From *The Unnamable*, by Samuel Beckett, in face of a scene that is as luminous as it is opaque, the lowered voice thinks with us: "... I prefer that, I must say I prefer that, that what, oh you know, who you, oh I suppose the audience, well well, so there's an audience, it's a public show, you buy your seat and you wait,... you take your seat and you wait for it to begin.... you wait for the compulsory show to begin, it takes time, you hear a voice, perhaps it's a recitation, that's the show, someone reciting, selected passages, old favourites,... and the spectators, where are they, you didn't notice, in the anguish of waiting, never noticed you were waiting alone, that's the show, waiting alone, in the restless air, for it to begin, for something to begin, for there to be something else but you...."[2].

In a fundamental inflection of his work, *Rumor* turns the miniature characters of Monticelli's first reduced-scale scenes into an invitation – this time – to the body of the audience. Again, we look at our looking eye, searching, through the dramaturgy of the installation light, for some sharpness of the senses and intentions of the situation in which we see ourselves implicated.

Ambiguous, *Rumor* performs what the works *Manual de instruções para construir paisagens em casa* [*Instruction Manual to Build Landscapes at Home*] and *Manual de instruções para encontrar paisagens em casa* [*Instruction Manual to Find Landscapes at Home*], both from the same year, were also experimenting. As the artist states, "I remember that, at that moment, I became interested in how much we can imaginarily transfigure one thing into another just by observing it for a long time. That became an issue for me."

It was about the understanding that, as Rancière synthesizes, “The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought”[3]. Reimagining what is apparently given, what puts itself as a transparent datum, will be the very way to understand it, to lend it uses, to politicize it. For that, it is crucial to disassemble the myth of clarity in favours of an opaquer experience of the world that necessarily involves the other and the field of relationships.

5

Alterity is constant in Ismael Monticelli’s work. Already featured in the miniature characters in his first works, such *Other*, that is subject and public, but also memory, matter, and time – starting from the condition of dust or of an open archive such as *Corpo político [Politic Body]* (2019)—will tend to, throughout the years of his career, occupy the place of a historic subject.

In the same direction, *Novo mundo [New World]* (2019) and *Não te esqueças nunca que eu venho dos trópicos [Do Not Ever Forget that I Come from the Tropics]* (2019) unfold the interest in the historicity that had been explored in *Visita guiada a uma paisagem desaparecida* by personalizing it in subjects, subjectivities, and memories which are no longer abstract or generic, but incorporated. They are works that, based on archives, investigate the lives of people, communities, and specific groups, naming and fictionalizing them in installations that, more than translating them into linear narratives, take them as intricate plots of references and desires unable of being captured by a sole ontoepistemic regime.

Formally, these installations explore some of the organizing principles already in operation at the beginning of Monticelli’s career. Antagonistic to a space-time-rendered experience, they are accumulations, superpositions, entanglements of objects, information, images, presences. They are not performed as texts to be read, but as palimpsests which, filled with erasures, blotches, opaque layers, blurs, etc., need to be fabulated to be interpreted. Even when eminently comprised of words – as in *Não te esqueças nunca que eu venho dos trópicos* – these projects do not organize words into a decipherable or apprehensible scale for us. Instead, words are exploded to a point in which, in front of them, we feel like the miniature figures that were lost through the scenes the artist once wrote.

Thus, differently from the canonic ethnographic tradition, these projects – the first one held in Singapore, and the second, in Switzerland – also explore the dimension of self-alterization. By dedicating himself to characters and stories that tell us about coloniality, intercultural relationships, and conflicts, Ismael Monticelli also puts himself in the scene: more than introducing us to an *Other*, the artist summons us up to look at him looking at the *Other*, a gesture that ethically implies us into the plot between diverse perspectives. Not by chance, when these projects are publicly presented, Monticelli creates videos narrated by an algorithmic subjectivity situated in a future from which he reflects upon the works. From a self-critical point of view that sees fiction as political language, Monticelli thus historically circumscribed his gestures, his conceptions of alterity, and some of the ethic crossroads of his position as an artist dedicated to “talking about the *Other*.”

In this sense, if it is important to recognize the ethnographic dimension of Ismael Monticelli’s work, it is especially relevant to nuance it. We are not before an artist symptomatically addressing denunciation or appropriation of the condition of alterity violently invented by coloniality—as the indigenous people or the Black cultures whose approach seems “irresistible” for white artists full of good humanistic intentions. We are, singularly, before one of the few artists in Brazil who has been dedicated to problematizing his own gaze on the *Other*, which involves critically facing the normative dimensions of art, circumscribing them to his own epistemic, aesthetic, ethnic, and racial ethnocentrism, among others.

6

The critique that Ismael Monticelli fires towards art in *Colírios* [*Eye Drops*] must be faced. Although the package inserts referring to each eye drop are homages of sorts to the artists that lend them name and meaning, it is crucial to notice that, getting closer to the ontoepistemic perspectives of each author he refers to, Monticelli precisely circumscribes his operations to the field of production and erasure of the regimes of visibility. That is what the instructions of the eye drops make evident: “ophthalmic solution indicated to elaborate categories for all things” (Jorge Luis Borges); “ophthalmic solution indicated to separate memory from imagination” (Milton Santos); “ophthalmic solution indicated to look, at the same time, at the past and the future” (Walter Benjamin);

“ophthalmic solution indicated to separate things from the way they look” (Merleau-Ponty); “ophthalmic solution indicated to create a plan of observation for all things in the world” (Italo Calvino).

Taking the eye as a starting point, *Colírios* offers us the vision that the so-called “optical regimes” of art are not restricted to modes of representing or producing images. Instead, they inhabit and coproduce the very politics of looking and being looked at. Politics which, in turn, cannot be isolated from the rest of our bodies and lives, since they safeguard the right to an all-encompassing perspective to some, while, on the contrary, it prevents access to visibility to the others. Acting on the eye is, as *Obsessão miúda – proposição vivencial para ratos selvagens [a partir de uma feira de arte]* [*Tiny obsession – experiential proposition for wild rats (from an art fair)*] (2017) shows, acting directly on the body: beyond our own, and on the body of the *Other*.

Conceived to be exhibited in an art fair, through a scale model and a publication, the installation *Obsessão miúda* fictionalizes affiliations between toys for rats/ hamsters and the geometries of a certain constructive matrix of Brazilian art, provocatively considering them immanent to each other. In a three-dimensional way, and reduced scale, paintings, engravings, sculptures, etc. from the concrete and neo-concrete Brazilian canon – such as Ivan Serpa, Lygia Pape, and Waldemar Cordeiro – Monticelli rearticulates their plans, colors, and voids, turning their geometry of eminently aesthetical intentions into a topology of environmental character for bodies and other species.

By doing so, he sarcastically problematizes the disciplinary program which, deriving from Gestalt and the studies of form psychology, longed for predetermining how the *Other*— spectators of the works, in this case—would relate to art, anticipating their perceptions, behaviours, and reactions. *Obsessão miúda* thus elaborates an acute critique to the paradigm of autonomization of art, whose pinnacle could be glimpsed at in a certain constructive project notably aestheticized: emptied from its socio-political implications (and even ambitions) in the name of art itself and its mythically pure, essentialized, transparent forms.

7

In 2018, the self-alterization present amid Ismael Monticelli's ethnographic view found a new inflection in the project *Exercício de futurologia* [*Futurology Exercise*] developed along with Paço das Artes (São Paulo). Acting in a cultural institution which, at the time, had lost its headquarters, this time, besides launching a (self-)critical view to art, its institutions, and historicities through a fictional-archivist practice, the artist does it in collaboration with people who, being alive, do not eminently inhabit the imaginary of representations but, on the contrary, dispute, in the present, their spaces of representativity.

As Monticelli states, "in the beginning, the project was conceived as a fictional proposition, a 'futurology exercise' that started from a certain context and a utopian hypothesis:... what would this museum be like?" However, "when [he began] to develop the work, the initial project no longer seemed to make sense. In my view, what caused a radical change in the proposition was the interviews and talks I had.... I realized that there were two possible paths. The first one would be to ignore my meeting with the reality of the situation, adopting a kind of bird's-eye view..., such as observing from afar a landscape existing calmly and, from that, maintaining myself faithful ... to the original project. The second—and chosen—path would be to dedicate myself to the situation to see, to think better, and to follow the development of the work according to the pulsations that are characteristic to the context with which I am dealing." Monticelli's choice was, thus, a construction having the meeting as a starting point. He aimed at escaping from the arrogant distancing that imagines solutions for others— such as *Gestalt*, museology, and curatorship—as well as fleeing the distanced cynicism that points to *Others* and their problems, without committing to them.

Reduced to black and white and thought of as a large graphic fabric of sorts, *Exercício de futurologia* flooded the walls of the gallery with texts coming from a rich research on cultural institutions made by Monticelli. Transcribed on the walls by the artist himself, that multiplicity of concepts coexisted with a group of seven scale models for museum architecture which mean, clarify, or determine very little: misanthrope, apocryphal, and somnambulistic museum of aporia, of aphasia, of the inextricable, of the imbroglio. Antagonistic to the pretense neutrality of the white cube and modern museums, the institutions fictionalized by Monticelli were conceptually opaque, destined to deal with the very crossroads of significations, functionalities, existences.

Amid such silent but graphically dense circumlocution, what stood out to the viewers' eyes was a group of posters placed at the back of the exhibition. There, excerpts of speeches from Paço das Artes' staff could be seen, arranged according to their themes or temperatures, designed in a way to differ in terms of position, weight, size, and style. The layout of their sayings acted as a semicolon among the flood of hypotheses of museums presented on *Exercício de futurologia*. By fracturing the words and neighboring differences, the posters instituted a play with the gaze of the viewers—summoning them up to perform, through reading and moving their bodies, the transformations evoked by the speeches of the staff, so desired by the institution, which then strived to find new headquarters and a meaning.

Participating and, therefore, acting on that historic moment, Ismael Monticelli indicates that "from ... *Exercício de futurologia* on, I redirected my hope deposited in museums towards the audience. Maybe the audience may rethink them as forums of ideas around social, political, and cultural pressing issues. After all, institutions still can become places that interest everyone, where dialogue may be built, where battles may be fought, where public debates may be established in a welcoming way. *Exercício de futurologia* is offered as a small drop that only the audience can turn into an ocean."

Thus, the audience, which was led to look at themselves looking in *Rumor* (2012), from the lessons of *Exercício de futurologia* on, has their place of agency recognized. But it would be, above all, through social media and his Instagram profile @corpopolitico_ that Monticelli, only very recently, would take the direct relationship with the audiences as a dramaturgy in itself. That is, for example, what the artist has been developing through his Facebook page, in which he has been publishing his doctoral thesis, turning the universe of social media into a fruitful territory through which the opacity of the world can be inhabited. In this direction, there are more scenes yet to come.

8

Even though the memories of his life in Cachoeirinha or the many stories of his family populate Ismael Monticelli's imaginary, until 2020 his work was committed to avoiding, maybe due to an ethical project, mentioning autobiographic aspects. As a critic of the narcissistic whiteness project which has, in art, its most well-finished facet, the

artist from Rio Grande do Sul had programmatically avoided the seduction of talking about himself or his family.

However, on the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic, a story wanted to emerge from its secretive condition. He obviously did not choose to present himself according to the logic of translucence of which the artist has always been incredulous, conscious of the fictional dimension of that which tries to perform transparencies and clearness's of different kinds. Thus, it was from the opacity of a secret suffered in the family that *Corpo estranho* [*Strange Body*] (2020) emerged, an installation that narrates the abuses of police against the artist's grandfather during the Military Dictatorship.

Tortured in the middle of the forest in which the police, without any evidence, suspected he had murdered his own cousin, Monticelli's grandfather was another one of the victims of the violence of the state that were silenced and made invisible. Aiming at a confession for a crime that was never committed, the police beat him up and simulated drowning to the traumatized body of the artist's grandfather, leaving him deaf and blind after months of torture. The memory of this trauma was, for that reason, conveyed to Monticelli through his father whose narrative was, in turn, once again fabulated by the artist in *Corpo estranho*.

In the long installation, cut-out texts on top of acetate sheets, photographs of his grandfather, and paintings covered by layers of tulle and net fabric narratively articulate themselves under the shadow of the memories obscured by time and pain. Collected by Monticelli for years, the paintings by unknown artists were arranged in a kind of panorama of a generic landscape, an unspecific forest whose strength does not lie in the idea of singularity, but in that of dispersion and collectivity. Veiled by tulle—in an affiliation to the pictorial glazing and the liturgies of mourning—like a random landscape, the opacity of *Corpo estranho* accommodates yet another story of pain.

Distant from the luminous spots of transparency and the canonical regimes of visibility, what Ismael Monticelli's work shows is that certain narratives, perspectives, traumas, or meanings can only emerge in opacity. At times, the light must be lowered, and the clearness of forms must be made ambiguous so that historically obliterated existences may find expression.

That we may, then, learn to move ourselves in between secrets, anonymous subjects, and shadows, not due to our lack of light, but in such a way that we do not unlearn to see in the middle of the darkness and the opacities of the gaze.

[1] Ismael Monticelli's quotations in this text have never been published and are part of Monticelli's doctoral thesis (2021).

[2] Samuel Becket, *The Unnamable*, ed. Steven Connor (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2010).

[3] Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

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