

What floats, floats in chaos

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“Now there is nothing but flowers”, echoes Caetano Veloso’s voice between two thrivingly ornated paintings on the third floor of the exhibition “What floats, floats in chaos”, Ismael Monticelli’s solo show at Portas Vilaseca Gallery.

His complaint – an ironic requiem to the fading of a paradise made up of machines, cars, gas, outdoors, freeways, and shopping malls – is a Brazilian take on the song (*Nothing but) Flowers*, by the Talking Heads.

As he cries always his yearning for the old Pizza Hut, later covered with daisies, the song mocks the primitivist fantasies that now and again plague civilizations with messianic longings for the utter reforestation of all life, minds, and territories, yielding revolutionary ideologies – albeit often authoritarian ones – that stubbornly devote themselves to rebuilding nations, peoples, ideals, based on a fabled “nature” that could explain all atrocities as stemming from “natural law”, biological determinism or scientific racism.

Today, as Brazil celebrates the 200th anniversary of its independence, the much-needed reflections on the failure of “our nation’s” colonial project eagerly compete for critical outlets against all the hoopla generated by the 100th anniversary of São Paulo’s 1922 Modern Art Week, we devise a historical fiction that could tie “modernity” to “independence”, as if one was bound to the other.

It is an unfortunately precedented irony that, for instance, the traumatic photos that document the recent Guarani Kaiowa massacre at Guapoy (Mato Grosso do Sul) have to plead for visibility precisely against the prominence given to *ad nauseum* reproductions of Tarsila do Amaral’s *Abaporu*, which, produced six years too late, it’s commonly taken as an icon for the celebrations of the Week of 22 (of which, incidentally, Tarsila was not a part of), demonstrating that timeframes – such as the one the cowardly Brazilian courts try to impose on the process of acknowledging the lands of native peoples – follow double standards or, as the wise Brazilian folk adage keenly explains: two weights, two measures.

While genocidal outlooks defend that, despite the emancipatory citizenship project contained in it, the Brazilian Constitution's date of enactment (1988) should be taken as the marker for a timeframe, historiographies and epistemicidal pedagogies continue to inadvertently spawn endless reinterpretations of Amaral's violent and monster-like representation of native-people (the *Abaporu*) before the eyes of our school-age children, as the utopic Brazil – whose peoples and cultures many believe to have inspired Thomas Morus' *Utopia* (1516) – daily flaunt its failures and reversals.

It's never too late to recall: this is not a new development and, on December 22, 1988, three months after the Constitution was enacted, environmentalist Chico Mendes was murdered in Acre with a single rifle shot, gorily rubbing on society's face that the "the Rule of Law failed", as recently stated by lawyer Eloy Terena in reference to the killing of Vitor Guarani Kaiowa and the wounding of many relatives in a massacre conducted by the Military Police following the murder of activists Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira, in the Amazon.

Thus, to Ismael Monticelli, in 2022 it becomes mandatory to desecrate Brazil: to criticize and even mock its project of civilization, beauty, tropicality, pacifism, colors, myths, its modern art, artist and, therefore, also mock himself.

Although we live in the age of memes and, inescapably, there is a lot of lampooning in the critics Monticelli brings forth, beyond the provocation that gives origin to the cast of works here gathered – whose formal and visual structure emulates the canonic *Anthropophagic* phase of Tarsila do Amaral's work, devised the late 1920's, as well as making a comment on Maria Martins' work -, we find ourselves before not a festive irony, but an overwhelmingly nihilistic one, that even mistrusts the utopia of a fresh start, as sung by Caetano: "I thought that we'd start over/ / but I guess I was wrong/ once there were parking lots/ now it's a peaceful oasis/ you got it, you got it".

Organized as an spatial narrative whose darkness guides us through a drama in three acts, experimenting with the many triads that structure the Judeo-Christian imaginary – heaven/purgatory/hell, father/son/holy ghost, beginning/middle/end -, Ismael's exhibition hijacks Amaral's political-aesthetical constructions to craft a garden, a large Eden whose fabled social harmony is, in its turn, disrupted by a bloodthirsty, carnivorous bestiary that devours others and itself amidst the volumetrically cohesive and chromatically shaded setting found in her works.

The Rio Grande do Sul-born artist's gesture, therefore, emulates the work of the artist that came from a landholding family to fracture, from the inside, its appealing ideology, on whose bosom the abyssal social and ethnical/racial inequalities of Brazil were depicted as natural: the flowering of peoples, hovels, and crafts as if they were mangos, avocados or *sapotis*.

His strategy consists of not only inserting beasts and wild creatures into the *Tarsila*-esque landscapes, but, mainly, do it from the Medieval aesthetic perspective by means of the direct appropriation of images such as the ones on the *Aberdeen Bestiary* (England, 1200), and aspects such as the gilding of the surface and the writing, forging an imaginary that is simultaneously modern and medieval.

With the double aesthetic historicity of his paintings – that are, in fact, the first in his trajectory -, Ismael Monticelli's interest does not lie in forging, into them, an a-historical feeling of "time standing still", but effectively bestows them with a strangeness by means of anachronism. With this friction with the medieval, the artist disturbs the modernist imaginary that is so familiar to us and that, recently, was recalled by the (bi)centennial of the Independence and the Week of 22. In doing it, he pokes at the current historicist mood with its flowery fabulation, reminding us how fictional is the horizon that supposes itself to be, like Brazil, as independent as it is modern.

Besides the extravagant aesthetic of the paintings, the artist causes heaven and hell to converge in them, making the cosmo-theological dichotomies ambiguous as their dystopian dimension is confirmed by the sentences that surround the paintings of emblematic nature – presages, prophecies, plagues, conjurations, confessions, warnings.

Extracted from books or narratives considered to be dystopian and juxtaposed with scenes that are part of the drama of *What floats, floats in chaos*, the sentences become a kind of interpretative text, suggesting a political and moral atmosphere that, following the scribing in the stairway that read "when lightning speaks, it says darkness" (George Steiner), leads us to the gallery's third floor.

On the third floor, the paradisiacal pictorial spring is seen infected by thorny snakes that coil around themselves to offer a nest to the eggs that abound throughout the space and that, in turn, emulate a certain archetypal drama that can be glimpsed in Maria Martins' work, thus contrasting – aesthetically and politically – with the two iconic artists.

Serenaded by Caetano Veloso singing (*Nothing but*) *Flowers*, at the center of the installation, as if at an altar, a sullen golden baby spins, in a foetal position, over a snakely ornated pedestal. Its continuous counterclockwise movement goes hand in hand with the spiralling turning of time, evoking pregnancy itself, or the intermission that is necessary to hatch, under the heat of the sun or of gunpowder, what is to be.

Lullabied by the verses "From the age of the dinosaurs / Cars have run on gasoline / Where, where have they gone? / Now, it's nothing but flowers", the baby seems destined to be born going 'round and 'round temporality, searching for a past that cannot be lived by him, but that has already been nostalgically taught as an ideal to be rescued.

This is an allegory to the production of primitivistic fantasies that, as a cycle, frequently befall the arts with an uncontrollable desire for that which supposedly took place before our current state of affair. Easy preys to the evolutionism over which art history was built along with its deranged hypothesis of a continuous overcoming between artists, periods, places, and movements, we're steeped into a specific kind of salvation-inspired longing: which expects, from an Other situated in another time-space, our own salvation.

While hijacking Tarsila and Martins' modernist imaginary – which precipitates, furthermore, a closer look at gender issues in Brazilian Art -, Monticelli's show underlines the fantasies of our own modernity and throws them against the now: a time increasingly interpreted in the light of the Anthropocene.

This concept, due to its environmentally implied, and even apocalyptic, dimension, seems to rekindle a few primitivisms that, in the Brazilian case, once fabled the forest and its native peoples as sources of hope from whose strength the future would be erected, as exemplified by Oswald de Andrade's ideas, which, from an native perspective, envisions a civilizational future based on matriarchy and the abolition of property, among other aspects he believed would aid our diseased occidentalized societies.

It is precisely from Oswald, author of the *Anthropophagic Manifest* (1928) and married to Tarsila do Amaral – who gifted him with her infamous *Abaporu*, the title for the show. From the text *The march of utopias* (1953), the expression emerges at the bosom of his (self)criticism to primitivism, which he acknowledges as a symptom of the hegemony of the "adult, white, civilized male" who, back in the 19th century, had not "heeded Marx's prophetic roars, Nietzsche's new sun, and Freud's outer abysses". For Oswald, these and other epistemological and political movements "would lead, little by

little, to white demoralization” and, with it, the understanding that all primitivisms are a perverse, fetishist fantasy of those who imagined themselves to be on the opposite pole of the dichotomic equation: who considered themselves to be “civilized”.

And so, Oswald acknowledged that the Anthropophagy he himself had coordinated with various partners beginning at the late 1920’s was equally a symptom of a supremacist whiteness whose utopias are an authoritative civilization project: “and what were the various forms of what we call “fascism” if not also mass movements and authentic utopic movement? (...) Who could deny that Mussolini and Hitler, as abominable as they might have been, dragged behind them the people’s desperate mass? And what were these volcanic layers but the enormous primitivist residues, deliberately left behind, by the “superior and distinguished” classes who alone enjoyed the benefits of capitalism? (...) Anthropophagy, yes. Anthropophagy could have only one solution: Hitler! (...) They (the anthropophagites) sang of the technical barbarian! What is Hitler but a technical barbarian?”

Therefore, Andrade concluded that the authoritarianism seen in that half of a century (that, today, is once again epidemic in the world) was implied in the primitivist perspectives that “for not taking the conviction of their primitive souls to their ultimate consequences” – that is, for not having dismantled the primitive/civilized, I/Other, etc. binominal, infringing their own civilizing fiction – ended up producing a “reaction, raging pincers”: indignant, collective furies of “the masses”, outraged for having been “deliberately left behind as primitivist residues”. In the end of his argument, Andrade enigmatically states that *What floats, floats in chaos*.

The disorder we experience daily, the one that is also expressed by this country’s presidency and the state’s racist violence, is probably one of the traces of this civilizational supremacy process based on the Other’s primitivizing.

Perhaps what still floats, hovers, or sustains itself in this chaos should be, effectively, desecrated, devoured, destroyed. So that hell ceases to exist for the 99% of the population that unequally share the remaining 60% of the cash that was not taken by society’s wealthiest 1%, urging us to desecrate heaven.

As he states in the prelude to the exhibition, whose structure mirrors the *Divine Comedy’s* (1304-1321) opening, the imaginary there gathered, in its counter-endemic, anti-pacifist monstrosity, announcing that *the emergence of a monster would be the precursing sign of events*.

However, as foretelling as the monstrosity sign might be, the Frankenstein's produced by our worlds are assemblages of their remains, their fragments. Its very existence arises from destruction, the ruin, when we come to give birth to alternatives and paths for our worlds, which won't come from the perspective of a birth, but that of a funeral: "womb and tomb. I glimpsed a baby emerging from a tomb and not a womb", asserts the prelude of Monticelli's show.

It is in that sense that the drama of *What floats, floats in chaos* imposes a grim atmosphere to the show, theatrically tailored to melancholically thwart the apology and celebration of the ephemerides amidst which we find ourselves.

From its gloomy character and the counterclockwise wise movement that magnetizes it, comes the very potency of transformation: one that is not made up of hope in the future or any kind of messianic summoning to a saving Otherness that will restore our lost paradise, but a willingness to wallow in hell to the point it deposes Eden and, consequently, its antagonistic duo: darkness.

As announced by one of Monticelli's paintings, in which, set against the landscape of Tarsila do Amaral's *Antropofagia* (1929), we find necrophagy scene – birds devouring a dead dog under the terrified gaze of other dogs – "the old forms begin to collapse".

[Text published in the context of the solo exhibition *What floats, floats in chaos*, Portas Vilaseca Gallery, Rio de Janeiro/Brazil, 2022.