

LUIZ CAMILLO OSORIO IN CONVERSATION WITH ARJAN MARTINS

Arjan, tell us a little about your training as an artist and your decision to become a painter.

My training began at Parque Lage in the 1990s. There I had classes with important teachers, such as Beth Jobim, Paulo Sérgio Duarte, Fernando Cocchiarale and João Magalhães, with whom I took practical painting classes. It was a time when many artists were exploring different media, and I didn't exactly know that I was moving in the direction of a practice that people were actually abandoning: the experience of painting. At this time my production was very plural. I produced works based on materials that I saw in the streets. I did some interventions on walls. I also did a lot of drawing, more at the time that I was leaving Parque Lage. I felt that I had to walk on my own two feet. Drawing was a kind of tool, a way of organizing my ideas. I wandered about Frei Caneca collecting materials in the street, discovering, in fact, the possibility of using these materials, which weren't necessarily available in stationery shops. Also I had no funds to visit those sophisticated stationery shops – that artist's challenge of having to think about the material, what to do, how to do it, how to produce it. As a solution I tried to make the practice more flexible, to not be a hostage to these sophisticated materials, focusing on experimentation, immersing myself in the process. In this search for material, I sometimes felt that there was other material out there, ready for a certain project. At this time, when I was drawing a lot, I was using sheets of A3 paper, school paper, which I used in my first show, at the Museum of the Republic, in 2002, with the curatorship of Fernando Cocchiarale. They were drawings in which I felt the strength of the blot and the line. I worked with a reduced palate and this struggle with formats, small formats. Painting gradually began to emerge with the paper I found in Frei Caneca. It was paper that consisted of formic sheets, and was really basic. But, at the same time, it had a very seductive colour. It was brown, and had something strange about it, a strange beauty. So I collected the sheets, placing them one on top of another, until they formed a kind of skin. And in the studio they took up a lot of space. Then somehow, starting with this question of scale, I found myself discovering this physical painting, this need for the body and the gesture: the space, the broom, the rake. I was experiencing this for some time and, somehow, one's posture in this case is different. It consisted of the medium on the floor, water colours, and a graphic element, without necessarily caring about the beginning or the end.

Historical questions from the point of view of the defeated, which is to say, the counter-factual of the official history, frequently surface in your paintings. However, at least in my case, I'm initially attracted by the pictorial power of the canvasses before wondering about the subject matter. How do you regard these two aspects of your painting, how do they define your working process?

Concerning this pictorial pungency, the fact is that there is, a priori, a plastic intention which precedes the historical question. But sometimes they are almost amalgamated. They practically move towards each other and end up being born together. Through my research, through this figurative work that I began to develop, it was with a certain naturalness that I began to

appropriate subjects which don't just concern me but also, in some way, us. At a certain moment, I bought some photos at the market at Praça XV, and on returning to the studio, I spread them out. At that time, I had some works on the go and it was then, like a flash, that the characters from these photos migrated to the works. They migrated just like people, not like Afro symbols, or like thematic elements. I wanted to paint those old ladies. Exploring the photos, I realized that there was no indication of the identity of the photographer and no reference to the people represented. These images at first received a certain honesty in relation to the colour – they were black and white. So in the first paintings they were also black and white – which was a challenge. The second challenge was to respect the anonymous identity of these people – so I hid their faces. These figures, which appear in the works, caused critics, academics and researchers to seek identities in these people, based on ethnography, etc. In those characters, I wanted to capture that atmosphere: they were old women. They seemed to be close to something that looked like a farm, nothing more than that. But these images brought me a feeling of great dignity. That was the point of the work; it was not just a matter of gender. But obviously, there was a question there that we need to talk about, which is that of the Brazilians. We're talking about a painting that comments on a large proportion of the population, who are not necessarily in places of possible opportunities. They are on the margins; they are in the street, as in those photographs. I became interested in these people. We are talking now about black people, about a social divide, about opportunities, education, ethnocide. We are talking about various layers and black people. And the layers of the Afro-descended community are emerging in my work.

After a long and arduous career, in recent years your work has been gaining recognition on the national circuit with a growing number of invitations and participations in group shows. What has it been like responding to this demand, bearing in mind the slower rhythm of your working process in the studio?

I have a tendency to enjoy the work. I need to feel it. It is not just a question of what I want to put out there but also of wanting to hear what the work has to say. I am a new artist in the market. I don't put myself in this position of having to produce so many works per year. I see no need to frenetically respond to this demand, since my work process requires time, which for me is a priority. I have a commitment to art but I don't know if I necessarily have a commitment to this urgency of the marketplace. My urgency is about doing interesting work and this has to do with my time itself and the market has to be flexible about this.

In addition to national recognition, you have also taken part in international exhibitions and done some residencies. Do you notice that your work is seen differently abroad? Is there anything that caught your attention in the international reception of your work?

I took part in the Dakar Biennale, in Senegal; I'm taking part in Ex-África at the CCBB; I took part in an artistic residency in Lagos, in Nigeria; and I'm going to Azerbaijan. I was also in Haiti; I was at the Mercosul Biennale, this year; I have work in the collection of the Pam Museum, in Miami. There was an acquisition at SP-Arte, by the Pinacoteca of São Paulo. I say this because there are people responsible for my projection, both in Brazil and abroad. Joshen Volz, of the

Pinacoteca of São Paulo, Alfons Hug, of the German Goethe Institute, Hans Ulrich Olbrist, who approached me, based on a list containing the names of 90 Brazilian artists and, wondering if there were any black artists in Brazil, had my name included as number 91. Somehow these interventions have ended up positively affecting the international perspective of my work. Obviously, supported by the national perspective, where I have important people in this regard, such as Paulo Herkenhoff and Cildo Meireles, who introduced me to Gilberto Chateaubriand, and also the investment in my artistic work, both in Brazil and abroad, by the gallery which represents me, A Gentil Carioca. Somehow, the curatorial world became curious about the subject matter that also appears in my work. Today these subjects are an agenda: reconsidering the modern project. Which has been favourable to the emergence of artists like me, Dalton Paula, Jaime Laureano, and Rosana Paulino.

How do you regard painting today and who are the artists that have most influenced your career?

I continue to regard painting with respect. It is a practice that will persist over time, even in these very plural times with so many languages. A painting has the generosity to not demand much of your time. Either you like it or you don't like it; it's as simple as that. And it also manages to be a practice that can be obtained like this, with its own accent, personality and stamp. May painting, new painters, good painters come to Brazil. What I have done is to begin a process. I don't do something that is closed, tied down, definitive – even if for some critics my art has a historic agenda. I can cite Alexandre Vogler, an artist who also comments on the Afro-Brazilian question, who has also engaged in this research in some way. “Fumacê do Descarrego” (“Discharging Fumigator”), for example, is a work that says a lot about this.