



THIAGO MARTINS DE MELO

R E S I S T A N C E

CURATED BY
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THIAGO MARTINS DE MELO

ART OF RESISTANCE

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Thiago Martins de Melo's paintings are part of a long tradition of History Paintings that depict historical, religious, mythological, allegorical, or literary subjects. History Painting was a major genre from the 17th century until the end of the 19th century, but the paintings of Martins de Melo are of his own time. He has contributed to the renewal of this kind of painting by moving it, in a very conscious way, towards a more personal position. We are no longer living in a time when History Painting is commissioned by the State or politicians to honour themselves or to represent an important event. Here, it is the artist who takes the initiative, who chooses his subjects, and who paints in the first person, in his own way. In this sense, Martins de Melo can be seen in the context of historical modern artists like Courbet, Manet and Picasso and contemporary artists like Kiefer, Immendorff and Erró, who have also revisited and transformed the History Painting with a clear intention – for the most part, very political.

It is important to note that the notion of History Painting is based on subjects and not on pictorial languages, but Martins de Melo's works have a very distinctive *écriture*, or style, based on collages with an extremely detailed accumulation of figures and objects and a heavy quotation load. The construction of his paintings, sculptures, and animated films is premeditated and rigorous. Nothing is left to chance. Before he starts a painting, the artist thoroughly researches the subject and plans how the story will be organized on the pictorial surface. He does not take a neutral approach to his subject matter, but creates an iconography where he presents his protagonists in a heroic or monstrous manner. In the act of painting, using an expressionist pictorial language, he works in an insistent and even violent manner, often very spontaneously, creating a psychological impact that awakens strong emotions within the viewer. But his artistic language is also nourished by popular arts and culture such as comics, video games, and the graphic design of promotional materials from the media world, including cinema posters.

The themes and subjects that the artist depicts, especially since 2013, are anchored in the reality of Brazilian and the wider South American society, but with a universal scope. The artist quotes and describes complex and problematic documented historical events as well as shedding light on critical issues still persist in Brazilian society. Colonialization and post-colonialization; expropriation of land and theft of resources; physical and psychological domination; exploitation of slaves; manipulation through religion; the fusion of races (Indigenous, white Western, Black African) are important issues. Overall, the paintings reveal a learned, spiritual, and politically engaged artist who tackles the history and the politics, religions, and occultisms of his country. He denounces oppression, inciting physical, mental, and spiritual resistance.

For this exhibition, presented in two parts, we have chosen paintings of great originality that we consider artistically important and significant for the development of Martins de Melo between 2013 and 2022. In the first part of the exhibition, we show paintings that denounce certain events and politics in Brazil. In the second part, we present paintings where the artist explores existential questions related to mythology and metaphysics.

DENUNCIATION

The exhibition opens with an impressive and complex sculpture-video-painting, where fire plays the main role, as in many of Martin de Melo's works. **“The burning of the temple of knowledge”**, from 2021, refers to the devastation by fire of the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro in 2018, which had the fifth largest archaeological collection in the world. The work is topped by a timeless two-headed couple: Dom Pedro II, Emperor of Brazil and founder of the museum, and Luzia, the fossilized skull of the earliest known woman in the Americas. Egyptian and Andean mummies, fossils and skeletons of dinosaurs, Asian, Mediterranean, Native American artifacts, and many other objects destroyed by the fire are represented on the surface of the canvas. However, more generally, the painting alludes to the burning of books and objects in history considered heretical and subversive. It denounces the falsification of history and the destruction of knowledge in the attempt to control citizens.¹

Three large-format paintings, **“Stairway of the decapitated”**, from 2019, **“Tupinambás, Léguas and Nagôs guide the liberation of Pindorama from the claws of the Mammon's chimera”**, and **“Rebis mestiza crowns the staircase of the indigent martyrs”**, set the tone for the first part of the exhibition. The two last ones were executed in 2013, a pivotal year in

¹ The artist wrote in an email to the author: “This work was logically motivated by the fire of the National Museum, which took place three years after Dilma Rousseff's parliamentary coup, but above all because of what lies behind this tragedy. It occurred due to a drop in investment in cultural public policies and their mechanisms. Cuts to education and culture deepened in the right-wing administrations of Temer and Bolsonaro. The National Museum, now in recovery, has been the victim and the greatest symbol of this project to dismantle culture and education in Brazil.”

the artist's career, when he moved away from an introspective and psychoanalytical vision to work on themes that he qualifies as "ethnic-social catharsis". These paintings are very intense, with an accumulation of figures and historical facts that show, from different angles, a state of continual conflict and violence, where the artist associates oppression of the natives with important liberating figures. The world of make-believe and spiritism combines with the presence of the artist, who takes part in the action at the same time as telling the story. These are recurrent ingredients in his storytelling about Brazil. The paintings are largely anachronical, mixing figures from different times and spaces, real and supranatural.

The compositions of the three paintings are arranged in a similar structure around a central motif: a column of fire, and staircases, framed by layers of superposed images, micro-narratives that depict political corruption, aggression, and violence of the dominant classes. But there is also a clear resistance in these paintings exerted by the oppressed people, who often ally themselves with divine and spiritual entities.

In the first, "**Tupinambás, Léguas and Nagôs guide the liberation of Pindorama from the claws of the Mammon's chimera**" (520 x 360 cm), three ancestral figures and deities of the Brazilian people guide the fall of a certain system of power: the relationship between the state and financial capital. The Léguas are ancestral voodoo spirits from West Africa that came to Brazil to protect their spiritual children enslaved to work on the cotton farms of Maranhão. Today they are venerated in the Amazon and in the Northeast region. One of the artist's spiritual guides is Tereza Légua, one of the members of this family. The Tupinambás make up the largest Brazilian Indigenous nation. Their descendants still inhabit the Brazilian coast from the north to the southeast of the country. They were known for cannibalistic rituals and many inherited Brazilian customs. The Nagôs represent the most influential African culture in Brazil. They mixed ethnically and perpetuated their customs in all aspects of Brazilian culture.

The column of fire of purification is both the main structure and a story element. At the top, a small assembly of deities, Pai Joaquim de Cachoeira, Tereza Légua, Dona Herondina, Francisco de Légua ("Chico das Entranhas"), Caboclo Sete Flechas, Caboclo Pena Branca, Cabocla Brava, Caboclo Ubirajara and Caboclo Beira-Mar, encourage and assist, physically – shooting with bows – and spiritually, in the "cleaning up" of the General assembly. In the middle of this column of fire is an appropriated allegorical sculpture of the Federation Republic and the Palace of National Congress in flames. On either side of the column of fire are overlays of scenes of violence and confrontation between the natives and police forces. At the bottom left appears the Yoruba divinity Ogum, wearing a red feathered cloak and with his anvil symbol drawn in red on his chest. We repeatedly find this divinity in the artist's works.

The Jaguar watches over the apocalyptic scenes in the painting "**Stairway of the decapitated**", 2019, (320 x 240 cm). The two eyes of the great spirit Jaguar just below the picture frame stare at the viewer from a composition made partly from a collage of

appropriated historical images executed by Marten de Vos Adriaen Collaert in Amsterdam in 1600, entitled “The invention of America”, which is symbolized by the image of the native woman on the armadillo. The artist has added an inclined cross. The jaguar is the power animal of most Indigenous peoples throughout the American continent, from north to south, a reference, according to the artist, to the concept of Native American.²

In the foreground is an appropriation of a copper engraving from a series of publications, illustrating voyages of discovery initiated by Theodore de Bry of Frankfurt in 1590 and which would continue for 54 years. The image illustrates the story of the Darien Indians, who after learning of the colonizing Spaniards’ thirst for gold, would torture any they caught by binding their arms and legs and pouring molten gold into their throats, crying: “Eat gold, Christians!”

Above it, in the centre of the painting, is an appropriation of an iconic and macabre photograph that shows the decapitated heads of Lampião (bottom) the notorious outlaw and his wife Maria Bonita (just above Lampião) and other bandits in their gang, which terrorised the rural frontier of northeastern Brazil in the 1920s and 30s. In the upper left corner is a plaque listing their names and the date on which they were killed.³ Here the artist masterfully mixes historical facts and a personal interpretation in a grotesque fiction of resistance with mysterious overtones.

In the third painting “**Rebis mestiza crowns the staircase of the indigent martyrs**” (390 x 360 cm), the story is organized around a central staircase, made of skulls and skeletons, which takes us up towards the Palace of National Congress dominated by a body with two heads – the rebis. The rebis is an alchemical concept, a divine hermaphrodite, and a reconciliation between spirit and matter, masculine and feminine. The staircase is a path strewn with discrimination, violence, and the sacrifice of the natives. However, there are also figures of resistance who have played an important role in the macabre histories of Brazil.

Going up the stairs is a man with the MST (Landless Worker Movement) flag, just below Gonçalves Dias, considered the greatest romantic poet in the Portuguese language, born, like the artist, in São Luís. His view of the native was “visionary and apocalyptic”.⁴ At the top right in front of Dias is another image appropriated by the artist, a statue of Zumbi dos Palmares, who was a hero of the Brazilian black people. A great leader, he was the liberator

2 According to the *Journal des anthropologues*, edited by the Association Française des Anthropologues: “Eduardo Viveiros de Castro proposes to highlight the point of view of Western thought with regard to Amerindian perspectivism, thus re-questioning the concepts of Culture and Nature. He tries to highlight, through the different positions that allow perspectivism, the relational modes of Amerindians and Westerners Through a complex game of thought, he leads the reader to realize that Westerners understand their relationship to each other according to one nature and several cultures, whereas Amerindians consider conversely, from a common culture and a multiplicity of natures.”

3 The artist wrote in an email to the author that “The painting is built like a cathedral based on the struggle of resistance and the massacre that shapes this structure that is believed to be sacred but precariously supported by colonial spirituality and the martyr image.”

of slaves and founder of a free black city called Palmares, which lasted for 100 years until it was destroyed by the slavers. In the center of the painting is the representation of Americas as a female over the alligator with the tupinambá mantle and with the shadow of Ogum and his arm wielding a machete behind her. It is a cloak used in the cannibalistic ritual of the tupinamba. Just above is the anvil, an attribute of Ogum, god of war and metallurgy. The painting is a testimony to the violence and brutality experienced by the natives, and their rise – almost a religious redemption – while surrounded by transformative figures of society.

The saga of violence, expropriation, and resistance continues with **“The chariot of the red flag-bearer”**, 2016 (260 x 360 cm) an allegory about opposition and ideologies in the face of the destructive advance on communal lands. This painting has a different format, but again, a totem with chainsaws and guns structures the image and divides it into two parts. On the left are scenes of confrontation between the police and the natives and a close-up of a man’s face covered with a gas mask. On the right are the heads of the natives, and below a couple making love on a mechanical bulldozer symbolizing resistance and the hereditary continuity of the people despite the devastation. Superposed on the two parts of the painting is a drawing in red of a man on a cart, the flag-bearer, a providential representation of the ideological struggle of resistance under the symbolic red colour of the anti-capitalist struggle. There is also a snake that climbs the totem, an Amazonian symbol of connection with the sinuosity of the rivers, characteristic of the hallucinatory plant ayahuasca. This transparent drawing appears like a vision from another world, a ghost, a supernatural force.

In **“War of jaguars in anaconda’s belly”**, 2021 (246 x 435 x 31 cm), again we have the large totem with its guns and chainsaws, and severed heads at the centre of the painting. Behind is a large burning building. Overall, there is a religious atmosphere. The main scene of the painting is encircled by a very large snake, which, according to the artist, symbolizes the State, a great devourer, manipulator and dominator that recruits the policemen who struggle with various tribes of natives below. Among the natives are transparent images of jaguars, the invisibles.

The two paintings that follow are quite particular in the artist’s production because they are both, each in its own way, based on appropriations of two entire paintings. It is a radical storytelling that creates a sharp dialogue between the original painting and the elements added by the artist, quotes that both subvert and extend the narration of the original image. The painting **“Ogum Xoroquê expels the devils of Caspar Plautius - for Tuíra Kayapó, Sebastião Salgado and Marighella”**, 2019 (241 x 321 x 17.5 cm) is based on the entire image of an old engraving by Caspar Plautius, an abbot of a Benedictine monastery

4 The artist wrote in an email to the author: “My favorite poem written by him is called ‘I-Juca-Pirama’ (translation from the indigenous Tupi language, it means the one who deserves – in a sense of honour – to die. He refers to being cannibalized in a ritual as a great warrior”

in Seitenstetten in Austria. “Devil Worship and Cannibalism in South America” from 1621 shows Brazil devastated by demons and interprets the ritual of the anthropophagous warrior Tupinambá as an offering to these creatures. Martins de Melo introduces other appropriated images into the narrative of the painting. First is the portrait of Ogum Xoroquê, a divinity linked to the lineage of Ogum, orisha of war and metallurgy, often syncretized with the Devil in popular Christianity in Brazil. Under the gaze of Ogum Xoroquê, is Tuíra, the protagonist of one of the episodes that marked the 1980s in Brazil. In a debate on the construction of the hydroelectric power station, at the time called Kararaô, Tuíra attacked the director of the state company in the face and the neck with a machete. The hydroelectric power station was to pass inside the Kayapó reserve, flooding part of the lands of the natives. Under Tuíra’s arm is a book, a mini manual of urban guerrilla warfare written by the revolutionary Carlos Marighella, which became a reference work for urban guerrilla movements around the world during the 1970s. It was widely read by the armed revolutionaries of Brazil and South America in the struggle against military dictatorships. Just above is an appropriated photograph by Sebastião Salgado of a poor black gold digger challenging with his hand the rifle of a Serra Pelada soldier during the military dictatorship. Once again, the artist introduces divine entities and revolutionaries who fight side by side, breaking the boundaries between the spiritual and natural world.

An engraving by Théodore de Bry, itself based on an engraving by Jean de Léry, that shows “Brazil” devastated by demons, forms the background of the painting **“The demons invade Pindorama, after Jean de Léry, Joãosinho Trinta, Tuiutí and Mangueira”**, 2019 (260 x 360 cm), a work that is part of a series entitled “Necrobrasiliiana”. The artist has coloured the entire original image red, creating an apocalyptic, demonic atmosphere while also paying tribute to carnivals. On the top, to the right, is a reference to an iconoclastic carnival parade that marked Brazilian culture: the Beija Flor parade of 1989. In the middle of the painting is a well-known image of the expropriation of Indigenous lands that occurred in March 2008 in the Amazon. At that time, the Catholic Church, represented on this occasion by the Archdiocese of Rio de Janeiro, obtained a court order prohibiting the presentation of an allegory of a black mendicant Christ who lived in the streets and dumpsters. The author of this carnival parade, Joãosinho Trinta, born in São Luís like the artist, had to comply with the court order. But instead of abandoning the project, he covered “the allegorical act” with black plastic, adding a ribbon with the phrase “Even forbidden, watch over us”. He also invited beggars, homeless people, street children, transvestites and whores, who weren’t from the samba school into the parade. Another parade represented is that of Tuiuti, here symbolized by individuals dressed in the shirts of Brazilian football fans, manipulated by the extreme right. The third reference to the carnival is a huge flag showing the face of Marielle Franco, city councilor of Rio de Janeiro, murdered in 2018, a crime that remains unsolved.

The painting, **“Américas - for Haiti, Túpac Amaru, Carlota Lukumí, EZLN and Munduruku”**, 2019, is smaller in size and has a more heterogeneous narrative structure, without the background “landscape” that ties all the elements together into a cohesive

unity. Here, juxtaposed quotations predominate and break the unity of time and space. The painting presents a nostalgic vision of South American revolutionaries, in which the artist pays tribute to his heroes. The composition is dominated by a huge sun that illuminates the sky behind a couple kissing, “the kiss of conception”, according to the artist. The woman’s long hair, amplified by the play of shadows and nuances of colours, covers a large central part of the painting like a river that flows behind a group of natives (a black African and an Indian woman with a child) who are also united by a kiss. They carry a spear with a skull-topped by a parrot. Behind them is a shadow image of a couple holding a spear with a mummified head, representing the Munduruku, for whom mummification was a tradition. The Munduruku are a people from the Brazilian Amazon who historically attacked rival territories and culturally dominated the region of the Tapajós Valley. Today, their contemporary warriors focus on ensuring the integrity of their territory, threatened by illegal gold mining activities, hydroelectric projects, and the construction of a major waterway in Tapajós.

The central scene is flanked by images of iconic South American revolutionaries. Next to the totem is a soldier holding a severed head, a quote from the famous painting “Battle for Palme Tree Hill” of 1845 by January Suchodolski.⁵ Just below is another quote from a painting by Peruvian artist Manuel Adrianzen from 2016, which shows the great Túpac Amaru II (1545–1572), who was a Peruvian revolutionary martyr and the last king of the Inca royal dynasty. He led the largest Indigenous uprising in the Americas and he still remains among the greatest symbols of postcolonial Indigenous utopia. He was executed by the Spaniards after months of pursuit following the fall of the Neo-Inca state.

Top right is a man on a horse, an appropriation of part of a photograph by Raúl Ortega of the Mexican Subcomandante Galeano, born in 1957, also known as Subcomandante Marcos. According to the artist, he represents the archetype of the Latin American revolutionary. Below is an appropriation of a statue of the Cuban revolutionary Carlota Lucumi. An enslaved Afro-Cuban woman, she was probably kidnapped in Benin when she was ten years old. She was one of the leaders of the slave rebellion in Cuba during the 19th century and was killed in 1843 during the slave rebellion against the landowners of the sugar cane plantations.

At the bottom of the painting, in the background, we can decipher images of jaguars and snakes behind the anachronistic fights between natives, former Spanish soldiers, and the Brazilian military police.⁶

5 The artist writes in an email to the author: “Haiti has a very important meaning in my vision of the insurgencies. It was the first independent nation in the Caribbean, the first Black republic in the world, and the first country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery. This country also has a strong contemporary relationship with Brazil, since Brazil was the country responsible for acting as a peacemaking force in Haiti and received the largest and most consistent exodus of Haitians in the last ten years.”

APPEASEMENT

The paintings in the second part of the exhibition are more peaceful, embodying a reflection on the origin of the world, humanity, and language, “a transition between the beast and the human”, as the artist writes. The subjects are anchored in the real and metaphysical world. The meditative narratives show subtle dialogues between reality, religion, and mythology, leaving more space for the viewer’s own interpretation. There is less action and more silence.

The painting “**First mother of the reincarnatory pit**”, 2021 (167.5 x 140 x 16.5 cm) is a representation of the first semi-human mother, who initiated the cycle of reincarnation. Here the artist continues to push the limits of figurative painting by renewing his *écriture* – his way of drawing and painting forms and figures. His use of colours and drawing style has rarely been so raw, direct, and uncompromising. On a background nuanced with cold and warm colours comes a narration drawn with a monochrome colour, white silver chrome, which invents the great narration of the first mother and the continual reincarnation of humans. On a monitor embedded in the painting, we see how it all started with her kiss before her uterus is opened by humanoids. Below is the first mother who carries within her an allegory of the blind struggle of a bestial humanity, and who puts her hand and arm in “the burning bush without being consumed”, a sign well known to Christians and other religions. Next to it, we see a stone axe and a mummified human head. The painting is a poetic saga of life and death, a continuous “renaissance” and a process of biological and cultural changes, introducing the notion of survival, belief, and spiritual presence.

There is a similar emptiness and silence within the painting “**The coming of Ogum Beira-Mar / silver thread**”, 2020, which represents one of the identities of the orisha Ogum galloping on his horse on the threatened beaches in a mythical landscape.⁷ Beira-Mar means “seaside” and he is the lord of the seventh wave of the sea. Working with the tides, he is the protector of all the seashores and receives the diverse offerings that wash up on the beaches and that he brings to Iemanjá, the orisha known as the queen of the sea. The silver thread or silver cord is what connects the physical body to the astral body and the higher self. The breaking of this thread causes “irreversible death”, according to beliefs. This work shows the mysterious and dark, visibly empty passage between the spiritual and material worlds.

6 According to the artist “It is an allegory of the Latin American utopia that refers to the past struggles of the martyrs and the hope of the future through heredity, the archetypal couple that generates the future. Life and death linked to the struggle to live freely in the native land.”

7 According to the artist, the painting represents “a phantasmagorical tunnel from the spiritual world to the material world connected by a silver thread (this is a metaphysical term, also called sutratma or antakarana life cord, which designates the vital connection of consciousness with the physical body, and which was adopted within the syncretic framework of Afro-Brazilian spiritualism”.

Martin de Melo has always played with different temporalities in his works, often fusing the past and the present. Here, the artist introduces what he defines as “cinematic temporality” to translate a metaphysical vision of Ogum Beira-Mar on a horse and the tides in the twilight, an atmosphere, and a transitory temporality, the interval between day and night.

“**Nagô-Cartesian Theater n° 2: Mangrove flower**”, 2015 (250 x 279 x 23 cm) presents the image of an enslaved man with his arms tied, merging with the horse he rides. The horse is a symbol of freedom, enjoyment, and virility, a symbolic extension of the man, who copulates with a woman of another ethnic group, counterpointing two figures on the left end: a woman and a man with three phalluses: black, indigenous and white. The narrative of the video integrated into the work shows water that gushes like urine from the two bodies. The male body has its origin in the Atlantic and the woman body in the rivers, forming a spiritual link between the two continents under the protection of the mangrove. The superposed drawing shows crabs and birds, the Guará, who get their strange red color by eating the shellfish. The mangrove can be seen as a metaphor for freedom and liberation, a land of emptiness and silence.⁸

The painting “**Nachash**”, 2022 (173 x 294 x 9 cm)⁹ depicts a serpent and a woman forming an ouroboros. The snake feeds from the hand of the female figure, its tongue a reference to language and the transmission of knowledge hidden to others. In the background is the virgin forest, the untouched, pure, and natural archetype of the Garden of Eden. The drawings of strange twisted figures also refer to mouths and speaking tongues.¹⁰

In Christianity, the serpent has long been associated with Satan, or the first wife of Adam, Lilith, who was banished from the Garden of Eden for not obeying Adam. Disguised as a serpent, she caused the fall of Adam and Eve. Here the artist turns this allegory upside-

8 The artist wrote in an email to the author: “The mangrove is a physical and spiritual territory, also called ENCANTARIA (an enchanted place, a land of the spirits who have become protective and revered entities in the syncretism of TAMBOR DE MINA (“Mina Drum”), a voodoo cult with roots in the West African coast, whose name derives from the origin of the slaves of the port of Elmina in Ghana. These slaves were called “Mina Negro” – in a very old translation – because they came from this port, despite their diverse origins. Tambor de Mina syncretizes Christian cosmology and Indigenous rituals and beliefs, a path between the sea and the river, the encounters of fresh and salt water becoming brackish. Tambor de mina, syncretic spirituality, the physical and territorial anatomy of identity and spirituality under the syncretized knowledge of peoples and ethnicities of different origins”. The mangrove route was the escape route for slaves and the marginalized because of its difficult access”.

9 “The artist wrote in an email to the author, “This work evokes the seminal act, the origin of the Western Judeo-Christian narrative. ‘Nachash’ is a word of Judeo-Christian origin and I use it in reference to its occult meaning and in agreement with the Hebrew tradition, which is “bright”, contrary to hermeneutic Christianity, which associates it with evil and a diabolical entity. Nachash is the serpent, synonymous with cunning. Nachash also means hissing (the sound a snake makes), in other words, knowledge passed through whisperings, observing signs and omens.”

10 In one of the drawings, according to the artist, “we can see a blacksmith’s pincers sticking out their tongue, allegories of the forced acquisition of knowledge that must be acquired by consciousness and not by force, at the risk of the distortion and perversion of knowledge acquired without proper understanding. Profound knowledge is transmitted in ‘whispers’ by the serpent and launched incomprehensibly as a weapon of oppression from the mouth of the human figure to imprison and oppress their equals in an eternal cycle depicted through the closed form of the composition referring to ouroboros.”

down and introduces the serpent as a sign of fertility and creativity, of continuous renewal. Furthermore, he creates a link between the serpent and the woman, between the animal and the human, through language, a metaphor for acceptance.

THE MEDIATOR

Martins de Melo could be described as a baroque painter – not in the sense of classical, illusionist Baroque, but an “expressionist baroque” where the large size and complexity of the composition, as well as the sensuality of the brushstrokes, absorb the viewer visually and emotionally into a non-linear, global reading, enigmatic and mysterious. Inside this abundance of forms and figures invented by the artist are quotations of images, more or less well known, which are juxtaposed on the surface and in the pictorial space, breaking the effects of traditional perspective and proportions between objects and figures, which are, above all, there to anchor the narrative into a known reality, often historical and political. Invented and quoted figures, objects, and landscapes are largely united by the artist’s very personal *écriture* that easily mixes the real with the surreal and gives credibility to the story in which humans and divinities coexist. What he achieves in his extraordinary painted stories is the fusion of the real and the fantastic, without any distinction or hierarchy. His characters are actors in a politico-social action as real as reality itself.

However, there is also a pictorial reality. In the encounter between subjective fiction and the materiality of the painting, the artist speaks in the first person, captivating and subjugating the viewer. In his brushstrokes we see and feel his truth, his enthusiasm, vitality and his anger. He works quickly and impulsively, even aggressively as he dives into his sensitive and painful themes and subjects. With quick gestures and more or less wet colours, he sketches environments, objects, and figures that suggest more than they show.

In Martins de Melo’s invention of a very original form of History Painting, the magic of his creation passes through an ingenious fusion of appropriated images and his invented and expressionist images of landscapes, objects, and figures. He composes his coherent and convincing narratives simultaneously in the first person and in the third person. Although the painted images as a whole are unified by the artist’s style, there is a slight discrepancy between the appropriated images and the invented images, which creates a dissonance that makes the images vibrate.

The works selected for this exhibition form a whole. They tell us stories from Brazil as well as Martins de Melo’s thoughts and reflections. He takes the viewer through his painted storytelling into the complex and multifaceted history of Brazil, referring to events that he considers to be characterized by a deep injustice. In this exhibition, he visually describes the problematic relations between the Brazilians and their historical colonizers and an unbridled

capitalism. The subjects of these paintings revolve around fundamental issues such as the rights of the natives, the struggle for land, and the violence it can cause. It is more or less a story of class struggle in the face of a “corrupt and devouring state”, first under the domination of European courts and then under savage capitalism framed by a Brazilian democracy. He also describes the extremely complex relations between the different ethnic and social groups: the colonized natives, the African slaves, the white colonizers, especially Europeans, and the great mix of races with all their cultural, religious, and spiritual differences. In his works, there is a great sense of morality.

The artist often takes as his point of departure his own state, Maranhão, and his city, São Luís, which he knows culturally and politically extremely well, before extending his subject matter to the whole of Brazil and South America. However, even though the subjects are clearly about certain situations and events in Brazil, they can be seen and understood in a broader sense. The comments and the questions that the artist raises can be taken up in all continents since they basically deal with human rights and respect for the other. These are universal subjects.

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