

*Maxwell Alexandre: Pardo é Papel (Brown is Paper)*

By Marcelo Campos, Chief curator of MAR, 2020

“Brown is Paper”, a solo exhibition by Maxwell Alexandre, is welcomed by the Rio Art Museum – MAR and by the Odeon Institute as a reaffirmation of the vocation that MAR has achieved in its seven years of existence. Face the mirror, recognize itself, listen, affirm what matters and proceed. Become. These are tasks for a Museum that puts itself in dialogue with a city and its neighborhood. What inheritances do we want to strengthen?

Strengthening, as Joice Berth explains, is one of the terms chosen by theorists in expansion of the much talked “empowerment”. Empowering is bringing to oneself and to the community, returning the tasks of reconstructing part of a society that has subordinated, relegated to the margins, oppressed, enslaved. Therefore, it remains for us to instrumentalize emancipation, which Maxwell’s production seeks to do, affirm the aesthetic and political powers of everyday gestures that can resonate with the Rio Art Museum and, never, be co-opted. Vibrate together, we highlight. The meeting between Maxwell Alexandre and MAR negotiates certain terms of this attempt to a consonance, a museum aimed at a wide audience that has in the exchange with the city, in the dialogue between art and culture, its pillars of support.

Maxwell Alexandre, a young painter from Rio de Janeiro, resident of Rocinha, elaborates a reflection on a color, a fact that is more than recurrent in the history of art, from Robert Rymann to Barnett Newmann, and sees in the form and the color elements of his own language. However, here, the “brown” is re-signified by the artist, taking us to other directions. When producing self-portraits on brown paper, MW, the acronym used by the artist, he realizes that was also facing a political act: painting black bodies on paper, in whose type, “brown”, also characterized the racialized distinctive. With that, the stigmas are assumed and reversed. The color of black skin, confused with the color of the paper, returns as a condition of resistance, as a reaction: “brown is paper”. Thus, art and culture, form and subjectivity are brought together in return to concepts and prejudices.

The black people and the portrait constitute an important chapter in the history of representation and ethnic representativity in Brazilian culture. The 19th century was a time when the idea of portrait was reconfigured, stimulated by the invention of cameras and the representation of non-Europeans. Brazil collected and sponsored missions and naturalistic trips to register both the peculiarities of tropical nature, as well as peoples and individuals who lived in cities and forests. Fetishizations of all kinds were produced on postcards and boards that traveled the world. The city of Rio de Janeiro, in particular, was featured in prints by Jean Baptiste Debret and Johann Moritz Rugendas, that contributed to a historicity of life in the metropolis, but, on the other hand, stigmatized the anonymity of bodies, serving the court, more than the pictured ones.

The result of these ventures was to mark, stigmatize, allegorize physical traits, phenotypes that extended their penetration in the invention of a national imaginary, in the search for a fictitious brazilianess that reaches, in painting, “the Black” of Tarsila do Amaral. This ends up placing indigenous and afro-descendant populations very distant from the portrait and closer to the stigmas of an allegory. What happened was the creation of an idea of race, of a fable, as in the terms of Roberto Damatta, in which whites, blacks and indigenous people would live in a supposed “racial democracy”, marking Brazil with an expanded tropical palette. But, all of this is a fallacy, the laws against the oppression of black and indigenous populations remain backward or null. The suburbs remain as a site of the largest contingent of people of African descent. With this, the merge between ethnicity and class forges one of the strongest bases of what is called “intersectionality”, meaning, it is not enough to mark the peripheryization of voices by a single factor, since everything is deepened by the sum of intersectional oppression in which there are class, ethnicity, gender, housing among others.

In Brazilian painting, however, in this same 20th century, other voices were heard in difficult amplification - Heitor dos Prazeres, Maria Auxiliadora, Djanira. Like Maxwell Alexandre, these artists exercised, in their times, the self-proclaimed “place of speech”, painted what they lived, lived where they painted. When looking at paintings like “My dudes, my chicks, my brothers, my sisters and my dogs” from the series “Brown is Paper”, 2018, we revisit scenes such as “Morro da Providência” by Heitor dos Prazeres. We also see the black population with their work and party outfits, in urban daily life or meetings “aquilombadas” of terreiro and samba. If we go on a digression, we can also think of Maxwell’s Rocinha as the Harlem of Palmer Hayden, contemporary painter of Heitor dos Prazeres, in which the afro-descendant population of North American society was living it up splendid in a daily struggle and fun, flaunting hats, gloves and cars, working, raising children, going to church.

In Maxwell Alexandre, we see a difference, obviously a period component, his scenes are marked by a spectacular culture that boasts images as if directed for a video clip. There is a lot of cinematic marking in the epic construction of MW’s paintings: foreground and background, resounding gestures, close-ups, poses, vogues. We note scenes such as those of the cinema by Beatriz Nascimento, Spike Lee, Zozimo Bulbul, in which black icons empowered by jewelry and ornaments that often work as an anagram, bearing the initials of a name, open the door of luxury cars. In another sense, the plethora of scenes denaturalizes the place, we are not facing a landscape, but clippings, all together: disc covers, works of art, museum fires. There is no “coetaneity”, to think like Johannes Fabian, that is to say, the summary about the culture of the Other does not coincide with the life lived. We are, in Maxwell Alexandre’s painting, on the contrary, inside out, in a simultaneous present, vibrating each fact in different places, which corroborates the critical comment, the art. It is enough to join one scene to another and offer the plot, unraveling other narratives, which we will see the appetizing mix with the media, the ordinary life become instagramable, a fact that digital media do today with society.

Thinking about the portrait is a fact that Maxwell Alexandre is dedicated to. There, we see well-known characters, Elza Soares, Marielle Franco, Nina Simone, Bispo do Rosário, Dalton Paula, Antonio Obá, Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Lyz Parayzo. Characters who in different ways write the story of “empowerment”. The relationships configured by MW in the scenes of the paintings become thicker, precisely, in the game between media recognition, common scenes on TV, YouTube, memes, Facebook and Instagram, and other scenes, from Rocinha’s daily life to subversion practices of capitalist values and the excess of money signs; ostentation. Let us remember that capitalism sets up a place for surplus, the profit. However, in a cooler, disinterested and blasé layer, these excess marks walk in mild discretion as a prerogative of the invented elegance, indifference, “nonchalance”. In Maxwell Alexandre’s paintings, the excess, the luxury, the party are related to a highlighted display load, everything is in the spotlight or in the sunlight, from limousines to slabs. Maxwell Alexandre thinks global art.

“Global discoloration” is the artist’s proposal organized on the pilots at MAR. An action that captures likes on Instagram in high share. Not only in the representations present in the artist’s paintings, the use of the art system, in the paths traced by digital media, treated as “guerrilla” tactics, contribute to increasing empowerment. So, courage is shown to displace an everyday practice, done for decades on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro, and reappropriated by the favelas, in bleaching body hair. A tone of colorism that obviously has its mark on biological impossibility, but that works as a mechanism of criticism, devolution of otherness and ethnicity, location of the prejudice so that it can be reversed, thrashed, criticized and enjoyed with the same benefits, who said you can’t be blond?

In another way, the culture of Rio de Janeiro is criticized, the “gem”, a term intended for those who would, in fact, belong to the city, such as the beach, the surf, matrices of the aforementioned “nonchalance”, with a certain indifference that confers “to the natural”, biological, every privilege, but that has always been produced, invented, discolored. Why star in Marilyn Monroe’s and Ipanema girl, forgetting Beyoncé’s? Why so many white icons? In another way, it is noticed a gender fluidity, there is no longer a binary division for hair dyeing, for a long time.

The color, ultimate surface, skin effect, melanin dyeing, in nothing the judgment is justified. We are late in proclaiming the freedom of color, if brown is paper, black and white are colors of equality, never of differentiation. This needs to be shouted, in the terms of MW, “We were the ashes and now we are the fire”, we went through the fires of racism, the dismantling of culture and museums. We want “fire”! Too much fire in our lives, not for destruction, but for the reprocessing forms of affection, of places, of what Agamben called “com-division”, because dividing, only, generates social inequality, the great exercise is to divide together, “comdividing”.

However, as MW warns us, “It was not by asking for permission that we got here”, a painting in which in the foreground we have an associative image of the Holy Communion, with the central figure wearing a school uniform. Although, all the

apostles are wearing Djellaba, a clothing used in North Africa and the Middle East, without a gender division. In the upper left corner of the painting, the phrase “a world to your measure”, a great utopia of democracy and humanism. What will this measure be? The Vitruvian man was white, he was kept as a standard. A world on your measures is, first of all, emptiness, a space to fit differences.

The central scene, as in a Renaissance painting, shows a black Madonna with the naked, black boy. All the surroundings, violence, cannibalism, war, banquettes, ferocious chained African hyenas, like those registered in photographs of Nigeria, by Pieter Hugo. But a narrative connects everything, the dispute between pink and brown, along with the brown of the paper that supports, on the surface, all paints and stories, two capitalist products that play with children’s desire are the most constant presences in the exhibition: Danone and Todinho. The child who desires and sees, around him, the impossibility, the young man who, even desiring, is not content to reproduce what is there, perhaps, these, the two great verbs of “Brown is Paper”, to desire and contest.

A Museum, like MAR, by bringing the itinerary “Brown is Paper” confirms the modes, sensations and places with which we are interested in dialoguing: the school, the entertainment, the museum, the flagstone, the family room, the street, the church. All of this appears in the artist’s paintings. The Museum, then, rethinks itself, as a sign of distinction, where inclusion should be a goal. Historically a place for the display of goods, the museum that we are interested in continuing should reverse the peripheryization, transforming it into self-esteem. And, above all, accept the plethora of colors already experienced by the city that is rethinking itself every day, in the struggle, in the blue of the school uniforms and the patterns of the pools, where we linger on Sundays.

Think museum, think city.