

Maxwell Alexandre's Labyrinths of Blackness

At The Shed, New York, figurative paintings on *pardo* paper lead us to reconsider our own positions in relation to artworks and museum spaces



BY ZOË HOPKINS IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 17 NOV 22



Experiencing Maxwell Alexandre's work involves more than looking at it: we must also move through it. Installed in two parts, 'Pardo É Papel (The Glorious Victory and New Power)' at The Shed draws us into a labyrinth comprised of monumental paintings suspended from the ceiling by an apparatus of translucent string and binder clips. A former inline skater, Alexandre embeds the sport's exacting weave patterns into the gallery space, entangling visual encounter with corporeal movement. He asks us to search for the paintings with our bodies: they reveal themselves slowly, each one layered between and partially or fully obscured by another.

This exhibition architecture requires an embodied attention that activates a sense of mutual implication between ourselves and the people in Alexandre's paintings. As we move through the space, the paintings stir with a subtle movement of their own, for they are rendered not on heavy canvas, but on *papel pardo*, a brown kraft paper that is widely and cheaply available in Brazil. *Papel pardo* is as quotidian as it is charged with meaning: 'pardo' is also used to delineate a racial category that is not quite Black or white, but brown or tan like the paper. Historically, the term has been deployed by the Brazilian government to both legitimize and conceal eugenicist policies. Alexandre's paintings make it impossible to hide from this discursive violence: our encounter with the physical attributes of color and materiality are entangled with and mediated through a conceptual critique of anti-Black racialization.



Maxwell Alexandre, 'Pardo É Papel: The Glorious Victory and New Power', installation view. Courtesy: the artist and The Shed. Photograph: Adam Reich



Maxwell Alexandre, *sem título* (Untitled, 2022), latex, liquid shoe polish and acrylic on brown kraft paper. Courtesy: the artist and A Gentil Carioca; photograph: Thiago Barros.

In the first part of the exhibition, entitled 'New Power' (2019–present), museumgoers find themselves doubly implicated as the object of Alexandre's institutional critique. The series opens with *sem título (untitled)* (2022), in which Alexandre intervenes in the tradition of the wall text by writing his own on *pardo*. In the paintings that follow, he depicts spaces that resemble museums. Black figures, inspired by Alexandre's neighbors in Rocinha, the Rio favela where he was born and continues to live, stand in front of blocks of *pardo* shaped like the traditional rectangular canvas. The walls of the painted galleries they occupy are white, an homage to the white cube gallery space and a critique of the racial whiteness that empowers it. Set against the *pardo* and the white paint, the assertive presence of Black figures offers a critique of dominant presumptions about who belongs in these spaces. Though Black artists like Alexandre himself are beginning to assume a 'New Power' in the art world, these paintings draw our attention to exclusions which persist, asking us to imagine what art institutions would look like if they were to truly answer to Black audiences and artists.



Maxwell Alexandre, *Não foi pedindo licença que chegamos até aqui* (We didn't get here by apologizing, 2018), latex, grease, henna, bitumen, dye, acrylic, vinyl paint, graphite, ballpoint pen, charcoal, oil stick and chocolate drink package on brown kraft paper. 3.2 x 4.7 m. Courtesy: the artist and MAC Lyon; photograph: Blaise Adilon

'Glorious Victory', the second series in the exhibition (2017–present), deposits visitors into vibrant visual landscapes of musicality, filled with colorful patterns and dancing figures. These paintings borrow from the visual and lyrical language of three of Alexandre's favorite Brazilian rap artists: Baco Exu do Blues, BK', and Djonga. For Alexandre, incorporating their art into his own is means remaining grounded in and legible to his communities at home in Rocinha. But at the same time, art history plays in the background. In *Não foi pedindo licença que chegamos até aqui* (We didn't get here by apologizing, 2018), thirteen figures sit at a table facing forward, a clear reference to Da Vinci's last supper. This collision between the visual landscapes of rap and those of canonical art history invite us to reexamine paradigmatic understandings of the 'universal' viewer in Art History. As we weave through his mazes of *papel pardo*, we find ourselves arriving at a critical way of looking and listening.

'Pardo É Papel (The Glorious Victory and New Power)' is on view at The Shed, New York, until 8 January.

Main image: Maxwell Alexandre, *Pardo é Papel: The Glorious Victory and New Power*, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and The Shed.

Photograph: Adam Reich