

How Rollerblading Propelled Maxwell Alexandre's Art Career

An Afro-Brazilian artist from a Rio favela is having his U.S. debut at the Shed this week.



Maxwell Alexandre at the Shed, where his new show opens Oct. 26. “I never wanted to be a banner of identity of Black people in the favela, but it was my own identity.” Gui Gome

By Arthur Lubow
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With the agility and velocity of the professional in-line skater he once was, the Brazilian painter Maxwell Alexandre, 32, has soared rapidly in the art world. Growing up in the Rocinha favela of Rio de Janeiro, where he still resides, he displayed his work to the public for the first time in a group exhibition in the Rio branch of the Fortes d’Aloia & Gabriel gallery in August 2017.

Barely five years later, after solo exhibitions at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and David Zwirner Gallery in London, he is having his first North American one-man show at the Shed, the cultural center in Hudson Yards, Manhattan, through Jan. 8, 2023.

“Pardo é Papel: The Glorious Victory and New Power” displays boldly drawn, large-scale Black figures, usually garbed in urban streetwear and often with bleached blond hair. Alexandre includes references to the local culture, such as the patterns on the inflatable swimming pools, known as “Capri pools,” found in backyards and on rooftops in Rocinha. Working in a pictorial style influenced by his American predecessors, Barkley L. Hendricks and Kerry James Marshall, he favors inexpensive, readily available pigments: shoe polish, oil stick, wall paint and charcoal.

One of a group of young Black figurative artists in Brazil that includes Antonio Obá, Dalton Paula and Haniel Revignet, he works quickly on kraft paper, known as pardo, a Portuguese word that also has a racially charged meaning. In a society where darker skin has traditionally been discriminated against, Afro-Brazilians would refer to themselves as pardo — not Black but tan.

Alexandre, sporting a septum ring and dreadlocks, was in New York this summer to investigate the exhibition space at the Shed, determining how he would hang his 10.5-foot-high drawings with clips from the ceiling to create corridors. Visitors will move through these paper-bordered channels, coming face to face with lifesize drawn figures, in an installation that Alexandre regards as part of the work. With one of his studio managers, Raoni Saporetti, as interpreter, Alexandre (whose command of English was good enough for him to occasionally make corrections) discussed his life and career.

These are edited excerpts from our conversation.

ARTHUR LUBOW How did you become an artist?

MAXWELL ALEXANDRE Before starting painting, I was Rollerblading. It’s one of the hardest things to map out in my childhood, when I started feeling this itch to be different from everybody else. In Rocinha, they like soccer or bodyboarding and skateboarding. Rollerblading is not popular. I used to like video games and I played the Sonic Adventure from Dreamcast. There was a black hedgehog called Shadow and he used futuristic Rollerblade. I viewed myself as a character. Ever since I was a child, I didn’t want to just get a job and marry and have kids and go to work every day. One way to escape was video games.



“My homies, my homegirls, my brothers, my sisters and my dogs” (2017–18). “Pardo é Papel: The Glorious Victory and New Power” displays boldly drawn, large-scale Black figures in a pictorial style influenced by Barkley L. Hendricks and Kerry James Marshall. Maxwell Alexandre; via Instituto Inclusartiz and Museo de Arte de Río; Photo by Gabi Carrera

Why did you identify with Shadow?

One aspect of liking Shadow being Black is that as a little kid I wasn’t really aware of being Black. My mother used to say I was born white and got darker. When I was a kid, she said, I had straight hair and blue eyes. I started getting blacker and blacker, and the hair started to curl.

How would you describe Rocinha?

It’s a self-enclosed community. You can work, eat, shop, do everything inside Rocinha. In the past 20 years, work relationships have opened it. People would work in a restaurant in Leblon [an affluent beach neighborhood below the hillside favela] and open a Japanese restaurant in Rocinha. A maid would come back and know different ways to dress. The 12 years of left-wing government with a worker in power [the Workers’ Party ruled Brazil from 2003 until 2016] also changed things with so many policies for inclusiveness of Black people. And the internet started creating access to more universal ideas and ideals. You would hear what was new regarding feminism or racism. More and more people were speaking out.

Did these political concerns motivate you to portray Black subjects?

It was not a political choice. It was a self-portrait. I’m Black, I’m painting Black people. The first four paintings I did on pardo were self-portraits before I realized the meaning of pardo. I never wanted to be a banner of identity of Black people in the favela, but it was my own identity. After I did that, I got stuck in this category.

In what ways did Kerry James Marshall influence you?

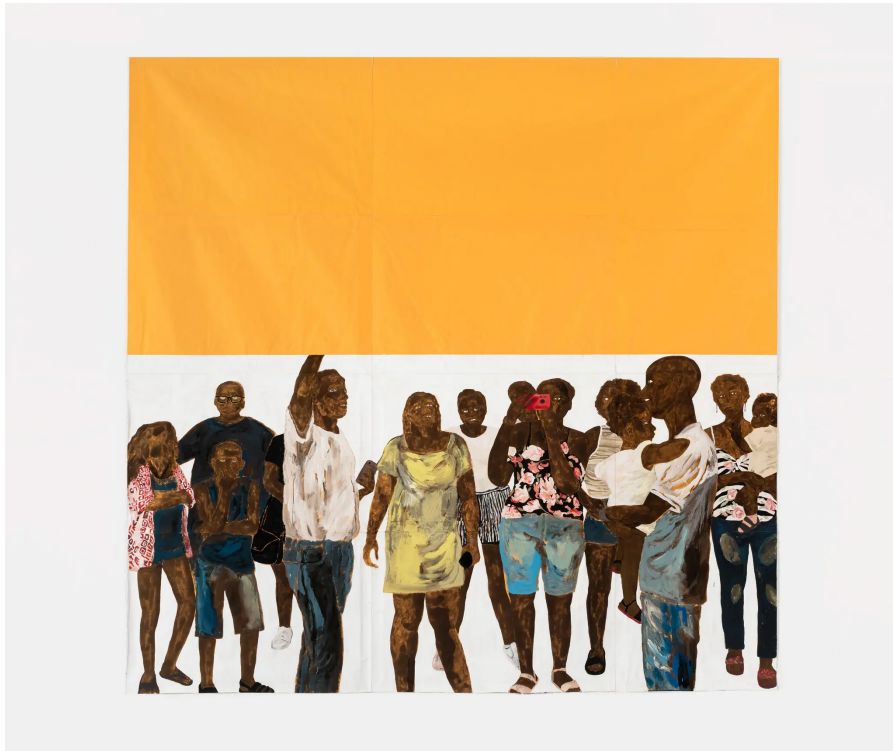
It was only through studying Kerry James’s works and talks that I realized there was an absence of representation. You would ask a Black kid to draw a person and he would draw a white person. I realized the violence of not seeing representation of the Black body in art and video games and dolls. Just by looking at his body of work, where every character is Black, it shattered something. I knew he wasn’t the first, but he was doing it with a great intensity and thoroughness, and an understanding of painting.



“Untitled” (detail), 2022, from Alexandre’s new show at the Shed, in latex, liquid shoe polish, graphite and acrylic on brown kraft paper. Maxwell Alexandre

Do you appreciate being linked with other Black figuration painters in Brazil?

I like the name “Black figuration.” It’s changing day by day, I like to think almost like a movement, and I like to be an important guy in the forefront of this movement. I can see there is a Before and After in Black figuration in Brazil. Now every young Black painter in Brazil is painting like that.



“Untitled,” from 2022, latex, bitumen, graphite and acrylic on brown kraft paper. What explains his mission to draw Black figures? “You would ask a Black kid to draw a person and he would draw a white person. I realized the violence of not seeing representation of the Black body in art and video games and dolls,” he said. Maxwell Alexandre

Is there a downside to being part of a group?

I have benefited because Black figuration is a trend, and it is good timing and has put my career forward. But I am embarrassed and uncomfortable because of all the expectations. I want to move on. On the one hand, the market is ready to receive and sell artists who deal with these subjects, because it is a gap that needs to be filled, and you are much likelier to be successful if you deal with this than if you want to discuss rhythm and emptiness. But you flatten the possibility of expression for young Black artists. You don't have white figuration. Because white people have been representing the white figure for so long, they can move on to the sublime.

Where is your work heading?

The Shed is already showing my new direction. The first paintings in the “New Power” section deal with tranquillity and being alone with my thoughts and daydreaming. In the new paintings, there are fewer bodies. Maybe it will be more pardo, more whiteness, and then there will be shoe polish covering white tranquillity and powerfulness. It becomes abstract, which I would like to do more of.