

TESTIMONY¹**By Maxwell Alexandre, 2022**

Edited by Daniel Frickmann, Isadhora Müller, Lucas Tolezano, and Raoni Azevedo
Translated by John Norman and Matthew Rinaldi

¹ This text by the artist recounts the history of the “pardo é papel” series as it has developed from exhibition to exhibition. Alexandre writes a new section for each subsequent iteration.

MUSEU DE ARTE DO RIO

In May 2017, on one of those days in the studio when you go without really knowing what to do, I painted three self-portraits on sheets of kraft paper that were lying around. The next day, when I looked at the paintings hanging on the wall, I noticed that there really was a very powerful aesthetic appeal, but it was only when I went to do the fourth painting that it hit me that I was articulating a political and conceptual act by painting Black bodies on *papel pardo*, being that, for a long time, the color “pardo” was used to conceal Blackness.²

The designation “pardo” listed on the birth certificates, résumés, and ID cards of Black people in the past was necessary in the process of redeeming—in other words, whitening—our race. But, nowadays, with more debates, and the increased awareness and grievances on the part of minorities, Black people have begun to project their voices, to understand themselves and take pride, accepting their noses, their hair, and building their self-esteem through the validation of that which they are, of themselves. This phenomenon is so strong and relevant that the term pardo has taken on a pejorative connotation within Black collectives. Telling a Black person today that they’re *moreno* or pardo can be a big problem.

Tão saudável quanto um carinho [As healthy as a caress] was the first large-scale painting I ever made, covering the entire wall of my studio with kraft paper. I did this four times, and in the end I attached everything with masking tape, forming a single, approximately 126-by-189-inch sheet.

On the occasion, I was preparing a work for the exhibition *Carpintaria para Todos* [Carpentry for all] at Carpintaria, the Rio de Janeiro branch of the gallery Fortes D’Aloia & Gabriel. The group exhibition was open to all artists on a first-come, first-serve basis until the exhibition space was completely full. The gallery’s online statement included the measurements of the gates to prevent artists from bringing works that wouldn’t be able to fit inside.

The work marked the beginning of the series “Reprovados” [“Failed”], which addresses more toxic aspects of the Black experience, like the conflict between the community and police, the decimation and incarceration of the Black population,

and the failure of the public education system.³

Though this was the first time my work came into contact with a large audience, the beginning of “Pardo é Papel” had happened right before that, when I was painting small scraps of kraft paper that I collected from fashion workshops when I was in college.⁴ Students use that material a lot in the process of creating clothing models. But “Reprovados” is bitter, and that’s why I went ahead with a painting from this series for the context at Carpintaria. I didn’t want to take a work from “Pardo é Papel” that spoke of prosperity to a renowned gallery in an upscale neighborhood in the south zone. I needed to pose an urgent problem there, and that’s why the first large format painting is *Reprovados*, but using kraft paper as a support, as a strategy in order to be able to occupy as much space as possible in the show without having to worry about the work possibly not fitting through the gallery gates, since I could bring it inside rolled up under my arm.

When I unrolled the painting inside the gallery and the organizers saw the size of it all together, at first they wanted to veto it, because they thought the work was too big and would take up a lot of space, not leaving enough room for several other artists who’d been in line earlier. But later, after taking another look, they reconsidered and chose to remove the curatorial text from the exhibition in order to make space to install my work. This painting ended up being quite successful, causing a commotion and initiating my contact with the art circuit and the art market.

Though there are distinctions in approach between the two series (“Reprovados” and “Pardo é Papel”), both have various common symbols, establishing a glossary with a number of layers and interpretations within the body of work. As a result, the narratives started taking on more complexity, and my interest in manipulating symbols and brands of status and power inside the favela—like the famous Capri pools that marked my childhood, the City of Rio de Janeiro logo, the Rio de Janeiro state flag, the Military Police shield, Danone, Toddynho, among others—was allowing me to create my own mythology from these emblematic elements in the experience of the favela and the city as a whole.⁵

Painting is a place where I can manipulate these brands, which are entities that encroach on and shape people’s lives, dictate behaviors, and invade stories and intimacies. But in the fictional field of art, they are subjected to the artist, who has the power to generate new questions simply by shifting them to the pictorial plane, assigning them a new time and space.

With this, I made use of a personal collection of photos from family albums, images from social networks, of celebrities, and even from advertising to build a lexicon that allowed me to develop real and speculative scenarios.

After the Carpintaria show, when I went back to the studio to resume the “Pardo é Papel” series, I found it pertinent to adapt this monumental painting format, to deepen the dialogue between the amount of paper used and the number of Black bodies in contemporary positions of power. I wanted density and contrast between these two pieces of information, Black bodies and brown paper, so I decided to move forward with large-format paintings.

I wanted people to feel the presence of the paper. The actual manner of installing the works helps in this regard. I wanted the tape and the rips to be evident: the fragility of the pieces was important for the poetics of the work.

Later on, I came to understand that it’s not just about painting. It’s about air, space, sound. . . . I made the decision not to present the works within a frame or any kind of rigid structure in order to emphasize the precariousness of the materials in the construction of the work. The transparency of the paper, the work that moves subtly in the environment, the large sheets that cut the space, all of these characteristics are important for the semantics of “Pardo é Papel.”

I already had a clear theme in my head, with a well-defined conceptual and formal structure. At the same time, I had been following the rap scene here in Brazil, which has grown a lot in the last four years, revealing various new talents. In this wave, three rappers have stood out and become very strong references in Brazilian hip hop: Baco Exu do Blues, from Bahia; Djonga, from Minas Gerais; and BK’, who, like me, is from Rio de Janeiro.

The music and poetry of these brothers in hip hop served to enrich and further structure my work, becoming an essential axis for thinking about the pieces. I was so inspired by the quality of the songs that I started to listen to the verses and see images. These guys were rapping about things that I was also addressing. I set out from this shared place and separated a number of verses to translate them into paintings. I think what is most relevant in all this is being able to affirm that my production is guided by Black poets whose experiences are congruent to my own. This is powerful, and it’s a paradigm break within the history of art itself, knowing that it’s common for artists, for the most part, to attempt to feed off of white European poetry to produce their work.

In addition to this affirmation, there is a strategic question in this decision to paint verses. Rap is known to be a voice of the outer-city neighborhoods. This is the kind of music that reaches the favelas and is assimilated, while painting occupies a very exclusive place of circulation within a codified, elitist, and privileged system. Here where I live, in the favela of Rocinha, contemporary art is not something of value. Most people aren’t interested in it or they don’t even know what it’s about. So painting rap verses is a way to try to bridge that gap. It’s a chance to bring my work closer to the popular interests of the community.

The first time I showed these paintings was at the Rocinha Sports Complex, where I had my first studio. I had to leave the space because of problems with the administration, so I asked for three months and scheduled a show with my latest pieces created there. It was an intense period in which I was putting in over 15 hours of work a day to produce the first 12 large pieces in the “Pardo é Papel” series.

On March 3, 2018, I offered the paintings for my tithe, a ritual in which artists symbolically present 10 percent of their production at the altar (space).⁶ The ceremony is part of a program of a church that I created in communion with other artists: A Noiva [The Bride], also known as the Igreja do Reino da Arte [Church of the Kingdom of Art].

Without production staff or institutional support, the church members and I started hanging the large sheets of paper at 8 am. At 3 pm, the time scheduled for the ceremony to begin, we were still far from assembling everything. At that point, an important question of the church was validated: the process of putting up the works within the idea of a pilgrimage or sacrifice. The members of the church, as well as the entire public who arrived there, got involved in helping set up the works and solving all types of problems.

It wasn’t an exhibition opening or vernissage for socializing and contemplating the paintings. It was a ritual in which the assembly was also part of the divine surrender. We finished putting everything up at 7 pm. The only work that didn’t get hung and remained open on the floor was *Megazord só de Power Ranger preto* [Megazord only with Black Power Rangers], which was taller than the ceiling. The building closed at 8 pm so we had just a short time to be there in communion, to witness the paintings operating together in the space, to pray and take everything down.

But still, the power of the paintings hanging there on display, floating in the environment, has stayed with me. There, it was plain to see that this was a monumental exhibition made for large museums and institutional spaces. This further reinforced my ambition to see this series as a traveling exhibition going from city to city, from museum to museum.

The tithe at the Sports Complex was remarkable, because it was the occasion when I first made contact with and later formed a partnership with A Gentil Carioca, the gallery that has been supporting and representing me ever since.

Just one year later, in March of 2019, I had the honor of having the first institutional exhibition of *Pardo é Papel* mounted at MAC Lyon (Lyon Museum of Contemporary Art) in France. The opportunity came thanks to an invitation from French curator Matthieu Lelièvre, who believed in the work when he saw a painting from the series, *Um cigarro e a vida pela janela* [A cigarette and life

through the window], occupying the entire outer wall of A Gentil Carioca's booth at SP-Arte [São Paulo's International Art Festival]. The painting was acquired by Pinacoteca de São Paulo that same day.

The show in Lyon was the beginning of the exhibition's touring, which then went to MAR (Museu de Arte do Rio). This time, I was able to count on a great partner, Frances Reynolds, a collector and patron who heads the Instituto Inclusartiz, largely responsible for the exhibition's itinerancy. For MAR, Inclusartiz brought in the company Grupo Petra Gold as an investor for the exhibition. When I painted this first phase of this series, I dreamed of this dynamic, which is why I am excited to see that the exhibition can reach other states in Brazil and around the world.

Just like in Lyon, we had some problems at MAR getting loans for works that were sold to institutions. It was frustrating to see that the set of works I created to be displayed together would be incomplete. There is a feeling of confusion common to artists who see their creations garner broad recognition, only to then lose control over their works' destination and how they are shown. I needed to figure out a way to deal with this, so I decided to re-create three of the pieces that we were unable to retrieve but that are essential to the show.

Éramos as cinzas e agora somos o fogo [We were the ashes and now we're the fire], *Um cigarro e a vida pela janela*, and *A lua quer ser preta, se pinta no eclipse* [The moon wants to be black, it paints itself in the eclipse] were re-created based on the original works for the exhibition at MAR. The idea was that these new works were entirely faithful to the previous versions, but during the process they were subjected to various updates while the same atmosphere was maintained.

The same titles were also used, but with the word *diss* tacked on at the end—"diss" being short for "disrespect" and used in the music scene to describe tracks produced by rappers to attack or argue with one another. I found it pertinent and honest with my feelings of frustration to make an assertion of the artist's creative power in response to the bureaucracies of the art game.

In addition to these three new paintings, I created another work in the series "New Power" that is an extension of "Pardo é Papel" for the exhibition at MAR. In this series, I explore the idea of the Black community inside the consecrated temples for the contemplation of art: galleries, foundations, and museums.

The favelas' and outlying urban neighborhoods' lack of interest in contemporary art is a construction of power systems. This interest is a marker of the elite and a marker of social distinction even among the rich. For those who have yachts, helicopters, mansions, and swimming pools as commonplace belongings, art becomes a reference, a way of understanding who is more sophisticated. In this sense, anyone who has a Picasso in their home and is able to understand Mark Rothko comes out on top.

In addition to financial capital, the field of contemporary art is, overall, the holder of great intellectual and symbolic capital. Having considered this factor, I understood that the reclaiming of these places is directly related to a position of power. Because it's in these spaces that history is legitimized, that narratives and the construction of images are manipulated.

Artists, gallery owners, critics, curators, historians, patrons, and collectors are the agents that control the codes in this specific field, that construct images, worlds, pasts, and futures. Art is a stockpile of culture. Drawing the Black community's attention to this field is a prophetic, uplifting strategy for taking power.

Familiarizing ourselves with the codes is a way for us to begin to occupy a crucial place in the construction of history. Today I occupy a position of power in this game as an artist who can create possible worlds that will be validated by the current system. But I know that my position is an exception to the rule. The agents who operate within this structure are almost always white.

At vernissages, Black people are mostly found serving or cleaning, even when they themselves are the subject of the exhibition. This is why it is important not only for Black artists to occupy their place of representation at a time like this but also for the community to occupy it physically, because the presence of the Black body in these spaces is political. I think that real coexistence is the most effective frontier for dismantling stereotypes, racist caricatures, and the like. Having Black people in two-dimensional paintings or any kind of visual representation is not enough.

As I was preparing the exhibition space at MAR, I visualized this painting as creating a corridor to be installed in front of a white wall, a perfect opportunity to create an experience of contemplation. At MAC Lyon, I had already included three paintings from the series "New Power." I believe this is a way to announce this subject to the audience, since my show scheduled for October at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris will focus exclusively on this series.

The exhibition's run in Rio de Janeiro was the chance to present a performance of "Pardo é Papel," with BK' and Baco Exu do Blues, for the first time. A stage was set up on the museum's pilotis for the poets to perform six tracks, with a golden Capri poolpattern painting in the background created especially for the occasion.⁷

As Baco Exu do Blues said in an interview with MAR, "It was an important night for the occupation of a space of white perspective, a meeting of Black art, something that will be seen as historic further on in time."⁸ The performance took place at the show's opening, and the publicity for it caused a commotion on social media, which brought crowds to the museum. It was there that the fulfillment of the series took place, with the whole Black community empowered, singing "Minha vez de ganhar!" (literally, "My turn to win!"), the chorus of the track "Vivos" by BK' featuring Baco.

The performance was also a way to challenge the already established structures for the format of “Pardo é Papel.” Presenting the series in a concert format was one of the ways I tested this. The articulation of these stories cannot be attached to one single medium. By navigating this idea, I understood that my aim was to encourage appreciation and recognition of the series’ content: empowered Black people who are bold, showing off, winning.

I was interested in this issue before I decided to migrate the narratives of “Pardo é Papel” to the canvas, in order to move away from paper. Painting had to be identified as part of the series, even if it were painted on a stone. To come to this place, I needed to make a radical decision: to destroy what is traditional about this series—the paper—resorting instead to what is most traditional in painting—the canvas.

The only canvas in the exhibition at MAR is also a central testimony to this research; the untitled work is a polyptych of the “Golden Shower” series, an offshoot of “Pardo é Papel” with urine as its main subject.

The “Golden Shower” series title comes from the expression used to describe the act of urinating on one’s partner during sexual intercourse. The expression made headlines in Brazil in 2019 when [Jair] Bolsonaro, the country’s current president, tweeted a video of two people practicing the act on the street during Carnival, then went back to ask: “What’s a golden shower?” It was a huge scandal, inspiring me to tackle the subject in a specific painting, which ended up inspiring an entire series.

The narratives addressed make room for eschatological interpretations. Knowing that the subject of the Black body is complex in any situation, especially when it comes to a practice considered unclean and impure, “Golden Shower” presents itself as a place of affirmation of the freedom to be what you want to be, to do what you want to do, regardless of the stigmas attributed to Black bodies.

The *Golden Shower* canvas was the only work we were able to retrieve from a private collection for this exhibition, though I created 12 more paintings with this theme for an installation I made for A Gentil Carioca’s booth at Art Basel in Switzerland (2019). I wrapped the entire space with kraft paper and exhibited paintings on canvas, doors, and paper in dialogue with works by other artists represented by the gallery. The booth stood out that year and was ranked number one at the fair by some critics.

In both form and content, the development of the series and its extensions deal intensely with liberation/freedom. That’s why I wanted to take the “Golden Shower” works to Art Basel, the biggest art fair in the world, a relevant spotlight for this kind of confrontation and discussion.

One action I did for the exhibition at MAR was *Descoloração Global* [Global

bleaching], in which I hired hairdressers and bought Blondor for people to bleach their hair. In the favelas, this is always an occasion for people to get together, to make a mess. In my studio, there have been several occasions when we have worked there with Blondor, bleaching our hair. Officially, this event happened on two other occasions, once in 2018 for *Batismo nas águas* [Water baptism]—my first solo exhibition—at the intersection of Rua Gonçalves Ledo and Rua Luís de Camões in downtown Rio, where the A Gentil Carioca gallery is located, and another in December of 2019, in Rocinha, which was a New Year’s Eve ritual.

I’ve been bleaching my hair blond since 2013. I used to want to bleach my hair when I was a kid, because this is a style in favela culture, but my mother never allowed me. She said it was something “good-fornothings” do. Many drug dealers bleach their hair, so this aesthetic was associated with the gang lifestyle. In this context, if you’re Black and you dye your hair blond, you end up attracting the attention of the police, racists, and all kinds of prejudice. This changed a lot when celebrities like Chris Brown, Kanye West, Pharrell, Jaden Smith, and, in Brazil, Belo and even Neymar adopted this style. After they assumed this aesthetic, the fashion world quickly absorbed it.

For me, *Descoloração Global* is also a commentary on freedom, of being able to be what we want to be. It’s an affirmation of rebelliousness and empowerment in the face of any discreet or indiscreet structure for imprisonment of the Black body. One big reference that I’ve had ever since I was little and which helps me to legitimize this aesthetic is the famous anime *Dragon Ball Z*, which marked my generation. The characters had Black hair that would turn blond as they reached higher levels and became Super Saiyans, increasing their superpowers.

IBERÊ FOUNDATION

The third stop for the *Pardo é Papel* show was the city of Porto Alegre. Emilio Kalil, director of the Iberê Foundation, was at the inauguration at MAR and got excited about the exhibition. This is why Frances Reynolds and her team at Instituto Inclusartiz, responsible for the exhibition’s travel schedule, took the generous initiative of working with Emilio to determine that the next Pardo é Papel show would be at the Foundation. Inclusartiz got support from the Petra Gold Group to sponsor this endeavor, just like at MAR. Since the beginning of the year, everything was aligned for the exhibition to take place, but we were surprised by the Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic destabilized the touring plans.

With the agenda on hold and everyone anxious, not knowing what would happen in the near future, we decided to take down the MAR show early. It was a disappointment for those who had intended to visit over those last few days, but a great prospect with the realization of the exhibition’s run in Rio Grande do Sul, since taking down the show early offered more security for the next exhibition. I say this because there is a protocol for minimally preserving the works, which

requires that they be stored for a considerable time before being installed again, due to the acidity and fragility of the paper. Even with this margin of time for the work to settle, the pandemic hindered a safe process of maintenance on the oldest paintings, from 2017 and 2018, which were really in need of repairs. This group of works had to be left out of the new exhibition. In any case, it would not have been possible to include all the works, considering the physical properties of the new exhibition space in relation to the others where the show had been held previously. These factors were coauthors of the curatorship, which allowed us to select just 11 paintings. But one novelty of the *Pardo é Papel* run in Porto Alegre consisted in a video work: a recording of the *Pardo é Papel* performance with BK' and Baco Exu do Blues.

TOMIE OHTAKE INSTITUTE

Pardo é Papel's fourth stop was at the Tomie Ohtake Institute in São Paulo. The public's expectations seemed high due to the success of the show's previous runs and all the content generated to promote it, which would continue to travel and gain more and more strength. São Paulo has one of the hottest cultural circuits in the country, and I had been eagerly waiting for the exhibition to arrive in the city.

Some panels in the series had already been shown in São Paulo: *Éramos as cinzas e agora somos o fogo* was part of the exhibition *Afro-Atlantic Stories* at MASP [Museu de Arte de São Paulo] in 2018, and *Um cigarro e a vida pela janela* was displayed at SP-Arte, also in 2018. The latter work was also found in the current exhibition of the Pinacoteca de São Paulo's collection. They were isolated appearances. But this time, the audience would have a chance to see the counterparts of these works together, gathered for the first time in the city.

For this occasion, I quadrupled the size of the untitled work, with the gold Capri pool pattern, to circumscribe part of the exhibition space. In addition, I chose not to show the video of the performance and to reinsert one of the most important paintings in the whole series, the piece *Se eu fosse você olhava pra mim de novo* [If I were you I'd look at me again], which I installed on its own in one part of the room. For this chapter, we were still going strong, with Instituto Inclusartiz and Petra Gold once again financing and executing this undertaking.

THE SHED

The show's run in Porto Alegre was marked by the reopening of the country's cultural scene following the hiatus brought on by the first phase of the pandemic. When it traveled to Tomie Ohtake Institute in São Paulo, however, *Pardo é Papel* showed us the fragility of the policies for relaxing the social isolation rules and other measures in an attempt to return to normal life. That instability threatened to shut down the exhibition at Tomie Ohtake Institute multiple times. I had been planning another staging of the *Pardo é Papel* performance, this time with the three

poets BK', Baco Exu do Blues, and Djonga. We would have liked to have done it with a large crowd as we had in Rio de Janeiro at MAR. Instead, the alternative would be to hold a livestream, which had become somewhat of a communication fad during the quarantine. We held the performance without a physical audience, broadcasting it live through social networks. I had already fine-tuned everything with the rappers for this activation to take place, but the crisis was worsening. Someone had even died on the Ohtake Institute's team: one of the security guards had passed away from Covid-19. That situation was felt by everyone, and so the performance did not take place, because even without a physical audience we would still need to involve many people in the activation's logistics and production.

Despite the worsening of the crisis, the show continued to the end, with normal visitation while maintaining all protocols for controlling the virus. In the last week of the show, I gathered eight people, all of them Black from São Paulo, to carry out an activation that I called *Rolezinho*, inspired by a grassroots movement of the same name, which arose in around 2013, where young people, mostly from the city's outskirts, used social networks to organize gatherings at upscale places in the city, such as prominent public squares and shopping malls.

Within my practice, *Rolezinho* has a similar connotation: to occupy, circulate, and hang out in places where certain social groups are not welcome due to the way they dress, the way they talk; in short, due to their ethos. The potential of this activation lies in gathering the largest number of people possible, since the action is about generating strangeness and uneasiness. In the context of the pandemic, however, I needed to gather a minimal number of people—in accordance with established safety protocols—that would still generate the impact arising from a group of Black people, circulating and affirming their presence along the façade of an art institution and in the hallways, bathrooms, libraries, and galleries of that space. I chose the members of the activation group based on images I found on Instagram, photos taken at my exhibition. The *Rolezinho* that took place on June 26, 2021, was an utterly new sort of activation in the course of the *Pardo é Papel* traveling exhibitions.

On December 18, 2021, the second Thailand Biennale was held, in which I was invited to participate by the event's chief curator, Yuko Hasegawa, who, through the intermediation of Frances Reynolds, had seen *Pardo é Papel* at its first stop in Lyon in 2019. That led to my first significant presence on the Asian circuit: the exhibition of *Pardo é Papel*—albeit in a reduced form, with fewer works—traveled to Thailand. This was the fifth stop on the tour.

The invitation to show at The Shed arose through the recommendation of curator and critic Hans Ulrich Obrist, who had demonstrated a desire to work with me since the first time we met at Art Basel in June 2019. Frances Reynolds helped to set up the meeting. Since then, Hans and I had collaborated on some smaller projects until the official letter from The Shed arrived in February 2020. From then on, my team and I have spoken more specifically with the curator responsible for

the exhibition, Alessandra Gómez.

While the show was traveling, I made two more significant releases in the series. The first was in London, at David Zwirner Gallery in 2020–21, where I showed nine brand-new “Pardo é Papel” works. Although it did not have a precise connection with the traveling show, that release was decisive for me to rethink, classify, and rename the exhibition that was traveling. The production of “Pardo é Papel” works for David Zwirner had a density and impact very similar to that of the works I created in 2017 and 2018, which are now traveling from institution to institution. The context and conditions were therefore completely different. How, then, can these two periods be distinguished without confusing what belongs to the traveling exhibition and what was shown in London?

To understand this question, I refer to part of the testimony I wrote on that occasion:

[. . .] The intersection between visual arts and music in my practice naturally makes me establish relationships between the two fields beyond just painting song lyrics. I began to be interested, for example, in how the musicians organize their works based on a system composed of albums, mixtapes, EPs, and singles. Normally albums are constructed within a limited period of time, covering a moment of research by a musician and often built around a specific theme or concept. While mixtapes are more random combinations of contents, EPs present works that are interlinked yet concise, with fewer tracks. The single is a song that is released separately from these divisions. Even though the single might otherwise fit into one of these categories, it is released on its own as a way of promoting the artist, calling attention to another, larger project, more strategic in the sense of presenting a potential that is about to arrive, to engage the public. Meanwhile, in painting, the more traditional organization takes place based on series, which divides the artist’s production more by motifs/themes than by periods.

This reflection appeared to me precisely at the moment when I was beginning to prepare *Pardo é Papel*: Close a door to open a window, my next solo show for the David Zwirner Gallery in London. The show was designed to occupy the gallery’s two floors with nine large-format paintings, including three diptychs and one triptych. Due to the density of the work and subjects articulated in the show, I sought a way to separate these paintings into a delineated collection, and it was at this moment that the concept of the album arose as a way of organizing them.

This need that I felt to create a separation by periods led me to look back on my production and to retroactively classify it. The first moment of the “Pardo é Papel” series took place in late 2017 and early 2018, in connection with a symbolic ritual of A Igreja do Reino da Arte—A Noiva (The Church of the Kingdom of Art—The Bride), where I presented the first 12 large sheets of paper shown previously at the Rocinha Sports Complex, where I had my first studio. One year later, this vision

was already a reality, and the show *Pardo é Papel* was opened in March 2019 at MAC Lyon in France. This context is summarized in the painting *A vitória gloriosa* [The glorious victory], which became a sort of emblematic banner and the cover of the first album.

Now, constructing this second album to be released abroad, I decided to insert lyrics from another three international artists of whom I am a great fan and who had already been inspiring “Pardo é Papel” aesthetically—namely, Frank Ocean, Solange, and Tyler, the Creator. The exhibition’s title, Close a door to open a window, is after the painting I made as a translation of this line from the lyrics of the track “New Magic Wand” from Igor, Tyler’s most recent album. This is the cover of this new moment with “Pardo é Papel.” [. . .]

The second significant release was that of the subseries “New Power,” which had three simultaneous openings: a main show at the Palais de Tokyo and two at A Gentil Carioca in its galleries in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Even though the series was only definitively launched in 2021, I had already included at least one work from “New Power” at previous stops of *Pardo é Papel*, a sort of introduction to the public. The following passage presents questions and thoughts regarding that launch:

[. . .] After a little more than one year developing the research, concept, and sketches for this project, on April 5 we began the first execution of paintings in the new studio. As the series is monothematic (figures of Black people in exhibition spaces, such as museums, galleries, and foundations, in relation to contemporary art, mainly the contemplation of painting), I look at these works as being akin to the practice of still-life painting, where objects are articulated on a table to paint their variations, with the aim of understanding the subtleties of those objects of study. In “New Power” I chose precisely to work in this way, and the investigation became so prolific that I did not concern myself with conceiving an a priori exhibition design. The idea was to work with density and to push the subject matter to exhaustion, for me to later look at the work as a whole, and only then begin to carefully curate what would enter the exhibition. Thus, the release and presentation of this series could take place in a basic way, at its genesis, while also being as integral as possible. I created more than 100 new works, not counting the unfinished sketches. So many works were made that there were enough to hold at least two more shows in the years to come.

It was while thinking about this, together with the opening of a new space of A Gentil Carioca gallery in São Paulo, that I had the idea of occupying not only that new setting, but also the old traditional space in Rio de Janeiro, with the works that did not enter the main show in Paris at the Palais de Tokyo. This same insight also led me to a conceptual approach suited precisely to this period of global pandemic we are all experiencing, since getting together for a meeting or traveling is something that must be carefully planned and considered. The simultaneous opening of the same exhibition in three different places around the world is a poetic solution for these concerns, since with this format the audience is divided

in the three locations for the three shows. Coupled with this, there is the further possibility of bringing a piece from Paris—the center of the world, where the main show is to take place—to downtown Rio de Janeiro, where the access to and the possibility of contact with the periphery, the main public to which my work refers, are leveraged. This last point is very special for me.

Besides the three exhibitions produced, I also planned some insertions of “New Power” in art fairs as a part of this large release of the series. I began with three panels that were shown at A Gentil Carioca’s stall for the return of the largest art fair in the circuit, Art Basel in Switzerland, in October.

November also saw the return of the largest art fair in Latin America, SP Arte, in São Paulo, where A Gentil Carioca installed four never-before-shown panels displayed each day of the fair. The continuation of these installations that lend support to the launching of the exhibition in Paris, Rio, and São Paulo, will take place in December at Art Basel Miami Beach with four more new panels: three installed at the gallery’s stall during the days of the fair and one main panel that will be available at the Meridians, a special section of large-scale art projects inspired by the Unlimited section of Art Basel Switzerland, which is being opened at this edition of the fair in the United States. [. . .]

When the exhibition at The Shed was confirmed, I considered this a good opportunity to combine two periods of the “Pardo é Papel” series: the initial phase, “The Glorious Victory,” and the more recent development, “New Power.” This combination reveals the evolution of this body of work over the last five years, creating parallels and tensions between the two. As part of “Pardo é Papel,” both “The Glorious Victory” and “New Power” elaborate different aspects of the central themes of the series: portraits and prophecies of a future of blessings, glory, and abundance for the Black community.

“The Glorious Victory” attempts this by painting the more material and earthly forms of power and access: clothes, jewelry, cars, jets, food, parties. It also exalts friends, famous personalities, and the careers often associated with the rise of Black people in Brazil, such as music and soccer. Ostentation in the urban outskirts is a symbol of power that recurrently incites the imagination; it is a direct way of showing that it is possible to achieve, that money and Black skin can go well together, as stated by Baco Exu do Blues. Ostentation is also a strong characteristic of Brazilian funk and rap. It is cultural.

During that first phase, while making reference to those languages, a concern arose that became central in my practice: to create works and narratives that bring the Black public to the museums and spaces of contemporary art.

The concretization of this aim was the genesis of “New Power,” which, although it was only officially released years later, already existed back then, in the first exhibitions of “Pardo é Papel,” as indicated by the massive presence of Black

people in a space that was not designed to host them. Many of the visitors to my exhibitions were in an environment of contemporary art for the first time. Contemplating the works of those who were enjoying a new sort of inclusion—that is, portrayed in paintings—they felt proud and validated.

Thus, each of the series contains—and is simultaneously contained in—the other. By talking about the many forms of Black empowerment and pride, “The Glorious Victory” attracts these people to the universe of art, while “New Power” mirrors and reflects on this movement. Consequently, while “New Power” is a narrow cross section focused on one of the many careers of upward mobility contained in “The Glorious Victory,” it is also a broadened viewpoint, a meta-approach, gaining a more distanced view and enlarging the perspective on the system into which its works are inserted.

On the other hand, as in my entire body of work, “New Power” involves an aspect of self-portraiture, where I deal with the particular universe that allowed me to get to this point. In these works, the color pardo [a term for “brown,” used in Brazilian society to gloss over negritude] often appears in large rectangular formats, in a sort of self-reference to the works of “Pardo é Papel.” From a biographical perspective, the series talks about how I, upon arriving at a position of success, looked around and found myself in a world dominated almost exclusively by white people. The series is a study and mapping of the contradictions, pitfalls, and opportunities in this field so that more Black people can infiltrate it, not only as spectators or subjects in the works but also as agents in positions of power: curators, artists, collectors, directors, funders, gallerists, and so on.

But it is moreover necessary to go beyond this, and so “New Power” deepens and imagines the future of this plan in which “The Glorious Victory” took the first steps, surpassing the more material and worldly forms of access—clothes, possessions, jewelry, cars, jets, food, parties—to consider access to more immaterial and ethereal values: contemplation, idleness, irreverence, intellectuality, philosophy, free time, ambiguity, uncertainty, futility.

This prophesizes the analysis and proposal of what would be not only the physical but also the metaphorical occupation of the spaces of art and the privileges they contain. Art is a place for disputing narratives, which are produced and legitimized. Images that mold the collective imaginary, conserving the past and prophesizing the future. Pointing out what has value or what does not have value, what will be shown, and how it will be presented.

In the future of “New Power,” the Black community is informed about the codes of contemporary art and is able to relate fully, without restrictions, to the objects, performances, installations, paintings, and so forth. It is a place where these audiences will no longer feel repulsed in the white space, which was always hostile to them. A place where the relationship with aimlessness and abstraction is no

longer a cause for guilt, since the political and social onus on a Black person to achieve and be functional has been diluted. This is an aspect in art that interests me particularly as a demand of a people for power and freedom: art objects as food for the spirit. Aesthetic enjoyment is a privilege. And art offers this place of maximum power, as when one visits an exhibition of contemporary art, especially of abstract painting, which is both a privilege and a need that we never knew we could have. We were not educated for this. This place, the place of experiences that transcend the practical purpose of things, of objects, and even of behaviors and practices, was stolen from us.

The idealization and romanticization of the making and contemplation of art were initially generated by and for white people to experience art as a religious place, a place of food for the soul, for an encounter with the sublime. In this ideal, the artists have a special license for eccentricity, exception, and uselessness. The privilege of not needing to hurry, to be successful or functional, and the right to be idle and intellectual. The maximum immaterial luxury—of free time, of rest, of ingenuity, of craziness and carelessness. The right to indifference and irreverence in regard to money, assets, authority, one's focus, one's appearance, one's time. Who can study, understand, give meaning to, create, and fetishize objects of such limited practical value? This tension is important because it has much to say specifically about questions concerning class and culture.

“New Power” is therefore also the occupation of these romanticized and utopian ideals of art. Not by chance, sometimes the white spaces, which involve works and subjects, border on abstraction without a clear spatial definition, being completely sanitary, hermetic, and aseptic—like stores selling expensive jewelry or designer goods. They are borderline, transitory spaces between what was and what will be, spaces of transition between the starting point and the finish line. And the prophecy is the occupation of this aura, of this subconscious, of white tranquility, with Black people calmly circulating among the white, among the whiteness, absorbing its codes, its symbols.

As portrayed in “The Glorious Victory,” a painting is a unique, traditional object, and certainly with its ostentatious value, a possession, a consumer good. It is a more subtle ostentation—imagine arriving at someone's house and finding one of Francis Bacon's triptychs right there in the living room. In “New Power,” however, these objects are seen in another light: they are considered for their intellectual, philosophical, and religious value. They are tokens with a high speculative and symbolic value. Perhaps the most interesting transformation is that they are no longer the final object of desire. Rather, they become a means for the ascension I see for Black people, who, by creating, contemplating, selling, collecting, curating, and mastering them, can appreciate the subtlety, sublimation, and enjoyment that were previously reserved only for white people.

1. This text by the artist recounts the history of the “Pardo é Papel” series as it has developed from exhibition to exhibition. Alexandre writes a new section for each subsequent iteration.

2. In Brazil, kraft paper is known as papel pardo, literally “brown paper.” In Brazilian Portuguese, pardo is a term that refers to the tone between black and white, often used to categorize something as distinct from “a white norm,” i.e., brown rice, brown paper, etc. For years, pardo was used as a racial designation to describe mixed-race Brazilians and was preferable to labeling someone as Black, an expression of the dominant Eurocentric point of view in Brazil, where the powers that be strove to whiten the population.

3. Reprovados is a plural noun referring to students who have not passed an exam or whose failing marks prevent them from advancing to the next grade.

4. The title of the series makes use of a pun, as the Portuguese word papel has a double meaning and refers to “paper” or “role.” As such, the title can be read as “Brown Is Paper,” or “Brown Is a Role.”

5. Capri is a brand of inflatable swimming pool, Danone is a popular yogurt snack, and Toddynho is a popular chocolate drink marketed to children.

6. Tithing is a common practice in many of Brazil's Protestant churches in which church members hand over 10 percent of their salaries.

7. Pilotis are supports that lift a building above the ground or a body of water. They are similar to stilts, piers, columns, pillars, posts, and so on. It's one of the most used elements in Brazilian modern architecture. The MAR museum, even being a contemporary construction, follows a pattern of the 1940s and 1950s buildings. The word is frequently used to designate this architectural component.

8. Baco Exu do Blues, quoted in an interview on the occasion of Alexandre's exhibition opening, posted on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/0Dg89gHA3Jc?t=184>.