The Guardian

Maxwell Alexandre: Black Painter, White Figuration

★★★★☆

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A vast red concrete wall splits Maxwell Alexandre's work in two. It's the wall of the Flamengo sport club in the painter's native Rio de Janeiro, a towering crimson monolith of division, literally separating us and them, rich and poor, black and white.

Alexandre joined the upmarket club in the early 2020s. He'd walked past its red walls countless times as a kid - the club is on the edge of the favela he's from, the biggest in Brazil. What he found inside was serenity, sunbathing, prosperity, and whiteness. He'd spent his early career painting the black figures of his favela, but now he was surrounded by pasty bodies with rippling pink skin.

With success in his career, he'd bought access to this new world, and knew he couldn't paint the same black figures he'd made his name with. So this is the result, dozens of paintings of lush tropical trees and white bodies in repose, lounging, chatting, playing by the pool within the confines of that red well, all part of his new approach to what he calls "white figuration".

The red walls dominate the works in the first space as a figure stands on a diving board and palm fronds wave in the distance. The second room is covered floor to ceiling in paintings on brown paper of the club's members, some shown next to figures from art history. Boys stand in the sun, men splash in the water, girls talk and women sunbathe. It's idyllic, hazy, almost nostalgic painting.



White serenity ... Untitled by Maxwell Alexandre. Photograph: Damian Griffiths/© Maxwell Alexandre 2026, courtesy the artist; Almeida & Dale, Brazil and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

But it's full of emotional complexity. The work is a rejection of the expectations placed on black artists to make black work, to churn out paintings of black figures to sell to white audiences and collectors. It's Alexandre refusing to play the game. But there's also an introspective exploration of what happens when your life changes, when you stop being young and poor and desperate and become something different. This doesn't feel like Alexandre mocking white flabby bodies, it feels like him trying to make sense of a divided city, an art history that doesn't represent him, and a world that expects you to be something you no longer are. It all looks like heaven, but even heaven is a complicated place.