

PAULO NIMER PJOTA

Every Empire Breaks Like a Vase

Opening October 22, 2021 from 6-9PM

I have studied the art of the ancients and the art of the moderns, avoiding any preconceived system and without prejudice. I no longer wanted to imitate the one than to copy the other; nor, furthermore, was it my intention to attain the trivial goal of “art for art’s sake”. No! I simply wanted to draw forth, from a complete acquaintance with tradition, the reasoned and independent consciousness of my own individuality.

—Gustave Courbet, 1851

Paulo Nimer Pjota (b. 1988) is an artist living and working in São Paulo, Brazil. The title of his exhibition, *Every Empire Breaks Like a Vase*, refers to the precarity of colonialist and imperialist practices that inform today’s globalized world. With Pjota’s work, he synthesizes ancient history and mythology with the aesthetics of contemporary and urban street culture. He layers material references from Ancient Egypt, Flemish still-life and Greek mythology on painterly, monochromatic supports to foreground how these and the symbols taken from the streets of Brazil interrelate and disjoin. From this context, cast sculptures of antiquities and exotic fruits offer a vocabulary to Pjota’s highly orchestrated compositions both iconographic and allegorical. They observe a realism forged in political and economic conflict, where the struggle to maintain power offers a backdrop and material for the works’ productive antagonism.

Aspects of Pjota’s work draw from Hermetic philosophy and readings from *The Kybalion*. Both the painted and sculpted elements in his compositions possess qualities of mental and spiritual transmutation. These signs and symbols create a complex framework that can be unpacked and interpreted in the manner of classical history, genre, iconology and still life painting.

O jardim alquímico [The Garden of Alchemy] presents casts of pumpkins and brazilian fruits combined with an image of a monstrous severed foot taken from the internet. A still life of cacti surrounded by insects and butterflies rests on the foot. An image of an entangled sun and moon sourced from a truck in Brazil, sits high above the composition.

The contrasting elements in Pjota’s work are valent, offering polymorphous interpretations and meaning. The pumpkin found in a number of exhibited works can be viewed as a symbol of death and decay. The subject is present throughout history, most notably seen in the form of ceramic vessels from 1300 AD. Mexico and in 18th and 19th century European still life and genre painting in works by Chardin and Antoine Villon. Here, the pumpkin symbolizes an “in-between” found in the transition from light to darkness. The cactus, a symbol of strength and resilience, is arranged with the same formal qualities of a dutch still life. The sun (male energy) and moon (female energy) represent an alternative transitional perspective, the sun being the expansive creative force (yang) while the moon is flexible and contemplative (yin).

The Gorgons from Greek mythology are another recurring thread. Appearing as early as 1194-1184 BC. in the work of Homer, the powerful gaze of the monster from the underworld could turn a mortal body to stone. Pjota appropriates Gorgon imagery as well as creating his own gorgon-like figures. The ceramic ashtrays on view evoke the form of ancient funeral urns that are decorated with figures that recall Gorgons who offer protection of the deceased. In place of cremation remains, porcelain joints and cigarettes are deposited at the mouth of the vessels.

Pjota’s ability to construct visual narrative with synthesized elements from history and the contemporary social landscape is a research study of authoritative power and its sociological impact on cultural formation. High and low culture, art and vulgarity, the art historical canon and slang are presented as one to create a rich tapestry.

His most recent solo exhibitions include 1981/2021: arte contemporânea brasileira, CCBB, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil (2021); *Imagens que não se comportam*, MAR – Museu de Arte do Rio, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil Cenas de Casa, Caixa de Pandora, Ivani e Jorge Yunes Collection, São Paulo (2019); *Medley*, Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo (2018); *The history in repeat mode — image*, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels (2017); *The history in repeat mode — symbol*, Maureen Paley / Morena di Luna, Hove (2017). Additionally, his work has been included in institutional group exhibitions such as *Private Passion - New Acquisitions in the Astrup Fearnley Collection*, Astrup Fearnley, Oslo (2019); *Trouble in Paradise*, Kunsthal Rotterdam, Rotterdam (2019); *Sea of Desire*, Fondation Carmignac, Porquerolles (2018); *Going it is own way*, KRC Collection, Voorschoten (2018); *The Marvellous Cacophony*, Biennial of Contemporary Art Belgrade, Serbia (2018); *O Triângulo Atlântico*, 11ª Bienal de Artes Visuais do Mercosul, Porto Alegre (2018); *Painting [or] Not*, The KaviarFactory, Lofoten (2017); *Soft Power*, Kunsthal KAdE, Amersfoort (2016); *19º Sesc_Videobrasil*, São Paulo (2015); *Here There*, Qatar Museums – Al Riwaq, Doha (2015); *Imagine Brazil*, Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo (2013) / DHC/Art Foundation for Contemporary, Montreal (2015); *12 Biennale de Lyon*, Lyon (2013).

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