

Paulo Nimer Pjota
Na Boca do Sol
January 27 – March 2, 2024

Mendes Wood DM presents *Na Boca do Sol*, Paulo Nimer Pjota's first solo show in New York. The exhibition's title refers to an eponymous 1972 Arthur Verocai song, fragments from which have frequently been used as samples both internationally and in Brazil. Its lyrics offer a biographical account of the nostalgia of being born and raised in a provincial town and are enriched by a sunlit force that lends itself to sublime fabulation.

"A vacant, silent train track in the warmth of a setting sun. That's an image my grandfather always described to me and that I instantly remember when I hear that song," says Pjota. The group of works in this show are, accordingly, autobiographical returns: The artist returns to scenes from home, family, familiar memorabilia, and his initial artistic practice close to the free act of drawing – all intertwined by the memories of his hometown, São José do Rio Preto, in the state of São Paulo. Literary scholars would identify this as *nostos*: A narrative archetype in ancient Greek literature that depicts the epic hero returning home, dreaming about domestic scenes, and mentally writing letters never to be sent. Following Joseph Campbell's reading of the monomyth, central to Pjota's practice and investigation, the hero returns after diving into the unknown abyss, facing moments of revelations and atonement, ready to start all over again in a cyclical flux. In *Na Boca do Sol*, the artist exhibits his most mature work, though still restless and insomniac, with enough strength to address answers found in his trajectory, exploring what remains embedded in memory but at the margins of official history.

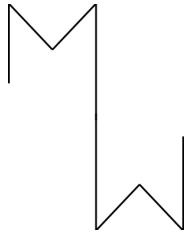
Pjota's main questions revolve around the inefficiency of hierarchical knowledge that segregate elite and popular cultural expressions throughout history. The artist adopts an oblique gaze that connects different temporalities, equating artistic manifestations of counterculture movements – such as stickers, tattoos, and kindergarten drawings – with pre-Columbian and Greek vases, highly respected by academia and untouchable by museum standards. His work recalls that many of the songs perceived today as historical chants originated in informal gatherings (as in *Jardim de faunos*, 2023); and that the division between contemplation, function, and devotion did not exist in the production of objects considered today as archaeological; and that the discriminatory devices imposed by colonialism remain active in a vicious cycle separating these cultural radiating nuclei into an aseptic artificiality. To remix history is to rebel against the hegemonic and violent cultural system, defending an inevitable contamination of time, history, and image by the confrontation between symbols, spiritualities, and cultural expressions.

In the displayed works, Pjota embarks on dreamlike and hallucinatory compositions that trigger mythological atmospheres. Unlike his older works, where his main concerns were focused on the history of the myth in Western culture, he now amalgamates the proper myth's dynamics into freer arrangements. The resemblance to urban walls with written notes and scribbles of his former works gives room to grainy fogs that suggest the background of ritualistic landscapes, such as solstices and twilights. Instead of tracking and trying to identify what the painting symbols represent – such as the geographic and cultural origin of each artifact or direct references to art history – Pjota focuses on a fuller experience of visibility, leaving the viewer with residual memory instead of an archaeological index. The nocturnal paintings (such as *Noite com frutas*, *Noite com Julia*, and *Noite e Dionísio*, all 2023) underscore Mayan beliefs in which the real world was accessed only by dreaming, in friction with modern psychoanalysis. Like a mixtape, Pjota's iconographic program is composed of historical symptoms that refuse to be abandoned in the past, always resurfacing in the present.

Wide planes of thin coats of tempera in the background of the paintings emphasize the artist's broad gestures and create breathing spaces close to *ukiyo-e*, a Japanese art tradition from the Tokugawa period whose name stands for "pictures of the floating world." These placid areas are balanced with fierce fields of rich details, in which vibrations, vital eruptions, and energetic recordings sprinkle the gaze. The crispy and contrasted flowers with flaming petals put into the archaeological vases, by their thickness of oil paint, tend to a three-dimensionality parallel to the bronze sculptures, where poppies are embedded in dysmorphic bases with calligraphic impulses. With homages ranging from Cy Twombly's *Thermopylae (Gaeta)*, 1991 to ex-voto objects from Brazilian religious syncretism, it is the first time that Pjota presents sculptures autonomous to the paintings. The

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presence of plants of power – forms of life that can teach, guide, and heal physically, mentally, or spiritually – reveals his interest in how ethnological and religious phenomena can infiltrate the symbolic and discursive spheres of visual culture.

In the works of the exhibition, the operation of ancient culture puts two magnetic poles in front of each other: Attention to 17th-century Dutch and Flemish still lifes and the scenography of Greek tragedies. By combining these two erudite (artistic) systems, both deeply studied by the artist, Pjota holds a vast liberty to experiment with pictorial arrangements, and the juxtapositions of elements toward a complex construction of language are the same as the compositional dynamics of hip-hop. These feast scenes – called *Cenas de casa* (*Home Scenes*) – culminate five years of investigating domestic episodes in art history and his own life, as setting celebrations to the hero's return home. Thus, functional displacements wittingly happen: Mythical beasts turn into Matissonian tables and ancient ceramic vases escape their usual contemporary isolation, filled with lavish bouquets as an act of disobedience. In this way, Pjota proposes a fragmented understanding of history, perhaps the only one possible.

Getting too close or too far from the works is like standing in front of the sun – and being swallowed by it. Sore images rise as staring at a ball of fire that reaffirms human smallness. Sinuous bodies move like everlasting flames. Dewdrops that fall from the stems of flowers foreshadow a fiery rain. In *Na Boca do Sol*, Pjota reminds us that the sun that bathes pearly marble, granting the grace of ruins, is the same flaring star that makes sunflower heads swirl like demons.

—Mateus Nunes

Paulo Nimer Pjota (1977, Barcelona) lives and works in Rio de Janeiro and Barcelona.

His most recent solo exhibitions include *Do cômico e do trágico*, **Mendes Wood DM**, São Paulo (2023); *Every Empire Breaks Like a Vase*, **The Power Station**, Dallas (2021); *Fragmented images, fragmented stories*, **DEO projects**, Chios, Greece (2021); *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); and *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); and **12 Biennale de Lyon**, Lyon (2013).

Pjota's works currently reside in the collections of **Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art**, Oslo, Norway; **Centro Cultural São Paulo**, São Paulo, Brazil; **Domus Collection**, Hong Kong, China; **Fondation Carmignac**, Porquerolles, France; **Lodoveans Collection**, London, United Kingdom; **KRC Collection**, Voorschoten, The Netherlands; **MAC Lyon**, Lyon, France; **MASP**, São Paulo, Brazil; **Pinacoteca de São Paulo**, Brazil; **Pinacoteca de São José do Rio Preto**, Brazil; **Pinacoteca de Piracicaba**, Brazil; **Rubell Family Collection**, Miami, USA; **Sesc_Videobrasil**, São Paulo, Brazil; **The Kaviar Factory**, Lofoten, Norway.

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