

CARLOS/ISHIKAWA

Antonio Tarsis: *Storm in a teacup*,
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Antonio Tarsis: *Storm in a Teacup*
Text by Mateus Nunes, PhD
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“Storm in a teacup” is an English expression that means doing much ado about little. Antonio Tarsis (b. 1995, Salvador, Brazil), as a Brazilian immigrant artist in London, subverts the meanings by working with such a restricted and modest range of materials to create an inexhaustible poetic and aesthetic production. His artistic practice, however, arises from enduring storms of sociohistorical, racial, and xenophobic violence. By invoking the allegorical power of tea in the British Empire’s history and its colonies during the spice trade, Tarsis reclaims an imperialist motto for a production that denounces hegemonic dynamics in colonized countries as his homeland.

The artist explores the centrality of labor in the human condition—especially labor born from violence—by contrasting the rigorous processes of industrial science with traditional, modest manual craftsmanship. Industrial processes like standardizing matchbox sizes and mining for electronic devices are juxtaposed with manual actions: hand-cutting, folding, pasting, dyeing papers, and exposing labels to sunlight for natural fading. This approach recalls the scarcity of tools and materials in his early years—living in a favela at 12 after his mother’s death, he dropped out of school, self-educated through public library books in Salvador, and began working with materials found on the streets. The emphasis on manual production in Tarsis’ work also connects to the complex artistic traditions rooted in African heritage and the labor systems devastated since colonial enslavement: Salvador, the first capital of Brazil for two centuries during the colonial period, is home to one of the world’s largest Afro-diasporic communities.

The characteristic repetition of sections of wooden matchboxes emphasizes the physical and epistemological fragility of a structure. In the exhibited works, Tarsis replaces the matchstick, the element that ignites the fire, with irregular pieces of charcoal, an aftermath of the burnt body and ready for a new combustion. A potential, flammable storm in a teacup, a given recipe for disaster. The pieces of charcoal refer to Black flesh seen as fuel, within an annihilating system of categorization that does not obey the individuality of the entities it houses, still partially or totally covered by a paper that gives them another color, another appearance.

Floating in space like an ambiguous open obstacle, the suspended grid matchbox walls perform as barriers that prevent the observer’s body from crossing but are still visually penetrable by irregular passages, as if to allow viewing a place that cannot be easily reached. They critically address an architecture of violence, from surveillance mechanisms and fences that delimit public space from private property to curtains and structures that partition precarious housing. The entryways, created by the irregular destruction of the grid, evoke the doors of houses in Brazilian favelas riddled with rifle shots, replicating a labyrinthine and wounded environment shaped as intricate alleyways.

By addressing colonial and contemporary gold mining, as well as the generation of electronic waste—two phenomena that directly affect colonized countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, Tarsis buys old cell phones from Brazil, Mexico, India, and Nigeria and extracts small golden components from their boards. The artist transforms circuits initially designed using engineering and optimization parameters into aesthetic compositions. In this show, large quantities of electronic waste collected by Tarsis are recycled and produced gold nuggets

using sustainable techniques. During the colonial period, these nuggets were used by black people who acquired their own freedom from slavery to produce jewelry that they wore as religious devotion and symbol of social ascension.

Comprising a flag over a loosely woven fabric with see-through wool, Tarsis composes a constellation with shiny electronic parts. Representing the fictitious sky of a non-place, he symbolizes all places in a network consisting of the most diverse countries that manufactured these parts—whether through mining, processing, design, or final production. The artist alludes to territories that cannot be seen, made invisible by mineral extraction processes, and to the set of stars that emblazon the Brazilian flag. By sticking it into a raw branch of the very wood that generates paper, coal, embers, matchsticks, and matchboxes—in opposition to the maximum level of processing of electronic parts in their final reduced state—Tarsis coins an anti-flag, questioning the relevance of national unity, the pertinence of a digital territory, and the relationship between sovereignty and colonial violence.

What is a Storm in a Teacup?
Interview with Amah-Rose Abrams
September 2024

In this exhibition Antonio Tarsis takes us on a journey through his interior world. We see things through a barrier we can just about see through but is too fragile to touch, pierced with violence their beauty belies their meaning as we peer through to observe the works they obscure. Through a practice instigated by a journey of the self Tarsis comments on global themes through the language of his lived existence.

Amah-Rose Abrams: You describe starting to make art almost as a statement of selfhood?

Antonio Tarsis: Yes. Then I started to collect these matchboxes and I saw that each one was truly unique. In terms of painting, I began to observe how they worked as a material. Each matchbox had its own uniqueness because of the exposure to the elements and to life, much like my own experiences. A rough exposure to life will alter you as a person.

I had this discovery of finding something in the streets of Salvador that I felt spoke to life and the human condition, connecting with my own experiences. It's linked with painting because of the versatility of matchboxes as a material. I can destroy them, alter them, and adapt them for use in my paintings to create my compositions, taking the place of paint, which I could not afford.

But as you connected with other artists and grew your practice you continued to work with matchboxes and matches as your primary material?

I find it intriguing to consider how this research, which began with matchboxes in Salvador, Bahia, where the colonisation of Brazil began, and the extraction of its resources has evolved and developed into the concept of gold in a global city like London, one of the world's major financial centres. This contrast—between a simple material like Guarany matchboxes with indigenous references and the notion of gold in Europe— shows how everything connects from the micro to the macro.

Speaking to you about your practice I am struck both by how meticulous it is but also by the meaning in each stage of the process that builds into the overall message of the work.

When you look at the indigenous communities in Brazil, everything there has a meaning. Every leaf on a tree has a purpose and when it falls there is a reason for that as well—everything is part of the circle of life. Also, in Afro-Brazilian religions each rhythm played on the drums is dedicated to a specific deity.

For each deity, there is a specific food, each with its own significance and each is associated with a specific dance. So, everything forms a circle, reflecting the interconnectedness of everything, in my background.

Sometimes the materials are so deconstructed that it is unrecognisable as you interpret it in all these different ways. How did you create the maze-like walls we see in Storm in a Teacup?

I like to think of these walls as a body, with their veins and skin. When we think about blood, we don't make a direct association with the rhythm of the heart, that's constantly beating, the most repeated rhythm we have. So the repetition of around 45,000 cut-out squares forming a wooden grid comes from this idea of the body, and invisible repetition and rhythms we carry within us.

It's a very labour-intensive process, between my studio in Salvador and in London and recently we found ways to take matchbox apart to create a structure in a scale that we never did before.

By separating the papers one by one from the wood they originated on to finally immersing the increasingly fragile papers in red pigments, letting the papers rest in these pools of various red hues for a few days the colours seep into the fibres making the paper even more delicate and thin, like skin. After dyeing, I adhere these papers to the grid's surface, adding a skin to the structure

I then pierce them with different sharp objects and rejoin them to create the translucent barrier that runs through the exhibition.

These barriers that guide us through the show, they are leading us somewhere, but they are also obscuring other work. Your Symbolic Genocide series for example, where you deconstruct Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais (BOPE), the Rio de Janeiro State Police, what made you want to take on this emblem?

I moved to Rio to live. Transitioning from Salvador to navigating this bigger city and this with a real threat from the police, because they can kill with impunity in the favelas. I would see them all the time and I began to carry flowers in my backpack to appear less threatening. It's such a harsh and hard environment that even something as simple as walking around with flowers can make you stand out.

The police are there to keep the community trapped in a cycle of violence, your body can be killed and it's nothing special. I was interested in how I was able to create distrust and horror in them, and how I could dismantle them through their own image, gradually erasing the oppressive skull and crossed guns logo.

I also like the idea that the walls and the embroidery intertwine two distinct narratives. The walls, ravaged by sharp objects, resonate with the embroidery images, which are similarly crafted through stitching. Obscuring these images within a fully violated structure forges a compelling connection, reflecting on the body, its violation, and the territories affected.

There are other elements of deconstruction in the exhibition, you take on ideas of extraction and rebirth through disassembling mobile phones?

It comes back to the idea of a cycle I talked about, the indigenous community and acknowledgement. I was thinking about extracting things and how the industrial revolution happened. Then I began to think about the minerals used in modern technology like mobile phones and how they are extracted and used allowing us to connect with each other all over the globe with extreme positive and negative results.

I was also curious about the contrast between the matchboxes and the electronic components, as they represent such different forms of materiality. One is associated with fire, while the other facilitates

communication and the flow of information. I wanted to explore how these two elements could be together, even with their distinct yet complementary roles.

Sobre penetrar no consciente
(On penetrating the conscious)

Text by Keyna Eleison

Translated from original Portuguese, 2018

The human imagination can formulate questions, develop facts, acts, objects and moments that record in our trajectories contours of what is right, wrong, good and evil. And with that same command, undo everything.

Symbolic Genocide is a series of embroideries proposing a narrative of erasure through the disappearance of images that form institutional symbols of the military police in Brazil – institutions that denounce a society structured by the conception of ‘epistemicides’, the disappearance of a mass of bodies that form an episteme. A way of thinking that forms a nation; an ethical, aesthetic, symbolic perimeter that leaves a void to be filled.

These works are embroideries; the act of embroidery consists of a perforating movement onto a soft surface with an object, usually metal. The objective of the act of perforation – introducing a material in a repetitive and exhaustive manner, with figurative or non-figurative results – is to adorn a surface. Through a deconstructed heraldry, these insignias embroidered in black, white and grey denote the warlike aspect of these military coats of arms and reflect the contradiction between the meaning of public safety and their identification with symbols of extermination, proposing the disappearance of these images as analogous to the genocide of a Black and peripheral population of which the artist is part.