

Now, Tomorrow

Niccolò Gravina: I'm interested in how you conceive time in your work, especially when you talk about the flattening of the past and the future into a continuous present.

Francesco João: For me, painting is a tool to explore this theme as well. Take, for example, the series of works I created using some materials from Antonio Dias, who fled the dictatorship at the end of the 1960s, stopping in Paris before moving to Milan. In these works, I reworked his used stretchers—stained with paint, marked with notes and traces—which I received one summer when he was clearing out his studio. I engage with these trajectories in time, which transform objects. Some of my sculptures are fully functional kitchens; I presented two last year at Galerie Hussenot in Paris, but I first created one in 2021 simply because I needed it for my own home. I painted it in glossy red lacquer and added an induction cooktop, a sink, and a side-mounted faucet. The relationship between an artwork's contemplative nature and its function is important to me, as is the idea that things exist beyond the artist's control. I feel distant from the notion of the artist as a demiurge—it's a role I find somewhat insufferable.

NG: The obsolescence of things reminds me of Walter Benjamin. He saw in technologies on the brink of disappearing a potential to shed light on what follows as a consequence of their decline. He spoke, for instance, about the emergence of the contemporary concept of kitsch, which he associated with a dreamlike aura that resists rational interpretation. According to him, kitsch carried a critical potential not only in relation to time but also in redefining aesthetic categories in art.

FJ: Obsolescence is often framed as a kind of temporal exoticism, a way of looking at past things with a sense of fascination. Instead, I try to bring future things into the present, emphasizing their persistence. This approach actually predates the Agricultural Revolution, which radically transformed our relationship with time. In Australia, for example, some Aboriginal hunter-gatherer communities use ancient rock paintings as tools for spiritual connection or to bring good fortune in hunting. When the paintings deteriorate due to natural elements, they simply repaint them.

NG: From our perspective, this also challenges the distinction between original and copy, as well as our understanding of time.

FJ: For them, those ancient paintings are both present and functional.

NG: So, in your view, the separation between cult value and exhibition value—the idea that artworks originate in ritual contexts and gradually detach from them to gain greater visibility—collapses. The two poles merge.

FJ: Yes, for example, I see the seven-segment displays both as a tool and as a pretext for painting. But within that iconography, associations of ideas and memories emerge, converging in the present and evolving the work. There's a balance between these two components.

NG: It seems to me that there are two opposing yet complementary processes at play. For you, painting is both a device to explore themes and, at the same time, a pretext for painting. These two processes move simultaneously in opposite directions.

FJ: Our ideas about historical contexts exist only in the present, just as expectations projected into the future do—for example, when betting on the future success of a young artist. These expectations also influence our vision of the future, like when we imagine being able to intervene more effectively in our health or physical appearance. It's a contemporary obsession with prediction and control, characteristic of finance and agriculture. I believe we should refocus on the now, reclaiming a pre-agricultural conception, less focused on measuring time—an experience that is more immediate, based on need and direct response, rather than an abstract construction of the future. I think that today, due to the pervasiveness of the internet, we are at the beginning of a radical shift, almost closer to this archaic present. The way we gather information through search engines or use AI fosters the present, making our ability to contextualize the past less significant.

NG: We often overlook the ideological implications of certain conceptions of time, especially those based on the idea of progress, as if there were a timeline leading to a final goal, guided by a kind of teleological faith. I was thinking about Gilles Deleuze's Stoicism-influenced view of time, where he speaks of becoming-present, as opposed to historical time.

FJ: Deleuze is very important to me, particularly his idea of training oneself to speak about what we don't know—because that's where the space for invention lies. Risk is necessary for living thought, which isn't limited to just reproducing what we already know.

NG: And culture itself is an immense act of faith. Speaking of reversals, I've done everything I shouldn't have—I still haven't asked you how the exhibition is going.

FJ: I don't know yet, that too is an act of faith! Some works are already ready, but I usually decide on the final arrangement during the installation days. It will be an extremely abstract exhibition, centered around light, in the modernist villa that houses Marli Matsumoto's space in Vila Madalena, surrounded by greenery. In this domestic setting, the main room has an entire glass wall, allowing splendid natural light to shape the space. I'll be painting on the floor, rolling paint directly onto the parquet, similar to the color tests done in homes before painting, corresponding to how sunlight illuminates the floor at certain times of the day. It's a painting literally made of paint and light. Then, as the position of the sun changes over time, the light shifts as well. For me, this interaction with light evokes a constant present. While searching for tarlatan fabric, which I had used in previous works, I came across a dead stock where I found some slightly damaged waxed canvases. I stretched these fabrics onto frames and later intervened on them.

NG: So, it will be an entirely pictorial exhibition, where the works dissolve or explode into the architecture, unfolding in a continuous becoming-present.

FJ: It's a horizontal painting where architectural elements act as the stretcher, the floor functions as the canvas, and the structure of the windows becomes the frame. I don't mean this metaphorically; it's a literal painting made with a roller, far removed from the idea of fine art. The light changes the perception of the painting as the hours pass, through the universal movement of the sun.

NG: This universal light you describe—does it relate to your idea of returning to an archaic conception of the present?

FJ: I think so. In *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), Werner Herzog movingly recounts the paintings in the Chauvet Cave in Ardèche, France, dating back 32,000 years. These paintings existed thanks to firelight, which he compares to a form of proto-cinema. I like to think about this archaic relationship between light and painting, in a constant absolute present.

NG: It's like a simultaneous flattening of opposite poles—material or immaterial, absorbing or reflecting light, subtraction or layering. As if the segments curved into the number eight, moving away from the idea of

progress. Because the moment I'm tempted to interpret it as an immaterial or environmental sublimation, I'm confronted with the opposite pole in the materiality of the wood.

FJ: I try to achieve balance because trajectories aren't necessarily linear. It's an act that seeks to escape representation, turning artworks back into things, but what you see is only part of the whole. I often think about the extreme separation between functional and contemplative—for example, if you were freezing to death, you could burn a Caravaggio painting to stay warm. It's like in the 1993 film *Cliffhanger*, set in the Dolomites, where Sylvester Stallone steals a suitcase full of millions of dollars from criminals and burns it to survive the cold.

Francesco João's practice explores the ambivalence inherent in the pictorial method, emphasizing the tension between the immediacy and the complexity of the medium. His work is immersed in a constantly shifting, hyper-evolving loop of reconfiguration. Painting, as a medium, asserts its substance both through historical legitimacy and its confrontation with rapidly disseminated images in the digital sphere. This complexity is mirrored in João's work, where images are created through a layered process, allowing forms to emerge through subtraction. João's approach to the canvas is deeply tactile, with his gestures directed toward producing images that function as ideas. The immediacy and simplicity of painting form the core of João's practice, grounded in his ability to convey meaning without excessive formal barriers, while also remaining self-aware in his investigation of the medium's nature. The canvases João produces represent an exploration of a visual language that is both disruptive in its sensuality and rawness, with layers of gouache that shield the viewer's gaze. In João's work, the convergence of the enigmatic and the pragmatic is palpable. Simple, direct scenarios are often disrupted by additional complexities that subvert the linearity of his paintings. This duality evokes an idyllic mystery, capturing the ethereal fascination one feels when confronting the stretchers wrapped in raw canvas.

Francesco João (1987) lives and works between São Paulo, Brazil, and Milan, Italy. He attended the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan, Italy. His exhibitions include: *Seven Segment Display*, Fondazione Zimei, Rome (2023); *Sem título, por enquanto*, Marli Matsumoto, São Paulo (2023); *x_minimal*, curated by Friederike Nymphius, Cassina Projects, Milan (2021); *1550 San Remo Drive*, Hot Wheels, Athens (2020); *Francesco João*, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels (2019); *BRAZIL. Knife in the flesh*, PAC – Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan (2018); *Donkey Man*, Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo (2017); *A Terceira Mão*, curated by Erika Verzutti, Fortes D'Aloia Gabriel, São Paulo (2017); *Everything tends to ascend. Or not.*, Pivô, São Paulo (2016); *Summertime '78*, Kunsthalle São Paulo, São Paulo (2015); *Nimm's Mal Easy*, Ausstellungsraum Klingental, Basel (2015); *Dizionario di Pittura*, Galleria Francesca Minini, Milan (2014).

Niccolò Gravina is Exhibition Curator at Fondazione Prada. He has curated and contributed to several publications and exhibitions at Fondazione Prada's venues in Milan and Venice, as well as exhibition projects at Prada Aoyama (Tokyo) and Rong Zhai (Shanghai). He is the author of several essays and contributions in art magazines and books published by Mousse, Flash Art, Kaleidoscope and Fondazione Prada. His curatorial practice is complemented with a painting work investigating the relationship between current relevance and obsolescence of the medium.

Now, Tomorrow

Francesco João

Opening

Saturday

March 29th, 2025

From 2pm to 6pm

Marli Matsumoto

Arte Contemporânea

Exhibition

from march 29th, 2025

to May 10th, 2025

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