

ANOTHER SPACE, ANOTHER TIME,
OR THE INCANDESCENCE OF A
LANDSCAPE OF DESIRE.
THE SPECTRAL QUALITY OF JOÃO
GABRIEL'S PAINTING.

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[EN]

The shooting is half-finished. Before starting, I hope to make to make a fine movie, but then the problems begin and I aim lower. I just hope to finish the movie, period! Halfway through filming, I examine my conscience and say to myself: 'You could have worked harder, you could have given more. Now, you still have the second half to make up for it'. And from that moment on, I start trying harder to bring the film to life. 'Je vous présente Pamela' is on the right track now: the actors are into their roles, the crew is solid, personal problems no longer count.

François Truffaut, *Day for Night*

My music is the spiritual expression of what I am — my faith, my knowledge, my being. When you begin to see the possibilities of music, you desire to do something really good for people, to help humanity free itself from its hangups... I want to speak to their souls.

John Coltrane

"He was second-rate because young. Inferior because young. Sensuous because young. Carnal because young. Destructive because young. And in this youth of his—contemptible."

Witold Gombrowicz, *Pornografia*

After several moments, in different institutions and situations, that, over the past three years, have allowed the artist to register his work in the Portuguese contemporary and cultural fabric with a wide repertoire of images and reflections in the field of painting, the Municipal Galleries are pleased to present what will be João Gabriel's first solo exhibition, 'My Favourite Things'.

João Gabriel studied painting at the Caldas da Rainha School of Arts and Design, he showed his work in the exhibition 'Paul & Bobby', at the Sixth Grand Weekend at Bregas, in Lisbon, participated in the latest edition of the EDP New Artists Awards and created the poster for the film *The Ornithologist* (2016) by João Pedro Rodrigues, among other projects.

The title and his favourite things

The name of a well-known song, one of João Gabriel's favourites, in the version interpreted by John Coltrane, 'My Favourite Things' is a title which acknowledges, precisely, the prime obsessions of the artist, where the wealth of the symbolic and the precariousness of the vernacular join together, as a result of the meeting of erudite culture with aspects of the so-called culture of the masses. In 1959, the musical 'The Sound of Music', by Rodgers and Hammerstein, premièred on Broadway, in New York. It included the popular song 'Sound of Music', a melody which inspired the saxophonist John Coltrane to produce one of the most renowned albums in the history of jazz. 'My Favorite Things' is a recording that Coltrane did with his new quartet, which included McCoy Tyner on the piano, Elvin Jones on the drums and Steve Davis on the bass. The group recorded the album in the studios of Atlantic Records, in New York, over three days, in October 1960. At the time, Coltrane had recently left the Miles Davis Quintet, where he had been since 1958. With Davis, Coltrane had developed the ability to play several notes at the same time. Coltrane's avant-garde approach, with which he experimented and extrapolated new compositions, sounds and kinds of music from traditional musical structures, using improvisation, influenced jazz

and rock in the following years. As mentioned before, 'My Favorite Things' (written the American way), which we wrote, inadvertently, in the title of the exhibition 'My Favourite Things' (the English version), is one of João Gabriel's favourite songs. It can be said that this song is the result of a migration of creative contexts, more or less erudite – a factor which is also structural in the artist's way of painting. His work resides in an attempt to fix, from what already exists, another space, another time – as if the present time did not suffice, were not enough – defining a *queer*, incandescent and utopian language. Utopia is queer territory par excellence, inasmuch as it concerns a framework of desire, a structure of an affective world that, as with all utopias, is operative and essential as long as it remains in the scope of idea-concept-image. But we will get to that later.

The spectral image

On entering the Boavista Gallery, two paintings – one on canvas and another on paper – each show us the figure of a man. Athletic bodies, in the same position, almost squatting, legs slightly open, wearing running shorts and holding a camera in front of their faces, these figures confront us directly, not just because their bodies are almost life-size, but also because they seem to be taking our photograph. The work on canvas shows a man in an outdoor environment, in the open, surrounded by bushes. The one on paper depicts a man in a domestic environment, in a room in a house, with a chest of drawers with a vase of flowers on it. In the two paintings, there appears to be no inhibition in the use of colour. The artist appears to have thrown himself into a broad, dynamic and contagious pictorial exercise, imposing few restrictions on himself. His work has remained faithful - since his first public appearances - to a certain idea of spectral figuration, in which figures appear almost as shadows, transitions, traces, only to quickly disappear and blend into the background of the painting, from which they stand out at times. These figures give us the sensation of passing us by and disappearing, as in films, leaving their presence still hanging in the atmosphere, like a spectre. This quality of the image – which in the first place is a quality inherited from cinema - allows us to question the relationship between Eros and Narcissus, eroticism and pornography, background and figure, that exists in the domain of the painting.

From the relationships of tension generated by these pairs of images, beautiful movements and incandescent gestures appear – spectral images from another space and another time, more or less tragic, generated by the proletariat of love. For instance, consider the figure and the background, which, in João Gabriel's paintings, mutually corrupt each other, and frequently do so through the way in which the artist applies paint and colour. Figure and background become confused, at times, they are camouflaged within one another, they fit together like two bodies, they form a space and time that is erotic, impulsive, extravagant, delicate and silent, sometimes erratic and utopian.

Of the almost panoramic or cinematic style of the exhibition

Lower level

João Gabriel's works are all untitled. Following on from the entrance, before we proceed, there is a long and horizontal row of paintings on paper. At times, groups of images stand out, spaced at intervals from one another. At the end of the room, along the stairs, we glimpse an almost transparent and enigmatic painting on fabric, dominated by tones of a soft turquoise blue. It depicts the head of a man seen in profile, wearing a headband – the head of a tennis player?

The first sequence of paintings – some of João Gabriel's works function in sets, diptychs or polyptychs, others do not – substantiates the title and the sense of the exhibition. In 'his favourite things', we can see, among others: the cover of John Coltrane's record, 'My Favorite Things', in a painting dominated by the colour blue, an almost nocturnal blue, a glaze through which other elements can be glimpsed. This is followed by other enigmatic representations, with and without the human figure, always masculine, alone or accompanied, in different settings, more or less urban, domestic, more or less natural or scenic, in the mountains, the countryside, at the beach, in the sea.

It is this sea that can be seen in the background of a set of 4 paintings with formal similarities, a sequence of images in which the gaze of the receiver is divided between human action and the physical qualities of a rock.

The male body, more or less explicitly, in the context of this room, is the predominant subject around which diverse images gravitate.

Upper level

At the top of the second flight of stairs, before entering the room on the upper level of the exhibition, we see an almost monochromatic painting, in shades of red, on fabric placed directly on the wall, unframed, with jagged edges, depicting a faded face whose profile is barely visible. A moment of orgasm? Or of pain?

Fiction and reality

In João Gabriel's work, and particularly in this set of works specifically developed for the exhibition, nothing is ever only what it is. It also represents 'that which was' and 'that which can be'. After all, this is what the spectral figure and any formulation of utopian character are: the spectre includes what we see and what we want to see, what is there and what we add to it, the concrete and the imagined, the before, the during and the after. Thus, according to some thinkers, namely José Bragança de Miranda, it is possible to make an analogy between the spectre and a waterfall. This image is not constituted by an isolated frame, but by a sequence of frames (which substitute one another uninterruptedly), including the intervals. A waterfall is not, therefore, just falling water. A chair, a window, a television and a vase are not merely what they are, but also the cultural and social meanings that have been attributed to them and whatever else might be added to that.

It can be said that this spectral quality of João Gabriel's work is inseparable from the artist's need to reflect on the 'carnality of painting' and the helplessness of bodies. As previously suggested, the bodies represented in his paintings can be considered human and non-human insofar as they are also 'shadows', spectres, affected by the existential precariousness, ubiquity and ostentation of their desire. We know, there's no denying it, that these paintings are based on homosexual pornographic films, from the 1970s and 1980s, and that many of the actors portrayed in them have died – spectres, in the literal sense – decimated by diseases like AIDS, so often, very often, perhaps too often, associated with these groups and sexual practices.

The colours of memory

Do colours determine the identity of bodies?

On the upper level of the Boavista Gallery, a large-scale

painting, in salmon tones, made especially for this exhibition and mounted during its installation, dominates the rest, pointing to a still relatively unknown field of the artist's work.

The work is almost monochromatic, in variable formats, the large majority executed on small pieces of fabric placed directly onto the wall, without the use of stretcher bars.

The larger salmon tone canvas features a sitting room, perhaps the set of a film, a space or an interior view of a house. Without any human figures, this space seems to have been at the disposal of the bodies, now absent, which perhaps only recently left. For this reason, the image has the incomparable ability to invite us in, or to at least take a peek.

The smaller works are presented as *frames* of a black and white film, with their intervals and cuts. Each of the images, almost all of them in tones of grey and black, except two yellow ones, call for a universe of erotic life that is shadier, cooler, more delicate, introspective and silent. These images could thus be associated with the images of memory, which, little by little, disappear in the dark and lose their clear outlines. What is left in the memory after these images? Is this what these most recent images by João Gabriel are referring us to?

*"One must remember that man lives in the world. In the dark the world disappears. There is nothing around, you know, one is just with oneself."*¹

Selection process

After several conversations with the artist, over the course of a year, and a visit to his studio in Caldas da Rainha – an experience that was fundamental to understanding his forms and ways of painting -, and not being able to select, in advance and with accuracy, the collection of works to exhibit, João Gabriel brought us more than two hundred paintings on canvas, paper and fabric. In the Boavista Gallery, during the two weeks of installation, in daily working sessions with the artist, approximately 50 works were selected to be part of the exhibition. The intention was to show that which, in the early stages of this artist's journey, affirms the distinctiveness of his personal language, opening horizons and creating singular paths for it in the context of contemporary art. We identified

1 – GOMBROWICZ, Witold, *Pornografia*, transl. Danuta Borchardt, Grove Press, New York, 2009, p. 117

constants, looking in the work of the artist, and in his chosen themes, for that which attempts to shake up or deconstruct certain formal canons and conceptual dogmas (often channelling them and using them in his favour), namely clichés associated with erotic and homosexual images.

Eroticism and Pornography

Thus, the exhibition 'My Favourite Things', by João Gabriel, displays a selection of paintings on canvas, fabric and paper, carried out in the past three years by the artist, almost all of them now being shown for the first time. João Gabriel's work has been based on different aspects and situations, almost all of them taken from homosexual pornographic films, especially from the 1970s and 1980s. His gaze has challenged the plastic and pictorial qualities of the scenic, domestic, architectonic, mundane and bohemian, lyrical and obscure, anatomical and human, and intimate contexts which inhabit this polemical and forbidden universe that produces contemporary images – the proletariat of love. Convenient pretexts for a new critique of daily life? Or for a new critique of the image?

'There is a big difference between eroticism and pornography. Eroticism is a broth, a soup which one is always heating up and always afraid will cool down. A marriage of psychology and conveniences. On the side of psychology, it starts with good feelings, the ones which people supposedly awaken in one another. It ends in desire, which is something that needs to be satisfied, as psychologists have already explained. The broth results in a rhetoric in which literature coexists with hygiene. The erotic aesthetic tries to give off an aura of illusion to the lowest sense of conveniences. Eroticism is the cheapest alibi of domesticity and conjugality, the necessary complement to a profession and a job. The lie of eroticism sustains the big stage of promiscuity which is humanity.

Pornography is not given to fraudulent alibis of the feelings, psychology, desire, communication, or communion of whatever. The pornographic gaze is terribly honest. It sees everything and only what there is to see. The outer face of a body is made of flesh to be stripped. The visible surface of this flesh is the skin. The cadence of the muscles and hair draws shadows and tensions on the skin. The pornographic gaze is aware of all these details like a machine or an animal. It registers, accumulates, selects. Pornography is fascinated by the evidence of the functioning of the

flesh and the skin. Pornography is an abstract obsession, while it operates exclusively on facts of a physical nature.

There will be those who prefer to switch names, but the distinction is clear, and it is pornography which the truth.

The distinction between pornography and eroticism, in the sense defined above, corresponds with two models and speeds of the skin: convex skin and concave skin. And two models of passion: the vulgar or expressive and the tragic.²

Form and content, indissociable

The biggest challenge for this exhibition proved to be, precisely, the articulation and selection/exclusion of João Gabriel's works. On the one hand, it is possible to relate each work with almost all the others – which makes the selection of specific ones for the exhibition difficult. This connection between all the works results, in part, from the artist executing several simultaneously, with this synchronous making interfering in the final result of the set. The works flow into one another like they are the concentration of an almost unique quality – making the separation, articulation and creation of intervals between the sets ungrateful. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult and also reductive to establish thematic series or take exclusively formal approaches, namely because the artist's work challenges this divorce between form and content, contradicting it.

It would be more fitting to say that there is a constant vocabulary in the language of João Gabriel, or rather, elements, figures and ways of doing which are repeated, with some variations, from one painting to another. In any case, it is important to clarify that although the artist uses images from porno films, as previously mentioned, the images which he builds are not replicas or linear transfers from one medium to the other (from cinema or the screen to paper and canvas). Rather, they are abstractions of the referent, as is all art, even the most figurative, more or less critical, more or less politicised. This is nothing more than a tautological dimension of art, which all artistic production covers, questioning its own possibilities, means and ways of doing.

It also means that each work has within it all the previous works, that each image transports with it all the universes and

possibilities created by the previous images. It also carries, as possibilities, all the images which have not yet been invented, which are still to come. Thus, it can be said that João Gabriel's work intends to leave the space and time of the everyday, bringing life back to new perspectives of life itself.

Naturally, this is not independent from what each receiver extracts from these images. Do we not see only what we know? What João Gabriel provides is another starting point, other images, other doors, so that each one of us can look back at reality, taking part in a dialogue and finding our position in it.

The linking of his themes to an aesthetic of the sexual image is not indifferent, because it brings images which have the right to exist and coexist with all the others to our everyday reality. In other words, they bring the matter to the fore, rescuing it from an absence and omission which are oppressive and repressive. In this regard, in a recent text on the artist, published in the newspaper *Público*, in a supplement dedicated to future promise in the Portuguese art world, Nuno Crespo says that João Gabriel *'finds in porn films bodies which desire and surrender to one another in an attempt to fill their desire – but this is also where elements of narrativity and visual composition, important for the way he approaches painting, are to be found'*. He also stresses that João Gabriel's work *'is an immense contribution to gay culture and, in this respect, like it or not, his pictures are useful as important elements in the renovation of museums and galleries, on the political path to the integration and recognition of real communities and their positions of difference contrary to common normativity'*.³

In short, each painting by João Gabriel seems to represent an event, a unique moment, more often than not fortuitous or circumstantial – an eroticism of rapid consumption? – which brings to the domain of painting and tactility a reflection on painting itself, its time, the everyday. And he does so from a very unique perspective: questioning the qualities of the images, almost all of them from homosexual pornography, in the definition of an expanded *queer* visual culture that is less explicit and more poetic.

3 <https://www.publico.pt/2018/03/02/culturaipsilon/noticia/joao-gabrieluma-questao-de-desejo-1804456> in *Público*, Ípsilon, 2 March 2018, by Nuno Crespo

Image and refusal

As History of Art, in itself, is a narrative of desire and eroticism, the question remains: How is it that this artist's images introduce and bring to the field, today, new dimensions and possibilities of feeling and seeing?

In what way do they alter our relationship with bodies? With our body, the bodies of others, the landscape, objects, space?

For Álvaro Lapa, *'what is represented, in a figurative work, is possibly less interesting than the totality of what is excluded, what is refused. Such a work is as valuable for what it represents (at least as much) as for what it refuses to represent. This function of refusal is the true implicit content of the work, and its explicit message of resistance'*⁴. This could be transposed to João Gabriel's work, in which figuration is not an end in itself but a *political intentionality*.

Illustrating an invisible (world) – that would be the mission of painting. So, what invisible world is it that João Gabriel's paintings reveal to us? A landscape of desire or the promise of another (non-normalised) space and time to occupy. A constant game of presence and absence. Something which blossoms but which is extinguished at the same time. A simple and silent utopia inscribed in the everyday. A revelation that revives an erotic imaginarium, which is not limited to mere sexual fantasies. A sparking of a critical imagination of society, of what it is, and what it could be.

João Gabriel paints light, its luminous effects, emergence and dissolution. He figures and disfigures the enigma, without annulling it.

Perhaps it is fitting to cite the philosopher Sousa Dias in conclusion: *'the painting's object (...) is always a spectre in a way, a spectral object, a spectral visibility – an extra-being in the empirical being or an immanent dynamism of the being -, consequently an object without a possible image, a non-object, that painting attempts to capture in an image that is thus not an image, which is not and cannot be mimesis, in short, in a visibility of the image which exceeds, with its spectrality, with its inobjective non-objectival 'abstract' presence, the visible in the image'*⁵

Painting is sensation and desire.

4 LAPA, Álvaro, 'O que é hoje a figuração para si?' in *Álvaro Lapa. Textos*, EDP Foundation and Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon, 2007, p. 24

5 DIAS, Sousa, *O Riso de Mozart. Música. Pintura. Cinema. Literatura*, Documenta, 2016, p. 57