

*Maxwell Alexandre: The world is ours*

By Kiki Mazzucchelli, 2019

In 2016, Maxwell Alexandre went through what he calls his 'repatriation period'. Having earned a scholarship and spending six years studying design at an elite university, he was now spending his time at his mother's house in Rocinha, Brazil's largest favela located in the wealthy south zone of Rio de Janeiro. Things were not looking too promising back then: he had earned a diploma but had no steady source of income or a suitable working space to make art. At university, Alexandre had purposefully attempted to make his background invisible in order to blend more fluidly into an environment that was strikingly distinct from his own. Now, he felt the need to reconnect and to look back and recognise some of the values that had shaped his identity. This led him to make daily incursions to the roof terrace where he would spend hours on his own, making notes and observing the daily life of the community. Unable to afford proper art materials, he nonetheless started to work obsessively and experiment with things that were at hand.

His choice of materials, however, did not seem to be entirely determined by economic strain, but was in fact indicative of an interest in experimenting both with the formal and symbolic potential of everyday materials: the bricks that are typically employed in the construction of the *lajes*—the makeshift roof terraces so coveted by favela dwellers as spaces to host social gatherings and a sign of affluence; the shoe polish that was part of Alexandre's daily boot maintenance routine during the time he served in the army; or the hene, a product used for dyeing and straightening hair, whose characteristic smell is widely familiar in Rocinha households. Therefore, although his output at the time, consisted largely of abstract paintings, the selection of materials that relate to personal experiences and memories, signalled a shift towards a reconnection with the cultural and social context of his birthplace.

The year before, whilst still at university, the artist had begun to explore the possibilities of painting. An important development in his final year was the discovery, alongside the members of an art collective to which he belonged, of a modernist hotel located between the neighbourhoods of Gávea and São Conrado, whose ruins he had been frequenting for more than a year. Perched atop a hill surrounded by tropical forest, the massive sixteen-storey high structure offered a precarious yet generous workspace to test new ideas on a much larger scale than in a traditional studio. A former professional inline skater, Alexandre spent some of his afternoons in the abandoned building exploring the topography of the space on his rollerblades. The first thing that attracted his attention, were the marks left by the wheels on the floors and walls. Very intuitively, he started to place pieces of canvas on the walls and pour paint on the floor whilst performing skating tricks, thus mapping the marks of his trajectory on the fabric surface. According to him, skating is a practice that allows users to have a different experience of space, creating an alternative cartography based on one's ability to navigate through the

urban environment. The wheels capture information on several types of terrain, and, in these works, the canvasses become the sensors that make this information visible. However, this research was suddenly interrupted by the closure of the derelict building by the authorities. Unfettered, he decided to take the work into the streets.

Rather than simply replicating the methodology used in the hotel, in the urban environment, the artist had to negotiate his way with the unpredictable movement of passers-by, cars, and stray animals. As a consequence, he soon realised that his attention was no longer solely focused on the space of the canvas, but rather in everything else that was happening around him. The resulting work carried information about these specific sites, both in terms of generating a mapping of different terrains with specific textures, and through the incorporation into the fabric of small physical fragments of these same terrains, caused by the friction of the wheels against surfaces—a process of *frottage*. Materials found on these sites started to be incorporated as pictorial supports: political propaganda posters, an old sofa, street signs, and many other objects that somehow capture the atmosphere of these public spaces. The sites' varying degrees of publicness were a determining factor in planning these works. For example, an intervention in the external area of a heavily policed luxury shopping mall had to be carried out as quickly and discreetly as possible, so white paint was used in order to avoid drawing too much attention. In the last work of the series, staged at Oscar Niemeyer's 'Canoas House'—a listed modernist building designed as his family home in 1951—in order to avoid damaging the property, Alexandre didn't use any paint, capturing only dirt marks on the pieces of fabric.

Upon his return to Rocinha, the artist continued to experiment with fabrics that were placed on the roof terrace until weathering marks appeared on their surfaces. Completely relinquishing control over the painting process, he now patiently checked the development of the works on a daily basis; at the same time, as diligently, writing down descriptions of everything he saw around him, using the canvas as a notebook. As his days were spent apparently 'doing nothing' up on the terrace puzzled neighbours started to think he had gone mad, which in fact was quite a safe position to be in, within the gang-ridden environment of the favela. Alexandre speaks of this as a period of *vadiagem*, a term normally translated as laziness, but which he employs in order to denote a time of extreme reflection and attentiveness to his surroundings. Indeed, it is fair to say that the future developments in his practice are closely related to the pursuit of this heightened level of attention.

His luck finally turned when he was offered a studio space in a warehouse managed by a local NGO promoting sports activities in Rocinha, an organisation he had known since his skating days. Having a space to work, he started to focus inwards and articulate all the information he had absorbed during his 'repatriation' period in a new series of paintings. Some of the first works he produced in the studio were a set of self-portraits done in Kraft paper, marking an important shift toward

figuration. But soon he realised that the choice of medium also added a significant symbolic dimension to the work. In Portuguese, this particular type of paper is usually called pardo [brown], a term which has been historically employed in the national census to classify mixed heritage citizens. Unlike America, Brazil never adopted the ‘one drop rule’ and since the 1940s, the term pardo has been officially used as a whitewashing mechanism that lumps together all mixed-race populations. In a country where black populations have been systematically marginalised, many were led to believe that self-identifying as pardo would place one a step above in the socio-economic hierarchy. Over the past decade, however, as black movements have been gaining momentum, the number of citizens who self-identify as black has risen significantly.

In the series *Pardo é papel* (2017-19)—a title that can be freely translated as ‘brown is a type of paper’—Alexandre borrows an expression popularised by black activists in response to the generic categorisation of Afro-Brazilians under the all-encompassing umbrella of pardo. By depicting black bodies on Kraft paper, the artist playfully reaffirms the idea of a reclaimed blackness through images that deliberately focus on the celebration of self-esteem: the several groups of figures portrayed in these works include political or religious leaders; youths protesting against police oppression or proudly holding their diplomas; musicians surrounded by a crowd of fans; boys and girls dressed in trendy street fashion style, amongst many others. Rather than focusing on a single event, most of these sprawling ‘museum size’ paintings are populated by numerous characters rendered without any distinct facial features, dark skin and blonde hair who are all different versions of the artist himself.

Indeed, the biographical content found in these paintings extends much beyond the physical appearance of the figures, with many of the recurring motifs carrying a special meaning in the context of the favela. Alexandre says the fashion for dying your hair blonde is something that was initially adopted by drug gangs’ members. Others naturally avoided embracing the style that would make them stand out as an easy target for the police and the militias. However, when prominent singers and football stars appropriated the look, it soon became widely disseminated amongst black kids, to the extent that it was no longer possible to assume one’s guilt based on hairstyle. In a process of semantic reverse, the blond black look became a symbol of empowerment insofar as it challenges the rules created by the establishment to determine which styles are acceptable for favela dwellers; an act of rebellion against being judged—and most likely condemned—for your looks.

Other images are just as laden with meaning within the context of Rocinha, similarly appropriated from everyday life and given a renewed status within the symbolic space of painting. A noteworthy recurring image is Rio de Janeiro’s municipal school uniform worn by many of the characters, a very common sight in the streets of less affluent neighbourhoods, becoming rarer in the wealthy areas where private schooling is the norm. As a student, Alexandre never felt proud of wearing this uniform; on the contrary, he remembers quickly removing his school

T-shirt the moment he left the building in order to avoid the negative connotations attributed to state schoolchildren. The uniform motif is at the centre of a series titled *Reprovados* (2017-18), a term employed to designate both students who fail a school year and someone who is subjected to censorship or reprimand. Before appropriating the image in his paintings, the artist wore this uniform for six months, exploring the positive undertones conveyed by the traditionally stigmatised item once it has been incorporated in the more fluid world of street fashion.

While the series *Pardo é papel* focuses on the idea of empowerment, *Reprovados* offers a much cruder view of the reality of young black people in the Brazilian peripheries. The catalyst for producing these works was, for the first time, the opportunity to show in a major contemporary art gallery in Rio de Janeiro. The gallery had an unusual open call for a group exhibition, whose only rule was that artists who brought their work in first would be included. In an environment typically frequented by upper-class clients, Alexandre felt the need to present a work that spoke about the quotidian violence and abuse committed against favela dwellers by government authorities and militias, thus providing an alternative visual account to the official narratives disseminated by mainstream media outlets that are the main source of information for many aristocratic cariocas [from Rio de Janeiro].

Titled *Tão saudável quanto um carinho* [*As Healthy as a Caress*] (2017), the painting presented in this exhibition depicts the intervention of an UPP—Pacifying Police Unit—a law enforcement programme initiated in 2008 in the city of Rio de Janeiro to reclaim territories from drug gangs in the favelas and often resulting in the death of innocent residents. Amidst the presence of the police, a number of scenes unfold concomitantly: a little boy plays absent-mindedly with a truck, while next to him another kid is immobilised on the ground by a truculent policeman; other kids bathe in improvised water tank paddling pools while a police helicopter hovers overhead; dead bodies are seen inside a police van and across the landscape. In spite of the carnage scenes, there is an interesting contrast between the rawness of the subject matter and a choice of a vibrant-coloured palette and elements taken from a pop culture imagery that makes the work oddly attractive from a formal perspective.

Apart from the ubiquitous school uniforms, other elements in the composition also function as signs of social behaviours and values within the context of Rocinha and have become trademarks of Alexandre’s paintings. The wavy pattern that dominates most of the background is a pervasive design in the favelas: the print is found on the most popular brand of paddling pools, which are usually installed on most of the residents’ coveted roof terraces. In other works, the artist uses actual pieces of paddling pool canvas, which are applied to the surface and painted over whilst still revealing the design. Another pop reference is the cartoonish dinosaur that jumps happily on the top right-hand of the scene, a brand mascot of a well-known children’s yoghurt line. Alexandre explains that this supposedly affordable mass-

produced treat was scarcely available at the artist's household during the artist's childhood years, and only the children of more affluent favela dwellers were able to get these on a regular basis. Alexandre's portrayal of an insider's version of the daily violence in Rocinha, creates spaces in which multiple subjectivities are allowed to emerge. He accomplishes this by conflating personal memories and references shared by a social group whose values are often distorted by the media and invisible to the cultural elites. His characters are not confined to the usual stereotypical view of black populations as either criminals or victims—although sometimes they can fit one or the other, maybe both—appearing instead as multifaceted expressions of behaviours and desires that make up a more complex and honest portrait of black urban culture in Brazil.

*Tão saudável quanto um carinho* was Alexandre's first large-scale painting, a format that he fully embraced in subsequent works. In spite of deliberately sharing certain qualities with the classical old masters, paintings held by traditional museums—size, composition, narrative content—his works are often left unmounted, with the large sheets of paper usually displayed hanging from wires that cut across the gallery space. As such, the paintings assume an imposing architectural presence at the same time as becoming less sacred since there are no clear boundaries separating them from the public, who are able to observe their imperfect flipside made of taped-up sheets of brown paper. Importantly, they are also quite portable: the lack of a mount or frame means these large paintings can be simply rolled up and carried without too much effort. Indeed, in several occasions the artist and his colleagues have carried the unpacked works across the streets in a ritual procession that precedes their exhibition.

This performative action is in fact one of several ritualistic events organised under *A Noiva* [*The Bride*], a non-denominational church founded by Alexandre and a group of friends during his university days. Raised by an evangelical mother in a neighbourhood where religious devotion is regarded as a positive value, the artist became quite familiar with the codes and protocols associated with the main branches of Neo-Pentecostalism that are extremely popular across Brazil. Today, evangelical Protestants make up twenty per cent of the country's population, with their leaders controlling large media conglomerates and a significant number of seats in the national congress. And yet, in spite of having been involved in several corruption scandals over the last decades, Neo-Pentecostal churches keep expanding their cultural, economic, and political influence: the recent rise of the far-right in Brazil, for instance, has been greatly supported by the evangelical church.

In this sense, how does the appropriation of evangelical protocols by *A Noiva* fit into Alexandre and his fellow artists' practice? The 'church' was initially formed alongside his peers Raoni Azevedo and Eduardo de Barros with the aim of creating opportunities to show their work through self-organised exhibitions and events. Although he appreciates people's need to belong to a community, particularly in areas where there is virtually no access to other forms of support,

the artist is very sceptical toward the way individuals are manipulated—and often exploited—by most evangelical leaders. In *A Noiva*, rituals and procedures that are quite recognisable to people who may never set foot in a cultural institution are redirected toward a belief in art's ability to provide spiritual fulfilment, suggesting that there are other ways to find meaning in life. In this sense, by replicating the form of an extremely controversial institution, *A Noiva* appropriates a set of widely popular reference points that are completely alien to the art world and the cultural elites, and which may attract the interest of a demographic that, in turn, feels absolutely alienated from the art world. This 'preaching to the non-converted' on both sides of the socio-cultural spectrum—bringing evangelical protocols into the art world and bringing art into evangelical protocols—may or may not bring some sort of enlightenment, but, nevertheless, it can be seen as a genuine attempt to approximate art and life. *A Noiva*'s activities range from the aforementioned peregrination of artworks, the *dízimos*—self-organised exhibitions in pop-up spaces across the city of Rio de Janeiro—to public 'baptisms' of artists that usually include musical performances by young rappers whose work is a great source of inspiration to Alexandre. Like him, a new generation of poets/musicians who emerged in recent years across different Brazilian states, is also tackling issues of black empowerment and life in the favelas, articulating in their writing, ideas that reverberate in his pictorial work. BK' from Rio, Baco Exu do Blues from Bahia, Djonga from Minas Gerais are amongst the names whose poetry has been incorporated into the titles of several of his paintings. *Se eu fosse você olhava pra mim de novo* [*If I Were You, I'd Take Another Look at Myself*] (2018) shows the solitary figure of a young black man sitting leisurely on the bottom right hand corner against a vast paddling pool-patterned background. Although his features are effaced, some conspicuous details such as the nose ring, gold chain and blonde hair make it clear that this is a self-portrait. *O mundo é nosso* [*The World Is Ours*] (2018) is a line taken from a song by Djonga and the title of a rare abstract work in the *Pardo é papel* series whose surface is almost entirely covered with gestural strokes of black shoe polish. In a free translation, the whole chorus reads: "As if it was night everything looks black / as if in a blackout everything looks black / my bros, my sistas, my brothers, my sisters / the world is ours". Here, the narrative behind the title is mirrored in the act of blacking out the sheets of brown paper that, within the artist's material vocabulary, stand for the bigotry-laden concept of *pardo*.

Maxwell Alexandre started his professional trajectory in the art world less than two years ago, but it is clear that the many ideas he manages to convey in his work have been absorbed and articulated over a lifetime. Fully aware of the dangers of becoming engrossed in the glamorous environment of the art world, the artist makes a point of spending significant periods among his peers in Rocinha. For him, art and life are undoubtedly connected, and it is in life that he finds the source materials that form the complex, powerful, and playful counter-narratives presented in his work. Alongside a new generation of black artists, curators, musicians, and writers, he is part of a larger movement of reclaiming one's own voice and forging one's own narrative.