

BRRRRRAIN

António Olaio

FUNDAÇÃO CAIXA GERAL DE DEPÓSITOS

Culturgest



Rosebud (Post-Nuclear Country), 1994
Video, colour, sound, 3'09"

António Olaio: Paintings With Soundtracks

Kenny Schachter

The formal component of António Olaio's art imbues painting with another dimension altogether, for there are figurative paintings with overlaid text, accompanied by a music video singalong. These multimedia constructions function as storytelling devices with built-in soundtracks, revealing visual tales from deep in the artist's subconscious. To look further into the work, it is helpful to speak about the person behind the making, as he is inserted, literally and/or figuratively, into each and every piece, by way of his starring role in a bespoke musical accompaniment for your added visual and aural satisfaction. Olaio's songs are reductive affairs, with usually no more than a simple, monotonous tune, while his paintings are like graphic, single-frame films, despite the artist's protestations to the contrary.

Physically, António Olaio is a cross between Kevin Spacey, Elvis Costello, and a dollop of Pee Wee Herman. The Pee Wee bit is manifested in his absurdist, Dadaist musings on everything, nothing, and the plain weird. He's twee, and sometimes the effect is creepy, but at the same time affecting, touching and charming. The monotone singing can be a distraction, but it also hooks you and remains stuck in your mind's eye. For Olaio, painting is not enough; perhaps he needed more DNA in the work than pigment on canvas alone could satisfy. The result is António himself as the quirky pop performer, injected into each short film. It could be said to be rather exhibitionist and self-aggrandizing, but, in the hands of the artist, it is equally pathetic and comic. Unlike Cindy Sherman constantly gazing into her own navel as her performative fantasies run amok, Olaio's explorations are inextricably tied to his sense of self-identity.

In his art, António Olaio is confident, yet with low self-esteem, cartoonish and somber, haunting and goofy, all simultaneously. He doesn't seem to take himself too seriously, as reflected in this quote describing one of his works: "This song sounds quite serious, almost pompous, but fortunately it's quite silly in its pretentiousness." The sense of insecurity is palpable, just as the self-deprecating nature of the person that lies beneath the work is evident, but Olaio fearlessly faces failure by positing himself front and center in his compositions time and again.

As much as the significance of the images, both moving and still, the bizarre word groupings always arrest us. Maybe the language is as confusing to him as it is to me, maybe it's lost in translation; scarily, maybe it's not and this world of societal absurdism is completely normal, knowable and understandable to António. But I don't really care about Olaio's intended meanings: his verbal cocktails are so rich and flavorful they elicit all manner of existential associations.

Brrrrrain, the title of the exhibition, brings to mind a brain freeze, also known as an ice-cream headache, a momentary seizure-like ache due to excessive cold or God knows what. The wonderful works of António Olaio, consumed too fast like a child attacking a delectable treat, will bring on joy and confusion, pain and pleasure! The artist calls it punk, which is not something I admit to seeing, unless of a variety so sublime it is beyond me. What I see is cute, harmless, a tad annoying, with flourishes of slapstick, *though most definitely eerily unsettling*.

The paintings are of a school I call Good Bad Painting, not a photorealist variety of figuration, but colorful, alluring, gripping and graphic, in the vein of the Chicago Imagists, a group of surreal representational painters like Jim Nutt, Roger Brown and Ed Paschke. The genre of this painting style grabs you by the throat with acidic colors and completes the assault with grotesque imagery.

Olaio adds to this mix by incorporating word play and songs

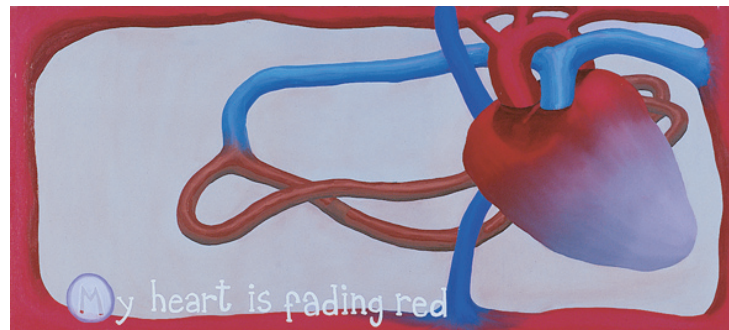
into his art: it's music and lyrics as sculpture, turning a tune into an object as weighty as bronze. Sound and vibration take on the characteristics of paint and brush. In the videos, there is not much happening visually, but there is always the distinctive, froggy moan to catch and hold your attention. The videos have crude production values, as the funerary, atmospheric melodies fill the background. And the songs... often they have the droll drone of Serge Gainsbourg, Leonard Cohen and Lou Reed, with some of the kookiness of John Cage. Yes, it can be irritating, but then it sticks in your craw, like all good music and art. Ultimately, though, the music works; it stands out as an accomplishment in and of itself.

Only António Olaio can find the "nasty" side of butterflies, and here are some reflections on his titles and wordplay...

My Dreams Are Small and Sad. Sad maybe, but the work of Olaio is far from tragic. Melancholic and filled with a sense of longing and dejection, the art carries with it a component of built-in failure. Is Olaio a misfit? I'd say most definitely not; rather in the manner of both the writer Samuel Beckett, and the singer Beck, he's an existential troubadour, a combination of the two. António seems to say: I'm a loser, baby, so why don't you kill me?

My Hand, a Ready-Made. It's as if the act of making art for Olaio is independent of his will, an action beyond volition. There is a sense of pre-determinism, of nature having the upper hand in the perennial nature vs. nurture debate in sociology. This notion of an art practice operating outside of personal choice is also evident in the title: *If I Wasn't an Artist What Could I Be?* For Olaio, art making is preordained and outside the realm and luxury of choice.

I Think Differently Now That I Can Paint. Though, for Olaio, the capacity for art is something you are inextricably born with, nevertheless, honing those skills is akin to a blue-collar job and entails a diligent, puritanical work ethic. It takes tenacity, perseverance and doggedness, and even then success is not assured, far from it, especially in trying times. The process of art, in whatever form it takes, often involves (despite perceptions



My Hand, a Ready-Made, 1991
Oil on canvas - 90 x 200 cm
Private collection, Leiria

My Feet in a Parade, 1991
Oil on canvas - 90 x 200 cm
Courtesy Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisboa

My Heart Is Fading Red, 1991
Óleo sobre tela - 90 x 200 cm
Private collection, Esposende

My Dreams Are Small and Sad, 1991
Óleo sobre tela - 90 x 200 cm
Collection Heitor Alvelos, Porto

otherwise) routine, task making and administration that do not exactly live up to the romantic idea of an artist in the throes of the act of creation. Art making for Olaio also equals intellectual enlightenment.

Broadcasting My Songs. Here we have signs of another vain, megalomaniac artist insisting on speaking to the world at large; yet, in the same-titled painting, besides the declarative text beneath the image of a microphone, there is also the depiction of knotted and impossible-to-function wiring. So there is self-love, but it is coupled with a vanity that is at times also self-negating.

Pictures Are Not Movies. Hah! I hate to be the one to break the news to Mr. Olaio, but if ever a picture was indeed a movie, it is here. These are one-film-cell films. Anyway, regardless of what Olaio insists, often, as is the case here, artists are sometimes the least capable of analyzing their own work. So, please forgive me for taking the liberty of looking elsewhere for interpretations and meanings in this art.

Bambi Is in Jail. A stranger juxtaposition of words does not exist: an unpredictable statement that is, in equal measure, demonic and whimsical, but simultaneously deliciously cruel.

Sit on My Soul. In this painting, we are faced with a pinup, nude and voluptuous, striking a provocative pose. The title expresses the yearning, not for a quick sexual fix, but rather a solicitation to quench Olaio's intellectual and spiritual curiosity. This work has also got a taste of Olaio looking inside some impenetrable room at others having more love, fun and success than he will seemingly ever enjoy. This is as close as Olaio will get to frontal sex in his paintings and videos, but it is a distracted and abstract longing, rather than any consummation. Love, but more likely lost love, a denial of love. *Three Pounds of Wine and She Loves You.* If that doesn't say it all, I don't know what does.

Sweaty Potatoes. With such disjointed evocations, sometimes Olaio can be plain gross and disgusting, like a certain genre of teenage movies. I guess that is where António wants to take us,

on a journey as absurd and surreal as Willy Wonka (the original version), with as much perverted, misguided fun. In any event, it is hard to look at potatoes the same way again.

Wicked Teachers. This is Olaio's questioning of authority, both in art and otherwise, but always with the perspective of an insatiable, curious, though *naughty* child. That, for me, is the essence of the work: it is the product of a jaded, twisted, but always humorous existentialist take on life, and you can feel the sense of joy and release he seems to enjoy in the process.

The videos, songs and paintings of António Olaio taken as a whole seem a poor excuse to stand on a soapbox, shouting at all who will listen, to convey an utterly unique voice that is nothing less than enchanting and fantastical. It's an all-encompassing philosophy of life seen through a multifaceted language of whimsical imaginings. In the end, Olaio has sung, written and painted his way deep into our heads, hearts and souls.

António Olaio was born in 1963 in Sá da Bandeira, Angola, and lives and works in Coimbra, Portugal. He graduated in Fine Arts – Painting at the Escola Superior de Belas-Artes, Porto, in 1987. He is a teacher in the Architecture course at the University of Coimbra, where he concluded his Phd in the year 2000 with a thesis on the work of Marcel Duchamp.

Between 1986 and 1992, he was the singer and lyricist of the band Repórter Estrábico, with which he recorded the album *Uno dos* (Polygram, 1991). He is currently developing a project with the musician João Taborda (António Olaio & João Taborda), with whom he has released three CDs: *Loud Cloud* (Lux Records, 1996), *Sit on My Soul* (co-published with Nortesus, 2000), and *Blaupunkt Blues* (Lux Records, 2007).

Recent Solo Exhibitions (selection)

2009 *La Prospettiva*, Galerie Mario Mauroner, Vienna;

Planeta Coimbra, Edifício Chiado/Museu Municipal, Coimbra

2007 *I Think Differently Now that I Can Paint*, Centro Cultural Vila Flor, Guimarães

2006 *Under the Stars*, Galeria Zé dos Bois, Lisboa

2004 *40 Years in a Plane*, Kenny Schachter conTEMPorary, New York; *I'm Growing Heads in My Head*, CAPC – Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra; 2003 *You Are What You Eat*, Centro Cultural Andratx, Palma de Mallorca

2002 *Telepathic Agriculture*, Galerie Schuster, Berlin; Galerie Schuster & Sheuermann, Frankfurt; *What Makes a Home a House?*, Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto

2001 *Slow Motion (António Olaio)*, ESTGAD, Caldas da Rainha; Anthological exhibition part of *Urban Lab – Bienal da Maia*;

Foggy Days in Old Manhattan, Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisboa

2000 *My Left Hand is Changing*, Galeria Pedro Oliveira, Porto



Potato Farm, 1999
Video, colour, sound, 3'20"

Exhibition

Curator

Miguel Wandschneider

Production coordination

Mário Valente

Production

António Sequeira Lopes

Paula Tavares dos Santos

Set-up coordination

Fernando Teixeira

Set-up

André Lemos

André Tasso

Heitor Fonseca

Laurindo Marta

Maria Soares

Sérgio Gato

Sílvia Santos

Brochure

Text

Kenny Schachter

Coordination

Marta Cardoso

Photographic credits

Laura Castro Caldas & Paulo Cintra

(pp. 6, 7)

Design

Gráficos do Futuro

Printing

Maiadouro

© 2009, Fundação Caixa Geral
de Depósitos – Culturgest, Lisbon

© of the works reproduced: the artist;
of the text: the author

Talk with António Olaio and Miguel Wandschneider

Saturday, 14 November, 4:30 pm

Guided tours by Miguel Wandschneider

Saturdays, 21 November, 12 December, 5 pm

Guided tours

Sundays, 8 November, 6 December, 5:30 pm

Monday to Friday, from 11 am to 7 pm (last admission at 6:30 pm)

Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays, from 2 pm to 8 pm (last admission at 7:30 pm). Closed on Tuesdays.

Information: +351 21 790 51 55 - www.culturgest.pt - CGD building, Rua do Arco do Cego, 1000-300 Lisbon

24 October – 23 December 2009
