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PAULO NIMER PJOTA AND GUNNAR B. KVARAN IN CONVERSATION

The work of the Brazilian artist Paulo Nimer Pjota has evolved from graffiti toward a practice referring to everyday objects, vernacular architecture and street life. An allegorical journey through histories and cultures.

Paulo Nimer Pjota's work carries a selection of images, colors, architecture references, popular and historical objects that dialogue with emerging socio-cultural principles. Individual exhibitions include "Synthesis between contradictory ideas and the plurality of the object as image," Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Brazil (2016) and "Relational System" project Season - Paço das Artes São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil (2013).

SURFACE TENSION

**GUNNAR B. KVARAN** When we met some years ago, you were doing street art. Now you've moved into studio practice. Can you tell me about this transition? **PAULO NIMER PJOTA**

I started my relationship with painting doing graffiti. It's important to signal the difference between graffiti and street art. What I did was graffiti: an illegal and rebellious practice, often transgressive. At twelve years old, my age when I started to do graffiti, I needed something transgressive as an outlet for my insecurities and my non-conformity. Parallel to graffiti, I always produced little things at home as a teenager. After seventeen years I moved from Rio Preto to São Paulo to study art, and it was then that I completely broke with graffiti because I understood that in the studio I'd have more possibilities for experimentation and support, among other things. **GBK**

Your studio work is still reminiscent of your graffiti and street-art activities, especially in the use of materials, the metal plates, and the nature of your compositions. **PNP**

Certainly there's a resonance. Because of the graffiti, I learned to look at the city, space, and architecture in a new way. When you paint on the street you're looking for walls, your eye is searching for space. Consequently,

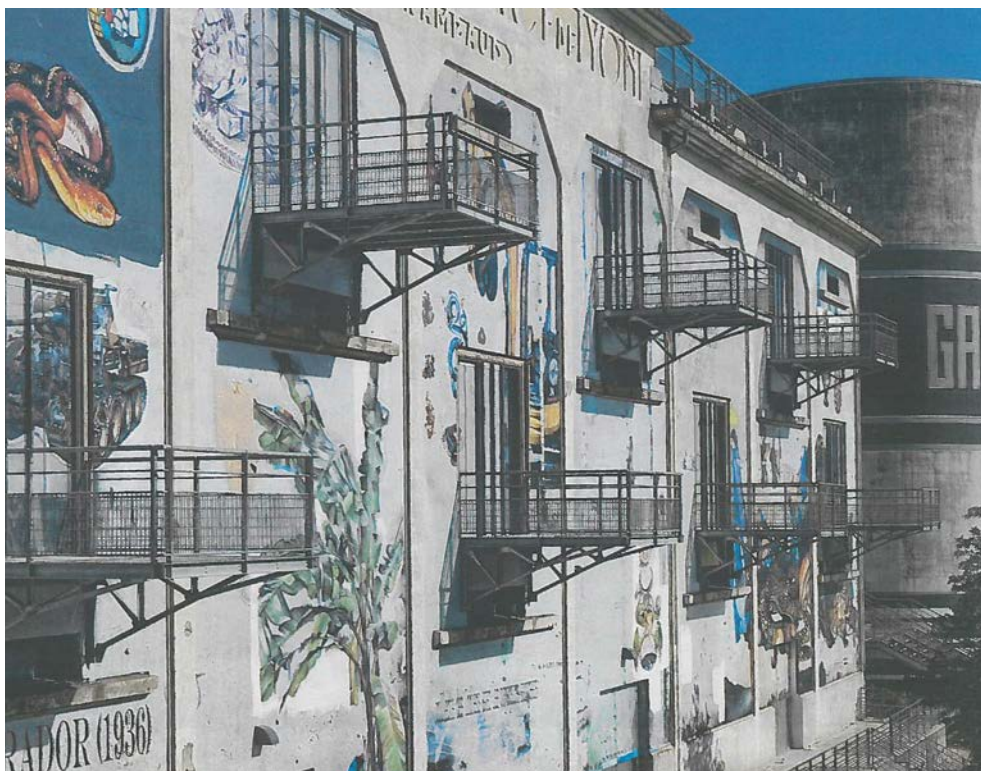
your vision is sharpened. Today I still walk around the city, aware of its characteristics. I believe that the traces of graffiti are in my work—not the graffiti itself, but the experiences I had during this time, the things I saw, the places I visited, the relationship between a person and their home, their neighborhood. **GBK**

Were your studies fulfilling? Did your professors have an important impact on the development of your art? **PNP**

I went to college when I was only seventeen years old. It was important for my deeper theoretical and conceptual understanding. But the most important thing was to have moved to São Paulo, to have traveled to other countries, to have continued studying on my own. **GBK**

In your works we find images of plants, arms, mechanical objects, references to antique artworks, cartoon figures, and recognizable signs and symbols that all tell different stories. Can you talk about the main themes in your paintings? **PNP**

The objects that I choose are things that appear in day-to-day life and in popular culture, such as vernacular architecture—often with irony, and always subjective. These historical parallels dilate the empirical and



Entre-temps... Brusquement, et ensuite, 2013, installation view at the 12<sup>th</sup> Biennale de Lyon, 2013. Courtesy: Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo



"Synthesis between contradictory ideas and the plurality of the object as image" installation view at Mendes Wood CM, São Paulo, 2016.  
Courtesy: Mendes Wood CM, São Paulo

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Serra, 2016. © Paulo Nimer Pjota. Courtesy: Maureen Paley, London

scholarly knowledge I have acquired through reading and travel. It's a synthesis between contradictory ideas made through signs and symbols. I'm interested in peripheral issues, conflicts, political relations, trivial things, and objects that summarize cultural clichés.

**GBK**

Your paintings are based on very original narrative structures. Can you talk about how you organize the narratives on the canvas—and, recently, outside of the canvas? **PNP**

I don't follow a specific rule to construct narratives and associations between images; what I have is a series of images and books piled on my desk that I always look at, sometimes over breakfast. I make long searches in books and on the Internet to find images. I watch hip-hop music videos, do searches on Instagram. I see images that allow analogies to be put together. Often in my research I look for objects that reflect the idea that I want to talk about, always in a subjective way. I also find other things along the way during the painting process. And I try to walk around town to air my thoughts and find situations to help me in the composition of the work. Lately I've been interested in the formal questions found in different objects. The fact that I use objects in the paintings comes from these walks. I started using objects because, after all, I've painted objects. I expanded the painting into space. My work already had this character due to its architectural scale and my research into vernacular and popular architecture. **GBK**

Can you tell me more about your interest in the questions that you find in these different objects? What would be some examples? **PNP**

For example, indigenous and Bahia ceramics are very similar to Greek jars in terms of the shapes and the geometric motifs. The use of objects such as African masks, or ceramics, or Egyptian artifacts interests me in terms of the capacity of the object to synthesize historical periods, and it tells us a lot about local culture, on a small and a large scale. When I paint an object I choose something that has a concept and a history behind it. The representation and symbology of the objects allows you to make a parallel historical journey into the painting. I don't need to use a lot of things to talk about a country, for example. I just need to use the power and the symbology of the objects.

In the work entitled *Democratic Republic of Congo* (2015), I painted Congolese masks alongside a sculpture by Constantin Brancusi and the ceramics of Pablo Picasso. Picasso kept a Congolese mask for some time in his studio. We all know the influence of African art on Modernism, but few know about the history of Africa. The subjectivity of the work starts at this point. The Congo was colonized by Belgium, and is one of the bloodiest stories I know. The Congolese rebels learned from the Belgians to cut the hands off their rivals. That's an inheritance of the colonial period. It's very ironic that the word "democratic" appears in the name of a country that was built in the middle of a civil war generated by political and financial interests. The work talks about cultural, territorial, and political appropriation in a subjective way.

In my series "Between Philosophy and Crime", I juxtaposed Greek, Egyptian, and Roman objects with criminal symbols from

Brazilian and Mexican gangs and prison tattoos, making an analogy between popular culture and philosophical history overlapping backgrounds and intellectual readings. The history of crime in Brazil sometimes mingles with the guerrilla struggles for rights and ideological principles, like Robin Hood. My mother worked for a long time in a prison, and my grandfather is a criminal lawyer. Maybe that's the reason why I'm so interested in researching this criminal world. All these analogies are very subtle and subjective. I don't care if people don't understand these relationships. It's a world of possibilities and symbology. **GBK**

Can you tell me more about the relationship between your work and music, perhaps giving examples from your paintings? **PNP**

I love music. I spend all day listening to music, and often go to concerts. Music is one of my favorite things in the world, so inevitably it appears in my work. In recent paintings such as *Democratic Republic of Congo* (2015), *Baiacu* (2015), and other works that will be in my solo show at Maureen Paley in London, I painted logos of rap and reggae groups, like stickers, and wrote musical phrases. I have some paintings where the title is taken from a song. If you think of the composition, you can imagine a rapper, sampling and repeating to produce the beat. I do it with my pieces: I cut a part of the history and reproduce, cut another part and reproduce. The balance of the composition works according to the flow of the objects. There's repetition, and you realize that there are lines that connect the objects and scribbles. **GBK**

Do you see your work as engaged with social and political questions? **PNP**

I'm interested in social issues because this is part of my own history with painting as a person, and my aesthetic interests overlap with these issues. If you live in Brazil, these questions are part of your day-to-day. I do what I do but I don't want to change the world. I do it because I like it, because I believe in it. I have my political position as a citizen and my principles, but I don't need to follow rules in my painting. I construct a way to put what I want in my pieces, to talk about social situations, to talk about music, about composition, about poetry, everything that I feel is necessary. I don't want to get stuck in my own work; I want to be free, and to open up possibilities in my work. To be honest, I do what I like. **GBK**

How would you contextualize your work within Brazilian or international contemporary art? Do you feel that you belong to a movement, or to a group of artists, in Brazil or globally? **PNP**

I think we're never alone. Sometimes I see works that dialogue with mine, especially abstract paintings that I hadn't known about before. I don't consider myself a figurative painter. I paint images as objects, not as figuration. In Brazil it's difficult to find something close to what I do. The school of painting in Brazil is different from mine. In fact, I don't worry about being a painter. I'm more influenced by music. I'm concerned to do something relevant and I work toward that. I don't know if I can, but I try.