

## Whispers, Curses and Prayers

The fleeting charm of the hummingbird revives mysteries, perhaps due to its almost intangibly luminous movements. For many peoples and cultures, the hummingbird is a sacred creature. It inhabits stories about the genesis of the world, the origins of water, the creation of heat. For some, its apparition is perceived as the presence of spirits, where the hummingbird is a messenger between worlds or between us and the divine.

Enraptured by the unfathomable beauty of these unassuming little birds, our ancestors have suspected for centuries that the hummingbirds are symbols. However, as we are unsure about what they mean, we carry on giving meaning to these fascinating creatures, involving them in our cosmovision and providing them with a special place in the fabric of our causalities. We see in their presence, for instance, a deceased relative paying us a visit or the prelude to an imminent change.

Therefore, for many of us, to represent a hummingbird is not an ordinary gesture. To draw its body, to model its volume, to emulate its movements or to illuminate its colors is to evoke the enigma of meanings that we attribute to its existence by updating them. By frequently coming back to the hummingbird in his works, and despite the formal accuracy these birds assume in his sculptures and paintings, Efrain Almeida is not attaching himself to the traditions of representation that favor figurative objectivity. Instead, the artist is linked to practices that, as we have seen in different cultures, value objectivity not for its self-referring aspect, but its ability to bring together often distant meanings, strengthening and unfolding them into the singularities of our space-time, our bodies, memories and viewpoints.

Akin to a painter of religious icons – whose representations are made as an appeal and are, therefore, also forms of prayer – Efrain Almeida does not subject his sculptures and installations, nor his most recent watercolors, to the imperative of exclusively aesthetic principles. Challenging a certain geometric tradition within the Brazilian art canon, through his watercolors' rays and color fields, the artist evokes visionary experiences that do not seek to be aesthetically supreme forms.

Conversely, his geometry moves and enlivens the agencies that are present in the cosmos, shared between multiple beings and phenomena, which we also attribute to things that we suppose are inanimate, like a work of art or a beaded necklace. Challenging geometries that are often seen as objective and autonomous, the prismatic lines and colors in Almeida's watercolors favor the coexistence and engagement between hummingbirds and other mysteries.

Almeida is an artist who, throughout his career, has sculpted animals, bodies and other objects of a potentially votive or totemic nature, shaping them with so much affection that when we face them we feel touched by their subjectivity, desire and agency. Like the hummingbird's wings that are revealed as shiny – and which are not only pigmented, but also iridescent, with the explosive phenomenon of color stemming from a complex and furtive convergence between the bird, the incidence of light and our gaze – the iconic character of Almeida's work also invites us to look at it beyond its aestheticization.

However, unlike the painters of strictly religious icons, whose historic-narrative commitment to sacred scriptures is compulsory, artists such as Efrain Almeida and Alex Červený – in dialogue in this exhibition – experiment alternatively with the agency-filled universe inhabited by sacred images, exploring their fabulation beyond the limits of dogma, doctrines and other norms inscribed in the field of adoration. Their works are not sacred, their fable-like iconologies are not claiming the right to produce images full of intentions and secrets. Instead, we witness an imagery that is not imposed as privileged or self-sufficient but offered to us as coexisting accomplices in the abysm-like experience of life.

In this same direction, Červený employs yet another mode of producing meaning within religious contexts: the allegory. Through allegorical compositions that bring together multiple extemporary symbols – in landscapes located in a suspended space-time with often mythical atmospheres – the artist creates images full of apocalypses and geneses, ascents and falls, transmutations, open wounds and miracles.

His figures are also enmeshed in networks of agency: they are frequently producing or experiencing an action, which, in turn, is not self-centered but spread across human beings, animals, fires, trees, rain, objects, words, storms, meteors, darkness and chainsaws. Furthermore, made with extreme precision and, at the same time, a highly delicate technique,

Červený's allegories exude the time that has been dedicated to them almost votively. Captured by its chimerical details and the vibration of its tones, we are lured into becoming part of their worlds.

As an admirer and researcher of multiple mythologies, Alex Červený's intoxicating paintings create scenes, characters and contexts with a level of cosmo-poetic freedom that is similar to myths and their regimes of causality. If from a mythical point of view, beings are transmuted into others, spiraling time, becoming giants or transforming everything around them, the same takes place in Červený's allegories, which reorganize what we know and imagine of the world and ourselves. It is not a coincidence that a large part of his works rearranges and creates symbols, references and other information about the artist himself, which are shown to us as a form of confession.

To be included in this active twist, in which several forces act upon one another, is a must. If, on the one hand, it would be impossible to untie oneself from this mesh, on the other hand, it is ethically important for artists such as Alex Červený and Efrain Almeida to reveal themselves as part of it. For art to be implicated and for its artists to perform, both biographically and socially, the double condition of agents and patients, it is paramount that we are aware of the vulnerabilities and ethical-political responsibilities of artistic practices.

Today, in this abject time of pandemic, whilst Efrain Almeida evokes hummingbirds and their messages, Červený offers us images of environmental destruction and deforestation. As well as exposing the ecocide perpetrated against our forests and its several – not only human – populations, his recent paintings are icons of a life that resists despite everything. With their unreligious ex-votos, replete with confidence in their power of agency, the images of Almeida and Červený mobilize cure and transformation.

In this sense, when faced with Červený's recent paintings – produced silently and slowly in his refuge in Santo Antônio do Pinhal, tended to and caressed as if they were alive because they breathe – what we see are not representations but evocations. We can hear the whispers, prayers and curses produced by all the forces that go through them or are anchored in them, conjuring the ruins of the project of extermination underway in Brazil and prophesying the verdant, obstinate and transformational permanence of life.

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Rio de Janeiro, May 2021