

Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel

Galpão

Rua James Holland 71 | 01138-000 São Paulo Brasil

T +55 11 3392 3942 | www.fdag.com.br

The Fabulation of Reality in Frank Walter

By Kleber Amancio

Humanity has changed, humanity is changing. Writing about Frank Walter (1926-2009) provides a unique occasion for reflecting on this process. The reorganization of art history's *ethos* is underway and seems irreversible. We stand before the case of a black, Caribbean-born character, with a surprisingly long career and a string of documented evidence. A rare opportunity.

Throughout his life, Frank Walter produced approximately five thousand paintings, a thousand drawings, two thousand photographs, six hundred sculptures (carved in wood), five hundred thousand hand and typewritten pages on art, music, poetry, drama, history, philosophy and political science, along with 468 hours of tape recordings.

If we focus on his visual artworks, the variety of formats, media and techniques the artist employed is noteworthy. It is possible to associate him with artists as diverse as Heitor dos Prazeres, Wilfredo Lam or Jacob Lawrence. The vibrant palette, drawings uninterested in verisimilitude, an appreciation for formal simplifications and eventual incursions into abstraction allow us to draw these parallels. I understand, however, that an analysis emphasizing these aspects alone loses sight of the complexity of the materials at hand.

If Renaissance perspective proposed the representation of convincing ideas of reality, if [European/Eurocentric] modern art parasitically perpetrated the translation of the primitive, Frank Walter provides us with other paths. We are reminded of Fanon, "to speak is to exist for the other absolutely".

His practice necessarily challenges veiled hierarchies and inequalities, the so-called objectivity inherent in traditional narratives, historically constituted under the aegis of a self-obsessed art history, supposedly isolated from the world. Walter's perseverance in his artistic career, against a system in which he was not welcome, was an important political act. The history, markets and critique of art wagered, for a long time, on a supposedly neutral, disembodied discourse. It is no coincidence that the end of the long night takes place at a time in which face offs against the sovereign subject have become radicalized throughout the world.

The longevity of his career forbids us to think of an apparent stylistic unity. However, there is certainly unity in his restlessness before reality. Reality is not portrayed but fabulized in his works. More than representing, he creates elements assertively positioned in reality, his expressiveness encapsulates the objects he approaches in such a way that we learn more of his inner movement, of the way he assimilates and broadcasts certain ideas or phenomena outside of visual perception.

Frank Walter works from a precise connection with his time, with his existence, with the events he experienced and the consequent development of his production. The relationship that Afro-Caribbean people established with their ex-colonizers is different from Brazilians', seen as much in their intellectual traditions as in their artistic forms. Frank Walter's trajectory between Europe and the Caribbean brings him close to figures like Frantz Fanon, Aimée Césaire and Henry Osawa Turner. All of whom restructured afro-diasporic experience after a stint in ex-metropolises. The search for a recognizable visual identity in no way takes precedence over his commitment to the need for adequate expression on each occasion. Sojourning through his work means observing history from a structurally subaltern body, avid for registering/expressing his voice, understandings and desire for intervention. Critiques of subjectivity, black cultural identity and representations of the subject are common themes.

It seems understandable that, for Brazilian readers, comparisons with what Eurocentric critiques have called *naïf art* are tempting. However, I would like to draw attention to the contemporary inadequacies of this concept, given its inherent coloniality and incapability of explaining the phenomena at stake. If we compare his work with that of Brazilian artist Maria

Auxiliadora Silva, for example, the manner in which both artists' images are organized bear similarities; the expression of the colors, the style of the depicted bodies or their tendency to narrate the prosaic, or reminiscences from their own memories. Though Walter was interested in the work of modern artists such as Gauguin and Valloton, his own paintings are projects built from brute matter, not from narcissistic idealizations as proposed by Picasso, Braque, or Tarsila do Amaral. He observes non European experience as a subject and narrator.

The group of works seen in this exhibition highlights these aspects. In his landscapes, Walter's point of view is always mundane, ordinary and partial. In *Self-portrait with Warwick* (1984), for example, we see a human figure accompanied by an animal, drinking water in a lake or on a riverbank. The character is surrounded by vegetation symmetrically advancing toward both sides of the painting. In the background, flat, rural terrain ends at the base of a dramatic mountain range. The sky is overcast and anxious. Both the human figure and the quadruped are solid black. Impenetrable. The physical limits of the work suggest continuity beyond what the eye can see. Be it the suggested sun or the remaining scene.

The small scale of this painting contrasts with the breadth of its theme. The miniature landscape paradoxically emphasizes, through contrasting colors, the complexity of the artist's perception. The vegetation and sky are presented with more chromatic variety and clearer outlines than the human and animal figures. This emphasis on observed nature to the detriment of its observers allows for approximations with traditional representations of black people in European colonial paintings. They presented subaltern bodies as labor-ready objects, sex or mere types and blots. Differently, Walter's own personage is safeguarded from any violent imposition, it is positioned far from any sort of suffering. The lack of detail, for that matter, emphasizes his singular and inapprehensible humanity, in a mysterious, unknown landscape. Nature is not paradisaical, but strong and expressive, like an unapproachable place, the result of an inner life in dense formulation.

Current interest in Walter's work is part of a larger movement. It is an established point that Afro-Atlantic cultures are of vital importance for a renewed understanding of global modernity. In this sense, Frank Walter's agency acquires a new dimension. His Afro-Diasporic experience, his Atlantic path and his experience of different forms of racism took shape in his work as the affirmation and invention of his humanity. The density of his proposition reassembles the post-colonial civilizational challenge.