

Mateus Moreira: a heap of broken images, where the sun beats By Tiago Mesquita

*You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. (...)*

T.S. Eliot

The way artists compose the light, temperature, humidity and air masses that surround objects in a landscape is an old subject. It predates even the consolidation of landscape as a pictorial genre in European art. The issue was discussed in different periods, by different traditions. To take only two examples, we might mention the fifteenth-century Renaissance debates and the Chinese tracts of six hundred years earlier. Leonardo da Vinci was concerned with the ways in which atmospheric events determined the oscillations in color and definition in the representation of depth. In another way, the Chinese artist and intellectual Jing Hao asked himself: how does one move the brush discreetly, in the way a vital breath of air or light lends vitality to the elements in a view?

In Mateus Moreira's painting, what gives his characters' actions meaning in the place they occur is the manner of representing atmosphere. His understanding of what painting can do is intimately related to its capacity of remaking the meaning of these ethereal and vaporous elements. In his exhibition *Nêmesis*, Moreira treats landscape scenically. In his paintings, it is the light and air that lend dramatic gravity to events, however dramatic the characters' actions are in themselves. Over a low, flat, weathered ground, we see a foggy, dust landscape where everything left seems left behind. We know this because we can see afar and it seems not even a pile of rubble is left. Everything is a wasteland.

In *Oblívio* (2023), for example, the artist punctuates the surface with extremely tall posts and no electrical wires. They emerge among abandoned railway tracks, overcome by a flood. In the background, wagons rust, tarnishing in the wind. All those lost people seem to live in the helplessness of a post-industrial, devastated society. The characters' scale is minute. They are castaways, reactionless. A white light mingles with the smoke and clouds. Nothing can be seen beyond the blinding glow in the background. In canoes, at the margins of the water, the characters are sent in our direction since there is nowhere to return to.

The scene occupies a small portion of the canvas. It is a mere consequence of time's passing. In some of these paintings, events are accompanied by archetypal symbolic forms; the artist includes birds and fossils in works such as *Nêmesis* (2023), *Mácula* (2023) and *Cárcere* (2023). With this, he seems to make the ruins a result of an otherworldly promise from another time, of mythical origins. It is no coincidence then that the fire that rises upward in *Mácula* does so almost symmetrically. This formal treatment tells violent, realistic occurrences in the tone of prophecy, religious eschatology and dystopia.

Mostly, however, the artist takes off from contemporary images or narratives linked to racial violence, land disputes, the oppression of the dispossessed and genocide. These are urgent, pressing political themes. Paradoxically, one of the most fantastic and allegorical paintings in the exhibition is *Compulsão* (2023). In it, Moreira draws inspiration from an already historical scene, taken from news broadcasts: the beating of Rodney King, in Los Angeles, in March of 1991. The fact was captured by a home video camera and, as an image, became exemplary of the struggle against police brutality toward black people in the United States. It still strikes a chord today, in antiracist struggles at different latitudes.

The artist chooses one of the video's frames and recomposes the image. First, three figures are distributed around the center of the canvas, following traditional compositional forms. We see a man protecting his head, while two others strike him with truncheons. The movement is one of a violent attack and a last-ditch effort to defend oneself. Tinted in orange, the

scene seems to happen under the torrid heat of a mythical desert. Around the action, the artist distributes immobile characters, watching the beating with sadistic attention.

In the painting, the scourge has no verisimilar date or setting. It happens in a shattered scenery that could be in the present, the past or the future. We gaze at the center of the scene, toward violence, just like the perverse characters at the margins. A formal choice here is also a moral one.

This temporal indeterminacy is present in all the paintings. Although it appears ruin-like, the image is not in the past nor in the future. It is the present, more specifically, the present in the outskirts of large Brazilian cities. Like some of the contemporary Brazilian writers and filmmakers, the artist recreates this experience as if it were happening after apocalyptic predictions have come true, in a grandiose romantic tone – as is the scenery in some of the paintings. After the end, those small figures still have a lot to face up against.