

Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel

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## TOC Divino<sup>1</sup>: Tiago Carneiro da Cunha's cosmos

By Pedro Köberle

"In Eden; in the Auricular Nerves of Human life  
Which is the Earth of Eden, he his Emanations propagated"  
– William Blake

In an apparently contradictory procedure, Tiago Carneiro da Cunha combines oil paint in thick impasto – historically associated with an anti-illusionistic dimension – with the desire to explore the limits of a varied figurative repertoire executed in gestural, expressive brushstrokes. This configuration is akin to the tactile modeling approach of sculpture, to which the artist dedicated the first years of his trajectory. With a roster of fantastical characters drawn from a combination of B movies, mythical cosmologies and historical painterly framing devices, his works seem to feed off the visual vocabulary of animation, the horizontal layout of newspaper strips and 1980s video games.

Positioned to the left or right of the surfaces, his creatures – ranging from men and women in Edenic nudes, hybrids of orchids and aliens, to enchanted trees – are always sources that emit or receive light beams and supernatural powers. As this placement lends the paintings horizontal legibility and attributes a polarity in an energy circuit to each of the figures, space acquires a mannerist elongation of perspective, like Tintoretto by way of comic book illustrator Jack Kirby (1917 – 1994). Kirby, credited with creating genre conventions for representing energy and invisible forces – the so-called Kirby Krackle – might be an interlocutor in the sci-fi voltage of Carneiro da Cunha's work. Most important, perhaps, is the spatial affinity with fighting games like *Mortal Kombat* or *Street Fighter*. The action occurs at the margins, while the center is free for the flurries of color and texture, for the clash of "emanations" that contract, explode and spiral. The aura and radiation coming off each creature, in turn, elevate their caricature-like, suntanned bodies to the plane of religious icons. At the same time, the outer-space backdrops, untethered from any recognizable environment, push them toward the spatiotemporal frame of allegory. If equipped with the necessary coordinates, we might see the cosmogony of a dysfunctional society in these paintings.

The beggar that exchanges cosmic matter with a tricked-out orchid in *Benção Maldita* (2023) is about to be jumped by two officers, an emblem of the violence perpetrated against practitioners of the unsensible arts. In *Hereditária* (2023), the pregnant woman, reclining with her finger raised like Michelangelo's Adam, oscillates between the iconic reference to fertility and the intergenerational perpetuation of a tragicomic condition. *Animalia x Vegetalia* (2023) stages a face-off between a chimera made of fragments of animals and another one made of pieces of trees, a natural monster versus monstrous nature. *Maldito Artista* (2023) shows an explosion/ass in combat with a naked man that holds up a mirror before his face with one hand and in the other brandishes a tiny paintbrush: a parable of the male painter's narcissism in combat with buttocks way more powerful than his own.

Finally, *Atlético* (2023) shows a man whose shoulders are burdened, like Atlas, with the weight of a ball of energy, up against an orange-tinted galaxy that emits green, blue and yellow quasars. At the center of the composition, we see a tubular duct, like those that transport water over the highly polluted Tietê River in São Paulo, struck by one of the beams. This is the most openly dystopian piece of the group, in which a mythological setting is offset by a recognizable element of environmental collapse and hyper-urban development.

Apart from these parodic relationships with mass culture iconography, Carneiro da Cunha strikes up another more historical and conceptual dialog with the prophetic, visionary verve of William Blake (1757 – 1827). The English poet, painter and draftsman in the 19th century undertook an oeuvre of cosmic dimensions. He diagrammed, explicated and illustrated the

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<sup>1</sup> An untranslatable pun on the homophony between TOC (obsessive-compulsive disorder) and "Toque" (touch). A tentative translation might be: "Divine OCD"

structuring forces of the universe according to his own highly idiosyncratic mythos. Blake, like Tiago, dedicated himself to the representation of emanations, beams of light and auras, which occupy a central position in his work. Also, like Tiago, he was an inventor of cosmologies, establishing tensions and connections between heaven and hell, but the analogy only goes so far. The divine verve of Carneiro da Cunha's work is always tethered to biting critique in a damned, sinful, infamous and base soil given in the totally mundane condition of his creatures.

In all of the paintings in the exhibition, the author resorts to the staging of a duality, spatializing oppositions and giving pictorial form to cosmic battles. In this, he carries out one of the most ancient functions of art, namely stitching together the inherent disparity of the real through symbolic action, codifying in images the irreconcilable tension between high and low, left and right, close and far. Carneiro da Cunha's paintings seem to harbor evil and beauty alike. In his treatment, as in art history as a whole, the damned and the sublime share space on the canvas. His formal and allegorical solution is to inextricably blend them together, admitting the universal character of evil and giving form to the fusion of these apparently opposite poles. The cosmos celebrates both our pleasures and pains in whirlwinds of color and saturated views.